

Good Grief

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 20, 1998.
Scripture lesson: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Sitting in the pastor's study a young woman bursts into tears. She confides, "My husband and I have a perfectly wonderful 9 month old baby girl. I left my career, which I loved, to fulfill the dream of having a child and being a stay-at-home mom. We planned this for years. My husband is very supportive. Yet I dread the dawn of every day. I'm short tempered and I feel guilty for wanting to go back to work with my colleagues. I feel like I'm losing my mind."

A 55 year old man with graying hair tells his barber, "My daughter just gave birth to our first grandchild. Everything is wonderful and our family is very happy. Yet I find myself welling up with sadness and tears. I've been thinking of mother and missing her. She's been dead for 24 years. How stupid can I be?"

Another man declares to his golfing buddy, "For years my wife and I have planned and dreamed of the day we could retire and pursue our fun dreams. Well, I'm retired, but I'm listless. I lack energy. I don't feel like doing anything. I keep thinking of all those years I put in at the office. I miss going to work." (adapted from *The Samaritan Connection*, Volume 9, Number 3, 1998)

All three of these people are dealing with grief. They're grieving. When we think of grief, we generally tend to think of the loss, through death, of people we love. Or the ending of a relationship through divorce. Death and divorce are not, however, the only times we grieve. We experience all kinds of losses and when we experience loss, we grieve. Our losses include our youthful romantic dreams, our impossible expectations, and the loss of time. You may be able to identify areas of grief in your own life...

The young woman I mentioned a few moments ago was experiencing the loss of her identify as a career woman. The new grandfather was experiencing the loss of his mother. He knew he'd never be able to share the love he felt for his grand child with his mother. The retiree made the assumption that because he had planned well he could easily sail into retirement years without grieving his lost youth and years of productivity.

The Bible knows a lot about grieving. Grief first entered the world with the loss of innocent when our first parents, Adam and Eve, ate of the forbidden fruit and lost their intimate relationship with God. They grieved again when Cain murdered Abel. We could read through the Bible tracing one experience of grief after another. ^{JEREMIAH GRIEVED.} Jeremiah lived near the end of the kingdom of Judah. He could see his nation laid waste. He could see the temple defiled by pagan Babylonians. He could see Jerusalem laying in ruins. He could see the decaying bodies of his friends and neighbors lay unburied. He could see it all before it happened. Jeremiah felt helpless in the face of the coming disaster. He was personally caught up in the suffering of his people. Jeremiah grieved with and for the people.

There are four areas in which Jeremiah experienced grief. We can identify with each of them.

First, Jeremiah grieved as a result of natural disaster. The end of summer was the time when the rains returned. The harvest of grapes, olives and other fruits was completed by late September followed by a harvest celebration. The rains provided sustenance for the newly planted crops of wheat and barley which would be harvested in the spring. But this year the rains didn't come. The summer was ended. The time for the rains had come and yet no rain to save the crops. Jeremiah grieved because of the natural disaster of drought. We also grieve whenever we hear the news of natural disasters. We need to share the suffering of others through our sacrificial special offerings. We also grieve with people suffering from natural disasters by participating in work missions like the one our church went on this past July. Christians, like Jeremiah, grieve with people who suffer from natural disasters.

Secondly, Jeremiah grieved for the sin of his people. When people suffer as a result of their own sin, Christians are called, not to gloat, but to grieve. Jeremiah writes, "For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me." In Dostoyevsky's, *Crime and Punishment*, Sonia grieves for the misery she sees in the face of Raskonikov the murderer whom she has come to love. He gives Raskonikov her cross to wear and promises that she'll go with him to prison. "Take the cross... it's mine! It's mine. We will go to suffer together, and

together we will bear our cross!" **Christians choose to grieve rather than gloat over the suffering that sin brings upon others.** CLINTON, BURTON, HYDE

Third, Jeremiah grieved at the hopeless condition of his people. He grieved that there was no cure, no medicine that would spare Jerusalem or the temple. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?" Where is God? Where's the great physician? Why doesn't God heal us?" What a depressing thought.

Depression is like a very dark day when the clouds have so blacked out the sun that everyone says, "The sun isn't shining today." We know that the sun is shining; but it appears as if it's not. Maybe you've taken a trip by plane on a cloudy day like that. Your plane climbs up and up through layers of heavy dark clouds and you can't see a thing through the windows. It's as dark as night. Then suddenly your plane breaks through the highest bank of inky black clouds at twenty-eight thousand feet, and immediately the sun pours through the window. Everyone looks out on the white billowy clouds still so black on the other side and people say, "Isn't it beautiful!" Then someone says, "Too bad people down below can't see this." But the people down below are saying, "The sun isn't shining today." **The sun is shining, but something has come between the people and the sun. This is what a depression is like. Something seems to come between us and God and between us and others so that we feel a tremendous loneliness, an awful sense of isolation.** When grief leads us into depression we find ourselves thinking thoughts we never have otherwise. We say God doesn't care. We may even doubt that there *is* a God. Jeremiah, in his grief, asks, "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her king not in her?" The thought of God's absence is depressing. Grief can lead us into depression.

But faith in the God who has come to us in Christ can bring us through our grief. Some people think that if we have really strong faith we won't grieve. Faith gives us an immunity from grief. Not true! The Christian faith has never said that a Christian will never grieve. Jeremiah grieved. Hosea the prophet grieved. St. Paul grieved. Jesus grieved. Christians

recognize that there are good ways to grieve and bad ways. We grieve but not as those who have no hope.

One benefit of the Christian faith is that we can bring our grief to the God who has borne all our griefs in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and grief to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." God promises that nothing, including death and grief, ultimately can separate us from his love. If we truly believe this, no matter what we go through, we eventually can make it a faith opportunity to cry out with Jesus, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Those who grieve can find great comfort and healing through involvement in Christian fellowship and worship. In a few weeks I'll be leading a support group in grief. We'll meet in the parlor on the first and third Thursday of the month, beginning on Thursday, October 1 at 6:30 p.m. and lasting about 45 minutes to an hour. I don't know what kind of loss you are grieving: maybe the loss of a loved one; maybe divorce; maybe the loss of a job; maybe the loss of innocence; maybe a romantic loss. I invite you to participate and to bring a friend. My hope^{is} that the group will be a health, safe place for you who are grieving to bring yourselves, your stories, your anger, your bewilderment, and to know that it's just likely that others will have been there and will recognize in your story parts of their story. Just as we recognize in the story of Jeremiah and his grief our own story.

Let us pray: Do not remember against us the iniquities of our ancestors; let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name's sake.