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## The Journey of Faith: Grief

1 Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. 2 She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.

3 Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said, 4 “I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead.”

5 The Hittites replied to Abraham, 6 “Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead.”

7 Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. 8 He said to them, “If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf 9 so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you.”

10 Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. 11 “No, my lord,” he said. “Listen to me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.”

12 Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land 13 and he said to Ephron in their hearing, “Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there.”

14 Ephron answered Abraham, 15 “Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver, but what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.”

16 Abraham agreed to Ephron’s terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.

17 So Ephron’s field in Machpelah near Mamre—both the field and the cave in it, and all the trees within the borders of the field—was deeded 18 to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. 19 Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. 20 So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site. (Genesis 23:1-20)

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13 Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. 14 For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 15 According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be

## Intro

Today is the tenth anniversary of the horrible attacks on 9/11. Where were you? It is, for many people, burned into their memories, much like the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, or the death of President Kennedy. Where were you that dreadful day?

I was driving, just the other side of the Grapevine, heading north to Palo Alto, when Beth called and told me to turn on the radio. For six hours, I listened, transfixed to the reports from New York, and Pennsylvania, and Washington, DC.

The day before, my mom had surgery at Stanford Hospital to replace the two major arteries going to her legs, in order to increase blood circulation. It was a grueling, 12 hour surgery. And that night, while in recovery, it was determined that the surgery had worked for one leg, but not the other. So they scheduled surgery for the next day to amputate her left leg just below the knee. And so, I was driving north that day, 9/11.

The second surgery worked, and my mom recovered nicely. She was back walking and driving within a few months. And she lived pretty well for the two and a half more years.

But many people were not so fortunate, and they died on 9/11.

- Americans as well as 236 citizens from more than 90 other countries.
- 2977 victims and 19 hijackers
- 246 people on the four planes (excluding hijackers):
  - 40 aboard United Flight 93 that went down in Shanksville, Pa.;
  - 87 aboard American Flight 11, which was the first to hit the World Trade Center;
  - 60 aboard United Flight 175, which was the second plane to hit the World Trade Center;
  - 59 aboard American Flight 77 that hit the Pentagon
- 2606 in New York City in the Twin Towers and on the ground

- 125 at the Pentagon, 55 of which were military personnel
- 411 emergency workers who responded to the scene, including 342 firefighters, 10 paramedics, 23 NYC police officers and 37 Port Authority officers

What do you remember about that day? The repeated showing of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers? Or the collapse of the Twin Towers? Or the sights of men and women in business suits leaping hundreds of feet to their deaths, just to escape the flames? Or do you remember the police and firefighters, the first responders, who did heroic deeds that day? Because my brother was a fire captain, though not in New York, I had a special affinity for the firemen that day.

On this day, we remember the senselessness of the lives lost. We remember the husbands who lost wives, and the wives who lost husbands. We remember the children who lost parents, especially the children as yet unborn who never knew their fathers. We remember the heroism, too. But mostly we remember the losses.

## **Emotions of Grief**

Whenever we experience a loss, we grieve. Grief is simply our response to loss. And the emotions of grief are many, and sometimes contradictory, all at the same time. Each of us has experienced loss at one time or another. Some of you have lost husbands, or wives, or children. Losses that I cannot even contemplate.

One of the first responses to a loss is a feeling of shock, and numbness. We don't feel anything! As I recall that day ten years ago, I had great compassion for those that died, but I was really neither angry nor sad. I experienced a sort of numbness that often is the first reaction to loss.

However, after a few days, feelings begin to return. I remember listening to the service in the National Cathedral just a few days after 9/11, and being quite moved by the words spoken and the songs sung. I remember feeling quite tender towards people, strangers, really. I felt as if we had all experienced a great loss together. There were no Democrats nor Republicans, there were no rich and poor, there were no gender or racial issues. We were in this together. And I found a great sense of togetherness with people, as my brother and I waited in the hospital for my mom to wake up in recovery.

There was a huge feeling of uncertainty for me, especially in relation to my mom, who had undergone two pretty drastic surgeries in two days. And, as I discovered later, the surgeon had not indicated that amputation

was even a possibility if the first surgery failed. So my brother and I wondered what we would say when my mom awoke and discovered her leg was missing. And even then, how would she recover? Would she recover? And those were questions facing us as a nation in the days and weeks following 9/11. The feeling was that we would recover, but how?

One of the most common reactions after loss is anger. That was certainly true as the nation considered how to respond. Anger at the responsible parties, and those who assisted them. Anger at ourselves for allowing this to happen. Anger at God for allowing this to happen.

People who study grief say that is important to recognize the feelings we have when we encounter a loss. Some of us cry. Others of us do not cry. Some of us get really busy. Others of us try to distract ourselves in different ways. Some of us try to punish other people because of the pain we are feeling. It is important to recognize our feelings, and it is important to recognize how we are allowing our feelings to control our actions. Not everything we do, nor say, is especially helpful to us in our grief.

### **Can Christians Grieve?**

Some well-meaning people say that Christians are not supposed to grieve. They will say that grieving shows a lack of faith. However, our text in 1 Thessalonians this morning says Christians are not to grieve “like those without hope”, meaning we will grieve. Throughout the Bible, there are examples of men and women who grieved.

