

TRAINING A CONGREGATION TO SUPPORT THOSE
GRIEVING A LOSS CAUSED BY DEATH

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Abstract

Death is a reality that every human has to experience even before his or her own death. One of the hardest events anyone could experience is the loss of a loved one through death. A pastor and the congregation will be looked upon to comfort those who survive the deceased at the funeral. What about after the funeral? The problem is that our culture has diminished the importance of grief and supporting those who are grieving. This paper examines the grief process by providing Scriptural support for grief and the importance of supporting those who are grieving. It also examines secular studies on grief and demonstrates the benefit of these studies for a pastor and his congregation. After going through these two studies, application is provided for training a congregation to support its bereaved members beyond the funeral. Since every congregation has those who are grieving, they will be better equipped to serve and comfort those suffering if they have been trained to better understand grief and how to best support the grieving. This support is not only God-pleasing but provides more opportunities to share the eternal hope and comfort of God's Word with those who are suffering.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Death

Death affects every man, woman, and child. Physical death has been around since the beginning, remains in the present, and shows no signs of coming to an end.¹ Death is familiar to every age and culture across the world. No matter where the congregation is and no matter who the members are, a pastor is going to minister to those who experience death. Along with every death loved ones, whether family or friends, are burdened with a major loss. The relationship they had with this individual, now deceased, comes to an immediate halt, never to exist again for the remainder of their life on this earth. The loss of a loved one through death is the most difficult life change any man, woman or child will experience.² The following poem sentimentally illustrates this point,

What does grief look like?
Tell me,
Mother.

Grief is flowers on a floating pink chador
wrapped around a short, soft figure
who sits and prays and kisses on her small, stiff son's bed.

Grief is a girl
whose Spanish is a stream of tearful endearments
flowing from a head-shaped face -
Ay, mamá, mira qué lindo, qué precioso -
as she cradles her 34-week-fetus' peeling body.

Grief is an ex-police officer,
hair cropped close, shirt tucked in,
shaking hands firmly down the hallway from his wife's deathbed,
saying, "No-one's driving home tonight."

What does grief look like?
Tell me,
Father.

Grief is a daughter hurling herself across
her father's dead form,

¹ That is until Christ's return (1 Corinthians 15:12-58).

² Monica McGoldrick and Forma Walsh, *Living Beyond Loss: Death in the Family*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995), xv.

crying to him,
Daddy. I'm so sorry.
I'm so, so, sorry.

Grief is a six-foot-four black man
stepping into a room of wailed-out sisters
making no sound as his knees crumple, forehead to the floor
and he covers his head with his arms,
his father's eyes staring and fixed
over the blood-flecked airway tube they placed in him.

Grief is a large and hopeful family,
prayerfully imploring for progress.
He got seventeen good years after the last time,
said his wife as she blows her nose,
and he's ready for seventeen more.
Two days later, his name is gone from my patient list.

What does grief look like?
Tell
me.

Grief is a young woman in green, armed with glasses and a badge
hidden in a hospital stairwell
on her father's empty birthday,
crying for a boy she never quite met.³

From the short word pictures, anyone can understand why grief would overcome the survivors. Each scenario and each individual involved is unique. Yet these are scenarios of death similar to the ones from which members of congregations around the world will be suffering.

1.2.The Funeral

In the midst of overwhelming grief, an important part of any congregation's ministry is to support the dying member and loved ones before and after their loss. The pastor, as the called minister, will share the gospel message to comfort and give assurance to anyone who is nearing death. At the time of death the pastor will also minister to family and friends of the one who is dying or has died. Prayers and devotions at the bedside, whether in the hospital room, hospice, or at home are crucial at such times. After the death, planning the funeral service and presiding

³ Vera Martina Broekhuysen, "What does grief look like?", *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, (2013), 1-2.

and preaching at the funeral are just as important.⁴ Helping with the funeral service at their church and supporting the mourners in those first hours and days is a vital part of a congregation's work. The pastor and the congregation would be failing their Christian brothers and sisters if they did not perform these acts of loving service at this difficult time.

The funeral, which changes over time and across cultures, has never ceased to be an important practice among all religions. Even in our "death-denying society"⁵ psychologists are reaffirming the importance a funeral service and burial play in the lives of those who mourn the loss of their loved one. The funeral and burial is the major event in the death experience. Secular experts place importance on the mourning ritual.⁶ The mourning ritual can be whatever helps the bereaved acknowledge and mourn the loss.⁷ For Christians the ritual is the funeral. "Funeral rituals and visits to the grave serve a vital function in providing direct confrontation with the reality of death and the opportunity to pay last respects, to share grief, and to receive comfort in the supportive network of survivors."⁸ "The best function of the funeral is served when it brings relatives and friends into the best possible functional contact with harsh fact of death and with each other at this time of high emotionality."⁹ Helen Harris makes this remark from her general observations,

"Congregations do an incredible job of responding to families at the time of a death. Church members bring food to the home and to the funeral meal. We attend the visitation and the funeral service and send sympathy cards offering thoughts and prayers. We visit the family in the days following the service. We are family to the families in the church experiencing crisis."¹⁰

⁴ Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ: a text book for pastoral theology*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), 296-297.

⁵ Darcy Harris, "Oppression of the Bereaved: A Critical Analogy of Grief in Western Society," *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, (2009), 244; McGoldrick and Walsh, 56.

⁶ Kenneth J. Doka Ed., *Living with grief after a sudden loss: Suicide, homicide, accident, heart attack, stroke*, (Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America, 1996), 130.

⁷ McGoldrick and Walsh, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰ Helen Harris, *What is a congregation to do? Greif in family and congregational life*, "Family Ministries," (Waco, TX, Summer, 2003). <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/92007.pdf>, 1.

Even beyond the funeral the congregation's need to be present and supportive through these difficult days is a real ministry to those adjusting to life without the deceased.¹¹

1.3. Problem

However, following these first few weeks of wonderful and needed support, Helen Harris continues,

Then, as families do, we get busy with our lives, things seem to return to normal, and the bereaved often face the ongoing challenges of mourning and grief with little attention or support. We wonder if we should bring up the name of the deceased. We know that we don't want to create additional pain. We wonder about our own questions and don't want to add to the questions of the bereaved. Days pass and it becomes more and more awkward to call or make a visit. There is in the American culture an expectation that grief support will be significant for days and even weeks after a loss. Places of employment provide up to three days of funeral leave. Then we find ourselves confused that the bereaved are still struggling while we have moved on.¹²

Many who have attended a funeral can probably relate to Harris' generalization. In her statement, Harris points out that one reason for everyone else to move on so quickly is that American culture has certain expectations of what grief entails. Darcy Harris has noticed that her work with the bereaved in American culture, or Western society¹³, was mostly spent normalizing grief. She writes,

Upon reflection, I realized that much of my work as a counselor has been spent attempting to normalize grief responses that have been deemed as abnormal by social indices, un-doing the unhealthy suppression of grief, and attempting to re-frame the pathology-based approach to grief that seems prevalent in Western society in order to counteract the paralyzing effects that these influences have upon many of my bereaved clients.¹⁴

¹¹ Helen Harris, 3

¹² Ibid.

¹³Darcy Harris prefers the use of the term Western Society as opposed to culture: "The term, 'Western society' describes a society where there is a prevalence of industry that is built upon capitalism and a market-based economy. Because the emergence of industry and capitalism are typically attributed to Western Europe and North America countries, it is often assumed that the term 'Western' generally refers to these countries. However, other countries in various regions of the world also now incorporate the values of capitalism into their social structures; thus, the discussion in this article refers to a philosophical stance that is deemed as 'western-oriented,' but not limited to a geographical location or particular culture or ethnic identifications (241)." "This exploration focuses on the dominant group's views of death and grief rather than upon those of the specific cultural traditions or ethnic groups that make up Western society (244)." This paper will also use the term "Western society" with the same understanding.

¹⁴ Darcy Harris, 242.

