

The Healing Power of Grief

Beni, my wife of 49 years, died on July 13 of last year. She was the love of my life. We started dating when she was 16 and I was 19. We married two years later. I am a better person in every way because she was in my life. Together we have three children with three amazing spouses, and 11 grandchildren. Philippians 4:8 says to think on things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report and praiseworthy. For years I've told people that if I had a challenge in my thought life, all I had to do was think about my wife—because she was all of those things. It's true. In this season, God is teaching me much about how He uses grief to heal and comfort us as He draws us closer to Himself.

Beni died after a long battle with cancer. For the last 15 months or so, I was by her side day after day. Cancer is a disease that we see healed regularly. And while she is now forever with Jesus, perfectly well, never to die again, those of us who remain are still facing pain, confusion and tremendous loss.

Pretending all is well when it isn't doesn't help. I must anchor my soul to who He is and what He has promised. Otherwise, I will spend my days wandering without a sense of purpose, never settling into why I am alive. Who He is remains the foundation of my life.

Many family members gathered around her bed in prayer and worship on that final day. It had been our practice for hours on end. When she breathed her last, we worshipped. We had the distinct privilege to walk with someone into their eternal reward. It changes you, in the measure you see it.

I lay next to her in the bed. My first instinct was to raise my hands and my face to the Lord and give Him thanks for His goodness. He is the one who forgives all our iniquities and

heals all our diseases. We weren't pretending in an effort to appear spiritual. It was an offering. We were the offering.

Facing the Inevitable

You might say, "But she wasn't healed!" That's true. But my experience, or the lack thereof, can never be allowed to redefine who He is or what He has promised. His Word stands supreme over my experience. Besides, no matter the situation, the lack is never on His end of the equation.

I learned the beauty of this many years ago when my dad died. I had questions, pain, confusion and an overall struggle with my faith. Then I realized that if I captured this moment, with all its pain and confusion, I could give Jesus a priceless gift. There is no pain in eternity. Neither is there confusion or regret, and He wipes all tears away. That means if I can give Him praise in the middle of this mystery, I will have given Him something I will never have a chance to give Him in heaven.

It's true that I will be a worshipper forever. Throughout eternity, I will bow before the Lamb of God and declare His greatness. But I only have the chance to give Him praise in the midst of pain in this life.

Picture with me for a moment that my sacrifice of praise was like incense. I was bringing the pain, confusion, regret and the like into the offering so it would add flavor to what I was giving Him.

Such flavors are a stench to me. But offered to Him, they become a sweet-smelling offering, expressions of a surrendered heart and mind. Since there will be no pain or loss in heaven, I am giving Him a gift here and now that costs me something. True sacrifices cost.

I have nothing to prove, yet everything to give. My goal is not to be strong. It is to be faithful—faithful to who He is

and therefore, to the person He has made me to be.

Pain, loss and disappointment are unavoidable in this life. If that weren't true, there would be no reason for verses such as, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose" (Rom. 8:28, NASB). This beautiful promise helps us to see that the master chef is able to take the worst parts of our lives and work them into a recipe, creating a masterpiece that illustrates His goodness.

And then there are commandments such as, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:16-18a). They serve their purpose in reminding us that we belong to a kingdom different from almost everything we see and hear around us. In this kingdom, we learn that we live by dying, we receive by giving, and we are exalted by going low. So the command to rejoice, pray and give thanks carries weight because we often find ourselves in circumstances where common sense tells us to do the opposite.

Pretending bad things don't happen to those who follow Christ doesn't benefit us. That is simply not true. Our walk with Him is a relational journey, and as such, is much more about the process than the outcome. Living in denial keeps me from the necessary journey that brings both the encounter with God that transforms me and the healing of my heart that makes tomorrow desirable.

Real faith does not deny the existence of a problem. Instead, real faith denies the problem a place of influence. The difficulties in life have no right to redefine us or direct us. And of greater importance is not allowing our challenges to redefine God or His Word. Each gives us opportunities to encounter His presence, grace and renewed purpose for our lives.

