

When Life Leaves You Breathless

Some of you may have experienced those more rare moments in life when you literally feel like you can't breathe, when everything in and around you crashes, when grief in unimaginable measure throws an unexpected blow and knocks you to the ground. It's a moment you can't conceive until you're in it, and with all your might, you wish you could turn back time and somehow make it all different. But you're helpless for change, though you literally groan for it.

I can't wrap adequate words around that moment when I received the phone call that told me that my dad was gone. It was a nightmare that still stings, that still brings tears, that still causes an ache to pulse in sudden moments as sweet memories of his life and pained memories of his death run together, hemorrhaging out of a broken heart.

I'm finding, in a really up close way, that grief truly is a journey, and I've been walking it a day at a time.

But that one-day-at-a-time, one-step-at-a-time journey is challenged by the fast-paced swirl of "normal life." We're still trying to catch our breath, but our busy schedules press; the spinning world that we wish would stop for just a few minutes, won't; that accusing inner-voice relates hurry-up-and-get-yourself-together whispers to our tired hearts.

The daily grind pulls us forward to where we're not ready to go yet, tries to hurry us along that journey of grief, pushes us to run laps our legs are still too weary to run.

Even some religious voices tell us to stop weeping and "Rejoice!" because our loved one is in heaven. But for those of you who've mourned the death of one you love, you know that rejoicing is not the path your heart immediately, fully steps

onto. You're broken in a way that sometimes feels almost beyond repair, and rather than clapping, "He's in heaven!" you're instead throbbing under the crushing reality, "He's not *here*. O God, he's not *here* anymore."

The reality is, we can't hurry out of grief. We can't go around it. We can't go under or over it. *We have to go through it*. And our beautiful Lord, who is near to the brokenhearted, is waiting to take hold of our hands and lead us through that dark, dark valley.

We've got to go through it, but we don't have to go alone. The road is grievous, and those pressures within and without urge us to move along and get on with our lives. *Quickly*.

But in the midst of a spinning world and a full schedule and lots of voices ... *take a breath*.

If we try to skip ahead to a celebration or stuff the ache, we're attempting to force our emotions into an unnatural place.

Because death is meant to be mourned. *It is sorrow upon sorrow*, as Paul wrote. It's an earth-trembling, heart-shaking reality, and it's right to feel the sting of it ... because it is so *wrong* to our God.

It's not a part of His kingdom. And when His dwelling is finally among us again, His all-consuming, magnificently invasive light will leave no room for sorrow, crying, pain, or death. He's kicking *all* of those things out—because He never wanted them thrashing through His creation in the first place.

When the widow at Nain lost her son, Jesus didn't pass by the man's coffin and simply say, "*It was just his time to go ...*" No. Jesus, moved with compassion, demonstrated how He felt about death, and He foreshadowed what He would ultimately do about this painful reality that has gripped humanity. *He brought the widow's son back to life.*

Our Lord hates death, too. So much that He went to unfathomable lengths to destroy it.

And He succeeded.

He submitted Himself to that which He hated so that the perpetual hold it had on humanity—His prized ones, His beloved ones—would be broken. *Forever.*

And now, gloriously, death is not the end for those who are in Christ. Because He broke the grave open, we who have joined our lives to the heart of the Living One hold confidence in God's promise of our resurrection.

The dead in Christ will rise – and when this mystery collides with the pounding ache we feel over death, gratitude becomes explosive.

We'll breathe our last ... but we'll never die. We celebrate the hope of a coming day when Jesus will utterly demolish death. *Totally.* Once and for all.

But for now, in this present age, death still has measures of victory—because people are still dying. Hospitals are still receiving the terminally ill and fatally wounded, babies are still dying in the womb, poor ones are still perishing in starvation and for lack of clean water, the innocent are still slain at the hands of unjust men.

Death still stings.

Things are not OK right now.

And we *need* to mourn. It is right to mourn.

The death that sweeps away life's breath is evidence of the not-yet. Death is not yet swallowed up in triumphant life.

... because Jesus is not yet here.

That glorious declaration, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY. O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" does not come *until*...

Until Jesus breaks open the sky.

Until His feet are back on this earth.

So as we mourn death, there is a sacred mourning for our hearts to touch—a place of mourning the absence of the One who has promised to obliterate it.

Death's grief ushers us into deeper longing, into greater knowing and remembering, into holy groaning—we need Jesus here.

And until He is, we mourn. We mourn death. We mourn pain and sickness.

Ultimately, we mourn His absence.

When we try to avoid or bury death's sting to put on our brave or happy faces, we miss the opportunity to fall over into His heart, and to peer into what He's feeling.

We miss the sacredness of what Mary of Bethany got to touch when her brother died. We miss weeping with God, and letting our tears flow down with His.

And we miss our heart's healing—because only those who allow themselves to break, who let their shattered pieces fall before the feet of Jesus, who let Him catch their unhindered tears, who let their brokenness bring them into the arms of the Comforter ... can be truly restored.

We may try to hurry out of grief, or go over it, around it, or under it. But unless we go *through* it, those wounds won't meet their healer. Instead, they'll meet us again and again, down the road, when those "Band-Aids" we've put on fail to hold their stick and fall off to expose the old wound that still

bleeds.

So we don't shut our hearts down. No, we run vulnerably into *His*—because that's where our hope and healing is found.

Have you lost someone you love?

Give yourself permission to feel ... and to take your time. In a busy world, with busy people, and a busy schedule—remind your heart that it's OK to go slow. Take some breaths in His presence as you drive to work today. Listen for His voice. Whisper your prayers while you prepare dinner or fold laundry. Sneak away with Him to a quiet place and open up the Word that has the power to give life to a fainting heart. Do today with Him, and trust Him for tomorrow. Just one day at a time.

Give yourself permission to fall apart ... and to weep. Cry it out with Jesus. Crumble on the living floor. And let Him hold you, right there, and keep your tears. Get vulnerable with God. Get vulnerable with trusted friends, invite them into your ache, and ask for their continuing prayers.

Really, it feels scary to go there. Because for most of us, the path of grief is uncharted territory. Because we haven't walked it before ... until we have to.

But when grief hits, let yourself go to the unraveling, crumbling, melting, breaking place before God.

Go there.

Don't go there to sulk and drown in your despair.

Don't go there to stay. Go there to take hold of the One who will lead you out.

Go there with God. Take this road into His heart.

Go there to lean. To talk to Him. To commune with Him in a very deep place.

Go there to weep with the God who never desired that His image-bearers would die. Go there to feel even just a piece of His holy, grieving heart crying out, “*Adam, O Adam, where are you?*”—when He knew that He’d lost His precious son, when He knew they’d be separated, when He felt the first-ever pangs of death sweep through His earth. Feel, *with Him*, the grief and the hatred that He Himself has over death.

Go there to feel His tears mingle with yours.

Go there to find your healing.

Go there to let your heart touch the reality that things are not OK *until* ... and so more fully enter into the cry, “***Come, Lord, Jesus.***”

Go there. And don’t rush out. Find Him, *right there*—in the middle of your darkest night and greatest ache. **Because He’s there.**

And surely, you’re going to walk through *and* come out of this wilderness, leaning on your Beloved.

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