Grief

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Preacher: Lyn Unger

[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. I am truly delighted to be here this morning. As you know, our topic is grief. There we go. As you know, our topic is grief.

And I stand before you this morning with more than a little fear and trepidation, because I know that many of you have experienced deep levels of grief, and some of you repeatedly.
And I know some of your stories. Some of you know some of mine. And I just want to make it clear that I'm in no way in authority on grief. But, however, I am currently in a season of grieving, as I lost my mom recently, the end of January, to an aggressive form of cancer.
My mom was one of my very favorite people. Even though I left home at the age of 17, it was a very rare day that I didn't talk to her on the phone in all the years since.
And she was sheer simplicity and one of the most beautiful examples of the love of Christ that I've ever seen. People often said to me, I wish that your mom was my mom, too.
[1:08] And I always said, yeah, I know, right? But she kind of is. She just had a great propensity for loving other people's kids. So, when we lost her, I was overwhelmed with sadness.

And so, I did the only thing that I knew to do, that had been instilled in me since childhood. Where do you go for comfort? You go to the scriptures. And that I was also in my final term of my Master of Counseling degree, so I did what I'd been trained to do.
I went to the literature and saw what kind of resources were out there to help me. And finally, I'm insatiably curious, and I'd love to hear other people's stories.
So, I've talked to dozens of people since mom's death, and I've asked them how they've dealt with grief and loss. And so, my findings this far in the journey are the basis for my talk today.
So, I want you to think of this as field notes on grief. I'm very much mid-process. So, here is where we're going to go today. We'll start what grief is, and we'll look at some examples and grief models out there.
[2:13] Then we'll move into what scripture says about grief, and examples from there. And finally, we'll touch on some practical help for grief, and some of my field notes thus far.

And then, most importantly, I want to hear from you. And we'll open this up to discussion, and we'll talk about grief together. So, what is grief?
Well, there is a lot of definitions out there, but here's a few that I find the most helpful. Grief is always a particular response to the particular loss of a particular object.
So, due to this particular understanding, identifying universal experiences of grief is difficult. Mitchell and Anderson, who have done a lot of work on pastoral care and grieving, say, the grief is the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions, arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or the object lost.
So, it's a cluster of emotions that could include guilt or shame or loneliness or anxiety or anger or bewilderment. The list goes on and on.
[3:31] These emotions are not only common to grief, but you might recognize them as being part of the normal human experience. Next, we have the Webster's Dictionary definition of grief, which is short and sweet, a deep sorrow, especially that caused by someone's death.

So, it's important to note, like I said earlier, that grief is a natural and normal process. It's not a disorder or an illness. You might be grieving about anything you've lost.
Grief is an emotional reaction to change. So, it's an emotional reaction to change. And it's simply part of being human. And it may entail many different kinds of feelings or behavior.
So, there's different kinds of grief. First one is bereavement. This is the state that you're in, that you go through after a loved one dies.

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So, this is where my extended family and I have been these last few months. And it's a period of mourning, but it isn't necessarily a specific time period. Long ago, the period of mourning was defined by cultural norms, like by practices such as wearing a black arm band.
[4:42] And just so other people are aware of what you've been through. And it was a non-verbal sign to say, like, I've had something really bad happen to me.

Go easy on me. Oh, just as an aside, did any of you see that amazing interview between Anderson Cooper and Stephen Colbert a few weeks ago? I'm like, oh, you know what?
After church, go home and Google it. I have watched it on repeat several times these last few weeks. Harvey and I asked Harvey about it afterwards. He had some really good thoughts on it. But one of the things that both of these famous men lost someone early in life. They both lost their dads very early. And then they both lost siblings tragically. And one of the things that really grabbed me is what Anderson Cooper said.
He said, I wish that I had a scar that's unavoidable, that's running down the side of my face, so people could be aware of my inner anguish. Very interesting.
[5:42] So our next one is anticipatory grief. And that's just what it sounds like. It refers to a feeling of grief before an impending loss. So typically the impending loss is the death of someone close to you due to illness.

