

Loss and our Christian faith

The Bible assures us that we have God's presence and assurance in the midst of our suffering, and that He knows and understands pain and grief. Often people who are bereaved find comfort in familiar prayers and psalms. Likewise, what we need is a glimpse of God's Word that really does shine some light in the darkness. To worship in the midst of pain is perhaps the most precious form of worship. By this we reaffirm our status as God's children even as the loss invades our spirits. Psalms 137 and 138 show the long slow journey that is faith in bereavement.

'The LORD is close to the broken-hearted.'

Psalm 34:18

A BRIEF INSIGHT INTO

BEREAVEMENT

Understanding Bereavement

Introduction

A wide range of different experiences of loss trigger a bereavement journey. Loss may involve the traumatic death of a loved one, the end of a marriage, the stillbirth of a longed-for child, the loss of home or livelihood. In the experience of the loss of another, we are all faced with our own loss and our own mortality. In the case of a loss through death, the Bible asks us to view death as a bridge to something better. It reminds us that our times are in God's hands (Psa. 31:15). We do not know exactly what will happen beyond death. We know that we will stand before Jesus and will give some account of ourselves to Him.

What is bereavement and loss?

Bereavement is to be robbed of something – usually of things such as life and hope. It is to be left desolate and deprived. Loss is the action or experience that caused bereavement. Grief, by comparison, is deep or violent sorrow, a keen regret. Bereavement, loss and grief can be caused by anything that constitutes *change*.

We each react to any kind of loss in ways that are uniquely personal. Each individual's experience of loss will be unique. In each situation, grieving and bereavement will follow. The longer a marriage has been enjoyed, the harder that tearing apart can be – through death or divorce. Untimely or unexpected death – miscarriage, stillbirth, suicide, accident or murder – brings with it a greater element of shock and misplacement.

CWR Applying God's Word
to everyday life and relationships

ISBN 978-1-85345-640-4



9 781853 456404

Copyright © 2011 CWR. Published by CWR, Waverley Abbey House, Waverley Lane, Farnham, Surrey GU9 8EP, UK. Registered Charity No. 294387. Registered Limited Company No. 1990308. www.cwr.org.uk

This material is adapted from *Insight into Bereavement* by Wendy Bray and Diana Priest. Bible version used: The Holy Bible: New International Version (NIV), copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society.

CWR

How loss and bereavement may affect us

- Initially we may feel numb, or even experience an alarming sense of indifference.
- Simple things can become enormously complicated.
- Weeping: This is a healthy and often necessary response to our grief.
- Yearnings and imaginings may cause us to believe we have seen or heard the lost person.
- A sense of failure, especially after divorce.
- Sleeplessness and overwhelming tiredness: Normal sleep patterns generally return in time.
- Panic attacks: Having company to do simple chores until confidence returns will help.
- Idealising: A tendency to see only the positives about the deceased person.
- A sense of social exclusion: We may believe we don't 'fit' into the world of couples, happy families, or ordinary life.

We may experience any combination of: unbelief; panic; guilt; sadness; anger; remorse; self-reproach; vengeance; mood swings; fear; regret; frustration; questioning; wondering; pain; bitterness; relief; denial ... If we are able to push through our pain we will cope in the longer term.

The bereavement journey

Grief is hard work. It is slow, demanding, exhausting work that stretches our emotional muscles. It also involves repetitive, often lonely tasks. From journey's start to journey's end we need to work at:

- Accepting the reality of our loss
- Experiencing pain
- Adjusting to life without the person we have lost
- Withdrawing and reinvesting in our life with others

Stages of loss in bereavement

Loss is experienced in three main stages. These are not rigid, and may ebb and flow or overlap at any point. Each stage impacts mind, body, emotions and spirituality. Other types of deep loss may lead to some similar experiences.

Disbelief and protest: Disbelief and shock may involve periods of anger, hurt, upset and fear. We may initially deny it has occurred – a sense of saying 'No' with every part of our mind and body, or a numbness that leads to calmness, or a sense of unreality. This is the point when we need help the most. This first stage of the bereavement journey can continue for some time until we can 'let go' and abandon ourselves to the next necessary stage of loss.

Despair: Despair engages our emotions utterly: sadness, hopelessness, confusion, yearning and longing fill long days and nights. Guilt is common; life loses meaning, and hopelessness and poor self-esteem can be overwhelming. We may experience loss of confidence, withdrawal, preoccupation with the lost person or our own death, excessive tearfulness, loneliness, depression.

Behaviour that links our body and our emotions may be unpredictable, and our tearfulness a constant companion during the despair stage (Psa. 42:3). Deep sighing is an involuntary response of sorrow that our words cannot express. We may focus on our aches, pains and difficulties. This initial period of despair may last some time.

Reorganisation and adjustment

Often there will be movement between stages of the bereavement journey.

Each stage is normal, and we are not 'going mad'. After six months or so friends may assume that we should

be 'over it'. In fact, bereavement may last much longer. Very often we will need to talk *more* at this stage, because we need to give significance to memories: birthdays and anniversaries. Here it is very helpful to develop friendships, old and new, so that we have a number of people to do things with and alongside. We should be cautious about moving onto new things prematurely. For example, if we have lost a partner we can enter into the euphoria of a new relationship too quickly and bypass much of the grieving process only to encounter it later – even much later. This may be our attempt to avoid the pain and agony of the despair phase.

At this point, some Christians will not just 'hang on' to their faith, but will find renewed meaning and relevance in it. The working journey that is bereavement can never be predicted. Most will, however, finish the journey – battered, bruised, but often strangely blessed.

What we need from others while we grieve

We need reliable companionship in our suffering (2 Cor. 1:3–5). These persons will be friends who accept us and our emotions unconditionally. They will not say, 'I know exactly how you feel.' Quite simply, they do not. Wise carers will provide a listening ear and be comfortable with our lengthy periods of silence.

Carers will recognise our need for touch, but ask our permission before taking the initiative in this.

In the early stages of grief, we may need help in completing the necessary paperwork, preparations and informing people.

The helpful carer will be careful not to take control from us. Our accomplishing small tasks can give back a little

of that control we lost when our life was 'turned on its head'. Once the carer has identified and addressed our immediate personal needs, they will encourage us back into a wider support network.

The wise carer will know that being out of our familiar situation for more than a few days doesn't help our grieving process. It may even trigger a stage of denial. Real life will – and must – always beckon 'back there' in our own home.

A thoughtful carer will avoid making us become dependent upon them by allowing us to keep control of our lives. Additionally, the insightful carer will be alert to unhealthy signs: for example, if we become stuck in an earlier stage of grieving.

Rituals of grieving

Contemporary and spontaneous memorials (flowers by the roadside) have largely replaced the traditional and organised ones. However, a funeral service, cremation or thanksgiving service offers the formal ritual needed in which 'goodbyes' can be said. Any unresolved conflict, guilt or regret will need to be brought out into the open and worked with, or grief may become complicated. As bereaved people we do not forget, and we do not really ever come to terms with our loss. Nevertheless, talking about the joys as well as the pain can provide a healing conversation. Photographs and video film provide moments of mixed emotions also.

Lament

Lament can be a healing expression of grief: a song or poem expressing loss. Poetry expresses emotion, so it fits the grieving experience well. This is why many of the psalms provide an expression of *our* feelings.