Most of the congregations in the Wisconsin Lutheran Synod (WELS) are located in areas that function according to the norms of Western society. Therefore, all the members of those congregations, both those grieving and supporting, will be influenced by the Western society in which they operate every day. The bereaved think that their grief is abnormal from what they have grown up learning about grief in a Western society. Those in the congregation who are able to support the bereaved do not know how to support since they have learned from society that grief should be short lived and anything else is strange. Those who are able to support have never been taught what to say or what to do and feel awkward just jumping into such situations unprepared.

In my personal experiences with those grieving I have realized that I do not know what to do or say. I do not have an experience of losing someone close and especially not in an unexpected manner. The death of my paternal grandfather and grandmother were both deaths that were expected and happened in their old age. There was no trauma in their deaths. I loved my grandparents but I was not losing someone that I was dependent on in any part of my life. The sadness that I felt at their loss was fleeting. To realize that a tragedy has happened is not the difficult part. To know what to say or what to do around grieving individuals is difficult because I do not personally understand the depths of their grief. I cannot relate to bereaved individuals since I lack my own experience with such grief. The challenge becomes how to be there for someone who is grieving. The influence of society has taught me to avoid expressing my own grief and has given me false ideas about the depths and duration of grief. I am sure that many are able to relate to the problem I have. This is what has lead me to write on this topic.

In conclusion, a few issues were emphasized as the result in the lack of adequate support for the bereaved. A couple issues have to do with Western society in which most who are reading this find themselves living. The diminishing value of grief has negative effects on both the bereaved and the supporters. The bereaved think and are maybe even told that their grief is abnormal. Consequently the bereaved are convinced they need to suppress their grief. Among those who might be able to support the bereaved, they have been taught that grief should be short-lived and anything else is not normal but a problem. Another issue is the lack of experience with grief any individual has when supporting someone grieving. Those who have not gone through grief from the loss of a loved one through death are not able to fully

understand. Therefore, they do not know how to fully support the bereaved at different times throughout the bereaved's grief process.

After feeling inadequate to personally support those who are grieving, I wanted to learn what is best to say and do for the bereaved. Since I am studying to be a pastor, the application for how to train a congregation to support those grieving a loss from death is also beneficial. This paper will first take a look at grief in Scripture. In an overview of the Bible I will point out examples of grief. From portions of Scripture I will discover what we can learn about grief. In another few selections from God's Word I will reveal God's care for those who need support after losing someone they loved. The next major section of the paper will explain what modern studies have learned about grief. From the large selection of theories I will communicate the importance of all this knowledge for the pastor and his congregation. Finally, the paper will conclude with direct applications for a pastor to train his congregation to support its members who are grieving a loss from death.

2. Study of the Bible on Grieving

2.1. Examples of grief over death in Scripture

Scripture has a number of examples of individuals who have lost a loved one through death. From the beginning of Scripture to the end, death is present and so are bereaved survivors. The first major account and reaction of a survivor of a traumatic loss is when Jacob thinks his son Joseph has been killed (Ge 37:31-35). Jacob experiences a grief that he thought would last until his own death. “He refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.’ So his father wept for him” (Ge 37:35). (Cain’s murder of Abel didn’t have any reaction of Adam or Eve recorded, but just Cain and God’s interaction [Ge 4].) Judah recovers from grief over the death of his wife (Ge 38:12). After the death of Jacob, Scripture records the mourning ritual of Jacob’s family (Ge 50:1-14). Jacob’s family returned to the place where Abraham and Isaac were buried. Then they mourned for seven days and seven nights. They were able to grieve with the support of friends and family for seven straight days. There was nothing abnormal about this practice either. A whole week just to mourn in Western Society would be looked at as a waste of time. Aaron’s (Nu 20:28-29) and Moses’ (Dt 34:8) deaths both resulted in an extended period of mourning that showed respect for their high God-given status in the Israelite community.

The life of King David provided a handful of examples of grief over a loss caused by death. He lost his very close friend Jonathan, who died in battle alongside his father, King Saul (2 Sa 31). His lament for both Saul and Jonathan is recorded in 2 Samuel 1:17-27. King David, after committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering Uriah (2 Sa 11), suffers the consequence from the Lord of losing to death his newborn child from an inflicted illness (2 Sa 12:15-25). He loses two other sons to death, Amnon (2 Sa 13:23-39) and Absalom (2 Sa 18:1-18). David expresses an intense grief over Absalom’s death that begins to crush the spirits of his victorious soldiers (2 Sa 18:29-29:8).

The book of Job is filled with traumatic experiences of a very wealthy (Job 1:3) and righteous man (Job 1:1). He experienced the loss of loved ones through death when all his children died at the same time (Job 1:18-19). On that same day he also lost all of his wealth (Job 1:13-17). Shortly after those losses, Job lost his health when he became covered in painful sores on his entire body. (Job 2:7-8). His reaction to the loss of all his children can be very

controversial, since Job seems to be broken up but he immediately expresses sincere words of praise that not many Christians struggling with grief can relate to.

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.

The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised.”

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing (Job 1:20-22).

A closer look at sections of this book later in this paper will give helpful insight into the grief that Job was experiencing and the “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2) his three friends were.

The New Testament has a number of examples of grief and sorrow. One of the greatest examples that shows grief is not a sin comes from Jesus’ experience of sorrow in the Gospels. As true man and true God Jesus was not able to sin. Jesus “was deeply moved” (Jn 11:33) when Mary broke down in tears at his feet from the death of Lazarus (Jn 11:33). Following those verses, “Jesus wept” (Jn 11:35) from the sorrow of losing his good friend Lazarus to death and from the weeping of Lazarus’ sisters and Jesus’ close friends, Mary and Martha.

While on this earth, Christ’s heart also went out to a widow (Lk 7). The widow, who was already in the grief process from losing her husband, lost her only son. The widow’s son was also her only means of support after losing her husband. The country of Israel at the time of Jesus didn’t have any welfare this woman could live off. After losing her son, she would live a very poor life unless someone else supported her. The dead son was being carried in a funeral procession near the town gate of Nain. Seeing and hearing the weeping and mourning of the large crowd, Luke writes, “Then the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry’” (Lk 7:13). Even more than grief not being a sin, Jesus’ sorrow for those grieving a loss caused by death shows that God cares for and is concerned about the bereaved. By raising her son, Jesus gave back to the widow not only someone whom she loved dearly, but also the man who would take care of her until her own death. There are a number of other passages that give examples of grief caused by death, but the selection gives ample proof to the fact that death causes grief in all people, even in our Savior, the God-man, Jesus.

The difficult part about the grieving process and Scripture is that long-term grief and how to deal with it is not found anywhere explicitly in Scripture. There are a few sections of Scripture that can be examined to shed light on how to best deal with those grieving a loss

caused by death. Job is an example of conversation about grief moved by deep sorrow over the loss of almost everything he once had. However, his friends do not do a good job of comforting him. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul tells the Thessalonians “not to grieve as ones who have no hope” (1 Th 4:13). Although we are not to grieve like ones without hope, to distinguish a normal grief process from the grief of ones without hope has value for those looking to comfort the bereaved.

2.2. A Look at Job and the Support of His Friends

The book of Job focuses on the suffering of Job who “was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). The great suffering he experienced was mentioned above among the many examples of grief in Scripture. Job’s response to the loss of his ten children is one filled with great sorrow. Robert Alden gives some short commentary on Job’s response: “The tearing of clothing and the shaving of the head were standard ancient Near Eastern demonstrations of grief.”¹⁵ He continues, “The tearing and the shaving are the expected reactions to the tragedies that suddenly and recently came to Job. The falling to the ground and worshipping are what separate him from others. He did not shake his fist skyward and scream, ‘Why me, Lord?’ but bowed to the ground in humble acknowledgement of and capitulation to God’s sovereign will.”¹⁶ Another author gives more realistic and detailed commentary on Job’s reaction.

