

Aging, Elderly, Death, and Grief

Biblical View of the Aged and Elderly

In an ancient civilization, elderly people were viewed with great respect and endowed with the responsibility of overseeing civil disputes and ensuring social peace in a community. You can find in many places in Scripture where it talks about the elders sitting at the city gates. The city gates were the place where people could come and bring a case before the elders and receive a judicial ruling on what to do about it.

Joshua 20:1-4

Yahweh spoke to Joshua, saying, ²"Speak to the children of Israel, saying, 'Assign the cities of refuge of which I spoke to you by Moses, ³that the manslayer who kills any person accidentally or unintentionally may flee there. They will be to you for a refuge from the avenger of blood. ⁴He is to flee to one of those cities and will stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and declare his cause in the ears of the elders of that city. They are to take him into the city with them and give him a place that he may live among them.

In the early church, Paul designates that respect be given to elders. They are to be treated with dignity and viewed as honorable individuals.

1 Timothy 5:1

Do not rebuke an older man, but encourage him as a father; the younger men as brothers.

Young people have a tendency to look disparagingly upon older folks, as though they are outdated, stubborn, or just dumb. Regardless of what young people might think about older individuals, especially elders who are typically advanced in age, they are to submit to elders in the church. Why? Because young people have a responsibility before God to acknowledge those who have been given authority to oversee and manage God's household.

1 Peter 5:5

Likewise, you who are younger, submit to the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, since God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

But respecting older people, like elders, isn't about just recognizing their position and function in the church (i.e., faith community), it is more about recognizing the value that age has to offer.

Proverbs 16:31

Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is found on the road of righteousness.

"A crown of splendor" is something to be proud of; it is a mark of distinction; it is a recognition of grandeur and excellent qualities. It is important to note that gray here stands for being advanced in years (i.e., age), and that it is found "on the road of righteousness." What the proverb is saying is that it takes years to walk on the road of righteousness.

Along the way, while walking on the road of righteousness, a person will gain wisdom. Being old means you have lived life and have learned the ways of the Lord and what it means to live with the fear of Yahweh. You've been able to understand the works of the Enemy, and the traps of sin and wickedness and how to avoid them.

Job 12:12

Wisdom is found with the elderly, and understanding comes with long life.

Death is Contrary to God's Design

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:22-24

Yahweh God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to work it and to care for it. ¹⁶Yahweh God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may eat, yes, eat, ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you must not eat of it, for in the day that you eat of it you will die, yes, die."

Yahweh God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and also take of the tree of life and eat, and live forever." ²³Therefore Yahweh God sent him out from the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴So he drove out the man, and he placed the cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden-- with the flaming sword that was turning in every direction-- to guard the way to the tree of life.

Revelation 21:1-5

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and the sea is no more. ²And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a great voice out of the throne saying, "Look!, the tabernacle of God is with man, and he will live with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them, and be their God, ⁴and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither will there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more; the former things have passed away." ⁵And he who sits on the throne said, "Look!, I make all things new." And he says, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."

Death and Loss

Death causes relationships to be severed which produces a deep sense of loss and hurt. Why does death hurt so bad? It's because we were never designed to experience it. Death is foreign to the way God created us. We were created to enjoy lasting enduring relationships. But since the fall, death has interjected itself into our existence because of sin. And so, death is the end that we all experience in this present world. The pain of death brings much grief.

We could say that grieving is natural, which it is. But it is really unnatural, the same way that death is. But since death is a natural and unavoidable part of this current age in which we live, we can also say that the pain and grief caused by death is also natural. And therefore, people must be allowed to experience it.

We're not supposed to act like death isn't real, or that we're tough and can deal with death. Death can cripple even the strongest and most resilient individual.

Grief is a physical, emotional, and psychological response to loss. Grief entails mourning the pain of loss.

The Sting of Death

No matter who it is, no matter what the circumstances, death hurts! There is no such thing as “easy” when it comes to experiencing the death of someone you know, much less someone you love.

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Look!, I tell you a sacred secret: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. ⁵²In a moment, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed. ⁵³For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴Now when this corruptible puts on incorruptibility, and this mortal puts on immortality, then the word that has been written will be brought to pass: Death has been swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? ⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin comes from the law, ⁵⁷but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸So then, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Death always comes with a “sting.” It is that prick in your heart that causes it to bleed when you come to feel the reality of death. Death comes to all humankind, whether rich or poor, whether smart or unintelligent. No one escapes the power of death. It is all consuming, and despite how much we fight against it, in this present world, we are powerless against it.