It's the beginning of the end in our minds. So Elizabeth Kugler-Ross, we'll come back to her in a few minutes, she said this, anticipatory grief is generally more silent than grief after a loss.
We're often not as verbal. It's a grief we keep to ourselves. We want little active intervention. There is little or no need for words. It's much more a feeling that can be comforted by the touch of a hand or silently sitting together.
Most of the time, in grief we are focused on loss in the past, but in anticipatory grief, we occupy ourselves with the losses ahead. Next one, fancy word, disenfranchised grief.
And so simply put, this is a grief that is not acknowledged readily by society. And I am willing to bet that every person in this room can identify with this in some way.
[6:54] Maybe it's the loss of a job, a marriage, or a chronic but not curable health condition. Maybe it's the desire to marry, but yet that person has never come along.

Or maybe it's something that society does not fully understand, like a loved one dying to suicide or to drug overdose. So disenfranchised grief presents some complications that are not always there in other grieving processes.
The griever might be angry or more depressed because they can't fully express themselves. Secondly, disenfranchised grief means that society does not recognize the death or loss. Therefore, the griever does not receive social support and can become isolated. Well, supporting somebody through disenfranchised grief, it's really important to acknowledge and validate their loss and grief.
I found some really good questions that people have asked me are what does this loss mean to you? What does it represent? Being able to name something is really important.
[8:01] And I found when I learned of this concept, I don't know, maybe two or three years ago, I was utterly relieved is that as some of you know, some of us were in an adoption process to adopt a little girl internationally that went on for years.

And then suddenly and unexpectedly, the program collapsed and with one signature, Mr. and Mrs. Unger, you're done here. And it was really upsetting. I just felt it in my chest for months, if not years. But then to be able to, there was a wise older lady here that was able to really help us through that, to be able to ask us those questions. What does this represent? What does this mean to you? And then you have a chance at healing, which we're very much in the process of doing. Then we come to complicated grief.
So this is something that happens when your ability to move through normal, and I say it like this because I don't know what normal is, grieving process, prolonged by maladaptive behaviors, maybe obsessive thoughts, or uncontrollable feelings.
[9:05] It is a chronic, heightened state of mourning. So mourning on steroids, perhaps, would be a way to frame it. Many of the symptoms of complicated grief are the same as acute grief, what one might experience right after a loss, but they're typically more intense, and they last longer.

So some examples could be maybe an extreme focus on the loss and reminders of a loved one, problems accepting the death, numbness or detachment, depression or sadness, trouble carrying

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out normal, everyday activities, or feeling that life holds no meaning or purpose.
So if one has not begun, notice I say begun, to adjust to their new normal around maybe the year mark after a big loss, maybe you have complicated grief, and it might not be a bad thing to talk to a grief counselor or a wise older person.
So, you might wonder, what is the history of grief? Obviously, it's been here as long as there's been humans, but there's, believe it or not, been more of a scientific study in this last century.
So, complicated grief has been acknowledged at the very beginnings of scientific study of grief. So, Freud, in his 1917 paper, this is the earliest I can find, he wrote one called On Mourning and Melancholia.
[10:31] So, it's often viewed as one of the earliest and defining contributions to the study of grief. I think that Freud's important work here is that he attempted to differentiate the normal process of mourning from a more complicated variant, that of melancholia, or what we would now today characterize as a major depressive disorder.

Then, in 1969, many of you will be familiar with this, we have Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who was a Swiss psychiatrist, who wrote a groundbreaking book entitled On Death and Dying.
I'm sure that many of you have read that. She first introduced and explored the now famous idea of the five stages of dealing with death in this particular case.
So, the first one, as we can see, is denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and then finally, acceptance. Now, over the years, she's taken an awful lot of heat for this theory.
Some people have understood her work to mean that people go through stages linearly, whereas that's not, I believe, what she meant. She herself would say that not everyone moves through these stages one after another, and in fact, not everyone even goes through every stage.
[11:51] Personally, I found her model really helpful, and her book entitled On Grief and Grieving that she wrote with David Kessler just before her death has been by far one of the best resources that I've come across.

