

Burdened by Grief - Dealing with Death

Psalm 34:18, John 11:17-37

When I was about ten years old, the sister of one of my close friends was killed in a car accident. She was a wonderful young woman with a vibrant Christian faith who had just completed her first year of university and she had so much potential. Her sudden death was a real tragedy.

And it left her parents with an incredible sense of loss – which perhaps is stating the obvious, we know this mentally... but I experienced their sense of loss one night, maybe a year later when I was having a sleepover at their house with my friend and I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the washroom.

As I walked down the hallway past their room I could hear them crying out to God with their sorrow and their questions... their grief was as raw as it was a year ago at the funeral and a burden that was still very heavy for them to carry.

Brothers and sisters, as I'm sure you realize - dealing with the loss that the death of a loved one can inflict on us is not an easy process, nor is it a quick one – and for many of you; I'm stating the obvious again – because you've been through this or you're going through it right now.

However, others of us – myself included- have yet to walk that path at some point in the future, and the thought of losing someone very close to us is so disconcerting and disturbing we try not to think about it.

Indeed, it's not just the reality of grief that can be a burden to us but the fear of that grief as well.

So brothers and sisters, if you are burdened by grief this morning, if you fear being burdened by grief – Jesus word's in Matt 11:28 are for you, *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest”* For all scripture points to the Lord Jesus Christ and as such is it Jesus who fulfills the promise to us in Ps 38:18 *“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

Brothers and sisters, when the inevitable loss of a loved one comes our way, and we must deal with the grief that such a loss leaves us with... we are not left to deal with it on our own – The Lord is with us and He calls us to come to Him. “Come to me with your burden of grief and I will give you rest from it.”

And this is not just a platitude, brothers and sisters. We know this is true because the scriptures reveal God came to us, to be with us, to become one of us as Jesus Christ.

And the scriptures we read this morning shows that Jesus was not only close to those who were brokenhearted and crushed in spirit from the grief of losing loved ones to death – but that He himself also experienced the sorrow and the sense of loss the burden of grief that losing someone to death causes.

Vs. 38 in the passage from John says *“Jesus wept!”*

The passage describes how when Jesus saw Mary and the mourners weeping and he was deeply moved and troubled in

spirit. And when he goes to stand in front of Lazarus’s tomb – He weeps.

And the significance of Jesus weeping for his friends is that it validates our grief and the emotional expression of that grief when we are faced with loss.

I remember hearing a story about a woman whose husband had died and her community was impressed with how well she was holding up and dealing with the loss, because she wasn’t breaking down emotionally and so on... but six months later when her cat died, was hit by a car – and this woman absolutely lost it and went to pieces.

Brothers and sisters, when the Lord is with us, when Jesus calls us to come to Him - brokenhearted and crushed, it gives us permission- encouragement in fact to weep, to mourn, to express our grief outwardly, in His presence instead of trying to hold it in and be strong in front of Jesus.

Brothers and sisters - Jesus wept.

Don't be afraid to bring your grief in all its intensity to Jesus, crying and weeping and pouring out your sorrow is also how you bring your grief to Jesus in prayer... and here's something else Jesus says to us, Matt 5:4 "*blessed are those who mourn... for they will be comforted*"

You see grief, even though it seems like a burden, grief is God's healing gift to us – grief is a healing process which helps our spirit and our emotions, even our physical bodies – recover from the trauma and the loss we experience in the face of death. And the closer the person is that you lose, the greater and more intense the grief will be in order to balance out that loss.

So part of the way Jesus gives us rest from the burden of grief is by helping you understand what grief is for. You will receive the rest and the comfort – the blessedness that Jesus promises... if you mourn. If you go through the process of grieving.

It's important to hear this brothers and sisters, because our society and lifestyles are not really conducive to mourning.

Often people who have lost a loved one reflect back on that time of loss and comment that they received a great deal of support around the funeral but once that time was past, they were expected in rather short order to get back to normal again and get on with life.

Maybe some of you have experienced that – even within a Christian community.

You see the truth is that we often don't really know what to say or do for people who are mourning, who are burdened by grief. We know their loss is such a burden and what could we possibly do to that could lighten it? What can we say in the face of death, its awkward and uncomfortable, so we do and say nothing.

However, we can learn a few things from the scriptures about what we can do and say.

In John 11 we see that mourning was a communal activity. People had come from the surrounding area to comfort Mary and Martha upon Lazarus' death.

