

# When Grief Enters Your Door



By Paul David Tripp

I'll never forget those grief-stricken eyes—sad, hollow, distant. She watched helplessly as her husband's life withered away. He was a good man, in his early forties, father of two children, and committed to Christ, family, and ministry. Her husband's dying pushed her to the borders of her faith. What good, what love, what meaning could she find in the death of this young husband and father? How could God let this happen?

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A father sobbed as he told of arriving at an accident scene to see his daughter's lifeless body lying twisted on the hot summer pavement. His voice quivered with emotion, distorted by the shocking illogic of death. His wife had taken their three children to the community pool for an afternoon of fun. They finished their swim and crossed the road to get to their car. Suddenly, their precious three-year-old daughter yanked away from her mom's hand and darted into the street. A speeding SUV struck and killed her. Their lives would never be the same.

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I looked at my mother in her hospital bed; her body ravaged by age and disease. She had been so vibrant, so strong, so alive. Now, her frail body lay in a tangle of tubes. The incessant hum of life support machines drowned out her weak breaths. Helplessly we watched death take her, defying all the technology that tried to keep her alive. We held her lifeless hand and pushed the hair off her forehead. We kissed her cheek and straightened her sheet. We acted as if she were there. We simply didn't know how else to act.

We had so much unfinished business with her. But we would have no more conversations. No more phone calls. No more visits. No more anything. We were left with a warehouse of both fond and painful memories and a collection of faded photographs.

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The Bible isn't arranged in topics. We can't go to the section on grief and collect what we need to get through life's darkest moments. Yet the Bible, God's great story of redemption, has much to say about your story of grief. This article will imbed your story of loss in the larger story of God's plan to fix everything that sin so cruelly broke.

This article has two principal sections:

first, what to *think* when death enters your door; and second, what to *do* when death enters your door. Yes, the story of your loss is precious and unique, utterly unlike anyone else's suffering. My purpose is not to squeeze you into a "one size fits all" mold, but to help you see how the general themes of *God's* story speak with power to what *you* face in the death of a loved one. Only one Person can pick you up in your darkness and carry you into the light.

### ***Thinking your Way through Death's Darkness***

#### **1. You Cannot Prepare for Death**

Whether death results from a sudden accident, or from a progressive and predicted illness, it always catches us unprepared.

Scripture includes many poignant and personal stories about God's people. These stories read with the familiar drama of real life in a fallen world. The people in the Bible are like us. They feel what we feel. Their world operates in the same broken way ours does.

One such story tells about Absalom, David's son. Absalom and his army plotted to take over David's throne. When David's army successfully crushed the rebellion, Absalom was killed—even though David had ordered that he be taken alive. David reacted with profound grief when he heard of Absalom's death.

The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said, "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33)

David speaks the cries of every father confronted with news of his child's death. No matter how unexpected or how predictable, death shakes us to the core. There is simply no way to be prepared.

Death's pain is inescapable. You will hurt. You will grieve. Don't feel guilty or embarrassed that you face this storm seemingly unprepared. There simply is no way to prepare for what you are now going through. But just knowing this may help you.

#### **2. Death Was Not Part of God's Original Plan**

We all feel death's wrenching finality. Death is so wrong, so out of place, so completely out of step with life as God planned it that the

apostle Paul could think of no better word for it than "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:25, 26). Death is the living enemy of everything that is good and beautiful about life as God planned it. Death should make you morally sad and righteously mad. Death is a cruel indicator that the world is broken and not functioning according to God's original design. In his plan, life was to give way to life, giving way to life on into eternity.

It is biblical to treat death as the sad, unnatural thing that it actually is. God encourages you to mourn. Death was simply not meant to be. When you recognize this, you will hunger for the complete restoration of all things. You will long to live with our Lord in a place where the last enemy—death—has been defeated.

#### **3. You are Never Alone in the Darkness**

The experience of loss is powerful. The circumstances around death are individual and unique. It is quite normal to feel as if no one has been through what you now experience. People surround you, yet you feel like you are all by yourself. Feelings of separation and alienation accompany grief.

The sadness of losing a loved one is a universal experience. A company of fellow mourners surrounds you. Their lives have also been touched by the deeply personal pain of death. Yet there is an even more powerful way in which you are not alone. Your Savior has taken the name, Emmanuel, or "God with us." This name reminds us that, as you came to Christ, you literally *became* the place where God dwells. You have a powerful Brother, Savior, and Friend who not only stands beside you, but resides within you. That hope will help you make it through your pain.