I use it with Framework all the time to talk to my dad and to extended family members just about where are we in this process? It just gives us some shape. Now, over the years, other theories have emerged, many which have transitioned from the concept of stages to tasks.
So just for fun, Google grief theories, and you'll see how many there are out there. But I think that William Warden's work entitled Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy is also really helpful.
It describes the four tasks of mourning. Warden suggests that there are four tasks that one must accomplish for the process of mourning to be completed and for equilibrium to be reestablished.
He makes it clear that these are in no particular order, though there is some natural order in that completion of tasks, presupposed completion of another task. So he acknowledges that people may need to revisit certain tasks over time, that grief is not linear, and that it is difficult to determine a timeline for completing these tasks.
[13:08] I can see it on your faces. Lynn, what are the tasks of mourning? So here we are. So the first one is to accept the reality of the loss.

So typically what this could mean, maybe you're planning a funeral, maybe you're getting used to talking about your loved one in past tense. The second one, to work through the pain of grief, from sadness, fear, loneliness, despair, hopelessness, all of these human emotions.
But basically what's important in this task is acknowledging, talking about, and understanding these complex emotions in order to work through them.
I think the best phrase here would be just get curious about them. When you feel these things, don't push them down. What are they trying to tell you? So number three, to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.
So I'm watching my dad go through this right now, is that my mom and he had pink and blue roles in their marriage, if you will. It seemed to work for them. My dad was a cattle rancher, worked outside, took care of that.
[14:16] My mom, the house was her domain. And so now my dad has to learn a lot of those just basic skills about how do I cook and how do I clean clothes. He's doing great, by the way. So number four, is to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life.

And I've also heard this task, or this entitled, maybe moving from presence to memory. Someone, my brain thinks in pictures and someone recently illustrated this point beautifully for me.

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He told me about his sibling's tragic death and his struggle to embark on a new life, in Warden's words, in the aftermath. So he said, I keep one foot firmly planted in the past.
I'm not going to forget my brother. But I keep my other foot firmly planted in the present and I turn my face towards the sunshine. I thought that was very well put.
However, I think my favorite grief model is the one that somebody told me about in conversation. She said that in her experience, there's really only two stages of grief. very, very bad and then not as bad.
[15:30] And I love the honesty and the simplicity of that. So, here's just a few thoughts on the hard work of grief. Grief takes time.

It can't be rushed. Stages, as we know, are not linear. Each stage has its own length and each of us will be different. There's no right or wrong way to do this.
So, now we move on to our biblical examples of grief. So, the verse that gets, the shortest verse in the Bible is Jesus wept.
So, the context of this is at the death of his friend Lazarus. This is what scriptures say. When Jesus saw her, Mary, weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.
Where have you laid him? He asked. Come and see, Lord, they replied. Jesus wept. Next, we see in the Gospels the account of Jesus' sorrow and grief over Jerusalem.
[16:35] Here's his words. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those who sent you. How often have I longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings?

But you would have none of it. Now, we'll skip over to the Old Testament for an example. This is David's grief in response to an anticipated loss.
So, a story from the Old Testament. The child that resulted from the unfaithfulness of David and Bathsheba became ill. In anticipation of what might happen and the losses that could occur, this is what the scriptural account is.
David therefore pleaded with God for the child. David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. The elders of his house stood beside him urging him to rise from the ground, but he would not and he did not eat food with them.
Sounds like symptoms of grief. And finally, we see God himself grieving in response to the rebellion of people. So here in Genesis, a few chapters before, we see God's delight in the creation of world and people and then rebellion.
[17:45] And here's the account of that. And the Lord was sorry he had made humankind on earth and it grieved his heart. So these examples are by no means exhaustive.