One writer describes Job’s utterance as “the noblest expression to be found anywhere of a man’s joyful acceptance of the will of God as his only good.” Noble, yes. But joyful? It is possible to read Job’s words too victoriously. To a nonsufferer, Job’s declaration sounds triumphant and inspiring – the obvious and only biblical reaction one would expect from such a spiritual giant. To someone in the vise of Job – like loss, those words can sound so serene and celebratory that they seem unrealistic, unattainable, untouched by grief. They were nothing of the kind.

To read Job rightly we must view his words in 1:21 through the tears of 1:20 – hear his robes rip, watch him shave his head, and see him fall to the ground. These are impassioned actions. Job’s response was not a super-spiritual stoicism. Still less was it a superficial shrug of the shoulders and a shallow, “Praise the Lord anyhow!” Job is a man in agony, his anguish the overflow of a hemorrhaging heart.

Ripping the garment and shaving the head express abandonment to grief, an eternal image of how you feel inside, heart-torn and bare. Job’s words are neither impassive nor tearless. He displays remarkable resolution in the face of mystifying providences and disturbing events; but it is a resolution voiced through tears, “As the victim of unparalleled misfortunes, he felt too crushed in his heart to put up any false

¹⁵ Robert L. Alden, *Job*. (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 61.

¹⁶ Alden, 61-62.

front of cheerful courage.” Job was no stranger to weeping. There is no shame in sorrow and tears to not necessarily contradict faith or submission.

There is a glory in a firm declaration of submission to God, come what may. The same resolution, polished by tears, shines even more brightly for the glory of God. Tears testify that though pain is real God is still worthy of trust whatever He chooses to do.¹⁷

This commentary by Talbert gives readers and those who will comfort the bereaved helpful insight into Job’s words. Job can seem like an unattainable example of what Christians should be expressing, when in reality Job’s accomplishment is simply not cursing God and going against what Satan wants.

Even though in the first couple chapters all of Job’s responses seem stoic, later we find Job crying out that he wishes he hadn’t been born (Job 3). These questions in a time of great grief do not necessarily mean that the bereaved is without faith. In deep sorrow, these individuals may just be searching in the depths of their heart and mind for answers to the tragedy in their life. Earl Grollman notices these “whys” of someone in deep anguish are also found in Scripture including Job,

Remember, three of the Psalms start with “why”: “Why do you stand far off?” (Psalms[sic] 10) “Why have you forsaken me?” (Psalms[sic] 22) “Why have you rejected us forever?” (Psalms[sic] 74) But each one ends on a note of trust in God. The “whys” were really cries of anguish, a natural reaction to pain. There are 16 “whys” in the book of Job. God never answered the ‘Why?’ Instead He answered “Who.” The statement: “Dear God, why me? Why us?” may be not only a question but your own normal cry of distress, a plea for help. As you probe even further: ‘Since it has happened to me –to us- what can I – we- do now.’¹⁸

When the laments of Job are examined they “surprise and unnerve”¹⁹ the reader, who had found victory in Job’s initial response.

“Is Job, then, a positive or negative example of grieving? Neither really. Job is a *realistic* example of grieving, by one of the godliest men in Old Testament history. This is what grief looks like, sometimes even for spiritually mature saints, because even spiritually mature saints are human.”²⁰

In the midst of Job’s great grief, three friends come to support him.

¹⁷ Layton Talbert, *Beyond Suffering: discovering the message of Job*, (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2007), 49-50.

¹⁸ Joyce D. Davidson Ed. and Kenneth J. Doka Ed, *Living with grief: at work, at school, at worship*, (Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America, 1999), 187.

¹⁹ Talbert, 89.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was (Job 2:11-13).

The three friends came with good intentions as the narrator of Job discloses to us in the verses.²¹ They grieved with their friend, Job, by their recorded actions – weeping aloud, tearing robes, and sprinkling dust on their heads. Their silence has received different interpretation. Rudolph Honsey, author of the People's Bible commentary on Job, sees the silence as negative, since they should be speaking words of comfort at this time.²² Other commentators suggest just the opposite. "Notice that they sat, 'with him,' entering into his grief in this demonstrable way."²³

Good counselors know that sometimes the best thing they can do is simply listen. Just the presence of a sympathetic person can provide comfort altogether apart from any spoken words. This probably was the finest demonstration of love these three could have shown. If they simply returned home without saying anything, their reputations would be much different. After listening to each give his first speech, Job wished they might resort to their original treatment of him and suggested that silence would better prove their wisdom (13:5).²⁴

And also by Talbert,

"The narrator tells us that they came on a mission of mercy: to *mourn* with him (2:11), to *comfort* him (2:11), to *weep* with him (2:12), and – this is perhaps that highest commendation of their character – simply to *sit* with him and say *nothing* for *seven days* out of sympathetic respect for his "great grief" (2:12).²⁵

The three friends do not just sit in silence the whole time but after Job speaks they give their responses. The friends' attempts to comfort Job became negative examples of consoling because of the words they spoke to Job. Alden gives a summary of their responses, "His friends reasoned that Job must have committed some terrible sin known only to God. Perhaps he had broken some of the laws that God had built into the created order." This attack on Job's

²¹ Talbert, 81

²² Rudolph Honsey, *Job*, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1992), 30-31.

²³ Alden, 70.

²⁴ Talbert, 80.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

righteousness is the main argument of the friends' dialogues, as it seems to be the only reason in their minds that answers the "why" question. The opening response of Eliphaz offers a glimpse into the arguments the three friends continue to bring against Job.

Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they perish; at the blast of his anger they are no more. The lions may roar and growl, yet the teeth of the great lions are broken. The lion perishes for lack of prey, and the cubs of the lioness are scattered (Job 4:7-11).

In our culture, we are more likely to be more sensitive to those suffering. Bible loving Christians still run the danger of quoting certain Scripture that seems helpful or to give answers, but this really makes the grieving more difficult. A fellow member or loved one of the bereaved may think that some of the promises from God found in Scripture they are using will bring comfort. The comforter may even assume he/she is helping the bereaved answer the why question. In the mind of the bereaved those passages have no comfort at that moment since they can see no good in their scenario and feel no end to their pain. The three friends began doing a great job of supporting Job in his grief when they sat in silence and waited to listen. The friends became "miserable comforters" (Job 16:2) when they began to accuse Job with the only explanation of suffering in their theology they had. Talbert provides good insight into being Scriptural in one's support of those grieving.

Be Scriptural. By this I do *not* mean to quote lots of Scripture. Though there is a large place for Scriptures in consoling the afflicted, resist the temptation to be a surrogate Holy Spirit. Some passages are better left to Him to minister. Do not quote Romans 8:28 to a suffering saint. It is a wonderful verse, but the afflicted have thought of that verse long before you have. Some truths can be effectively ministered to the believer by God alone. Sufferers draw Spirit-ministered comfort from Romans 8:28, but it is not a verse to be doled out like spiritual aspirin, as though it instantly answers all questions, quiets all concerns, and heals all the hurts.

What I mean is, be scriptural in *your* approach to the sufferer and his or her suffering. Allow the full range of the Bible's teaching on suffering to inform your ministry to the sufferer.²⁶

When using Scripture to comfort the bereaved first listen. After listening do not attack their responses with Biblical clichés that might be used incorrectly in the first place. Just find ways to be there for them and support them physically and emotionally. Offer scriptural hope when they ask. Do not simply answer the "whys" they may be asking but to show them that their

²⁶ Talbert, 71.

God does care for them. Share with them words that will supply support in a time that their faith is being tested.

2.3. A Look at “Do not grieve” in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words (1 Th 4:13-18).

The Christians in Thessalonica were having trouble understanding what happened to their believing loved ones after they died. This troubled them so much that it was causing them such great grief that Paul wrote the words above to put an end to any despair. Although Paul refers to this ignorance that some had, what was causing them to grieve to such a degree that Paul addressed the problem was not identified or clear.²⁷ Many commentators have tried to establish what the problem of the Thessalonians was, but “none of the proposed explanations are satisfactory.”²⁸

When searching Scripture to learn how to minister to the bereaved it is important not to interpret Paul’s words incorrectly.

