

In the Mess

UNSPEAKABLE GRIEF

Two weeks ago I had a surprise 'phone call from my mother. It wasn't a surprise that she called, but the content of the call that surprised me. I was out at the time and when I got back the answer machine was bleeping (as it always is). I wasn't quite ready for the message I was about to hear. Messages from my mother are usually some sort of plea to call her, but this one wasn't! She left a short message which went something like this, "Ian, just calling to remind you that today is July 1st, and it is the 40th anniversary of your dad's death. Hope you have a good day!"

She has never 'phoned me before to remind me it's the anniversary of when my dad died and to tell you the truth I had never remembered the date myself. My sister, who's a couple of years older than me, always remembers and sends my mum a card. I don't know if my brother has ever registered the date (he's younger than me). The message pulled me up short – I wasn't ready for that. It provoked a mixture of emotions that flew through my mind. What struck me most though was why my mother had 'phoned me on this anniversary. She'd never done it before – never reminded me before of the day my dad died.

I don't know the answer to that, but here's what it made me think: there are some things you never forget, and the grief of losing someone we love, never entirely goes away. That grief will not be expressed in the same way over time but it will remain in one's heart in one way or another. And the good thing my mum still remembered my dad, even though he hasn't been here for 40 years.

Now we all come here this morning with different experiences of grief. Perhaps some of us have not yet had the experience of losing someone who is close, precious, special. That's ok – you don't have to feel guilty, you need to be grateful and thankful you still have those people with you. For some of us our

grief is still painful and raw; some of us lost a loved one a long time ago, and although we express our grief differently now, we still grieve.

Perhaps for some of us we know we will lose someone we love soon – their body is not going to go on forever – through illness or age – and we have begun to grieve. For some of us the reason for our grief may not be the death of a loved one. Loss comes through different experiences: a divorce or separation; loved ones moving a long way away; a breakdown in a relationship; betrayal by someone close.

The truth is that in one way or another, we will all, at some point, face the human emotion of grief. Perhaps the question we can all ask this morning is: “God what do you want to say to me this morning?” Perhaps, for many of us, this morning is an opportunity to remember with thanks someone, more than one person, we loved and lost. Perhaps too, it’s an opportunity for us to thank God for those he has given us, whom we don’t want to lose. Perhaps too, it’s an opportunity for us to face a very human emotion in a healthy way, one that doesn’t destroy us. As we begin, let me pray.

David Hears of Saul's Death

¹ After the death of Saul, David returned from defeating the Amalekites and stayed in Ziklag two days. ² On the third day a man arrived from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and with dust on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground to pay him honor.

³ "Where have you come from?" David asked him.
He answered, "I have escaped from the Israelite camp."

⁴ "What happened?" David asked. "Tell me."
He said, "The men fled from the battle. Many of them fell and died. And Saul and his son Jonathan are dead."

⁵ Then David said to the young man who brought him the report, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?"

⁶ "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa," the young man said, "and there was Saul, leaning on his spear, with the chariots and riders almost upon him. ⁷ When he turned around and saw me, he called out to me, and I said, 'What can I do?'

⁸ "He asked me, 'Who are you?'
" 'An Amalekite,' I answered.

⁹ "Then he said to me, 'Stand over me and kill me! I am in the throes of death, but I'm still alive.'

¹⁰ "So I stood over him and killed him, because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive. And I took the crown that was on his head and the band on his arm and have brought them here to my lord."

¹¹ Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them.
¹² They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

¹³ David said to the young man who brought him the report, "Where are you from?"

"I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite," he answered.

¹⁴ David asked him, "Why were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?"

¹⁵ Then David called one of his men and said, "Go, strike him down!" So he struck him down, and he died. ¹⁶ For David had said to him, "Your blood be on your own head. Your own mouth testified against you when you said, 'I killed the LORD's anointed.'" 2 Samuel 1 v 1 - 16

For David this was the moment he was dreading. He knew Saul and Jonathan were fighting the Philistines – he's waiting for a message. When it comes it's devastating: Saul and Jonathan are dead: Jonathan - David's true friend, the one who saved David's life and swore to protect his children. Saul, God's chosen and anointed king. Saul did not like David, tried to kill him, pursued him, but still is God's anointed. David's loss is huge.

For many of us this brings back our own memories doesn't it – it has things in it we recognize. And it seems that David has two choices before him – as we do: flee our grief and live in pretense, or face our grief and live in truth and honesty.

Many many people want to walk away from their grief. They will try anything but face it. Perhaps one reason we do it is because in truth most of us don't want to face the reality of death: there are too many unanswered questions we're often afraid to talk about; we'd rather change the subject and put on a brave face. Some of us avoid facing our grief by working harder, staying busy, becoming distant – or perhaps numbing our feelings with alcohol or pills.

I took a funeral about six months ago of a lady I didn't know. Her son's name was Steve – he's just a bit older than me. When I met Steve he had lots of big questions: what happens when someone dies; what's it all about; why does this happen? At the end of the service I gave him one of my cards and told him he could call me if he ever wanted to carry on our conversations. Two weeks ago he phoned me from Thailand where he's now teaching English. He had all the same questions – but at least he had the courage to talk to someone about what was going on for him.