Psalm 88 says, "You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend" (v.18). Psalm 88 begins and ends in darkness and isolation. Where is hope in the hopeless cry of this psalm? Psalm 88 gives us hope in our grief precisely because it has no hope in it. God understands the darkness that we face. He is right there in it with us. He is "an ever-present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). The Lord of light is your friend in darkness. The Lord of life stands beside you in death. The Lord of hope is your companion in your most hopeless moment. The Prince of

Peace supports you when no peace can be found. The God of comfort waits faithfully near you. The Source of all joy is your nearest friend when death has robbed your joy.

#### **4. Ultimate Bad Meets Ultimate Good in the Gospel**

Is death a bad thing? Yes. But Scripture tells us the brightest of good things can be found right in the middle of the darkest of bad things.

The cross most powerfully demonstrates this. On the hill of death, outside the city walls, the best thing ever came out of the worst thing ever. Peter says this about Christ's death: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him on the cross" (Acts 2:23).

What could be sadder or more wicked than the killing of the Messiah? What could be more unjust than the illegal trial and execution of the one perfect person who ever lived? What could be a greater injustice than to torture the One who came to free us from death? Peter says

Your Lord is present in this darkness. He planned that the darkest of things would result in redemptive good for His children. He surrendered his Son to death so that you could have life. He will not abandon you in this moment of darkness.

#### **5. There is More to Life**

Every time someone dies, it reminds those watching that God's work is not yet complete. Because of sin, death entered the world. Only when sin is finally and completely defeated, will death no longer be part of the equation. Paul talks about Christ's present ministry: "For He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:25, 26). Christ died that we would no longer have to die. He rose again so that death would be put to death. Every time someone dies, it reminds us that death still lives. Every death brings us the promise that Christ brings a resurrection once and forever. Through Christ, death has been defeated. One day, life will no longer give way to death. Children will

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that the death of Christ was an evil thing done by evil men, the ultimate bad thing done to the ultimate good person.

But Peter says more. He says that God delivered up Jesus for his own "set purpose." This very bad moment was under God's control. He planned from the beginning to use the worst thing to do the best thing ever done for humanity. In this dark moment, God conquered both sin and death—two enemies we could never defeat on our own. On that cross of death, ultimate bad and ultimate good embraced.

In the same way, God often brings the most lasting and wonderful things out of the darkest moments in our lives. Sometimes the passage of one of God's children into death preaches the gospel in more powerful ways than the life of the person ever could. Sometimes in the shadow of an imminent death, feuding family members make long-overdue peace with one another. Sometimes a funeral brings closure to things that would never have been closed in any other way.

not mourn their parents. Parents will not mourn their children. There will be no widows, no shocking announcements of death, no grieving friends. Yes, death is an enemy. But this enemy will die. Christ's present reign guarantees this. One day, life will give way to life, and life will give way to life in eternity.

As you weep in grief, know this: the One who weeps with you is not content for things to remain as they are. His death was a cry and His resurrection a promise. As the living Christ, He will continue to exert His power and you will grieve no more.

#### **6. Grieve in a New and Different Way**

God has not chosen to remove us from this fallen world where death is a daily reality. For our good and for His glory, He has chosen to have us remain here. Because of this, grief will touch each of us. Though we grieve, we grieve in a different way than those who do not know this Lord.

In times of death, a Christian should be sadder than anyone else. We know how sin

brought death into the world. We mourn not only for the loved one we have lost, but also for the fact that death continues to destroy! We live in a place where something that was never meant to be has become a common experience. We know how wonderful life on earth could have been.

Yet in times of death, we should be the most hopeful of any who mourn. God brings the best of things out of the worst of things. Even in the darkest moments, we are never alone. The death and resurrection of Christ stand as a sure and reliable promise that someday death will die.

God doesn't call you to stifle your grief. He doesn't call you to put on a happy face when you are crushed with grief. He doesn't want you to hide behind religious clichés and theological platitudes. God approves of your tears! But He welcomes you to look at death through the eyes of Christ. The comfort and hope He provides does not remove your grief, but allows you to grieve in a brand new way. And He promises one day to take you to a place where you will never cry again.

our hope in Christ.

### **1. Speak with Honest Emotion**

The Bible is honest about the sorrows of life in this fallen world. God welcomes you to be honest as well. The psalms capture examples of such honesty. Psalms 13, 22, 38, 42, 55, 59, 61, 73, and 88 all record God's people bringing their honest grief, questions, and complaints to the Lord. Perhaps you are in a place where you are confused or even angry with God. You want to complain about His sovereignty. It is an act of faith to speak that complaint to Him in the pattern of these psalms. Your faith in God should never silence you in the dark hours of your grief. Rather, it is in these very moments that we begin to understand how deep, rich, and sturdy God's love for us really is. He will not turn away from your questions. He will not be surprised by your grief. He will not be repulsed by your anger. He will not turn His back on your pain. He understands the darkest moments of human existence. He enters those moments with boundless mercy, unending love, and amazing grace.