Paul is not saying that Christians don’t grieve. He simply says they do not “grieve like the rest of men.” Of course there is sorrow at death – one cannot part even for a short time from a loved one without some sad feelings. But because Paul did not want the Thessalonians to grieve without hope like most people, he presented them the facts about the death of Christians and the Lord’s coming.²⁹

“Some argue that Christians are not to grieve at all for deceased believers (see e.g., Lightfoot 1904:63; Milligan 1908: 56; Frame 1912: 167; Best 1977: 186; Malherbe 2000:264).”³⁰

²⁷ F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), 104; Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 213; Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistle to the Thessalonians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990), 164; Jeffery Weima, Baker Academic. *1-2 Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: 2014), 310.

²⁸ Green, 215.

²⁹ David P. Kuske, *Thessalonians*. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1984), 47.

³⁰ Weima, 314.

However, Weima continues, “The majority of commentators, however, from the time of Augustine and Theodoret until modern times, recognize that the purpose of Paul’s contrast between non-Christians and Christians cannot be to forbid the latter group from any expressions of grief in the context of death.”³¹ Passages from Paul’s other letters reinforce that Paul doesn’t forbid grief. “Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow” (Php 2:27). “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Ro 12:15).

Weima succinctly summarizes the validity of Christians grieving:

There is no justification here or anywhere else in Scripture for Christians to gloss over the pain of death and glibly utter pious phrases about the deceased “being in a better place.” Tears and other expressions of grief by believers in these situations are not evidence of weak faith but only that of a great love (John 11:35-36:”Jesus wept [over the death of Lazarus]. So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’”). But while both non-Christians and Christians grieve at the death of loved ones, there is a critical difference; in contrast to the hopelessness that characterizes those outside the faith, believers grieve with hope.³²

Paul is separating the Christians from the non-Christians in the type of grieving they will experience. Christians, who know that their loved one will rise again on Judgment Day, have hope. They have the hope that the believing loved one is in heaven with their Savior, Jesus, at that very moment. They have the hope that their loved one will rise again on Judgment day to live forever in their glorified body. They have the hope that they will see their loved one again and they will live together in glory and perfection alongside Christ. They will grieve the loss caused by death, but they will grieve with hope. Their “grief should be tempered and informed by the hope they held, based on the resurrection of Christ and the promise of his coming.”³³

This hope does not change the grief individuals will experience. Their grief may certainly look just like other people’s grief to the onlooker. Their grief may certainly feel just like an unbeliever’s to the one grieving. The caution is not to assume that the natural human reaction in the individual’s grieving process is the grief Paul warned against. He is simply speaking of the lack of hope when it comes to the fate of the deceased in the mind of a believer versus an unbeliever. The separation and grief over the loss of that individual and coping with

³¹ Weima, 314.

³² Ibid.

³³ Green, 219.

this tremendous change is exactly the same between Christians and non-Christians. Another benefit that a Christian has that many unchurched individuals do not have is the support system of believers in their congregation. Thus the congregation is wise to be informed how best to support their grieving brother or sister in the faith.

Paul closes by urging the Thessalonians to talk about these facts so they might encourage each other in times of bereavement. Do we wonder what we should say to a bereaved fellow believer at the funeral home, or at church before the funeral service, or when leaving the graveside after the committal, or a week or a month or a year after the funeral? Let's not just say "I'm so sorry!" Unbelievers can also say this kind of thing in their hopeless grief. How much more comforting it is to hear again and again from the lips of fellow believers the simple facts about the dead in Christ and the coming of our Lord: Christ rose and promises us we will rise also; death is but a sleep from which Christ himself will wake us, at his coming all believers will be reunited to meet with Christ and live with him forever. You don't have to be a pastor to be able to relate these simple truths. We all know them and believe them.³⁴

Just as the Thessalonians all heard these words first read and had access to them, the use of these words in encouragement at the time of death is crucial. To remind the bereaved of the hope they have in Christ reminds those grieving of the hope they have and allows the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts as the Chief Comforter. Just as Kuske highlighted this as the work of all individual members of the congregation not just the pastor, so does Green in the very way Paul words verse eighteen.

Paul does not put himself forward as one who comforts the grieving; rather, he urges the members of the church to use *these words* to comfort *each other*. The development of a true pastoral concern among the members of the congregation was a fundamental goal. The preceding teaching would serve as an instrument in the ministry of mutual comfort, but it was not designed to be a substitute for it.³⁵

The encouragement for the work of bereavement ministry can be found in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. For the bereaved to see the love in their fellow Christians' desires to encourage often is more helpful than just the pastor making these visits and calls.

2.4. God Cares about Those Who Have Experienced a Loss Caused by Death

The final study in the Scriptures is to see the care God has for those who need support. In the list of those who need support fall the widows and orphans. Both widows and orphans have lost someone they dearly loved and God does not overlook them, but often gives special attention

³⁴ Kuske, 49-50.

³⁵ Green, 229.

to their needs. For the New Testament Church, James lays out a strong encouragement to those who consider themselves Christians: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27). James seems to pick up this important ministry to the widows and orphans from a common Old Testament concern of the Lord.³⁶

A few passages in the Old Testament really bring to light God’s care for the needs of widows and orphans. In Exodus, God demonstrates the seriousness of his instruction that his people support widows and orphans: “Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless” (22:24).

The theme is continued in Deuteronomy, “For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (14:28-29). God establishes certain functions of society into his law for the Israelites: “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands” (Dt14:28-29). God also commands,

When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹ When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²² Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this (Dt 24:19-22).

The Psalms also testify to God’s concern. “You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted, you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror” (Ps 10:17-18). “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling” (Ps 68:5). “The Lord watches

³⁶ Peter H. Davids, *James*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 43; Douglas J. Moo, *The letter of James: an introduction and commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 97.

over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked” (Ps 146:9).

Besides James other places in the New Testament show God’s continued care for widows. Even Jesus in his ministry on earth takes notice of the widows. In Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4 Jesus notices the widow placing her offering, which was all she had to live on. As we pointed out before, his heart went out to the widow of Nain who lost her only son in Luke 7. The early Christian church continues to support widows. This support is seen in Acts 6:1-7. In this section of Acts seven men are elected to lead this ministry so that the twelve apostles could continue with their entrusted ministry of the Word of God. In 1 Timothy 5:3-16 Paul instructs Timothy in proper handling of the ministry to the widows.

Although God does not give explicit instructions for the church on how to support those who are grieving a loss caused by death, he lays out principles for his children to follow at all times. Since the widows and orphans are ones who would be grieving losses caused by death and God is concerned and personally cares for them, his people will have that same concern and care for those who need support among them, especially brothers and sisters in the faith.³⁷

³⁷ Galatians 6:10: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

3. Study of Psychology on Grieving

The area of secular education that has done many studies on grief is psychology. If pastors or their congregations want to grow in their understanding of how grief impacts the bereaved, then they will want to understand psychology's research from the beginning until modern times. Psychology has made multiple contributions to this study of grief. First it has made counselors and individuals aware of the problems Western society has caused for the grief process. Over the years many different models of grief have been suggested to help in an attempt to help those grieving.

