

Grieving

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- [0 : 0 0] Thank you, Katie. Good evening, everyone. Really good to have you with us tonight. On the back pew of this church, there's a plaque in memory of David McBride.
- Mr. McBride was a very gentle, unassuming man. I don't think I ever heard him taking part publicly in a church service. But every week until a very old age, Mr. McBride would check the heating was on on a Sunday morning.
- He would put the notes of the hymn boards up with the hymn numbers. He would welcome latecomers at the door. He would tidy the books away at the end of the service. And lots and lots of other things that went unseen.
- He was a fine role model to many of us. On Hockman A in 1995, fairly late in the evening, we got a call from Sheila McBride, David McBride's daughter, saying that he had passed away at the age of 101.
- I went over with a number of other close friends. And we sat around and we reflected on a long life that was well lived for the Lord Jesus. We were sad because someone we loved and knew had gone.
- [1 : 0 7] But we were also thankful. Thank you for thankful for a good life, live for the Lord Jesus. Thank you for thankful that its end ended in a fairly straightforward way without a lot of suffering.
- And I think we could identify with what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4, that we don't grieve like the rest of mankind who have no hope.
- But a year and a half before that, we got a call on Sunday morning. The 10-month-old son of a close relative had died in his cot. Bridget and I went with other family to the house.
- And naturally, the parents were distraught. And we were asking, how and why could such a thing happen to a baby who was so loved and had so much potentially before him? And the grief was almost unbearable.
- I think for me, these two deaths represent the extremes of grief that I've witnessed. There was a further family tragedy a few years later, which would also be in that category.
- [2 : 1 6] But it illustrated to me, as I was thinking about this evening, that there's no one experience of grief. Every death is different, and our response to it is different.
- And you can probably think back and think of loved ones or friends that you've lost, and the effect, the impact that it had on you immediately and over time.
- Every death is different. Every experience of grief is different. It depends a bit on how close we were to the person.
- The death of a child or a spouse is probably the most traumatic thing that will happen to many people in their lives.
- But the more distant the relationship or the friendship becomes, the less we are affected by grief on someone's death. It also depends on the circumstances.

[3 : 16] Some people like Mr. McBride go peacefully, having a long life, and we can be thankful for that. Some people are taken suddenly, perhaps in an accident, and there's enormous pain and questioning immediately as a result of it.

Some people die after long and difficult illnesses. And in some ways our grieving has started sometime before, as we knew that they were going to die.

And yet, when the actual moment comes, there is still that great feeling of loss, that we're never going to see them or be able to speak to them again.

Our response probably also depends on ourselves, our own character, and perhaps our own mental health. So everything is different. And even in our own reactions, perhaps they're not always as we would expect.

King David in the Bible lost three sons during his lifetime in quick succession. The first was the son who was born as a result of his adultery with Bathsheba.

[4 : 25] And you remember that Nathan had told David that the son would die. And as the boy, his baby grew very ill, David was inconsolable. He was face down to the ground, praying to God, not eating, and so on.

And when the boy died, his servants were really worried about what would happen. If David was like this when the boy was ill, what would he be like knowing that he had died? But David's response, of course, as you may well remember, is that he got up and he cleaned himself and he got back into a normal situation of living.

Because he recognised that God's will had been done. He had hoped that the boy would live. The boy had died and he accepted that was God's will for him. I'm sure he was very sad, full of grief, but it wasn't what people expected.

The second son who died was Amnon. Now, Amnon had fallen in love with and raped his half-sister Tamar. And another of David's sons, Absalom, then murdered him.

And David's response to that was one of grief, of sorrow, but also of kind of evading things. He hadn't dealt with the original problem with Amnon, nor did he deal with Absalom well after his killing of his brother.

[5 : 46] And that then led to all sorts of problems with Absalom. And he's the third one who died. Absalom rebelled against David, almost took the throne over. David eventually prevailed and Absalom got his head stuck in a tree and Joab put three spears through it to kill him.

And as the people told David about that, perhaps they thought, well, he said not to kill Absalom, but actually he'll be quite pleased that we have. And David was absolutely inconsolable.

He wished that he had died rather than Absalom. Three different experiences in one life in the scriptures. They're fairly close together, probably a few years in practice between them.

Different experiences of death and different reactions from the same person to them. So I think one of the key things I want us all to take away this evening is that every experience of death is different.

And if we're trying to help and support people in the church who are grieving, we need to be very careful with making assumptions about how they'll be. They might well be very different from what we expect.