It is in the honest acknowledgement of pain and loss that I

can be truly healed. And strangely, acknowledging pain is often the route that takes us to our greatest promotion. Dealing with pain properly offers us the back door to promotion and increase. To ignore the pain in our hearts is to bury it deep within our souls, ultimately affecting our personalities. That's never a good plan.

The distortion of our personality caused by undealt-with pain will resurface at a most inconvenient time outside our control. The people we most care for are often the ones who suffer the consequences of our unwillingness to deal with such challenges. As has often been stated, "Hurt people hurt people."

Baring My Soul

Giving God such an offering does not automatically remove pain. But in my experience, this is where soul healing begins, as His strength is attracted to the surrender inspired by crisis and tragedy.

I have also purposed not to try to rush the process. One temptation is to overcomplicate our lives with activities, which deadens our awareness of our need for the touch of God. If our goal is to avoid feeling pain, we'll usually settle for whatever makes us feel better in the moment. But if our goal is to be healed at the root of the pain, our times before the Lord have much greater intentionality. I felt impressed of the Lord to simplify my life to make sure I walked through this journey without grabbing quick fixes.

I don't come before Him to pray religious-sounding prayers. Nor do I pray to fill a quota or to feel better about my spirituality. I do so to encounter His love in the untouched places of my heart. My prayers must be real; honesty invites healing.

But let me be brutally clear: I will not accuse Him. My prayers usually look something like this: "Father, I know it's

impossible for You to lie. And I know it's impossible for You to betray me. But it really looks and feels to me like You did. I know my perception is wrong, and please forgive me. But I am in desperate need for You to heal my heart and restore my perception of You as a good Father."

This is not a two-minute prayer before going to work. This takes time, allowing the ongoing encounter with His face to heal and restore the most broken places of our hearts. It's not a quick fix but the ongoing lifestyle of health and healing.

In these moments, I always have the Scriptures before me. I can't afford to think things about my circumstances or myself that He doesn't think. Wandering from the Scriptures is wandering from the mind of Christ. Such deception is costly beyond description.

My history with God includes immersion in the Psalms at every place where there's brokenness and loss. I read until something speaks to my heart, either about Him, me, my pain, my circumstances or hopefully, all of these at once.

Immersing myself in His Word plays a huge part in the healing of my soul. Obviously, my healing doesn't bring my wife back. It doesn't change the situation of loss and disappointment. But it does remove the sting. And while it may sound unbelievable, the healing enables me to genuinely rejoice and give thanks for the moment I am in, knowing He really does work all things for good. This comes from a place of deep surrender, knowing He will use whatever I give Him for His glory and my strength.

Mourning With Hope

Believers often avoid mourning in the name of faith. In part, I understand the reason, as there are so many who wind up in hardness of heart and unbelief in their journey. In their times of pain, they often accuse God or the people around

them. We often tolerate this kind of behavior because we think people need an outlet for their suffering. And while I don't want to accuse or condemn, I will say it is completely unnecessary and ill-advised to accuse God or others.

Mourning done correctly enables us to find the comfort we need, which happens to be a person. There is a mourning that takes me to the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. How I mourn determines where I end up in my journey. Certain measures and manifestations of His presence can only be found in the "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4a).

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). The Holy Spirit comes to comfort unto complete healing. The process cannot be rushed, but it can be slowed down. I have found that in my most difficult moments, I don't need answers; I need presence. The Spirit gives us peace that passes understanding—if we give up our right to understand.

But answers aren't wrong; God just doesn't owe me any explanations. My quest is always for wisdom and understanding, but I don't have the right to hold Him hostage to an explanation so I can obey Him. I cannot link my obedience to what I understand, or I will have created a God in my image.