3.1. Awareness of Society's Problematic Impact

Unfortunately contemporary Western functioning societies do not lend any help in the grieving process.³⁸ Many people have not experienced a loss that has left them with true grief that has affected them physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and behaviorally.³⁹ Individuals who are onlookers of the bereaved often have a formula for recovery that expects a long-term griever to get over it, move on, or turn the page.⁴⁰ This formula reflects the "impatience with the unresolvable or the chronic."⁴¹

Darcy Harris reveals Western society's rules of grieving that have formed such an understanding. Harris observes that workplaces only acknowledge leave for those who have lost a spouse or child. There is not similar leave for the loss of an ex-spouse or close friend or loss of a child before birth.⁴² "Funeral leave for most workplaces is three days for a close family member."⁴³ When Harris asked those who are grieving how long they think grief should last, they often answered anywhere from three months to one year.⁴⁴ Even in a bereavement ministry program like Jan Nelson's and David Aaker's a time limit is set. The program looks to extend the support and care for the bereaved beyond the funeral and even for years, but Nelson and Aaker suggest that after three years you keep the member on record but mark them as

³⁸ All of Darcy Harris' article focuses on this point.

³⁹ Davidson & Doka, 7.

⁴⁰ Davidson and Doka, 5 & 10; Richard Lischer, "Another Grief Observed." *The Christian Century* (2014), 30.

⁴¹ Lischer, 30.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

“inactive.”⁴⁵ Nelson’s and Aaker’s work was published in 1998, which might have influenced their program, since they established a time for eventually moving on. Many in their work with bereaved have observed that grief may take years. The grief will “manifest itself at milestones throughout one’s life,”⁴⁶ or continue throughout their lifetime.⁴⁷

Darcy Harris has observed that the bereaved themselves do not feel comfortable in the way they physically express their grief. She writes: “Strong emotions of any type are usually stigmatized, and bereaved individuals often express embarrassment for ‘losing control’ of their emotions in front of others.”⁴⁸ The behaviors will greatly vary “if the manner of death is considered acceptable or if it is a loss with some stigma attached.”⁴⁹ If the loss is a suicide, the family will be considered dysfunctional and negatively affect the bereaved. Murders or other deaths, which include the legal system, involve the media. The involvement of the media can greatly hinder the grieving process.⁵⁰ Western society doesn’t have time for or an acceptance of the normal grief process. The lack of any grieving observed in our society results in the bereaved trying to hide or feel their grief is abnormal. The reality is that grief of any kind is completely normal, since the grief process is totally subjective.⁵¹

3.2. Grief Models

One of the earliest models of grief is Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’ five stages of grief.⁵²

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross developed a frequently cited model of bereavement, the “stages of grief,” in her landmark book *On Death and Dying*. She describes a linear five-step – consisting of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – as terminally ill patients became aware of impending death. Dr. Kubler-Ross’ work helped legitimize the wide variety of emotions in people who are dying. The five-stage theory was later

⁴⁵ Jan C. Nelson, *The Bereavement Ministry Program: A Comprehensive Guide for Churches*, (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1998), 21.

⁴⁶ Darcy Harris, 245.

⁴⁷ Davidson & Doka, 10; Darcy Harris, 245; “Beyond the five stages of grief. The bereavement process is seldom linear and varies from one person to the next,” *The Harvard Mental Health Letter*, (2011), 3; David McNeish, “Grief is a Circular Staircase: the uses and limits of models of grief in the pastoral care of the bereaved.” *Practical Theology* (2013), 192.

⁴⁸ Darcy Harris, 245.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 245-246.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ McNeish, 196.

⁵² Lischer, 30

altered and adapted to cover the reaction to other losses such as divorce or the death of a loved one.⁵³

The five stages is still a very useable model for grief. The only problem of this model is that people make it into a step by step process that should eventually come to an end over time. This was not Dr. Kubler-Ross' intention, since the griever may go back and forth between stages. The length and the process will vary for each individual. The current validity of the "five stages" was renewed by a Yale bereavement study in 2007 which also adapted the model according to modern research.⁵⁴

The Harvard study mentions Dr. Colin Murray Parkes' model for grief: "Dr. Colin Murray Parkes, who has written extensively on bereavement, proposed that people who have experienced a loss undergo several prolonged and overlapping phases – numb disbelief, yearning for the deceased, and finally reorganization – during which they carve out a new life."⁵⁵

Another model:

Dr. J William Worden suggested a model of grieving that includes certain tasks. The first three tasks are to accept the loss, to experience the resulting pain, and to put the loss in some perspective and adjust to a changed world without the person who has died. The fourth and final task is for people to alter ties with the deceased enough that they are able to invest their love and energy in others. People may shuttle back and forth among these tasks.⁵⁶

And most recently:

Two psychologists make the case that advances in diagnosis and treatment – which have enabled people to live longer with life threatening illnesses, such as cancers and heart disease – have significantly changed the grieving process. In their book *Saying Goodbye: How Families Can Find Renewal Through Loss*, Dr. Barbra Okun and Dr. Joseph Nowinski identify a pattern of grief commonly encountered by families who face the loss of a loved one to protracted illness. The book includes the following stages, which begin long before a person actually dies. Crisis, Unity, Upheaval, Resolution, Renewal.⁵⁷

Robert Neimeyer, noticed that there is a shift from the old traditional models of grief to newer theories. He lists six points that characterize these newer models. Skepticism has

⁵³ "Beyond the Five Stages of Grief", 3.

⁵⁴ Lischer, 30.

⁵⁵ "Beyond the Five Stages of Grief," 3.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

allowed studies to question how universal or predictable the grieving process really is. The result is that studies have come to appreciate the complexity of grief and adaptation to loss.⁵⁸ This shift allows the grief and the griever to be complex. Then, grievers do not need to be forced in a certain grief process that they are not experiencing themselves.

The second point is that grief no longer needs to be a “letting go” in order to be successful. To move on may also include maintaining symbolic bonds with the deceased.⁵⁹ An example of a symbolic bond would be a husband remembering that his deceased wife would write a special note for their children on their birthday and continuing that tradition in remembrance of the loved one in a healthy way. Another point is the making-meaning process. In this process attention has been given to how the bereaved attach meaning for what has happened and make new meaning for how things will now be without the deceased. The making-meaning process supplements the focus on emotions and symptoms of grief caused by the loss.⁶⁰

Next on the list, awareness has been raised for the implications of loss for the bereaved’s sense of identity. They will go through major revisions of who they are and what they now have to do, since they are missing the major role which the deceased partner once controlled.⁶¹ Those supporting will need to help cover and teach things that the bereaved might have to do which they didn’t before. These things may include doing the laundry, doing the finances, or being more involved with the children.

The fifth point is that the bereaved will learn a lot from the loss. This might move them to realize the fragility of life or the what ifs they didn’t think about before.⁶² These areas of growth might move them to be more open to getting more insightful answers from Scripture or could also lead them away from Scripture if someone isn’t there to help guide them at this time of grief. Finally, the need to be mindful of the impact that this loss has not only on those immediately impacted by the loss, such as spouse, children, and parents, but also on the family

⁵⁸ Robert Neimeyer, "Narrative Strategies in Grief Therapy." *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, (1999), 66.

⁵⁹ Neimeyer, 66.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 66-67.

and others who are close to the bereaved.⁶³ This is a helpful insight for those who want to support the bereaved but also to check up on those who might be impacted by the grief of the bereaved.

Most often in the past when supporting someone who is grieving the encouragement was to let go. Although that may be helpful for some, there is a new consensus that bonds with the deceased should be continued in different ways as mentioned above. McNeish supports the continuing bonds model.

The main conduit of this new consensus was Dennis Klass, Phylliss R. Silverman and Steven Nickman's book *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (1996).

In the book they bring together twenty-two different authors who all cite evidence, from a range of clinical backgrounds and cultures, that continuing bonds with the deceased can be healthy and helpful.⁶⁴

3.3. Factors that Influence Grief

When working with those who are grieving a loss caused by death there are many factors that influence how an individual will be affected by grief. Kenneth Doka offers six factors around traumatic loss that influence this process. The first factor is whether the death was a natural death or caused by another human. The second factor is whether the death was caused by one who died or by someone else. Along with that factor, to what degree were the intentions of each party involved in the death. For example, was it a suicide, a murder, or an accident? The third factor is to what degree was the death preventable. The fourth factor is whether or not the individual suffered and to what degree they suffered in their death. The fifth factor is how many people were affected by the traumatic loss. The sixth factor is whether the death was expected or unexpected and to what degree was the expectedness.⁶⁵

In their work on grief's effects on family relationships Forma Walsh and Monica McGoldrick have identified a number of factors that influence family adaptation to loss. These factors are also important to be aware of because they will impact the grief of all individuals. First, the manner of death can impact the length and the severity of the grief. A violent, sudden, or ambiguous death will negatively impact the grieving process. A lingering illness that resulted in an expected death will also be grieved but without the extremes that result from a death by

⁶³ Neimeyer, 67.