Being Comforted and Comforting Others

God comforts us in our suffering and grief, and we are also able to comfort others.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we are able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

One of the greatest sources of comfort is from our trust in the hope of resurrection—in knowing the truth that death is not going to be the end. There is life coming even for those who have died! God will raise to life every person who has placed their hope in Him, and death will no more ever affect them in the way that it has. Death will be no more (Rev 21).

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Now, we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, in order that you will not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring from the grave those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of a ruling-angel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be suddenly caught up together with them in the clouds, for a meeting with the Lord in the air, and in this manner we will always be with the Lord. ¹⁸So then, comfort one another with these words.

Many Christians don't know how to grieve, and they don't allow others to take steps through the grieving process.

An example could be:

The fellowship dragged on for a while, but before they left, the one in charge of the fellowship asked if anyone had any prayer requests. Phil's voice broke as he explained, "You probably know that my wife Jan had a miscarriage four weeks ago. We're still pretty shaken up by it. Would you pray for both of us?" Someone sitting next to him turned to him and said, "Brother, that was four weeks ago. It's time you put that behind you and go on with your life." Sadly, many Christians give dumb and hurtful answers to people who have suffered loss. An author whose wife died at childbirth along with the child, wrote about how, in trying to comfort him, a well-meaning believer said, "It will be all right." The man thought, "No, it won't be all right. They are dead." Another person compared it to the pain she felt when her dog died.

To one degree or another with most problems we are suffering loss. For example:

- Loss of a spouse or children, long term relationship, close family and/or friend.
- Loss of feeling safe.
- Loss of feeling loved by parents.
- Loss of affection and respect from a spouse.
- Loss of self-respect and ability to provide financially due to chronic illness.
- Loss of close friends due to a move to another community.
- Loss of personal faculties due to age.
- Loss of career or job.
- Loss of children going off to college or leaving home.

We all go through some form of loss with grieving at some point in our lives. If we do not face up to it, acknowledge and deal with it in a godly manner, the grief will sit and become a rotten mess for later.

Many Christians are not comfortable with grieving. Our instant society and our desire for God to work quickly create expectations that "it just shouldn't be this hard or this slow" to get over this loss. (I hear so many people tell me that working through emotional pains is so hard. It is like the healing time with God is too hard to go through and should only be an "owiee" for more than a minute or two.) I think of Jesus when he was on the Mount of Olives weeping for what would happen to Jerusalem. He wept. He had great sorrow for their losses. He bore and bears the pains we cannot bear.

If we haven't taught ourselves how to grieve in a godly manner, we will possibly give a quick, superficial answer to questions from the person grieving that demand we have patience and insight into grief.

A person who is grieving generally does not want to impose on others because of their visible sadness. The person will tend to isolate. Those who are grieving do not like to be around others who are having a great time (Christmas and other Holidays). Being around family and friends that share the same common grief feels better, feels more real. Family and/or friends do not have to be talking about the event all the time. Being around others who share in the grief gives each person a sense of community, a common feeling that grief is a thread that attaches to each one, signaling to each one of their shared pain. We mentioned earlier about mirror neurons. Grief is a situation where they are very active.

When a person is caring for a very sick patient for a short term or many years, grieving is a part of the care taking. There is a realization that what was supposed to be for living life is much different. What could have been is not there. We grieve those losses.

It is okay to state that we are sad. It is okay to cry. It is okay to well up when we are reminded of a loved one or a situation that did not go well. Staying in that mode of thinking and ruminating about it (rehearsing it over and over and over) does not help to move ahead out of the grief. Sadness and grief do have an end point. This point is usually prolonged when there was unfinished business with whatever the event was that is causing the grief and sadness.

Grief and loss:

Denial – We insist it isn't true, we have disbelief, we can't let ourselves believe the situation. Our first reaction is that it can't be true. Most people use denial. It becomes the way of coping with everything. "If I don't acknowledge that it is a problem (or that something happened), then I don't have to 'deal' with it." Fear is one of the biggest emotions that pushes denial.

Anger – This generally looks like finding someone to blame - doctors, nurses, God, the boss, a lifestyle... Unresolved anger turns into bitterness, resentments and depression.

Fredrick Buechner wrote, "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last tooth-some morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you." Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, (Harper San Francisco, 193) p. 2.

As one who is grieving, we become upset over the situation or the circumstances. This happens especially when someone close dies and leaves a big financial and physical mess.