I just wanted to show you that the grief about varied things is very much a part of the biblical record. And in our discussion time, I know that you'll have many more examples. So it's important to note that these passages, they're not prescriptive.
They don't tell us how we must grieve, but they do illustrate that grief is a typical human experience. And I chose some of these passages because it reminded me that we are image bearers of a God who also experiences grief.
So grief and loss from a Christian perspective. We're in church this morning. In 1 Thessalonians 4.13, the Apostle Paul says this, But we do not want you to be uninformed brothers and sisters about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others who have no hope.
Now there are several theologians in this room that can shed light on this, and I hope you do during our discussion time. But as far as I can see, the key distinction between Christian and non-Christian grief is the presence of hope.
[19:05] If there is hope, a confidence in the future and in Christ himself, who is with us in the midst of grief, we will respond differently than if hope was absent.

This is one of my favorite quotes that I found by our own Ross Hastings. Thank you, Harvey, for the recommendation on that book. It's excellent. It's called Where Do Broken Hearts Go?
Russell Ross says, At the heart of the gospel is a loving, trying God who we can go, specifically, a Father of compassion who embraces us, a Son who entered into the heart of our pain and brokenness, who gathers up sorrow and presents them to the Father, and at the same time comes to us by His presence within and among us in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.
Isn't that well put? Then, of course, we come to the Psalms, immensely helpful to a grieving person.

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The Psalm gives language to the cries of our hearts. And I'm only touching briefly on this because, shameless plug, St. John's is about to embark on a nine-week study on grief and it's going to be centered on nine different Psalms.
[20:17] So if you're interested in that, take a look in the bulletin or on the website or talk to me later about that. But here's a few that have been really helpful to me personally.

I'm a woman of simplicity so I always think that the best Psalm is the one that you know and Psalm 23 is one for those of us who've grown up in the church that a lot of us have memorized.
So I find that sometimes during grief, your mind wants to ruminate and worry. And I find that if you can ruminate, so to speak, on this instead, wow, does that make a difference?
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why? Presence of our God is with us. And I love Psalm 27.
This has always been one of my favorites and I think it's because it lifts our eyes higher than ourselves at our own grief. This is what part of it says. One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple.
[21:24] Isn't that beautiful? Okay, so I told you this was field notes and I just want to tell, I want to share with you and I want you to add to the discussion, what are some things that I've observed thus far in this grieving process of seven months or so?

Oh, the first one is the preciousness of Emmanuel, the God who is with us and we are never alone in our joys or sorrows and I'm very slowly learning to embrace what it means to be the implications of being yoked together with Christ is He's doing the lion's share of the work but I'm joining Him in it and most importantly with that image I think is the image of Him standing beside me and whatever we're facing that day, we can say, Jesus, what are you and I going to do together about this?
The second thing is I found it incredibly helpful to view my circumstances through the lens of what I know to be true about God. Once again, my brain thinks in pictures and so this one from Deuteronomy has always been very precious and more so in these last seven months.
Deuteronomy 33, 27 says this, the eternal God is your refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms and I love that picture in all seasons of life but I think especially in grief because sometimes it feels like the bottom is going to drop out on you but that is not the truth of the situation is that those everlasting, those eternal arms are holding you.
So the other thing that I thought is kind of interesting and I want to hear more from you about this too is that what has been helpful in grief? I think the biggest thing is just people coming alongside and simply being with us.
[23:19] Oh friends, we do God's work when we show up for each other. I've so appreciated just little handwritten notes, casseroles, and those who just push past the awkwardness and aren't afraid of saying something wrong, just, yeah, just come talk to me.

Come talk to your friends. The second one is the sharing of stories. I just, oh, I love this. What has been helpful in your grief?
It's a precious story and I genuinely want to know. Now the maternal part of me here wants to stop and say, but when you do share your story, make sure that's in a place with people who have earned the right to hear it and are going to handle it appropriately.
Your heart matters. That's just my little maternal piece about that. But the best image I have for grief came from a woman in our apartment building who heard about my mom's death.
She simply said, oh Lynn, I am sorry to hear about your mom. When I lost my dad a few years ago, I felt like I'd been caught in a rainstorm without an umbrella.
[24:24] Oh, I feel like I've been caught in a rainstorm without an umbrella. It just, her vulnerability was really helpful to me and it gave me the words and the picture to frame exactly some of the things that I had been feeling.