[7 : 00] And we have in every circumstance to be sensitive to how the person is and to be for the Lord that we may be able to help and support them in the best way possible.

Psychiatrists tell us that there are a number of stages in grieving. I've seen several different lists, but I think this is a reasonable one when the grief is a result of someone dying.

There's often initial numbness, just not being able to quite grasp what's going on. Then there's maybe a time of denial, of disbelief. This can't possibly be happening.

Sometimes there's anger, anger against God. Why does God allow this to happen? Why has God allowed this person to die? Maybe even a bit illogically anger with the person themselves for having died.

There's then sadness, a deep sadness about the person who's gone. And in the end, acceptance of the situation. Not total forgetting about the person, but getting over the initial stages of grief.

[8 : 07] I think that's helpful. But again, I think it's probably a bit too simplistic. So I thought of a number of other emotions that we might have with someone dying.

In some cases, there actually might be some relief of what's happened. If the person has been suffering and going through a really difficult time and they're a Christian, we may well be saying, well, they're now with the Lord.

It's much better for them. Or if the person has caused us great hurt, we might have relief that they're no longer with us. We might also have feelings of guilt.

Could I have done more to help the person? Could I have been more supportive of them while they were alive? Perhaps even sometimes guilt that we don't feel sadder than we do at the fact that they've died.

And then I think a very important one, if we're thinking pastorally about this, is the loneliness that many people suffer after a loved one dies. Perhaps particularly after a spouse or someone really close to them.

[9 : 14] And that is the part of grief that goes on and on. In most people, the immediate pain of grief will diminish over time.

Probably over a period of months, but it will diminish over time. But the loneliness for many people, the missing, the one who they love so much, that can go on for years and years.

And if we're looking to care for members of the church who have lost others, we need to be aware that many of them could be deeply lonely over a period.

Now again, perhaps even with that, it all looks a bit simplistic and neat. C.S. Lewis, the author C.S. Lewis, married quite late in life.

And a fairly short time into his marriage, his wife had cancer and she passed away. And C.S. Lewis kept a journal after her death of his thoughts and feelings.

[10 : 15] It was eventually published as a book called A Grief Observed. And it is brutally honest. This most logical of men in most circumstances recognises that his reaction to the death of his wife is in many ways illogical, and he finds it really difficult to understand.

The start of chapter two, I think, probably a second journal, he looks back over his first journal and said, I'm appalled at what I read, at my response to what happened.

And he questions God, he questions how a God of love could allow such suffering. He questions himself and his response is, is he too self-centred?

Should he be more concerned about his wife and particularly concerned about God and turning to God in his situation? And eventually, he does come to accept things and his faith in God remains strong.

But that really illustrated for me that the feelings that we have following the death of a loved one may not be that logical, may not make sense to us or to others.

[11 : 29] There's nothing wrong with that. That is simply us coming to terms with what has happened and getting to the stage where we can accept it. So with that kind of background, let's think about what the Bible has to say then to those who are grieving.

And really just two simple things that I want to say this evening. One is that death is our enemy. Death is something that shouldn't be there.

It's only there because of our sin. And it's not something that we should accept as being good and right and just kind of part of the way things are. Death is our enemy.

And Paul says, we'll come back to it in a few minutes, in 1 Corinthians 15, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Now thinking of that, a few thoughts.

Every death is a reminder of our human failure. Sin entered the world, says Paul, through one man and death through sin. And in this way, death came to all people because all sinned.

[12 : 42] And in a sense, every death, every time someone dies, that is a small victory for the enemy. It's a reminder to us of the strength of the enemy, of death, and our own weakness.

You remember in John 11, I think Corey referred to it in prayer, where Jesus is talking at the grave of Lazarus. He's been talking to Martha and Mary.

And it says, Jesus wept. Do you ever wonder why Jesus wept? He knew that Lazarus was going to be raised back to life.

So it wasn't the same kind of weeping that the family and others would have. He knew what the outcome was going to be. Perhaps it was just this, that as he stood at that gravesite, he was reminded of sin and was reminded of its terrible consequences.

Perhaps also he's looking forward to when he would himself take the consequences for sin, when he would die for our sins. Every death is a reminder that we are sinful people and that death has come as a result of our sin.

[13 : 59] I'm not saying that every death is right to specific sin, it's not clearly, but it is the result of the sinfulness of all of us. Second thing to be aware of in this is that Christ has overcome death.