⁶⁴ McNeish, 192.

⁶⁵ Doka, 12-13.

other factors. Second, the family social network will impact the grief process and the support the bereaved receives. How well the family is connected socially in their regular life will greatly influence how they support each other and open up to one another when they lose a mutual loved one. Third, the timing of the loss affects the how well one is able to cope. If a death, although never timely, is at a time of greater struggles or challenges than before, then dealing with the loss will be a greater challenge. Fourth, the sociocultural context of the death is a factor that influences grief. In our Western Society gender role constraints are on men not to cry or show grief, while women can freely grieve. In congregations a context exists of Christians willing to help with the funeral and be there with open arms and comforting words. While other people might not have a church family and the grief will be more of a struggle.⁶⁶ These are just some of the examples of the factors listed but each situation is different. To be aware of these factors and see which ones apply to a specific situation will benefit the comprehension of someone looking to support different bereaved individuals. The observations by these three authors cover the many variety of factors that can influence grief. They are the same factors mentioned by other authors as well.⁶⁷

The many different models and theories on grief can get very extensive and confusing. The goal of knowing the different theories about helping those grieving is not to get caught in the details. The goal is to be aware that from years of research and observations by professionals, there is no clean cut way to grieve. There are many different models that anyone mourning a loss could use and go between that would best help them at any given time in the process. The theories and models allow those supporting the bereaved to understand that grieving is messy and consuming. At no time is the bereaved doing something that is abnormal or something that hasn't been observed, they are doing something very natural to humans at their time of great loss.

McNeish exposes the danger of grief models, "There is a danger of practitioners using any of these models as route-maps to grief and over regulating subjective experience."⁶⁸ He summarizes their usefulness very clearly, "Models of grief are therefore perhaps most useful when considered as a framework upon which grieving can be negotiated rather than as a mould

⁶⁶ McGoldrick and Walsh, 13-25.

⁶⁷ Darcy Harris, 245; Davidson & Doka, 8-9; Neimeyer, 68; McNeish, 192.

⁶⁸ McNeish, 196.

into which grieving must fit.”⁶⁹ And he highlights the importance of listening, “Instead, the conversation and support given should be shaped by intense and active listening that forms the bedrock of pastoral care. Some argue that such compassionate listening should shape the care given as much, if not more, than any theoretical framework.”⁷⁰

3.4. Literature Review

There is now a plethora of books on grieving. Books have been written by those who have gone through grieving or are in the midst of the grieving process.⁷¹ Books have been written by psychologists, counselors, social workers, and pastors. These books on grief are mainly for individuals who can learn how best to grieve or better understand what they are going through. There are some for the counselor or pastor to help them understand grief and how to interact with those who are grieving. In this assortment of books there is a lack of resources on how the congregation can support those grieving or how the pastor can train his congregation to support those grieving. Although there is a lack in this specific area, some of the books written for the individual give insight for intervention by congregations among those grieving a loss.

In his book *Ministering to the Grief Sufferer*, C. Charles Bachmann begins by highlighting the misconception of grief onlookers can have. From this misconception, he notices that many problems can result from the one ministering with a lack of knowledge about the normal grief process.⁷² From the introduction Bachmann goes on for 6 chapters to describe grief and give practical applications for the minister when dealing with the bereaved. In chapter 3, he lists some very helpful techniques for grief management, both good and bad, that the pastor should be aware of.⁷³ In the following chapter he gives constructive and destructive ways of handling grief that the pastor should be aware of in the grieving of the individual he is

⁶⁹ McNeish, 200.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 196.

⁷¹ Edgar Newman Jackson, *For the Living*, (Des Moines: Channel Press, 1963); Gregory Schulz, *The Problem of Suffering: a father's thoughts on the suffering, death, and life of his children*, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern, 1996); Carol Staudacher, *Beyond Grief: A guide for recovering from the death of a loved one*. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1987); Roberta Temes, *Living With an Empty Chair: a guide through grief*. (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1991); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a son*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

⁷² C. Charles Bachmann, *Ministering to the Grief Sufferer*. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), 13-15.

⁷³ Bachmann., 38-39.

counseling.⁷⁴ Throughout the book Bachmann focuses solely on the role of the pastor. He puts major emphasis on how important it is for the pastor to be there and minister well to the bereaved.⁷⁵ In his book about ministry to those grieving death, Bachmann didn't write anything that involves the help or support of the congregation. However, the techniques he offers the pastor can also be offered to congregation members wanting to support those grieving a loss through death.

Comforting the Bereaved by Warren and David Wiersbe also highlights the ministry of the pastor to the bereaved. They highlight the lack of comfort or the lack of quality in the comfort shared with those grieving. The following quote is an example of the great insight they offer into the kind of comfort many Christians find themselves sharing:

There are thousands of people [...] in and out of our churches today, people who desperately want to trust God and have their deep wounds of sorrow healed. However, no one has yet accepted them as they are and shown them what God can do for them. Too many Christians [...] have pat answers for complex questions and simply do not understand the dynamics of grief. A broken heart is never healed by clichés like “Turn it over to Jesus!” or “Be happy that she’s with the Lord in heaven.”⁷⁶

Their overview of death and grief is very minimal. They simply notice that they both are realities that everyone at some point has to deal with. Chapter four lists three resources for the pastor: God's Word, prayer, and local fellowship of bereaved people.⁷⁷ They give practical application of both God's Word and prayer when comforting the bereaved. They finish the book dealing with the funeral. They reexamine the importance of the funeral and the role of the pastor in the funeral, at the grave, and following the funeral. The section about the pastor's role following the funeral received only two pages of treatment. This short section again reiterates the lack of information on how to train the congregation to support those grieving after a loss through death.

Living Beyond Grief: Death in the Family edited by Monica McGoldrick and Froma Walsh focuses on how grief from death impacts family relationships. In their opening chapter the authors wanted others to realize that the individual's bereavement has consequences on

⁷⁴ Bachmann, 45-58.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25-33.

⁷⁶ Warren Wiersbe and David W. Wiersbe, *Comforting the bereaved*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 4.

⁷⁷ Wiersbe, 30-33.

relationships among all the family members.⁷⁸ The authors noticed that books on grief didn't deal with impact of grief on the family from a loss caused by death.⁷⁹ To finish the introduction the authors listed some useful points. In order for the family to adapt to the loss there needs to be a shared acknowledgement of the reality of death and shared experience of loss. They also highlighted that there are many different factors that influence how the family will adapt to the loss.⁸⁰ The rest of the book is various articles collected by the editors and commented on by them.

There are two useful articles in this book for a congregation looking to support the bereaved. One article is "Family Reaction to Death" by Murry Bowen. His article highlights three important issues that accompany the loss of a loved one: how open or closed the relationships in the family are, the shockwave effect of the loss throughout the family, and the importance of funerals and the professionals associated with the funeral like the pastor and the funeral directors.⁸¹ The most intriguing and maybe not as self-explanatory is the shockwave effect of the loss. The example by Bowen may be the most helpful.

A grandmother in her early sixties had a radical mastectomy for cancer. Within the following two years, there was a chain of serious reactions in her children and their families. One son began drinking for the first time in his life, the wife of another son had a serious depression, a daughter's husband failed in business, and another daughter's children became involved in automobile accidents and delinquency. Some symptoms continued five years later when the grandmother's cancer was pronounced cured. More common examples occur when someone has actually passed away.⁸²

The other article is "Rituals and the Healing Process" by Evan Imber-Black.⁸³ The author focuses on the importance of "mourning rituals,"⁸⁴ which is often a funeral.

