
What Is The Biblical Way To Grieve According To The Scripture?

Death and loss come to each person at some time or another, no matter our worldview. How we process grief is often dictated by the perspective from which we see the world. As Christians, we “do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope”. This does not mean, however, that we should never grieve. Oftentimes we focus on Bible verses such as “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” and “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice”. Yet when one looks at the whole of Scripture it is clear that grieving is a major theme of the Bible. Over half the Psalms are laments. Yet we do not lament. We avoid it, thinking that, as Christians, we should not feel despair over the losses in our lives. From where did this notion come? For God grieved: “The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled”. Jesus did as well: “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death”. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet. The books of Lamentations and Job are filled with grieving. The Jews have a Wailing Wall! The early Christian Church “divided tears into four types: tears of contrition, tears of sorrow, tears of gladness, and tears of grace”. There is a biblical way to grieve. Examining the Scripture will instruct one on the biblical way to grieve. This paper will consider three passages, two from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament.

Chapter one gives an account of David’s response to the news that Saul, King of Israel, and his son, Jonathan, had been killed in battle. Though Saul had been trying to kill David for 2 years, when his enemy is finally dead, David grieves: “Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them. They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and for the nation of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword”. David composed a lament and commanded his army and all the people of Israel to grieve with him: A gazelle lies slain on your heights, Israel. How the mighty have fallen! Mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain, may no showers fall on your terraced fields. For there the shield of the mighty was despised, the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil. From the blood of the slain, from the flesh of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied. Saul and Jonathan—in life they were loved and admired, and in death they were not parted. They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. David’s reign as Israel’s king begins with this lament. This is his first act as king. Rather than celebrate his rise to the throne, he leads the nation into mourning. In doing so, David gives “to the people he would lead, and to himself, tools to survive, to move on, to go through a necessary rite of passage”. These words of lament bring closure to the past and ready the way for the future. In fact, David does not “just talk about his grief, he expresses it through song”.

One difference between how we grieve today and how David and all of antiquity grieved is that we are removed from the act of death. The family typically prepared the body and readied the grave but presently the professionals have taken over this preparation. “The result is that avenues of grief expression, intimately connected with preparation rituals, have been usurped”. Therefore, we do not fully and completely grieve. We are removed from the acts of death and from the rituals of mourning. As we no longer enter into grief, we no longer come out on the

other side of grief to the newness after it, for “only grief permits newness”. The Jews had several mourning practices that helped them to grieve. They put on sackcloth and ashes, shaved their heads, pulled out their hair, or tore their clothes. This tearing “exposed the heart” and “symbolized the severing of a relationship”. The garment was ruined and could not be repaired, just as the relationship was irrevocably changed. This tearing reminds one of Jesus’ death on the cross when, at the moment of his death, the cloth separating the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place of the temple was torn in two. “God did not say, ‘I hurt.’ God ‘spoke’ through the tearing of the curtain loudly, concisely, and publicly to the world beyond the Divine Self. An examination of grief and loss in the Bible must include a look at the life of Job. For 37 chapters we read of Job’s undeserved suffering and grief. What is more frustrating is that Job never finds out why he suffered so completely and lost everything save his life. He grieves but he does not let his suffering keep him there. Job testifies after all his affliction, “My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you”. John 11 describes the death of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha and dear friend of Jesus. This account gives one a glimpse into how the Jewish culture mourned the loss of a loved one. The first aspect of grief in New Testament times to notice is how the women were weeping with the bereaved sisters. These women likely knew Lazarus when he was alive but they were not wailing because of their own grief. Mary and Martha’s sadness infected them even though they did not share their particular grief. Wright describes it this way: “The process of grief is well and truly launched”.

Next, Jesus does something that is truly remarkable to our Western minds. “Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled... Jesus wept”. Jesus doesn’t sweep into the scene (as we might have supposed, and as later Christians inventing such a story would almost certainly have told us) and declare that tears are beside the point, that Lazarus is not dead, only asleep. Even though, as his actions and words will shortly make clear, Jesus has no doubt what he will do, and what his father will do through him, there is no sense of triumphalism, of someone coming in smugly with the secret formula that will show how clever he is. There is, rather, the man of sorrows, acquainted with our grief and pain, sharing and bearing it to the point of tears.

Scripture points to the proper way to grieve. Science and psychology tell us why it is important to grieve. “Posttraumatic growth was more commonly associated with approach-oriented coping strategies (e.g., active acceptance) than avoidance strategies”. When we grieve in a biblical way we experience positive health outcomes, including reduced depression and lower risk of substance abuse. People can become sick, physically, mentally, and emotionally if they avoid walking through the process of grief. There is a mind-body connection that cannot be denied. When we encounter stress it activates the production of cortisol. This is known as the “fight or flight” response. As this happens our adrenal glands produce adrenaline so that we can either fight the threat or flee the situation. Too much cortisol can predispose a person to infection, bone loss, muscle weakening, and increased insulin production. The problem with avoiding grief is that it puts the body in a chronic state of stress that can lead to a compromised immune system, which opens up the body to disease.

Even the word disease alludes to this phenomenon: dis-ease. When we are not at ease emotionally, we can become subject to disease. What are we to do, then, with our grief? Pete Scazzero, pastor and author, suggests three practical steps. First, pay attention to it. As David did in First Samuel and Jesus did in John 11, we must acknowledge that we are sad and angry rather than denying the grief of our hearts. Second, we wait on the Lord in the confusing in between. As antithetical as it seems, waiting helps us process our grief rather than ignore it.

Finally, we let the old birth the new. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn” because as we pay attention to our grief, God does something in us that can only come through loss. “Very truly I tell you, 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”. “Loss marks the place where self-knowledge and powerful transformation happen—if we have the courage to participate fully in the process”. There is a right way to grieve and this process is not found in books of psychology or in typical western thought. Instead, it is contained in the pages of Scripture and in Jesus’ own words. From David to Job to Jesus we learn how to truly grieve so that our grief produces good fruit in our lives in lieu of problems. “‘Come and see,’ we say to Jesus, as we lead him, all tears, to the place of our deepest grief and sorrow. ‘Come and see,’ he says to us in reply, as he leads us through the sorrow to the place where he now dwells in light and love and resurrection glory”. In order to emerge on the other side of our grief we must go through the sorrow. This is the biblical way to grieve.

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