So many of us want our grief to go away – we press it down, we bury it. I understand entirely why we do it, but it's not good! I've done it myself – least I'm pretty sure I have – and I've become very good at it. My mother tells me I didn't cry when my dad died. A trusted, wise friend told me not long ago that people will have said to me: "You're the man of the house now Ian – be strong for your mum." I don't ever remember anyone saying that, but maybe it was true. I don't think I ever expressed grief in a healthy way – maybe because I didn't think I should! Now I get moments when I think that grief catches me by surprise. I don't know for sure that's what it is, but I think it's got a lot to do with unexpressed grief languishing in my soul, but I've become so good at it that I can always suppress it – did it while I was writing this very talk!

What damage we do when we flee our grief! David chose to face his head on. On hearing the news, the devastating news of the deaths of Jonathan and Saul, David wept and tore his clothes. When his friend Lazarus died, Jesus wept! In many cultures grieving takes place in public and it takes time: the Egyptians dress in black for six months! Orthodox Jews offer prayers for a lost parent everyday for 11 months. In the light of that we seem to want to rush! The truth is that grief

takes time, and grief takes time because we care – we care about the person we have lost. David faces his grief in lament.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is the Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology at Yale Divinity School. In 1983 he lost one of his sons in a climbing accident in Austria. His son, Eric, was 25. Wolterstorff wrote a book of his struggle with grief which he called 'Lament for a Son'. In his introduction to that book he writes this: "If he was worth loving, he is worth grieving over. Grief is existential testimony to the worth of the one loved. That worth abides."¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff faced his grief and lamented because he cared. David lamented because he cared.

Eugene Peterson, writing of David at this point in his life says that: "David lamented because he was willing and able to bring his total attention to the fact of death."² To live well, to live life to the full, to live an abundant life we must face death fully. David knew and understood that life matters – he lived it fully and exuberantly, so the depth of his lament honours his love of life.

Did you know that 70% of the Psalms are laments – David's ongoing, honest struggle with loss, disappointment and death. David was a man who faced everything and prayed about everything. And that's what he does at the loss of Jonathan and Saul:

¹⁷ David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, ¹⁸ and ordered that the men of Judah be taught this lament of the bow (it is written in the Book of Jashar):

¹⁹ "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights.
How the mighty have fallen!

²⁰ "Tell it not in Gath,
proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,
lest the daughters of the Philistines be glad,
lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice.

¹ Wolterstorff, Nicholas: *"Lament for a Son,"* Eerdmans 1987 p. 5

² Peterson, Eugene: *"Leap over a Wall,"* HarperSanFrancisco 1997 p. 115

- ²¹ "O mountains of Gilboa,
may you have neither dew nor rain,
nor fields that yield offerings of grain.
For there the shield of the mighty was defiled,
the shield of Saul—no longer rubbed with oil.
- ²² From the blood of the slain,
from the flesh of the mighty,
the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
the sword of Saul did not return unsatisfied.
- ²³ "Saul and Jonathan—
in life they were loved and gracious,
and in death they were not parted.
They were swifter than eagles,
they were stronger than lions.
- ²⁴ "O daughters of Israel,
weep for Saul,
who clothed you in scarlet and finery,
who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.
- ²⁵ "How the mighty have fallen in battle!
Jonathan lies slain on your heights.
- ²⁶ I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.
- ²⁷ "How the mighty have fallen!
The weapons of war have perished!"

I find it very challenging that David laments Saul as well as Jonathan. Saul: the one who seemed intent on making David's life as difficult as he could if he couldn't kill him. But David chooses not to dwell on what Saul had done and tried to do to him. He chose instead, in his grief, to focus on and be influenced by what God had done for Saul! David chose to see the extent of the grace of God in the life of Saul. If he'd allowed it to, what Saul did and tried to do to David, would

have destroyed David, but David didn't allow Saul's hate to determine his life. He is able to see Saul's worth in God's eyes and his generosity towards Saul pours through this lament.

I find this extraordinary and profoundly challenging. David has suffered loss, but he doesn't become less in the expression of his grief. His grief does not lead to pity and his grief is not ugly and bitter. It takes great courage and it takes the eyes of faith that can see life in all its fullness to face grief as David did over Saul, but it is essential if we are to love God responsively and love God abundantly.

And David expresses his grief over Jonathan whom he loved deeply. This was a friendship that was deep and lasting one that brought out the best in both of them and David pours out his heart at his loss. Grief is never private, it is always shared. David gave orders that the whole of Judah should learn his lament. Part of the way through grief is to share it; we share it to help us deal with our pain; we share it so that we can deal well with the pain that comes from love and hate; we share it so that we are not diminished by it, but more fully human; we share it so that we might find God in our pain.

The worst thing about grief isn't the pain; it isn't the hate we sometimes feel; it isn't in truth, death itself. The worst thing is failing to acknowledge our grief and live in the reality of it and the truth of how we are. What we do with our grief affects not only our own lives, and health and walk with God, but also the lives of those around us. And death, simply and truthfully, does not have the last word:

“We do not need to grieve like the rest, who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4 v 13) And because of that and the hope that we will be with the Lord forever, we do not need to avoid and flee from our grief. We can face it and express it honestly, truthfully and deeply and as we do we are able to embrace more fully God who is in the mess with us, in whose story everything comes wonderfully and majestically together.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 18th July 2010 by Rev. Ian Phillips.