

“BELIEF & GRIEF” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Life on this side of eternity is attended with many sorrows and losses. The loss of a loved one is shocking, emotional, and so final. Death is the ultimate consequence of the Fall. It reminds us we live in a broken and decaying world. The apostle Paul calls death our “*enemy*” (1 Cor. 15:26). That is why it hurts so much. At one time or another, we will all have the painful experience of losing someone we love. Bereavement is no respecter of persons. This is not some hypothetical subject but one that touches the lives of all. When we speak about death, we don’t say “if” but “when.”



Death strikes at any time to our friends and family. We open our newspapers and we read language like “suddenly” and “unexpected” when describing the passing on individuals. Someone once observed that, “The problem with death is that it’s almost always unexpected.” No one can ever fully prepare for the death of a loved one. Thankfully the Scriptures provides some answers to the question of how believers should deal with death.

REALITY OF BEREAVEMENT

All of us came into this world and all will leave. We did not choose when we entered and we will not choose when we leave! The reality of death is not one that we like to talk about. People go out of their way to avoid mentioning it. Many people don’t even to say that a loved one has died. They prefer a more neutral term like he “passed on” or she “isn’t with us anymore.” Despite the fact that the statistics tell us that ten out of ten people die, every one seeks to sail through life thinking about something else. We do not like speaking in terms of there not being a tomorrow. But there may not be. Sooner or later we will all spend time in the tomb.

Death is not some accident but a sovereign appointment set in God’s calendar, “*It is appointed unto man once to die*” (Hebrews 9:27). This is one appointment we can’t avoid. For when the Grim Reaper knocks at your front door, you can’t slip out the back door! The Bible repeatedly warns us to face up to the fragility of life, “*truly as the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death*” (1 Sam. 20:3). A step takes just a moment to pass. So is life. It can pass in a moment. Job put it bluntly when he said that man “*cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.*” (Job 14:2). That’s a perfect metaphor for our

lives. Like a blooming flower, we are cut down. One moment we are here – next moment we are gone.

The reason our lives are fragile is because they are not controlled by us. The Scriptures reveal our lives are held in the Hand of a Sovereign God, “*My times are in thy hand*” (Psa. 31:15). Job tells us why our days are finite here on earth, “*Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass*” (Job 14:5) Indeed, we learn that God controls our very breath, “*In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind*” (Job 12:10). That means no death is truly “an accident” or “bad luck” but all are meaningful and with a divine purpose.



The only thing that keeps us from eternity is not our wealth or knowledge but the sovereign will of God. The world seeks to avoid this truth and emphasizes that we are in control of our destiny. But this is just a self-imposed blindness that filters out reality. We do not know what a day may bring forth but God does. It is all tied up in the sovereign plan of God.

DEALING WITH BEREAVEMENT

In Genesis 23 the Patriarch Abraham has to face a terrible bereavement. He lost his beloved wife Sarah. The stark words “*And Sarah died*” remind us of the great truth that death is a painful reality to face for even the choicest of God’s saints. Sarah had lived for 127 years and her son was only 37 years old, but that did not give her immunity from this obstacle. She did not live to see her son married or her grandchildren’s birth. Abraham was 137 years old when Sarah passed away. This loss of his beloved wife would have been a bitter blow to the old patriarch. His sense of loneliness must have been immense. Sarah had stayed by his side all the difficult years from when he left Ur of the Chaldees over half a century before. She had been his constant companion in all the struggles of life. We get a hint of his sense of loss when it records “*and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.*” (Genesis 23:2) and he stated to the children of Heth, “*that I may bury my dead out of my sight*” (Genesis 23:4).