Living with Grief After a Sudden Loss: Suicide, Homicide, Accident, Heart Attack, Stroke edited by Kenneth Doka is another book of collected articles which are meant mainly for the mental health provider. The articles in this book focus on a variety of traumatic losses, such as

⁷⁸ McGoldrick and Walsh, 3.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ McGoldrick and Walsh, 8.

⁸¹ Ibid., 79-92.

⁸² Ibid., 84.

⁸³ Ibid., 207-223.

⁸⁴ Doka, 207.

heart attack, stroke, accident, and murders. The insights to how the grief process changes when the death of their loved one is traumatic is useful for the different scenarios a congregation will experience. The introduction jumps right into the reaction of a widow and her family after the death of her husband from a terrorist attack.⁸⁵ He gives six points that can affect how the survivors experience the loss: 1. Natural or Human Made, 2. The Degree of Intentionality, 3. The Degree of Preventability, 4. Suffering, 5. Scope, and 6. The Degree of Expectedness.⁸⁶

In Kenneth Doka's book the article "Using Funeral Rituals to Help Survivors"⁸⁷ by O. Daune Weeks offers helpful insights into the immediate helpfulness of the funeral. The article "Spiritual Support After Sudden Loss"⁸⁸ by Earl Grollman proposes helpful insight for the proper place for "Why God?" questions of those grieving. These questions are found in Scripture by men of great faith, such as King David and Job.⁸⁹ The book mainly looks to help the individual griever understand his or her grief. A couple articles offer help to those supporting the survivors, but none offer advice for long term congregational support.

Living with Grief: At Work, At School, At Worship edited by Joyce Davidson and Kenneth Doka seeks to make others aware of the impact of grief in the daily lives of the bereaved. A quick look over the opening chapter, "A Primer"⁹⁰ will be useful for anyone looking to better understand the grief process people are experiencing after the death of a loved one.

Two sections from this book, which do not give significant insight for this paper, could be of some benefit for lay members of congregations. Those who function or are the leaders in their workplaces will benefit from part one, "Living with Grief: At Work."⁹¹ Schools and teachers will benefit from part two, "Living with Grief: At School"⁹² After both sections the

⁸⁵ Doka, 1-9.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 12-13.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 127-138.

⁸⁸ Doka, 85-187.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 187.

⁹⁰ Davidson and Doka, 1.

⁹¹ Ibid., 13.

⁹² Ibid., 93.

author provides great examples of how Starbucks handled traumatic deaths at one of their locations.⁹³ The practical suggestions after each chapter are very beneficial.

Part three, “Living with Grief: At Worship” offers the most benefit to the topic of this paper. Yet, the articles focus more on the help at the time of death through the funeral. There are a couple paragraphs on bereavement ministry,⁹⁴ but again any real suggestions for a congregation are lacking. The practical suggestions⁹⁵ are helpful for a congregation looking to get some ideas for a ministry to those grieving a loss caused by death.

Besides all these resources, Helen Harris in her article “What is a congregation to do? Grief in family and congregational life” highlights and reviews a number of books on grief. She looks at books written by those who are working through their own grief, the work of psychologists and counselors on grief to help those grieving, and resources for clergy and congregations. In her research and reviews of different resources she noticed the lack of resources for congregations to support those grieving. In the end of her article she does list different ways to support the bereaved. She bases her suggestions on all the resources and gives some practical application for support by congregations, which will be highlighted in chapter five of this paper.

⁹³ Davidson and Doka, 61.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 175-178.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 185-186.

4. Training Your Congregation to Support Those Grieving Loss Caused by Death

After digging into Scripture and examining some of the psychology theories on grief, how can you better train your congregation? This segment will look to give helpful tips for use by those wanting to be better equipped to support the bereaved. Then, some applicable ideas will be proposed for training a congregation to better support those grieving in your congregation.

4.1. Helpful tips

Talbert offers six tips that he calls “pleas from sufferers as wells as principles from Scripture.”⁹⁶ His principles follow but their explanation has been summarized. “*Be attentive*” to all those who are suffering and grieving the loss. A loss usually doesn’t just affect an isolated individual but there are many affected by their own grief and the grief of the primary sufferer. “*Be sympathetic*” by not looking necessarily to give advice or counsel. Your presence and listening ear can be the most helpful. “*Be Available*” to support the one who is grieving. “*Be Prayerful.*” Prayer is always helpful and God attaches power and promises to prayer. “*Be Patient.*” Patience will go a long way since the grieving process may last years or the rest of the bereaved individual’s life time. Finally “*Be Scriptural.*” This doesn’t necessarily mean quoting Scripture but showing Christian love in your support that Scripture teaches. Obviously the hope and healing Scripture can bring is very beneficial.⁹⁷

Hellen Harris gives some helpful tips for those looking to have a ministry to the bereaved.⁹⁸ In her list, Harris identifies the importance of being present, listening to the repetitive stories of the bereaved, be available over a long period of time, do not categorize the bereaved in stages, allow the bereaved to express their spiritual questions, speak about the deceased by name, and model self-care. These are just some takeaways from the list, but from all of the things Helen Harris lists the point is reinforced that “what you say is less important than that you are there.”⁹⁹

Pastor Jeske offers some cliché phrases not to say and practical reasons why they should not be spoken.

Ask any widow and she will tell you that the following comments bring no comfort:

⁹⁶ Talbert, 69.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 69-71.

⁹⁸ The complete list can be found on page 19 of Helen Harris article.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

1. *I know how you feel.* No you don't. You have no idea what I'm going through right now.
2. *I guess it was his time.* I didn't want it to be his time.
3. *Be strong. Don't cry.* If I don't let out this grief sometime somewhere, I'm going to explode.
4. If a lengthy illness: *You must be glad his suffering is over.* I wanted his suffering over by being cured, not dead.
5. If a brief illness: *At least he went fast.* That just makes even bigger the bomb dropped on my life.
6. *Oh, well, none of us lives forever.* That philosophy may have worked for the Roman Stoics, but it doesn't work for me.
7. *We must not question God's ways.* Oh yeah? I'm questioning him right now.
8. *He looks so natural.* No he doesn't. He looks like a wax dummy of someone I used to know.
9. If it is a woman who died: *God needed another rose for his garden and picked her.* There were plenty of other flowers. Why her?
10. *If there's anything I can do for you, just call.* Right now I am numb and overwhelmed with the number of decisions I need to make and I should pick up the phone to talk to someone else? What are you going to do, bring my dead husband back? When I am crying at 3:00 A.M. do you really want to come over?

Cracking a joke to lighten the mood is not a particularly good idea either. Just show up and be there. Listen. Come the day before and help organize the display of pictures and personal items. Make a point to come back a week later and listen some more. Don't ask the bereaved to call if they need a meal. Just prepare one and take it over. Send some flowers, not on the day (there will probably be plenty) but a month later.

Here are five suggestions of better things to say at the funeral:

1. *My heart hurts for you right now.*
2. *I am praying for you right now.*
3. *I can't wait to see him again. Jesus' resurrection makes us immortal.*
4. *She meant a great deal to me and was a huge blessing in my life. Let me tell you what I really appreciated about her.*
5. *I love you.*¹⁰⁰

All of the tips and reminders impress that being present and listening is far more important than what you say. When you do speak, be sure not to attack the grief or the griever. Although you may be speaking some truth, not to hurt or push away the bereaved but rather to comfort them by putting yourself right there with them to show you care is far more important. Take the tips above and apply them as necessary in order to check and evaluate your methods as you strive to be there and comfort the bereaved.