The psalms record the cries of God's people. "For the Lord has heard my weeping"

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## The psalms invite us to bring our grief to the One who cares for us more than anyone ever would or could.

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### ***Walking your Way through Death's Darkness***

I look forward to each new day and its possibilities. But, this day was an exception. It was the day of my mother's memorial service. I dreaded this particular morning. I dreaded the finality of this day. I dreaded the many painful conversations of consolation with people gathered at the service. Yes, I knew that people meant well. Their words would be kind and well intentioned. Her death resurrected painful memories in my relationship with her that could never be shared. How would I make it through the day?

Death is never easy. It is emotionally volatile and unpredictable. It is painful in unexpected ways. Death opens up closed memories. Death brings some people together and drives others apart. Death begins some things and ends others. Death mixes happiness with sadness. But we can act in ways that show

(Ps. 6:8).<sup>1</sup> The psalms invite us to bring our grief to the One who cares for us more than anyone ever would or could. God will never turn a deaf ear to the cries of His children. No cry is too anguished for His ears. He listens. He answers.

### **2. Run to Where Comfort Can Be Found**

Grievers seek comfort. But where do they find it? The Bible reminds us that all true comfort has its source in the Lord (2 Cor. 1:3, 4). In times of grief, we often seek out other comforters: memories, material things, distractions (TV, CD player, exercise, reading, crafts, work, food, even other people). All of these provide some measure of comfort at different times, but none of them can fill the one place where grief causes us to feel so empty, our hearts. Only one Person can provide the

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<sup>1</sup> See also Psalm 34:15; 40:1; and 55:22.

comfort that restores your heart—the source of all-true comfort, Jesus Christ. He knows your pain. He went through death Himself. He is able to touch you where you most need to be touched, in your heart. In all the things you do to get yourself through the shock and grief of the loss of a loved one, don't forget to run to the one place where true comfort can be found. He will always hear. He is committed to comforting you.

### 3. Resist Grief's Temptations

When you grieve, you are vulnerable to temptations you would normally resist. The enemy of your soul hits in your weakest moments. He does his evil work in the darkness. He targets strugglers. In times of loss and grief, look out for these temptations:

- **Doubt.** When you are shocked and dismayed at the death of someone you dearly love, it can be tempting to doubt God's goodness, mercy, faithfulness, and love. You don't *feel* loved. You don't *feel* like you are the object of God's goodness. You cry for mercy, but you don't see mercy. When you grieve, it is easy to lose sight of what God is actually doing. Wander down into a dark, windowless basement. The door accidentally locks behind you. You can't see any light or feel the sun's warmth. Did the light stop shining? No. Powerful feelings of grief get in the way of our experience of God's goodness. Do not give way to doubts of God's goodness. Hold on to your belief in His love and mercy more than ever before.
- **Anger.** Death should make you angry. The effects of sin still touch each of us. But be careful that anger at death doesn't degenerate into anger with God. In the face of things they do not understand, in the middle of questions that no one can honestly answer, many people bring God into the court of their judgment. Resist giving way to anger. Anger blinds you to God's ever-present help.
- **Envy.** Death often makes us feel you have been singled out for particular suffering. You sometimes wish you could switch lives with someone else. But that

is dangerous. Envy is rooted in a personal and heartfelt disappointment with God. "You didn't give me what I wanted!" In envy, you are less able to deal with your loss in biblically constructive ways.

- **Self-pity.** In your pain, you are tempted to move God out of the center of your life. Life becomes all about you. No one's loss is as great as your loss. No one's pain is as great as your pain. You give yourself to a level of self-pity and self-absorption that you wouldn't have tolerated before. This is how you feel, but resist setting aside those two great commands: love God, love others.

### 4. Seek God's Resources

God likens the church to a physical body of interconnected and interdependent parts. He reminds us that life is a community project. In times of grief, it is tempting to turn inside yourself and avoid the community of help around you. You can't bear to hear one more heartfelt condolence or have yet another conversation where you describe how you are doing. Paul tells us we should "bear one another's burdens" precisely because he knows that we will all hit times when the burden is too heavy to carry alone (Gal. 6:2). In these moments, remember:

- Cry out in weakness and ask for help from others. God never expected you to do this on your own. This does not show a lack of faith.
- God promised to provide what you need to face the things that He has called you to face.
- Those who help you will in turn be helped *through* helping you.