The Bible attests that Sarah had been a good wife. She is listed as one of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11 and is held up as an example for other wives to emulate (1 Peter 3:5-6). Sarah was not perfect, but she had a godly faith that is commended by God. The loss of such a spiritual companion is a grievous burden to bear. What memories must have passed through the aged patriarch’s mind, as he thought on their long and fruitful life together. There are a number of things we learn from Abraham’s example:

(1) **GRIEVE WITHOUT SHAME** – God made us with emotions. It is not a sin to grieve over the passing of a loved one. The initial shock gives way to grief and loneliness. Christian grieving is real and it is right. It is not that your grief and your faith should be separate. The Bible speaks of “*a time to mourn*” (Eccl. 3:4). Death carries with it sorrow for those left behind, “*and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.*” (Genesis 23:2) It is not wrong or unnatural to express that sorrow. We are not called to smile and claim that it doesn’t hurt. Abraham may have been a giant in the faith and the friend of God, but he still feels the pain of Sarah’s death. King David composed a moving tribute at the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. The Lord Jesus even wept at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35). It is true that for believers we do not sorrow “*as others which have no hope*” (1 Thess. 4:13b), but that does not mean that we do not sorrow. William Cowper, the English hymn writer, said, “Grief is itself medicine.” One of the prices we pay for true love is to mourn the passing of those we love!



(2) **GRIEVE WITH FAITH** – Abraham faced the death of Sarah with faith in a future reunion. When he made the funeral arrangements, Abraham refers to the corpse of Sarah as “*my dead*” rather than “Sarah” or “my wife” seems to show that he regards the real person of Sarah’s soul as having departed to another place. We know he lived in that reality as, “*For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*” (Heb. 11:10). Abraham knew death is an enemy, but this enemy will be defeated. So Abraham is publicly testifying of a future reunion, like David, who stated of his dead son, “*I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me*” (2 Sam. 12:23). That is the same truth we all have to do for our departed loved ones who die in the Lord. We believe in faith that we will see them again but we still have the solemn duty to bury their remains in dignity.

Paul instructed the Thessalonian believers, who had lost loved ones, that there was a right way to grieve, “*But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.*” (1 Thess. 4:13) There is a distinctly Christian way to mourn our bereavements. We are not to mourn with a sense of hopelessness like the unbelieving world mourns. Our grief is to be led by faith that our departed loved ones “*are asleep.*” But it is also to be led by faith in the hope of a future reunion in glory,

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a

shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: (1 Thess. 4:14-16)

Paul's argument is that heaven will be the place of perfect reunions. It is not "goodbye" but just "good night" when we stand at the graves of our loved ones. They have simply gone before us to our final eternal destination. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, all His people will also conquer death. We will meet the departed saints in the morning over there in glory. One day our grief will come to an end, "*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*" (Revelation 21:4) In our sorrow today we have the greater hope for tomorrow. It is hard for us to imagine a world without suffering, sin, and sorrow. But there is one coming. Weeping may endure for the night but joy surely will come in the morning over there. It is no wonder Paul concluded this by declaring, "*Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*" (1 Thess. 4:18) One writer explains,

"Christians experience grief but without despair, sorrow but without defeat, sadness but without hopelessness. It's true sorrow *and* true hope. These things don't cancel out one another. We feel the great weight of sorrow *and* the great thrill of hope. In moments of deep sadness, we feel both."

(3) **GRIEVE WITH DIGNITY** – Abraham didn't just mourn the passing of Sarah. He recognised that her passing must be marked and that he must prudently and spiritually handle the funeral and burial arrangements. He will carry out these issues personally, as this will be a testimony to the unsaved around him. Despite having spent 62 years in Canaan, Abraham still has no fixed abode or land that is legally his. There was, doubtless, a temptation for Abraham to take Sarah's remains back to where his relatives lived in Haran or Ur. But he doesn't do so. Canaan is where God called him and his family. Others may have mocked his simple faith but that did not shake him, "*By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise*" (Heb. 11:9). So with his eye on God's promise to one day give his descendants this land, Abraham seeks a burial place there for his wife. Burial in the ground is the pattern for believers in Scripture. Cremation is never encouraged for believers. The body has inherent dignity and should be treated with value. Deffingbaugh points out,

The body of a deceased saint is not to be venerated or treated as some kind of sacred object. The dead body is only the shell in which the soul has abided. The body must be laid aside, out of sight. Some would do well to consider this. On the other hand, the body is that which God has fashioned (Psalm 139:13-16), it has served as the "temple of the Holy Ghost" (1 Corinthians 6:15, 19-20); it will be raised again and be transformed incorruptible (1 Corinthians 15:35-49). Because of this the body should not be disposed of in such a way as to disregard the value it has been given by its Creator.