4.2. Ideas for Training a Congregation

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.timeofgrace.org/blog/10ThingsNotToSayAtAFuneral>

In the following section, some of the ideas for training a congregation will apply the knowledge of psychology and principles from Scripture. Other ideas may just be simple reminders of basic ways to get members, who are experienced with grief, involved in the supporting of those grieving and the training of the congregation. When evaluating the ideas proposed here, one will have to understand that not every concept will work at every congregation. The resources available to certain congregations will have to determine what is practical for their situation. In the proposal of my ideas I will include how the factors of different congregations' situations will influence the practicality of a proposed idea.

The first step in the process is finding how you can best train your congregation. There are a few factors that will influence this step. The first question is who has experience when it comes to grieving or supporting those grieving. Those who have gone through the grieving process will have the experience and be able to relate to others who are in need of support. They will also be a very helpful resource when it comes to giving training advice about what grieving is like and what the bereaved are and are not looking for from those who want to support. This experience is invaluable. When seeking the experience and help of those who have experienced or are experiencing grief, the pastor or one seeking needs to be aware of the situation of the one with experience. First, know how they are doing with their own grief. A newly bereaved individual is not someone to seek out for their experience. They still need support themselves. Even if they have been grieving for some time, it is important to know how they are doing with their grief, since their grief most likely will have a lifelong impact. If the individual has been properly assessed, then ask them what they think about helping out and sharing their experience with grief in the training of others to help support.

Others who might be good with grief may be those who have been part of supporting the bereaved in their life already. Their experience may come from being a counselor or psychologist and they have studied and used their training with the bereaved. Their knowledge and experience that would surpass the pastor's or even the psychology studies of this paper would be very useful. Others with experience might be those who had a good friend or family member who lost someone. They gained their experience from supporting in a helpful way and gained a better understanding of the grief process. These three differently experienced individuals are those whom the pastor will want to seek out in order to give you real life experience with grief. They will play a big role in the support of those grieving by their ability

to step up to the challenge right away. They will also be able to share their understanding and knowledge with those you are trying to train to be part of your support group.

After you have found and contacted the individuals, who have the experience to help you train, your next step is getting together those who will be trained and assist in supporting the bereaved. The training can be put together in whatever fashion those in charge see fit, but the following topics would benefit the training of any individuals, even the experienced.

An important point to get across is what the grief process is. All will benefit from understanding that the grief process varies from individual to individual on account of many different factors. A number of the factors were mentioned above in section 3.3. One crucial point to teach is that the grief may never completely come to an end in the lifetime of the bereaved. To establish these realities indeed should be included in the training and may be refreshing and informative to even those experienced with grief. This information will help get rid of the false ideas or opinions individuals have or have been affected by in their life.

Along with these points, a look at grief in Scripture will help decrease the negative stigma that is attached to grieving. Job is a great book to go through since it may be unfamiliar to many beyond the first two and final chapters. A look at Job will show that there is nothing wrong with grief and one may use Job to bring comfort to those who are suffering some of the worst grief possible. Another part of Scripture that can be beneficial in this training is the statement like “Do not grieve” in 1 Thessalonians 4. To clear up the difference between natural human grief and the hopeless grief of an unbeliever will be helpful. I would highlight these two sections of Scripture to be included in the training of a congregation in order to clear the false ideas and negative stigmas that are associated with grief from western society.

Once an appropriate understanding of grief from studies outside of the Bible and from the Bible has been reached, members of the congregation will be ready to grow in their confidence and ability to support the bereaved. The trained group will need to put together a system for keeping track of all the bereaved in the congregation as well as the work done to support them. This is a list that can find its final resting place among the pastor and his elders, similar to a delinquents list for example, to monitor that the work is being done. This list may not even need to be monitored in such a way if those in charge of a support group can be empowered and trusted to coordinate the group themselves. Obviously this depends on the size of the congregation. A smaller congregation may have fewer individuals who are able to support and

more that need to be supported, leaving the pastor and elders to coordinate it. A larger congregation may have more than enough qualified members to coordinate the group themselves.

The group, by whomever it is coordinated, needs a good tracking and filing system. A list needs to be formed that identifies those who are or could be grieving a loss caused by death. The bereaved should remain on this list until they themselves die and are united with their Savior Jesus. Dates should be included on this list that mark milestones in the life of the bereaved. Milestone dates include major holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. At these times the grief will hit harder and to have someone else remember and be there for the griever will be a huge comfort.

The next step is putting together a bereavement program. There are a number of books that lay out wonderful plans and give great ways to support the bereaved. A book I referenced in this paper was *The Bereavement Ministry Program: A Comprehensive Guide for Churches* by Jan Nelson and David Aaker. To put together a plan for a congregation in this paper would be impossible, since books of 100 plus pages cover the details of these programs. However a couple of common needs from Nelson and Aaker's book are:

For an older widow/widower:

- Help with finances
- Homemaking and house maintenance tasks such as laundry, yard work, making meals, grocery shopping, etc.
- Help with personal care
- Transportation to and from appointments

For a young widow/widower:

- Child care
- Help with finances
- Help in learning job hunting skills and locating a job
- Help with housekeeping

For anyone in the early stages of grief:

- Meal preparation
- Grocery shopping
- Child care
- Those willing to come and simply sit with the bereaved

You will no doubt become aware of other such needs in the course of bereavement care.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Nelson and Aaker, 18.

Writing letters, phone calls, and personal visits are most definitely recommended throughout the entire life of the bereaved. Remember in your talks to ask the bereaved what they need help with and do not assume what they need. To just show up with items that they might not necessarily need could possibly do more harm than good.

One final point to remember and take away from this all is to be there and be supportive. The worst thing you can do is to let yourself think that you do not know what to do or say and avoid being there for someone who is hurting. I have functioned this way in the past and I beat myself up for not doing anything. After doing this research, just being there and listening and feeling the other person's hurt despite whether you know what to say or do is far better than never being there at all. Just be there and you will be one step closer to better comforting and supporting the bereaved.

5. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the need to train a congregation to support those grieving a loss caused by death beyond the funeral. Congregations for centuries have gathered around the bereaved to support them with a mourning ritual that focuses them on the hope they have in Christ. Pastors and Christian friends know how to share the hope of eternal life and resurrection, but the individual left to grieve for the rest of their life is at times neglected. Western society has made the normal grief process of human nature to be something abnormal. An important part of training is to teach members of a congregation that lifelong and various processes of grieving are completely normal. These truths can be taught from studies and observations of professionals. These truths about grief can also be taught from Scripture, which clearly demonstrates that grief is not condemned but is important for bereaved individuals. After members have a solid footing in their training about grief, then they can begin learning, practicing, and growing in their support of the bereaved in their congregation.

Although I have examined grief and made applicable use of this important knowledge, I do not imagine to have covered every area of a congregation's support of the bereaved. One area that I know could be pursued and give great insight to what has been provided here are personal interviews with counselors, laypeople, pastors, and others who have firsthand experience with grief from loss caused by death. The gathered information from firsthand accounts in face to face interviews would be very beneficial to the topic and rewarding to the individual.

This paper focused on training members to support the bereaved within the congregation. Another area of research would be to find out how this system of supporting could reach out to the community to support nonmembers. This could lead to the supporting of the bereaved with outreach implications.

Further research could be done in the support of those grieving losses other than those caused by death. In my research I came across a lot of information about those grieving a loss though divorce, loss of job, natural disaster, etc. There would be some overlap with in the area of how people grieve, but there is a lot more to consider when it comes to people grieving a loss other than just losing a loved one through death.

Finally, my prayer is that after you have read these pages, you have come to see the need for supporting those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. This paper will give the needed information to feel more confident to reach out to the bereaved in order to comfort them and

support them throughout their time of grief. If you are a leader of your congregation, this paper will give the needed information to implement training for members to support those grieving. This way they stay connected to the church but more importantly to the means of grace which are offered in the church. Through God's Word they can be comforted again and again with an everlasting peace and hope, whether at church or by the individual supporting the bereaved.

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