

**A God Centered Perspective for
Caregivers of the Aging, Sick & Deceased**

Pastor Tom
December 10, 2017

Christmas Eve is two weeks away from today. So are you happy; joyful; excited and anticipating? If you're not, what's wrong with you? It's the most wonderful time of the year. You're supposed to be in a celebratory and joyful mood all the time.

Or might the increased expectation of joy and happiness increase your sorrow and unhappiness because of the state of your life or because you lost someone you loved this past year. This will be the first Christmas without them.

Christmas stirs up a lot of stuff, much of it good, some of it hard. Since families gather together, if someone is missing, their absence is especially pronounced. It's hard to get together without that person. It might be hard to get into the Christmas spirit because of what they used to do in those preparations. Maybe they put up the lights or they got the tree or they helped decorate or they brought their special dish or they wrote some meaningful card or they sang that special song.

A few years ago, our church started a Christmas practice supporting those who lost loved ones in the past year. We have purchased poinsettias for every family and provided some words of encouragement to help them through the Christmas season. This year has been unusual in this area. We have had 3 times more deaths of people connected to our church family than years past.

So this year, we have planned something a little different to include as many people as possible who have experienced this loss. But I also saw this as an opportunity to talk about the many ways God helps us deal with such a loss. But then I began to think about how many in our church community are year, a few months or a few weeks away from bereavement. Many of you are involved in care-giving for an aging or sick or declining or frail parent or loved one. Then I began to think of those other types of long term care-giving situations. Some of you have special needs children or family members that require ongoing care, support, energy and investment. Then I thought of parents with their children and the ongoing challenge of discovering how to parent each unique child in your family. Then I thought of all of us who have people in our lives that we struggle with. Maybe it's someone at work or school. Maybe it's an abusive family member. Maybe it's someone who is difficult to be around because of their attitude or problem or addiction or

the consequences of their life choices. I realized God's help for caregivers applies in all these situations. So I think there will be something for all of us here in what I will share today. If you will open yourself to what God has to say here, I pray the Holy Spirit will show and help you with whatever you're facing even though I'll be directing the comments to caregivers of the aging or those who are bereaved.

How does God respond to caregivers of aging, sick and deceased loved ones? God offers a wealth of help. There are many, many ways God helps us. I want to share 8 with you today.

1 –God reveals the necessity of accepting reality. Aging, illness and death are a part of life. Trouble and difficulties are part of life. Perhaps the hardest step to take in dealing with a difficult situation is accepting the reality that it's part of your life. Whether it be the death of a loved one, a serious illness, signs of aging or disease, it is a taxing emotional journey to recognize that things have changed likely forever.

I remember the challenging journey of making that transition with my mother. For the first 40 or so years of my life, she was care-giving Mom to me. But as she aged, she couldn't care for me like she used to. Then she began to require more help. I remember one time being angry at her inside. I thought to myself, "Mom you were always caring for me. Now you're in need. What am I supposed to do with that?" I slowly began to realize that things had changed and my attitude needed to change if we were going to get through this in a healthy way. We made that strange transition from Parent caring for child to child caring for parent until her death. It was not easy accepting this reality. But it was absolutely necessary if we were going to go through this as positively as possible.

God called His servants to accept the reality of the situation so they could move forward. God called Joshua to succeed Moses. This meant Joshua would have to succeed perhaps the greatest leader in Israel's history. That would be a tough challenge. There may have been times where Joshua was tempted to paralysis or frozen wishing Moses was there to guide him. So God constantly calls Joshua to deal with reality. He starts in the first verses of the book of Joshua. Joshua 1:1-2 – After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua, "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel." Now Joshua knew that Moses was dead. Joshua heard the wailing of the people and participated in the mourning rituals. He didn't need to be informed of Moses' death. But he had to accept the reality of Moses' death so that he could then lead the people into the Promised Land.

When hard things come into our lives, we naturally want to avoid them. We hope they will quickly leave or resolve. But some hard realities stay. The sooner we can accept the fact that they are part of our lives, the sooner we can begin dealing with them.

2 – God shows us the attitude necessary towards others needing help. Many of you here today have suffered the loss of at least one loved one this past year. Many also care for someone aging, ill or very weak. If you've lost a loved one, I want you to think back to their last few months. Those who are caregiving for a loved one, think about them in their current condition. If you haven't lost a loved one and you're not caregiving for someone, think about a person someone who is bed ridden or very sick.

Now, with those people in mind, imagine yourself in that condition. How would you hope to be treated by your loved ones? How would you want to be loved?