Peter's first sermon in Acts chapter 2, he said, God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Christ has overcome death. That's the whole thing in 1 Corinthians 15, isn't it? Paul is talking about the resurrection and he's saying because Jesus has been raised from the dead, then we don't need to fear death because if we die, we too will be raised and we'll go to be with them.

Again, it's there in 1 Thessalonians 4 that Katie read to us earlier. That those who die don't need to, we don't need to worry for them, we don't need to grieve as other people do because we know Christ has overcome death and they will one day be raised and will be restored to life and will go to meet him in the air.

Christ has overcome death. Third thing is because Christ has overcome death, we don't need to fear it.

[15 : 22] These are wonderful verses in Philippians chapter 1. Paul with this tremendous dilemma. Is it better that I stay alive and I work for Jesus or that I die and go to be with him?

And he says, For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

Now we may be afraid of dying. Dying is almost always messy. It can be very painful. It's not a good thing. But we shouldn't be afraid of what lies beyond death.

If our trust is in the Lord Jesus, if we know him as our saviour, then we can be confident that what lies behind us, what is in front of us, is much better than where we are now.

To live is Christ, says Paul. To die is gain. And then the final point here is that the enemy will be destroyed.

[16 : 26] Death will not be with us forever. Christ will return. He will take those who love him to be with him and he will have a reign over this earth.

And he will destroy all his enemies. And Paul says the last enemy to be destroyed is death. It's the ultimate enemy, but it's an enemy that has been defeated and that will be seen to have been comprehensively defeated.

Death will be swallowed up in victory. Through the Lord Jesus. So yes, death is the enemy. Death is something which is with us because of our sin.

And yet if we know the Lord Jesus, we don't need to fear it. And if people who know the Lord Jesus have died and gone to be with him, we don't need to sorrow for them.

We might sorrow for ourselves and what we've lost, but for them it's much better. Now clearly if they don't know the Lord Jesus, the situation is very different. I'm not going to go into great detail about that this evening.

[17 : 31] There is a judgment to come. But for those of us who know the Lord, where people die who know the Lord, we can rejoice that they've gone to be with him. So here's the first thing.

Death is our enemy. And we are coming eventually to Psalm 46. But I will just do one thing before that. You may recognize Johnny Cash there.

Johnny Cash's last recording of a song he wrote was called 1 Corinthians 15:55. Johnny Cash, you may know, was known as a Christian, but he lived a very troubled life in many ways.

And he wrote this song after the death of his wife June and when his death was clearly reasonably close. And he was looking forward and thinking, well, what comes next?

Here are the words he wrote. Oh, death, where is thy sting? Oh, grave, where is thy victory? Oh, life, you are a shining path and hope springs eternal just over the rise when I see my Redeemer beckoning me.

[18 : 36] The sting has been taken out of death. The victory has been won by the Lord Jesus. And one day he will beckon us to be with him, whether through death or if we're alive at his return.

Our Redeemer will beckon us. And now we're going to Psalm 46. I'm only going to look at the first couple of verses and the last couple of verses for the sake of time this evening.

And the second thing I want to remember, death is our enemy, but God is our fortress. Now, one thing we need to remember is that we by ourselves are powerless over death.

And we can only be defended from it and from its consequences through one who is stronger than us, who is able to surround us and be our fortress. And when we have this time of grieving when someone has passed away, it is good to remember our God and what he is to us.

So a few thoughts on that. Verse one, God is our refuge and strength and ever-present help in time of trouble. And when we go through times of sorrow, when we go through times of grief, God, if we know the Lord Jesus, God is with us.

[20 : 02] God is there to protect us and to help us and to bring us through the most difficult of situations. Even when the whole world seems to be falling apart around us, that's the thought of verse two, the mountains falling into the sea, the waters foaming and so on, the mountains quake with their surging.

Even when everything is falling apart round about us, God is there with us, even if we're not aware of it.

And in the time of grief, perhaps it is sometimes difficult to see God at work. Perhaps it is difficult to come to him and to cast our troubles on him.

Now, in some cases, it won't be. In some cases, people's faith will remain very strong and they won't find it too difficult to accept God's will. But certainly, there are many cases where people, as the world falls apart around them, as they have lost someone who they dearly loved, when they're not aware that God is with them.

And the important thing is that over time, that awareness comes back. That is what I took from C.S. Lewis when I read his book. For a long time, God seemed very distant from him.