[It is very loving for even young people to have their financial house in order and papers in one location. It is very loving to steward belongings such that there is not a heap of stuff to plow through and take weeks and weeks to sort through. It may seem morbid, but it is not morbid. Parents especially need to have a conversation with their children concerning their wishes and where important papers are, bank accounts, etc. Having a DNR or health Proxy is also important.]

Anger can be prevalent in any of the losses we mentioned earlier. Angry at the boss, angry at the driver that caused the accident, angry at the doctors or hospital. It is our old man nature to want to lash out because we are hurt. Keeping our minds and hearts in prayer with God, we will shorten this time of anger and maybe avoid it all together.

Bargaining – Bargaining is generally irrational. It has the idea that if I do something then something I want will happen. Examples: If I go to church every day then God will fix what happened. I will stop cursing and then God will give me a job.

"Bargaining is especially harmful because it is based on a strong hope that God or another person will finally come through. Hope is a good thing, generally. But bargaining is a "hopeless hope" based on magic, not truth; on manipulation, not personal responsibility. Many people

never move beyond this stage of grief because they know that when they give up their hopeless hope, they'll feel utterly completely empty." Adapted from Coffee Cup Counseling p. 126-127

Depression – This generally takes place when a person comes to grips with no denials, no reactions of anger, and no attempts to swap something to gain love and life. The crushing reality of end-stage cancer, memories of abuse, or an acutely ill child are taken as reality and the weight of that is suffering. Comfort is greatly needed. Sometimes people require medication for a short term to help them through this. Having a good foundation of faith and trust in Yahweh and Jesus Christ are the best antidotes to being in depression for long.

Acceptance – Becoming aware that life is to be lived, things to be done for Yahweh, family and friends to care for, is the optimal situation for one who grieves. These processes of grief are not linear, and some may stay in one or another for too long or skip some. We cycle around in no certain pattern but each one is something that is very normal in our sadness or loss. Grief is like waves. When the hurricane is present the waves are very imposing and destructive, when the storm is gone the waves begin to become more normal.

1. Working with those who grieve is difficult for the one who is trying to be a comfort during the time of stress of death or tragedy.

- a. Using your best listening is generally the most helpful.
- b. Being silent is fine. We do not have to be chattering all the time. Sometimes it is best to be able to just sit with someone who is clearly too upset to talk. Tears are welcomed.
- c. Be very careful of "platitudes"- "Just think about the good times." "Don't worry this will pass soon." Or use Bible verses out of context or as 'one liners'.
- d. The important part is to be able to have similar feelings of sadness, but not to get caught up in them and be a part of the problem.
- e. Never wear out your welcome.
- f. Find out what some needs are and get assistance for them – food, rides, etc.

2. Miscarriages are very traumatic for couples.

- a. They need to be allowed to grieve and possibly may need to have some closure.
- b. Anniversary times of deaths are important to many people. They appreciate mentioning it – generally. Each situation is unique and should be treated as such.

3. Sometimes people need to grieve the loss of jobs, children going off to college, loss of health or independence, etc.

- a. They will go through denial, anger, sadness type emotions not in a linear form. They usually are like a spiral that loops backwards and goes forward to another and then loop back to a previous one, etc.
- b. Couples or a parent that has a lot of trouble letting go of a college age child needs support and to find other things to do. Generally, they have not self-actualized fully themselves and may have defined themselves by their children. This can be a difficult stage for a lot of people. We see a lot of divorces at this stage.

4. Hospital or nursing care home visits:

- a. Be very aware of hospital rules and needs.
- b. Be very respectful of the family and their privacy.
- c. Pray with the person you are visiting and family that is there.

- d. Assess for any needs that can be attended to.
- e. We are not social workers, nurses or doctors, so be careful to not get into those roles.

5. Praying for healing with people.

Community Activity:

1. Using each of the processes we generally go through with grieving losses (highlighted areas above), select a type of loss (those listed as bullet points) and talk about what it could look like to be in the different stages. For example: grieving the loss of a job when a person is in the denial stage – what do you think denial of this grief would look like? How would you try to help someone in this stage? Discuss this for the different stages.
2. Discuss a time when you found yourself in the different stages. Did you go from one stage to another or did you go to one and then to the previous one, etc.?
3. What will be the hardest for you in working with people who are grieving? What is it about this that makes it hard for you?

Mary Ann Yaconis is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Mary Ann Yaconis' Personal Meeting Room

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