

THE BURDEN OF GRIEF

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 11, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8.05 P.M.

We are all familiar with the word grief. Most of us are not only acquainted with the word, but with the experience of grief as well. It is a common word and a common experience with all of us. My dictionary defines grief briefly and yet well as “mental suffering from bereavement, remorse or the like.”

There is a great deal of physical pain and suffering in our world. Think of the pain involved in child birth, broken bones, severe cuts, bad burns, and gunshot wounds. These, in a sense, are external, physical pains. There is also pain and suffering of the mind and it is this which we call grief or sorrow.

On one occasion the apostle Paul spoke of his many persecutions in these words, “Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep,” Then in contrast he said, “Besides those things that are without, there is that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches.” (II Cor. 11:24-28). It was in this last category that he held such things as the divisions in the churches and the apostasy of some of the disciples. In II Tim. 4:10 he spoke of one such person: “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.” These sorrows and grieves are within the mind and the heart.

Both the external and internal kinds of suffering are closely related, for man’s physical existence is a constant burden to the human spirit. The body is destined for decline and ultimate decay. Disease, accidents, hunger, disappointment, frustration, guilt and disillusionment are a few of the miseries that bring grief to the heart of man. Men grieve over lost causes, lost opportunities, broken friendships, broken homes, and, of course, death.

Universal

Nothing is more true than that grief is universal. For example, the first man and woman on earth, Adam and Eve, knew the pangs of grief. There was the day on which they discovered the lifeless body of their son Abel. The grief in the losing of a son was multiplied by the realization that he had been murdered by his brother Cain. In the months and years that followed, as Cain was estranged from the rest of the family and banished to another part of the earth, their grief must have been heavy. Especially so when they also remembered their own failures in disobeying God at an earlier time. Perhaps they even felt the anguish that comes from Parents’ realization that their children’s sins are made possible by their own sins.

While we might choose almost any character in the Bible at random, David presents another example of one who knew the inner hurt of grief. In Psalms 38:17 he wrote, “My sorrow is continually before me.” In Psalms 51:1-3, he further wrote, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness: according to the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgression; and my sin is ever before me.” Night and day, wherever he went, for as long as he lived, periodically his sin flashed before his eyes.

In the latter part of his life David had still another form of grief to contend with. His son Absalom, who was the apple of his eye, rebelled against him, and led an insurrection. As a result David was forced to flee from Jerusalem and seek safety in the wilderness. Eventually, however, David’s army discovered Absalom, and even though it was against David’s command, Absalom was slain. A messenger brought word of the death. It was then that David said, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (II Sam. 18:33). David’s great love for Absalom would not let him rejoice in the death of his son, even though it meant the return of his kingdom. This situation certainly involved deep grief.

Yet another example to be found in the Old Testament is that of Job. The opening chapter of the book that bears his name tells of the loss of his seven sons and three daughters, as well as his vast possessions, which included seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-asses. To this was added his own physical discomfort as he was plagued with boils. All of this was taken from him in a matter of a few short days, and he who had been blessed so greatly was brought down to the depths of despair. Three friends came to console him, but the scripture says, “They sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.” (Job. 2:13). It is well for us to remember that Job kept his integrity and ultimately was blessed again after his trial.

The Lord Also

More impressive, however, than even the grief experienced by these men of old is the realization that our Lord also experienced grief. It was prophesied seven centuries before his birth by the prophet Isaiah that, “He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief ... Surely he hath borne our grief, and carried our sorrows ... Yet it pleased Jehovah to bruise him; he hath

put him to grief ...” In Matt. 23:37-38, we see one major element of his grief, as the people of his own time rejected his message of salvation. Overlooking the city of Jerusalem, he said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.”

On the night of his betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus further felt deep grief. Luke 22:39, 41-44, pictures it in these words, “And he came out, and went, as his custom was, unto the Mount of Olives; and the disciples also followed him ... And he was parted from them about a stone’s cast; and he kneeled down and prayed, saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done ... And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.”

Not only did our Lord know the agony of grief, even God himself has suffered this anguish. Some generations after the creation of Adam and Eve “Jehovah saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented Jehovah that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart.” (Gen. 6:5-6) Presumably the grief experienced by the men and women reported in the Bible has come to an end. But the grief which our Lord and our God felt in the long ago, as men turned away in rebellion, continues until this hour and will continue until the end of time. God is still grieved by man’s willful rejection of his better way of life.

I have mentioned all of this in order to point out that when we, individually, come to face grief that it is of some help to know that all men who have lived before us, as well as all of our contemporaries, have known grief. Sooner or later in the lives of all of us we will experience this universal hurt. Even more, it is of help in our struggle to overcome grief to know that the divine Son of God and even God himself have not been above this especially painful kind of suffering. We are certainly not alone when we grieve.

