

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Wednesday Night Q&A Study

Key Text: Genesis 26:34–35 — “And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite: Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.”

Introduction: Understanding Grief

When we hear the word grief, our minds almost immediately go to death. We think about standing beside a casket, losing a spouse, burying a parent, or saying goodbye to someone we love.

Certainly, the death of someone we love produces some of the deepest grief we will ever experience.

But grief is much broader than death. Grief is the sorrow and pain we experience because of loss, hurt, disappointment, tragedy, or painful circumstances.

Noah Webster’s 1828 Dictionary defines grief as:

“The pain of mind produced by loss, misfortune, injury or evils of any kind; sorrow; regret.”

I find it interesting that the first time the word “grief” appears in our KJV Bible, nobody has died.

Genesis 26:35 — “Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.”

Isaac and Rebekah were grieving over the choices of their son Esau.

Esau had married women from among the Hittites. This was contrary to the pattern Abraham had established for his covenant family. Abraham had been very careful that Isaac would not marry among the daughters of the Canaanites.

Genesis 24:3 — “And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell.”

Now Isaac watches his own son make choices that bring sorrow into their home. Genesis 27 shows us just how deeply this affected Rebekah.

Genesis 27:46 — “And Rebekah said to Isaac, I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth: if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these which are of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me?”

They had not buried Esau.

They had not lost Esau to death.

But they were grieving.

They were experiencing the pain of watching someone they loved make choices they could not control.

Grief is not limited to the cemetery.

We can grieve the death of someone we love. But we can also grieve the loss of a relationship, our health, a job or financial security, a dream, a season of life, the choices of a child or family member, a broken marriage or friendship, a major change we never wanted, or even the realization that life did not turn out the way we expected.

Sometimes we grieve people who are still living.

Sometimes we grieve things that can never be recovered.

Sometimes we grieve changes that nobody else even recognizes as a loss.

Tonight, I do not want us simply to study grief associated with death. I want us to look at grief as the Bible presents it—the pain of the heart and mind that comes when something precious to us has been lost, changed, broken, or taken away.

The question is: What does God say to the grieving heart?

I. GRIEF CAN COME BECAUSE OF THE CHOICES OF OTHERS

Genesis 26:35 — “Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.”

Esau made the decision. Isaac and Rebekah experienced the grief.

Sometimes one person’s decision becomes another person’s grief.

We can experience grief indirectly because of what someone we love has done or because of what someone we love is going through.

A parent can grieve a child's choices. A spouse can grieve because of the actions of their husband or wife. A family can grieve because of the destructive behavior of one of its members. We can grieve for someone we love who is hurting, even though the circumstances have not happened directly to us.

Romans 9:2-3 — “That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh:”

Paul was not grieving over his own spiritual condition. He was grieving over the spiritual condition of others.

Indirect grief is still real grief.

Sometimes I grieve because of what has happened to me.

Sometimes I grieve because of what has happened to someone I love.

Sometimes I grieve because of what someone I love has chosen to do.

We should never minimize someone’s grief simply because the event did not happen directly to them. Isaac and Rebekah did not make Esau’s decision, but God still called what they experienced “grief of mind.”

II. GRIEF CAN COME BECAUSE OF OUR OWN CHOICES

There are also times when the grief we experience is connected to our own decisions, actions, or sin.

David gives us a powerful example in 2 Samuel 12.

David had sinned with Bathsheba and then attempted to cover his sin by arranging for the death of her husband, Uriah. Nathan confronted David.

2 Samuel 12:13–14 — “And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the LORD. And Nathan said unto David, The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.”

The child became sick, and David desperately sought God.

2 Samuel 12:16 — “David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth.”

Seven days later, the child died. David experienced tremendous grief, but in this particular situation, Scripture specifically connects the consequences he experienced with his own sinful choices.

Sometimes our choices today can become our grief tomorrow.

Galatians 6:7 — “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

However, we need to be very careful here. Not every tragedy is the result of that person’s sin. We should never look at someone who is suffering and automatically conclude, “They must have done something wrong.” The Bible does not teach that.

But neither should we ignore the biblical truth that sometimes sin and poor decisions bring painful consequences into our lives.

Sometimes we are grieving something that happened to us. Sometimes we are grieving something someone else did. And sometimes we are grieving something that resulted from our actions.

God Did Not Abandon David in the Grief David Helped Create

David was responsible for his sin. God did not excuse it. God did not remove every consequence. But God still showed David mercy.