Although he clings to God's promise for the future, Abraham still has to face the reality of Sarah's death and take care of the burial in a honourable way. This will cost him financially. Abraham's words "*my dead*" indicate that he recognises that he has a responsibility to do this. It is not wrong to grieve over the passing of a loved one, but our grief must not make us

irresponsible to the practical realities of dealing with the consequences. It is interesting to note that only a few verses deal with Abraham's sorrow but the bulk of Genesis 23 deals with making the practical preparations to bury Sarah's body.

(4) **GRIEVE WITH BALANCE** – Mourning cannot paralyse a person so they abandon their calling in life and finish well. In Abraham's case the parting was bittersweet but he knew that Sarah's race is over. She is in the eternal rest and will not return. Abraham was able to appreciate that death only ushered her to eternal life (John 5:24) which is an infinitely better place, "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" (Philippians 1:21b).



The Patriarch recognised that there must come a time when those left behind face the reality of the parting and fulfil their responsibilities to the living and the dead. Once Sarah was buried and the time of appointed mourning was over, Abraham rose up to lead his home. He will live for another 38 years before he departs to glory at the age of 175. In those 38 years, Abraham accomplished many things. It wasn't that he didn't feel the pain but rather that he did not let the sorrow control his duties. God's programme does not end with the passing of any individual. We owe it to the memory of the dead to press on.

(5) **GRIEVE WITH OTHERS** – When Abraham lost Sarah, he didn't retreat into a cave alone to mourn. He mourned openly with those around him. When Jacob died, Joseph and his brothers grieved together for 40 days. The death of Moses in Deuteronomy led to a national outpouring of corporate grief for 30 days. The people of God should be a place of comfort and support in times of loss. Indeed, the Apostle Paul tells us to "*weep with them that weep*" (Rom. 12:15). Warren Wiersbe points out,

"Paul reminded them that they must enter into the feelings of others. Christian fellowship is much more than a pat on the back and a handshake. It means sharing the burdens and the blessings of others so that we all grow together and glorify the Lord."

That maybe just spending time, giving a listening ear, providing a meal or a drink. That is part of self-denial and a ministry of mercy we are all called to share in. It is important to find the people and place that enables you to do that. Even Job's friends were an initial comfort to him when they sat silently with him for 7 days. Those that are close to the heart of God will be the warmest in such times. Don't neglect the community of the saints and the House of God. You need them more than ever.

(6) **GRIEVE WITH GOD** – The loss of a loved one often carries with it a deep sense of loneliness. That is to be expected. But we need to remind ourselves that it doesn't mean we are alone! Death does not exhaust the promises of God. Jesus said, *"I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you"* (John 14:18). We have a friend with us who has promised, *"I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."* (Hebrews 13:5b) He calls us to bring our grief and our losses to Him, *"Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you."* (1 Peter 5:7) The Psalmist experienced the grief of bereavement. But he also found the peace of God in the loss,

The righteous cry, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles. The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all. (Psalm 34:17-19)

There are many examples in the Bible and church history of how God comforts His people in times of sorrow and loss. Abraham was the Father of the Faithful. He got through the last phase of his life with God's help.

God will pour in grace to bind up the wounds that are hurting, *"He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds."* (Psalm 147:3) We aren't supposed to ever fully get over it! Earth is not heaven. But the grace of God over time will bring a sweetness in our pain. Our Heavenly Father felt the pain of giving up His beloved Son. He calls us into His loving arms so He can heal our wounded hearts. Through our tears, we rest on His unbreakable promises.

Frank Graeff was a minister in the Methodist denomination and served some of its leading churches, in Philadelphia Conference. Throughout the district, he was known as the "sunshine minister." Yet he went through severe trials in his life. His parents and 3 sisters died suddenly. He loved children very much but He and his wife never had any children of their own. Graeff He turned to the Scriptures for solace and strength. First Peter 5:7 became especially meaningful to him during this particular struggle, *"Casting all your care upon Him; for He careth for you."* This phrase "He careth for you," touched his heart deeply in his pain. It became the foundational thought for his beautiful hymn ***DOES JESUS CARE?***

*Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
Too deeply for mirth or song,
As the burdens press, and the cares distress,
And the way grows weary and long?*

*Oh, yes, He cares, I know He cares,
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
I know my Saviour cares.*