When it comes to an aging, sick, shut in or vulnerable person in your life, it is important to evaluate our own attitude towards them. God shows us the attitude necessary towards them. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus answers the question, "What is the greatest commandment?"

Matthew 22:37-40

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." The attitude necessary is love our neighbours, or loved ones like we want to be loved as if we were in their condition.

John Piper says, "This is the great issue of life. Would we be selfish or would we be servants? The beautiful life, the Christ-honoring life, is the life of serving others – not ignoring others or using others while we just go about our self-satisfied way. The great mark of the Christian and especially the adult Christian child is that they look not just to their interests in midlife as their careers reach their capstone. They look towards the interest of others including aging parents. They count others, like their parents, as more significant than themselves."

Philippians 2:3-4 states "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others."

Are we ready to make sacrifices for our parents or the vulnerable in our lives? Or are we resentful that they are a burden? That's the real test.

3 – God grants the motivation to keep going in a long term care giving situation. Our culture does not glorify or pay much attention to those who are aging, shut-in, weak, sick or suffering with something like dementia. It glorifies the good-looking, young, powerful and popular. But we must not let this emphasis influence how we value people especially those who have been weakened in significant ways. God helps us with this through something He did and declared at the very beginning.

Genesis 1:26-27 - Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Here's the motivation. Every human being has God given dignity because they are created in God's image. This is foundational to our thinking about aging parents and anyone with diminished mental or physical capacities for whatever reason. Whether a person is a child in the womb, a 1 week old baby, a strong, beautiful, blossoming 22 year old or a frail, emaciated, curled up, barely whispering, glaze-eyed senior in a nursing home, they all have the dignity of God's image. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:17 says "honor all," meaning all human beings regardless of their moral worthiness; regardless of their popularity or attractiveness but because they are image bearers of the one true God.

When we remember that, we can keep going in care-giving. We can pray for God's continuing strength to keep going regardless of whether or not they get better or we get a good response or we get affirmation from whoever we offer care. We instead honor God by honoring his image bearers. Whether or not they even notice, He does. He's pleased because we're imitating what He did for us. He reached down when we were at our weakest to raise us up to new life.

4 – God promises glory and power for Christians near the end of their lives. When visiting nursing homes or those who have been reduced to skin and bones – remember how close to glory those folks are. Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Philippians. We know he wrote the letter from prison. He talks about how imprisonment has really served to advance the Gospel, “because it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that his imprisonment is for Christ.” So he was in a Roman prison. The Romans were not interested in rehabilitating prisoners and did not spend much of the empire’s holdings on beautifying prisons. They did not invest much thought or time in making prisons comfortable. Prison was part of the punishment system that maintained order in the empire. Death in prison often occurred and could happen to a prisoner in a moment.

So Paul writes from a prison he might not come out of. Listen to what he writes in **Philippians 1:18-24**. “I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.”

Now if you or I were in prison, wouldn’t we think that the best possible outcome would be our release and reunification with our family to continue in ministry? Paul says he’s torn. He knows that release would bring fruitful labor. To die is gain. It is “FAR BETTER” to die and be with Christ.”

The same will be true for Christians who are near death in long term care facilities or in assisted living. Piper writes “Paul tells us that the weak, inglorious, demented shadow of a once-strong Christian in front of us is on the brink of glory and power. We must keep in mind the continuity between diminished powers of human beings here, and the spectacular powers they will have in the resurrection. If we lose a sense of that continuity, we will assume that they are becoming less human rather than being on the brink of being gloriously superhuman.”

So think about your deceased loved one or your sick or declining one at their strongest. Think of them at their best sometime in the past. That will not compare to what they will be like in glory and at the resurrection. Somehow,

we have to keep that eternal perspective in mind when we visit them or sit with them and there is no response. Certainly there is some mourning and grief. But we must also focus on what they're about to gain.

But you might be sitting there thinking, "Well that's great for people who's loved ones were Christians. But my loved one died never having confessed Christ. Or my loved one who declines has a hard heart towards God. So I don't have any reason for hope or encouragement." To you, God also offers His help.

5 – God provides hope for caregivers of unsaved loved ones through His power to save. Never give up for those who don't know Christ. God is a saving God. You never know what He has done or can do with your dying loved one who has rejected Christ for their entire lives.

1 Timothy 2:4 - First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9 - But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance".

While they are alive, we never give up praying that they too might participate in the power and glory God has waiting for those who come to Him. We are not God. We do not have the power to reach our unconscious loved ones. We do not have the ability to make a confused mind understand. But God can. God is infinitely more powerful and able to do what He wills. He can do way beyond what we can think or even imagine. Therefore, we keep praying and never give up because our God is a saving God.