However, there is another kind of mourning. We see it in Mark 16, where Mary Magdalene tells the disciples that she has seen Jesus, and He is alive! The Scripture says, "as they mourned and wept ... they did not believe" (v. 10, NKJV). Then the two who met a stranger on their way to Emmaus quickly discovered that stranger was Jesus. When they told the others their good news, the Bible says, "they did not believe them either" (v. 13b).

Jesus next appeared to the rest and rebuked them for "their unbelief and hardness of heart because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen" (). I find it interesting that He required them to believe another's

experience. Their desire not to be gullible to other people's imagination did not excuse them in the eyes of God. Truth always brings the presence. But they didn't recognize His presence when the story of Resurrection was spoken.

Mourning can take me to Him for comfort and healing, or it can take me to hardness of heart and unbelief. I consider unbelief to be the great sin, as it is our denying the reality of His nature, the faith-*full* one. That's why depression is essentially unbelief. But mourning done well takes us to Him. It's an unusually beautiful part of life, as it ends with the Father's embrace.

What we do in those moments will affect the impact of our lives for the remainder of our days and beyond. I don't say this to increase the pressure of an already difficult moment. I say this to bring sobriety to the subject so we don't use our pain as a justification to live carelessly or focus on ourselves in an unhealthy way.

Losing sight of our purpose and His promise will always damage our heart, mind and behavior. And more common than those who fall into careless living are the many who adjust their theology to fit their experience, or the lack thereof. Experiences cannot redefine the biblical revelation of God.

Picture yourself driving until you come to a Y in the road. You can only go one of two directions. That is the journey of mourning. We either go in the direction of healing and comfort, or we go in the direction of hardness of heart and unbelief. What determines the direction we take?

Those who mourn with hope will always end up in surrender to the Father, yielding to the working of the Holy Spirit, being healed by the Comforter Himself. Here's a key verse: "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep; *lest you sorrow as others who have no hope*" (1 Thess. 4:13, emphasis added).

Sorrow without hope has no legitimate conclusion. No closure. Sorrow with hope always takes us into life, into greater expressions of God and His will for our lives. In other words, sorrow and mourning are not the end. They are the hallway that takes us from one room to another.

We undermine hope when we feed our hearts on what God didn't do or isn't doing. Find the present activities of God and feed your soul on them. Doing so brings tremendous strength.

Embracing the Mystery

Our trust in God is seldom seen in what we understand. Our trust is often proven and established by what we do with mystery. This is one of the most neglected areas of the faith—treasuring mystery. Our wonderful Father's processes are never vindictive or humiliating. He deals with us to measure our capacity to live in and carry the glory of His presence.

Mystery is a crucial part of the test for all of us, but it's not a test of acceptance or rejection. It's a test of measurement to see with what we can be entrusted. My willingness to trust Him in mystery often determines the level of understanding with which He can trust me.

People will often ask why something happened or didn't happen. My response is quite simple: He doesn't work for me. I work for Him. He does not owe me an explanation for anything.

All I need to know is what He would have me do next. For me, that is the beauty of embracing mystery.

The lifestyle of miracles is not only the normal Christian life; it is the sacred responsibility of the believer. It is found in the example Jesus gave us in His earthly ministry and is imparted to us in the Great Commission. There, He instructed His disciples to teach their disciples all that He taught them. That process reaches to this very day. He taught His disciples many things, including the mandate for miracles.

It amazes me that many still think it's OK to follow Jesus without doing what He said to do. His command to heal the sick and raise the dead was not a suggestion.

Jesus healed everyone who came to Him, and He healed everyone to whom the Father directed Him. We cannot expect anything less.

Because my experience is different, I'm tempted to lower the standard of Scripture to fit my experience, or I move into guilt and shame for why I couldn't see the promised breakthrough. Neither option is healthy.

My greatest privilege in these moments is to embrace this contradiction, the mystery, as though it were a great treasure. At this point, my trust in the Father is deepened beyond reason. In these moments, we discover why our faith matters so much to Him.

If it doesn't bring the miracle, it will serve to keep us aware of the embrace of a loving Father.

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