Rev. James R. Kok once wrote a little book about ministering to people called "Ninety percent of helping out is just showing up" So if you are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing for someone who is grieving realize that just showing up and be around can be comforting, don't worry too much about saying or doing much, and if you're wondering. -you can always ask.

And it may feel awkward at first because we are so used to relating superficially with each other, and we're not accustomed to seeing others express pain and sorrow – but all you need to do is be there, and let them know you're willing to listen if they need to talk. And talking about their loved one is actually a good thing, don't avoid it. It can be a good thing for people to remember and share and talk about them.

You see brothers and sisters your presence, especially as a Christian – is a tangible reminder for those who are grieving

that the "*Lord is close to the brokenhearted*" - because we are the body of Christ, we are His hands and His feet.

So sometimes we need to go to people and support them privately, but we also need to encourage them and let them know that there is space and there is room among us for grieving publically.

Brothers and sisters, please hear what I'm saying and believe it – **You don't have to have it all together to be a part of this Christian community at Valleyview.**

It's ok to come to church when you are feel overwhelmed, when you feel depressed, when you feel sad, when you are burdened by your grief.

Years ago one of the ladies who attended Valleyview got a phone call that her brother had passed away on a Sunday morning... 20 minutes before church was starting, but she knew that she didn't have to stay away from church because of her shock and grief.

Instead, she knew she could be here and cry out to God, and receive the support and care of her community. Now I won't fault anyone for wanting some time by themselves to process such terrible news, but I'm glad she knew it was ok to come and share her grief with Jesus through His body.

So if you're grieving brothers and sisters you don't need to worry about being a wet blanket or raining on anyone's parade by being here at worship. There is space to grieve publically among us.

The only thing I ask is that you are honest and let us know what's going on and what you're going through. Otherwise, we might mistakenly think we've offended you or upset you.

And you don't have to bare you soul with everyone, but if you are able to share ab it of how you are doing and what's going on that helps us to pray and support you and walk with you.

And you also need to know that it's ok if being at church doesn't take away your sense of loss and make feel better –

you are grieving, you are in mourning, and that takes time - remember what it says in Isaiah 40:31 *“those who **wait**... upon the Lord will renew their strength...”*

Brothers and sisters, it is going through grief by mourning which leads to comfort and healing. Your grief needs both times of privacy and times of community. Neglecting one or the other, or allowing others to do so will prevent us from fully healing and receiving the comfort and with which Jesus wants to bless us.

And we also see in this scripture passage how our human sinfulness can affect the grieving process as well.

In the statements of Mary and Martha, and that of some of the Jews, we have before us the two options to how we can react to the Lord who is close to us when we are brokenhearted.

Mary and Martha give us the faith option. Both go out to meet Jesus when he comes to them, and they do so in faith – but

that doesn't mean they back away from the hard truth – that if Jesus had come sooner their brother would have still been alive.

Both of them confront Jesus with this fact, they confess it to him as a statement of their faith – because they knew it was true! If Jesus had come sooner, he would have healed Lazarus as they had seen him heal so many others.

But Jesus didn't. And friends we must also face this fact when death takes someone close to us whom we love.

Jesus could have healed them, he could have protected them, he could have spared them as we've seen him do for others... but he didn't.

So how do we respond to that choice which Jesus has made?

Some of the Jews see it as a reason to doubt Jesus – they mutter among themselves *“he could open the eyes of a blind man, what's wrong couldn't he keep this man from dying?”*

Because of their sinful nature they saw Jesus' decision not to heal Lazarus as a sign of impotence, that Jesus had delayed coming to see Lazarus so that he could avoid trying to heal him and failing, because he really couldn't do it.

They only saw Jesus as a sideshow miracle worker – not the Messiah. Their sinful nature prevented them from responding in faith to Jesus and his decision to allow Lazarus to die.

They did not come to Jesus to receive rest from the burden of their grief – and we must guard against that when we are grieving as well brothers and sisters.

Let us consider instead the examples of Mary and Martha, and their faith. They are examples of how we can respond in faith and stay loyal to Jesus when He chooses to allow death to take someone we love and we are burdened by grief.

When Mary comes to Jesus she simply breaks down and weeps uncontrollably. She confronts Jesus with the fact that He could have healed her brother and in doing so perhaps she

was hoping for some sort of words of comfort, some reasoning, some reassurance.