So the next thing is worship and gratitude. I think that the last time I was invited to speak at Learner's Exchange, I think it was about six years ago, and I remember speaking about the importance of training our eyes to see the way that God is at work in the world around us and then to be able to record those things and write them down.
And I'm so grateful for the simple spiritual practice that I've been doing almost daily for about nine years now is that even when times feel really dark, your eyes have now been trained to look for God's provision in small, even in small ways and to be able to offer that back in thanksgiving for

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him, to him.
And I think it's just once again, as Psalm 27, it's a way to lift our eyes off ourselves. And finally, the best thing that's helped in grief, go do something for someone else.
Yeah. Yeah. Totally. There's no better way to lessen your own grief than to jump in and see where there's a need and fill it in a big or a small way. So, my last section of my field notes is what's been surprising about grief and what do I wish someone would have told me?
[25:55] I think the first thing is, oh, just hit the answer. Just hit the answer. Okay. I'm sure, trusty, that'll come back. My trusty assistant here will help me find it.

But yeah, what do I find surprising about grief or what do I wish that someone would have told me? What hard work it is. Like, my goodness, it is so physical. And in those first months, I was just physically exhausted and I was in REM sleep by 9 p.m.
Although my daughter did say to me, Mom, you're always in bed by 9 p.m. But I was actually sleeping by 9. I found that my memory also took a hit. I've always really been proud of the fact that I can remember a lot of information and be able to spit it back out.
However, maybe it'll come back, but it's temporarily. There is just chunks of stuff that I don't remember. And the second thing that I'm very surprised by, and we're very much in the middle of working through right now, is the impact that the loss of a person has on the family system.
The best way that I can illustrate this, and this is, once again, so mid-process, but the best way I can think of it is like a mobile that's hanging over, say, a baby's crib.
[27:10] Do you know what I'm talking about? Little things are hanging over it. And I think of my mom as a bluebird because she always loved birds, and she was more weighted than the rest of us.

And what I mean by that is not more important, but more weighted. Some things that you don't realize in life become very apparent in death, is that how we orbited as an extended family around her.
So when that bluebird flies away, so to speak, the mobile snaps backwards, and we're all just kind of dangling, and we haven't quite figured out who we are and what our roles are in this new reality. It's a loss and a gaining of an identity. It just blows my mind daily that I'm now the matriarch. I feel very much responsible.
I know that I'm not, actually, but for the well-being of our extended family in ways that I didn't have to before because my mom did it. So I'm just very much kind of stumbling through that role at the moment.
[28:15] You might wonder what's been unhelpful. Personally, I have found any phrase that begins with the words at least, and I know I've done this in the past and I want to strike it off out of my vocabulary this much forward.

At least she died quickly. At least you didn't have to watch her suffer for long. At least she didn't have to die young. All 100% true, and I'm so grateful for those things. I thank the Lord repeatedly that I wasn't a teenager when this happened.
And I totally understand where that's coming from in another person. They're trying to connect you and comfort you. But I think, once again, it's just far better to just push through the awkwardness, say the wrong thing if necessary, but just be with the person.
Just once. Okay, just once. Okay. So, here's our last... Oh. Perfect. Our last slide. Or not.
Okay. So, I will read it to you. I really would like you to see it, though. I want this to be up while we're having discussion. Krista will see what you can do. So, it's 2 Corinthians 1, 3 to 5.
[29:29] It's about the comfort we receive from God. I just want to say publicly that God has comforted us, and it's the same God that whatever circumstance you're in can do the same thing for you.

So, this is what it says. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort that we ourselves have received from God.
For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. It's okay, guys. That's fine. Okay.
Thank you very much. That's the formal parts, and Harvey's going to come up and lead us in some discussion.

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