### 5. Look for Blessings in Your Grief

Paul tells the Thessalonian Christians to "Give thanks *in* all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18). That preposition "*in*" is important. Paul may be saying, "Even in the hardest of life's moments, God calls you to look for His grace, to search for His love, and to expect His mercy." Don't let grief rob you of worship. Don't let sadness permit a complaining spirit to replace a

thankful heart.

No, God doesn't expect you to jump up and down for joy when you lose someone close and precious. But He has promised to never leave you. You will find blessings in the middle of your grief. Perhaps it will be someone's love and support. Perhaps it will be financial provision. Perhaps a confusing decision becomes clearer. Perhaps it will be precious family moments. Perhaps it will be a sense of His presence and help in a moment of particular struggle. Maybe the wisdom of His Word guides and clarifies just when you need it most. Perhaps your relationship with the Lord deepens. Death has a way of clarifying truth for us. In times of death, we clearly see how weak and needy we are, and we gain a deeper understanding of God's precious and powerful grace. We learn to seek Him in ways we never have before. Spiritual growth begins in the middle of sadness and grief.

### **6. Rely on Your Spiritual Habits**

Sometimes grief is so powerful it feels like you have died too. It is hard to live without the person you lost. But by God's grace you live on because God has chosen for you to do so. There is meaning and purpose still ahead for you. Maybe in your grief it is hard to read God's Word, to be in a worship service, or to sing hymns. These things don't do very much for you now. But, remember, though you are surrounded by death, you still live. Your soul needs to be fed. Your heart needs to be encouraged. Don't quit. Don't give up. Don't let go of the good habits of faith that shaped and strengthened your relationship with Christ before your loss.

### **7. Celebrate Eternity**

One wonderful thing about the story of redemption is that God has let us in on the ending. We know that death and all the suffering and grief that accompany it *will* die. There is glorious life after death when God will dry your last tear and you will have no reason to cry ever again. In time, the light of God's eternal glory your life will flood your life. You will never face death again.

Your tears are not only tears of grief; they are also tears of longing. All of us experience this longing when we are cast into the darkness of death. We long for a better place, a place where life never ends in death. The Bible gloriously

reassures us that our longing is not in vain. (See 1 Cor. 15; Rev. 7:9-17.) The story that began in an eternity that had no death in it will end in an eternity that has no death in it. Because you know how the story is going to turn out, your grief in this moment can be tempered by hope. You can grieve with one eye on your present loss and one eye on your future. Yes, you will still miss your loved one greatly. You will feel the stinging pain of loss. But your pain does not have to give way to discouragement, depression, and desperation. Even this moment of pain can be colored by your hope.

Leave room in your tears for little quiet moments of celebration. The darkness of death will someday end forever. In your present sadness, let your eyes gaze on the future. Let your heart have moments of gladness, knowing the beauty of what is to come.

### **8. Give Away the Comfort You Have Been Given**

Listen to what Paul says about the comfort that God's gives us.

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 we ourselves have received from God. (2 Cor. 1:3, 4)

The comfort God has given you is not only His loving ministry to you; it is His call to you to minister to others. You have experienced the powerful pain of loss. But, you have also begun to experience the comfort that only the Lord can give. You know how easy it is in your grief to give way to doubt, anger, envy, and fear. You know how easy it is to isolate yourself and to want to give up. You know that in the face of the death of a loved one it is easy to lose your way. You also know the things that God gave you to give you help, hope, comfort, and strength.

God now calls you to give this comfort to others. Who near you is discouraged? Who near you is tempted to quit? Who is struggling to hold on to hope? Who is dealing with the pain of loss or disappointment? Who is struggling with problems so large that they can't see God? You are God's agent of help and hope. God entered into your darkness, not just to give your heart

rest, but so you would be able to give that rest to others.

### ***Seeing Light in the Darkness***

It's hard to find words that do justice to what you are now going through. Few things we face in this broken world are more difficult than death. Yet, in the darkness, you can see and experience the brightest light of God's truth. In death, you experience the damage that sin has caused. But in death, you can celebrate the new life that the Savior has given. In death, you can come to appreciate Emmanuel's constant presence. In death, your eyes can begin to see the hope that God will give you the resources to

face what He leads you through. In death, you can be touched by a desire to help others. Finally, in death, you can celebrate the end of the story in a way you have never celebrated it before. Death will someday die, and that is cause for rejoicing!

May you look through this moment of darkness and see Christ's light. Even though you are the saddest you have ever been, receive the rest and comfort that only He can give. May He give you the grace to think about this dark moment in distinctly biblical ways. May you respond to it with the hope, surety, and courage of faith.