Strength In Christ

It is in Christ that we find the strength to overcome our grief. The Bible is quite realistic in its approach to the problems of life and the inevitability of death. There is no glossing over. Never are we told that we will be freed from the suffering and anguish which is so common in this world. Man is never deceived about what lies ahead on the earth. Disappointment, decay and death are inevitable for all.

However, in Christ we do find the strength to overcome our grief. He has given us hope of a better world. He has also given us higher goals for which to live. If our lives were centered in this world, inevitably life would be a tragedy. Christ has taught us to center our lives in the more wonderful world to come, the spiritual world.

Let us allow Paul to present this emphasis. To the Corinthians he wrote, “If we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable. But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the first fruits of them that are asleep.” (I Cor. 15:19-20). To the Philippians he wrote, “I Count all things to be lost for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ ... For our citizenship is in heaven.” (Phil. 3:8, 20).

In a second letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote, “Therefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.” (II Cor. 4:16-18). To the Thessalonians he wrote, “We would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning them that fall asleep; that ye sorrow not even as the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with him.” (I Thess. 4:13-14). Finally, from the apostle John we have these encouraging words concerning the life that is to come, “He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, anymore: the first things are passed away.” (Rev. 21:4)

Blessings

Actually, our heartaches and trials in this life often prove to be blessings. In the words of James, “Count it all Joy, my brethren, when you fall into manifold temptations (RSV: trials); knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience.” (James 1:2). In the Roman letter we read, “We also rejoice in our tribulations: knowing that tribulation worketh steadfastness; and steadfastness, approvedness; and approvedness, hope; and hope putteth not to shame; because the love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given unto us.” (Rom. 5:3-5).

On this point Harry Emerson Fostick once wrote, “Adversity, far from being nuisance or cruelty, is one of the constituent elements of great living, to be finely used. When you and I have a personal calamity and have handled it well, we have always added a new dimension to our character ... When real adversity comes, a soul true to itself builds new dimensions. And some people who have lived like that, simply by being what they are, have helped us more than all the busy folk who serve us with their hands—they triumphed in their troubles.”

Through our grieves and sorrows, we often come to a brighter, better world. As the straits of Gibraltar seem to close as a gate before the ship as it travels west in the Mediterranean, so death and other of life's crises seem to close us in from life. However, as the broad expanses of the Atlantic open wide beyond the strait, so do the beautiful vistas of eternity open wide to the Christian beyond death.

Suggestions

Dr. M. Norvel Young, president of Pepperdine College in Los Angeles and a long time friend, has suggested six ways to overcome grief.

“(1) Accept the sympathy of others graciously. Sometimes they will not know how to express themselves well, but their love is sincere and you help them and yourself in leaning on them for a time.

“(2) Recognize that the pain will grow more bearable. The pain of sorrow is acute, but time will help, or rather we should say God will help and he uses time to heal our hurts.

“(3) Turn to the Bible with renewed thirst. Someone has said, ‘I opened the old, old Bible, and looked at a page of “Psalms til the wintry sea of my troubles, was soothed as by summer calms; for the words that have helped so many, and the ages have made more clear, seemed new in their power to comfort, as they brought me their word of cheer.’

“(4) Utilize the Power of prayer. As Tennyson said, ‘There is more wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.’ In the words of Frank L. Cox, ‘Divine comfort is greatly needed. Hearts are broken, bowed down with sorrow, filled with fear. Anxiety, bereavement, and temptation beset us. A humble prayer to ‘the God of all comfort’ brings relief, binds up the broken heart, lightens the burden. Through Prayer Jesus found relief and obtained strength to face the foe.’

“(5) Be even more faithful in worship. Some people make the mistake of withdrawing from the world and of closing the blinds and locking the door. The wise Christian knows that worshipping with others who have suffered will help him. He knows that grief is a common denominator and that the solace of worship will be especially helpful at this time.

“(6) Look out and see others who need your help. Work is a blessing when we need to overcome sorrow. There is no substitute for getting busy helping others. The best way to honor the dead is to serve the living.” (*20th Century Christian*, Feb, 1964, pp. 4-5).

Conclusion

In the words of Annie Johnson Flynt:

God hath not promised
Sun without rain
Joy without sorrow
Peace without pain,
But God hath promised
Strength for the day,

Rest for the labor,
Light for the way,
Grace for the trials
Help from above,
Unfailing sympathy
Undying love.

We close with the words of the apostle Paul, “I can do all things through him that strengtheneth me.” (Phil. 4:13). “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:38).