But Jesus doesn't respond, he stays quiet and she realizes that Jesus had chosen to allow Lazarus to die.

So Mary weeps, she lets go and gives full vent to the sorrow and sadness and the grief she is feeling in the face of her loss and in the face of Jesus' decision to allow it – but she does this in faith at the feet of Jesus, and Jesus is moved by it, he responds and asks them to take him to the tomb.

Jesus will go with Mary and face that which has devastated her – she will not face it alone. In her brokenheartedness she will discover Jesus standing beside her, bearing the burden of her grief with her.

Brothers and sisters it is possible for us to give full vent to the sorrow and sadness and grief that we feel when we lose a loved one and still remain loyal to Jesus – expressing our sorrow, our grief, our devastation over a decision that Jesus

has made does not make us unfaithful and it doesn't drive him away from.

If we must weep and be devastated, let us weep and be devastated in the presence of the Lord – for he draws close to the brokenhearted. In your grief Jesus will be next to you.

Now Martha took a different approach. Martha wasn't the emotional type like her sister Mary. She was rational and practical and she deals with her grief over Jesus' decision by speaking truth.

She confesses that Jesus could have healed her brother if he had come earlier, but the fact that he didn't hasn't shaken her belief in the truth of who He was. She says *“But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask”*

In other words, she knew Jesus had come to deliverer Israel.

She knew God would work to accomplish this through Jesus even though her brother had died because Jesus had come

too late – in fact she knew that one day He would rise again at the resurrection and she says this to Jesus.

And these aren't empty words or pat answers for Martha – they articulate her faith and so Jesus responds.

He affirms what Martha says and responds with *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”* (John 11:25-26)

In other words, he is saying to Martha it is through this experience that you will come to a deeper understanding of who I really am and the truth you believe.

And this is true for us as well.

I know that I'm a lot like Martha – and that when I have to face loss and grief I work through it by confessing what I know to be true about the world we live in, how sin affects it, and how God has acted in Christ to bring salvation from that and

how that is evidence that there will be a new heavens and a new earth someday – and the experience of loss and grief brings me to a deeper place in my relationship with Christ.

And this is helpful for us to know Brothers and sisters, as we make space for people to grieve among us, and as we bear one another's burden in love, because some of us are like Martha, and some of us are like Mary.

I'll tell you that I was convicted as I studied and prepared this sermon, because as someone who is like Martha I keep trying to help my wife – who is like Mary – process loss and grief by telling her how she ought to think and it doesn't help her.

Instead – in contrast to what comes naturally for me – I ought to encourage her to feel, feel all the devastation and grief she is feeling, and to do so in the presence of Jesus because in doing so she will encounter Jesus' compassion and his presence.

And visa-versa it doesn't help the Martha's among us when the Mary's insist that we're not getting in touch with our feelings, that we are repressing them and that we need to express our emotions in the same way they do – we're not repressing, we're confessing – that's how they come out for us.

Brothers and sisters both responses can be made in faith and Jesus responds to both because of that faith.

Both Martha and Mary are led to the tomb by Jesus and they both witness His power as He raises their brother back to life!

Martha comes to understand what Jesus' words will truly mean – that believing in Jesus has the power to overcome death – literally!

And Mary experiences that that going through this devastating emotional experience in Jesus' presence is actually the path to new life.

And if there is one thing we can be certain of as followers of Jesus Christ brothers and sisters is that there is life after death. Jesus achieved that in His death and resurrection.

That is why 1 Thess 4:13 says "*We do not grieve as those who have no hope!*" For those who have confessed their sins and received Jesus' forgiveness – we have the hope of the resurrection to new life, standing before God with no fear of His judgement on our sins, no fear of facing condemnation and Hell.

We have rest from the uncertainty of not knowing where we stand before God – we may not be certain about others who have gone to stand before the Lord before us, we leave that to God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ, but if we come to Jesus, we can be certain about where we stand.

And that give us hope that tempers our grief and leads us to look forward to resurrection at Christ's return.

Brothers and sisters, may the Holy Spirit help us to come to Jesus and bring Him the burden of grief that we may be experiencing, in order to help us grow to a deeper understanding of the truth, and to reassure us that Jesus is with us and that we will come out on the other side of our devastation with new life, both in this life and in the life to come.

So come to Jesus, brothers and sisters – He will give you rest.

Amen.