6 – God uses dementia (and other illnesses) of loved ones to develop the fruit of the Spirit in us. **Galatians 5:22-23** list the fruit of the Spirit. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* The Holy Spirit produces His fruit in us when we cooperate with Him. We open our lives up to His leading and His work in us. Sometimes we need pruning just like a grape vine needs that cutting out of some blockage so that the plant produces more and better fruit. We

might appear outwardly patient to those around us. But our patience and love is tested when a loved one gets dementia or a loved one presents some great challenge in our lives.

John Piper talks about walking this path with his father. He says, *“One of the manifestations of dementia is that every moment is real to the failing person but the connection of the moment is lost. As I was driving my father in his last days to his brother’s funeral (a brother he loved dearly), he asked me every two minutes in that twenty-minute drive where we were going. In every single one of those questions, he really wanted to know. If he was really there, he was really curious in that moment about where we were going.*

The real test and the real question for me was, Would I patiently, graciously — as if for the first time on the tenth time — answer him with grace and interest, engaging the person who was there in that moment? Such challenges of love are no accident.

Tough care-giving situations test the maturity of our spiritual walk. When we respond unlovingly, impatiently, unkindly, harshly or with anger we need to cry out for help. We need to acknowledge that sometimes our first love is not God but uninterrupted pursuit of whatever we want to do.

So we’ve seen six ways God helps us with these challenging situations. The last two focus specifically on those who have lost a loved one to death this past year. **7 – God raised Jesus from the dead so that we do not grieve like those who have no hope.** So to cope with our grief we must remember the resurrection of Christ and the coming resurrection of our loved ones.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (ESV)

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

If you're loved one knew the Lord, you can be certain you will see them again. If you're not sure, you can entrust them to our saving God. We talked about this. But remember Christ's resurrection. Look forward to your loved one's resurrection.

8 – Jesus knows very deeply the pain of sorrow and bereavement. In John 11, one of Jesus' dear friends named Lazarus dies. Jesus arrives about 4 days later with the intention of resurrecting Lazarus. He meets the grieving family and neighbors. Look at how He responds to this.

John 11:28-35 – Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with Mary in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept.

That verse always amazes me. I'm pretty sure Jesus already planned to raise Lazarus from the dead. He was going to give them a taste of the resurrection to come. Yet even though a living Lazarus was only a few moments away, Jesus shares the grief of these sisters. Though knowing with certainty that your loved ones will one day rise at the resurrection, Jesus shares your grief at their death.

The great passage from the prophet Isaiah also speaks of the Lord's familiarity with your suffering.

Isaiah 53:1-3 (ESV)

Who has believed what he has heard from us?

And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

For he grew up before him like a young plant,

and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,

and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men,

a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;

and as one from whom men hide their faces

he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Jesus knows deeply, suffering, sorrow & grief and invites us to come to Him with yours. Finally, I want to speak to those of you who know or live with someone who is currently facing a difficult care-giving situation. Young People – Some of you are very close to your grandparents. Some of you might be quite distant from them. You likely have not been involved in their care. But your parents have been involved sometimes at great personal cost. Would you think and pray about how you could help your Mom and or Dad through this time. Simply asking how they are doing with it all might be a great gift. Or asking if you can help in any way might also be helpful. After all, you will likely have to do that yourself one day and learning a little now certainly wouldn't hurt.

Friends of caregivers – Keep in mind that they have to negotiate their way through medical opinions, the sick person's opinion, other family member's opinions and their own opinion. Add to that the emotion of the sick person, family members and their own emotions. If you have a friend going through this, don't say to them, "I know what you're going through." But also don't avoid them. Maybe ask, "Can you help me understand what this is like for you?" Then pray for them.

I want to close with this assurance for prayer. A lot of times, we don't know what to pray. We don't know what would help. But **Romans 8:26-28** provides vital direction. "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he (God) who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

When you don't know what to pray for a friend, ask the Holy Spirit to pray. So we are going to put that into practice now. We are going to pray for the bereaved in our congregation. You can pray for those you know who are bereaved. Maybe you don't know how they are really doing or what they really need. So ask the Holy Spirit to intercede for them.

I am going to invite all of you who have been bereaved this year to come forward and take an ornament an envelope from our remembering tree. We would ask that you take one ornament per family unit. So if your family

has experienced multiple deaths, we would ask you still take only one ornament so that hopefully there will be enough for everyone. As they come, will the rest of you please pray?