[21 : 23] But eventually, as he began to think, perhaps more carefully, about what had happened, he recognised that God was with him and that God, throughout his troubles, was there to help.

And this evening, if you're going through a situation of grief and perhaps you think, well, where is God? Where is God in this situation? God is there waiting for you.

He is eager that you should come to him and seek comfort and strength from him. And if you're able to do that, when you're able to do that, then he will be there to help and to encourage you.

Then at the end of the chapter, at the end of the psalm, there are these wonderful words, verse 10, Be still and know that I am God.

And perhaps that is what is sometimes very difficult for us in the time of crisis. Just to be able to be still, to still our hearts, to be able to gather our thoughts together and to meditate on our God.

[22 : 37] If you're in that kind of situation, two suggestions for you. The first is, read your Bible and think about it. Meditate on what the words of Scripture say.

Perhaps the words of the psalm, like psalms like Psalm 46, that tell us about God. Perhaps words of the Gospels, of the Lord Jesus, as he comes and he brings us the wisdom and the love and the care of God.

Perhaps some of the words that we've read in the epistles this evening, words that remind us that the Lord Jesus has won the victory over death. Read these words.

Try to meditate on them. And God will speak to you through them. And then the second suggestion, pray. And if you find that difficult, ask others to pray.

Speak to one of the elders or one of the pastoral staff and ask them to pray with you or to pray for you. And even if your prayer, to begin with, is faltering and you feel that God isn't very close and you're not sure if it's going above the ceiling, just persevere with it and God is there.

[23 : 57] God is wanting to hear and God is wanting to answer your prayers. And as a church, when someone suffers a bereavement, it's good that we can come together and we can bring them before the Lord together and bring their needs to the Saviour.

good also when there are opportunities to pray with them when that's appropriate as well. God says to us, as you go through the deep waters, as you go through the difficult times, be still and know that I am God.

There's a band, a heavy metal band called Machine Head and they had a song that was called Be Still and Know.

The guy there is Phil Demmel who is the lead guitarist for the band. Phil Demmel grew up in a Christian family and in particular he had a Christian grandmother and his grandmother chose a verse from the Bible for each of her grandchildren, a kind of life motto for them if you like.

And the verse she chose for Phil Demmel was Psalm 46 verse 10. Be still and know that I am God. And every time you got a birthday card or a Christmas card from her this verse would be in it.

[25 : 23] Be still and know that I am God. As a young man you can probably see he got lots of tattoos on his arm and at other places too he got lots of tattoos on his arm and one of these tattoos was the words his grandmother had taught him.

Be still and know that I am God. So one day when he had developed a riff on his guitar that he was happy with and he was trying to think of some words to put to it these words must have come back to him and he and his other band members wrote a song called Be Still and Know.

Now I don't think it's particularly written from a Christian perspective in many ways but I think it's clear from the words of the chorus I'm about to put up that Phil Demmel remembered a lot more than just one verse from what he had been taught as a child.

Isn't it the power of a godly grandmother or grandparent or godly parents as well that later in life they can have a real influence? So this is the chorus of the song I think the words are terrific.

And the sun will rise Dawn will break through darkest night distant in its glow This shall pass Be still and know Now we're thinking about what the Bible says to the grieving perhaps this is it This shall pass Be still and know that I am God The grief that you feel will be intense but with God's grace you will gradually begin to return to normal And this shall pass in the sense too that one day sin and death will be behind us and we will be with the Lord Jesus and be with him forever And with that in our minds and knowing that we need to be still and know that he is God Let's pray I continue to pray for those who are grieving in our church

[27 : 29] A number of people over the last year or two have lost close relatives and Christmas time will be particularly difficult for them Let's support them as a church And if you are going through a time of grieving and finding it really difficult then seek the support of the church that we may pray with you and we may pray for you Let's just pray together just now Father we thank you for your word We thank you for the tremendous truth that although death is our enemy although it's the most powerful of enemies that last that will be destroyed it has indeed been defeated Christ has risen victorious from the dead and we know now that the dead in Christ will rise to be with him when he returns that there is a life beyond death that is much much better than anything in this world We pray that we may be comforted with that when we go through times of grief and of bereavement

We pray that you will help us to recognise that you are the God who protects us You are the God who is there for us and that we may be still and know that you are God Thank you for this time together we do pray for those who have lost loved ones in recent times again and pray that your strength and your comfort may be a real encouragement to them We give you thanks and commit ourselves to you in Jesus name Amen !