2 Samuel 12:20 — “Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the LORD, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat.”

David could not change what he had done. He could not undo the consequences. He could not bring the child back.

But he could still go to God.

There are times when we need God's comfort because someone else hurt us. There are times when we need God's comfort because life hurts us. And there are times when we need God's comfort because we hurt ourselves through our own choices.

Never confuse forgiveness with the removal of consequences.

David was forgiven—"The LORD also hath put away thy sin"—yet David still experienced painful consequences.

But neither should we confuse consequences with abandonment.

David was suffering consequences, but God had not forsaken him. There is still grace for the grieving heart—even when some of that grief is connected to our own failures.

III. GRIEF CAN HAVE LONGEVITY

One of the mistakes we sometimes make with grief is assuming that eventually a person should simply "get over it."

But some things in life we don't get over. They are things God gives us grace to get through.

Paul's experience with his thorn in the flesh illustrates an important principle about living with something God chooses not to remove.

2 Corinthians 12:7–10 — "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

Paul asked God to remove it. God did not. Instead of promising Paul removal, God promised Paul sufficient grace.

We are not told exactly how long Paul lived with the thorn, nor does Scripture identify exactly what the thorn was.

God's grace can sustain me in something God does not remove from me.

You Do Not Have to "Get Over It"

There are things that happen in life that, after a little time, we recover from.

Suppose I severely sprain my ankle. For several weeks it hurts. I limp. I have to change what I normally do. But eventually the swelling goes down, the ankle heals, and I return to normal.

I got over it.

But suppose the injury were far more serious. Suppose complications developed and, in order to save my life, the doctors had to amputate my leg.

The wound may heal. The pain may become manageable. I may receive a prosthetic leg. I may eventually learn to walk again. I may even return to many of the activities I enjoyed before.

But I will never wake up one morning and have my old leg back.

Every morning when I get out of bed, there will be a reminder that something has permanently changed.

I have not necessarily gotten over it. I have learned to get through life with it.

There is a difference.

Some grief is like that. There are losses that do not merely interrupt our lives. They change our lives.

There is a new normal.

You learn to laugh again. You learn to enjoy life again. You learn to worship again. You learn to serve again. You learn to move forward again.

But moving forward does not mean going backward to the person you were before the loss.

Paul wanted the thorn removed. God said, “My grace is sufficient for thee.” Paul never tells us that God eventually removed the thorn. Instead, he learned that the grace of God was sufficient to carry him through what God had not taken away.

The Longevity of Grief

Some grief lasts longer than people around us understand.

There may be anniversaries that hurt. There may be songs that bring memories flooding back. There may be an empty chair. There may be a photograph. There may be a place you drive by. There may be a holiday that will never feel quite the same. There may be a decision made years ago whose consequences are still present today.

That does not necessarily mean you are failing to heal.

It may simply mean that what you lost mattered deeply.

Closing Thought — A Grace Disguised

Jerry Sittser writes in *A Grace Disguised*:

“Can anyone really expect to recover from such tragedy, considering the value of what was lost and the consequences of that loss? Recovery is a misleading and empty expectation. We recover from broken limbs, not amputations. Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery. It will transform us or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same. There is no going back to the past, which is gone forever, only going ahead to the future, which has yet to be discovered. Whatever that future is, it will, and must, include the

pain of the past with it. Sorrow never entirely leaves the soul of those who have suffered a severe loss. If anything, it may keep going deeper.”

We recover from some things. We learn to live with others.

Learning to live with grief does not mean living without joy. It does not mean living without purpose. It does not mean living without hope. It does not mean God has abandoned us.

It means we discover that God’s grace is sufficient for a life that looks different from the life we had before.

Maybe tonight you are carrying grief because of something someone else did. Maybe you are carrying grief because of something you did. Maybe you are grieving a death, a relationship, a child who has gone away from God, your health, a dream, or a life that did not turn out the way you thought it would.

And perhaps you have been waiting for the day when you finally “get over it.”

Maybe God is not asking you to get over it.

Maybe God wants to teach you that, by His grace, you can get through it.

The circumstances may have changed you. The loss may always be part of your story. The grief may occasionally return. But every morning that you wake up and discover that the loss is still real, there is something else that is still real:

HIS GRACE IS STILL SUFFICIENT.

2 Corinthians 12:9 — “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

You may never completely get over some things. But with God’s grace, you can get through them.