- One thinks of Jacob mourning in absolute despair at the supposed death of his son, Joseph.
- One thinks of David who grieved the death of his son by Bathsheba. And then later when his son, Absalom was killed, even though Absalom had tried to kill his father and take over the kingdom.
- One remembers Psalm 137 that begins, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.”
- One thinks of Jesus himself, who wept at the tomb of his friend, Lazarus, expressing grief, even though he knew what would happen!
- One thinks of Mary Magdalene, outside Jesus’ tomb on Easter Sunday, weeping.
- And in our story this morning, Abraham weeps and mourns the loss of his wife, Sarah.

My friends, Christians and people of faith certainly do grieve. We feel loss, as anyone else does. But we do not grieve as hopeless people. We know that death is catastrophic, and separation from loved ones is painful, but death will not have the final word. Of that we are assured.

### **Sarah's Death and Other Deaths**

Genesis says that Sarah was 127 when she died. When God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12, Sarah was 75. So at the very least, they had been married for 52 years, and most likely longer. That is a very long time, and it is very difficult to lose a mate that you have spent that many years with.

Those who research grief tell us that while everyone grieves differently, the grieving cycle is three years for a good death, that is, a death for which you are prepared, you have said your goodbyes, the affairs are in order, all sins confessed and apologies made. However, for a bad death, like a heart attack, or an accident, or a suicide, something for which there was no preparation, the grieving cycle is seven years long.

The tragic events of 9/11 were of the bad death variety. And no wonder it has taken years to grieve the loss of all those people, and many are still grieving. There isn't a day that goes by that the people who perished on 9/11 are not missed. There isn't a day that goes by that I do not miss my brother who died in 2009, and my mom who died in 2004, and my dad who died in 2005.

My brother, Dave, was a fireman who died of a brain tumor which he had battled for two and a half years. And his death completely floored me. I had talked and prayed with people about their grief, and I had read a great deal about grief. And now, I was knocked senseless. When my brother died, I could not eat, I could not sleep. He died at a little past 1:00 a.m., and for several months, no matter when I went to bed, I would wake up at about 1:00 a.m.! I found myself going through the motions at work, and with the family. I found my interactions with people to be tinged with either apathy or anger. I found it difficult to pray.

There are several things that Abraham does in Genesis 23 that I think help him cope with the loss of his beloved wife of 52 plus years.

First, verse two says that "Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her." It is appropriate, and even necessary to express one's emotions. Some of us are natural criers, we tear up at just about anything. Others of us are more stoic, and while we have deep and powerful

emotions, we don't often show them. There is no one way to express our emotions. But we must express them.

Talk it over with a friend. And if you are a friend to someone who has just lost someone, and who is grieving, the best thing for you to do is ask how they are doing, and then to listen!

You can write in a journal. You can go for walks and talk it over with God. You can watch movies that make you cry, sometimes crying at someone else's troubles will allow you to express tears for your own troubles.

However it happens for you, express your emotions. Somehow. Somewhere. With somebody.

Second, verse three tells us that Abraham got up and spoke to the Hittites. That is, he engages people. He goes to find a place to bury Sarah. Even though God has promised that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the land, there were already people living in the land. And so Abraham had to negotiate with the Hittites about buying a cave in which to bury Sarah. Abraham wanted to bury Sarah in a cave in the land that God had promised to him. It was an act of faith, really. It was an act of faith that God would fulfill His promises and give Abraham and his descendants the land.

And in order to do that, Abraham had to negotiate with other people. It is very easy in our grief to close down, to shut out the world, to be alone with our pain and sorrow. While that may be good for a season, it is not helpful for us. That is why grief support groups are so helpful. These people have also lost someone. And no one understands grief like those who are grieving. Their situations may be different, but the feelings of grief are very similar.

One of the amazing positive results of 9/11 was that in New York and around the country, people opened up and related to one another. Christians talked with Muslims and Jews. Republicans and Democrats spoke kindly to one another. Liberals and conservatives embraced one another. Sure there were differences, and there still are, important differences. But the commonality of grief, and the willingness to engage one another in our grief, had some amazing results.

So Abraham engaged other people, and did not isolate himself. It is a good lesson for those who grieve.

One of the things that helped me a great deal was a grief group that we started at church, called Griefshare. It was a group that met for 13

weeks, and in the group there was a lesson on a DVD, a workbook with readings, and then time to share with each other. I helped lead that group three times, and listening to people's stories, and sharing together, and praying for one another, and crying together, had an amazing affect on all of us. And I greatly benefited from that group.

If you are in a season of grieving, I would highly recommend that you check out a Griefshare group, or some grief support group. Many local hospitals have such groups.

### **A Biblical Model for Grief**

One of my seminary instructors offered what I thought was a brilliant idea, that the biblical model for grief, based on the story of Jesus, is "death-burial- resurrection". That is, when someone dies, or when a job is lost, or when you move from a familiar place to a new place, there are feelings of loss, of death.

But how to we react to that death? Abraham buried Sarah. The women put Jesus in a tomb. It is an act of finality. That part of our lives is now over. Things will not ever be the same. It will never be September 10<sup>th</sup> again for us. And so we need to acknowledge that a death has taken place.

There are some people who simply cannot bury the loved one they lost. Oh, their body has been cremated, or it is in a cemetery plot, but they cannot let go of the past. They cannot throw away anything that belonged to the person, or that reminds them of the person. It is too painful. It feels like an act of betrayal. I know.

Before my brother died, he had given us a red 1998 Ford Mustang for Mark. It had belonged to his daughter, and was to be a car for Mark to drive while we rebuilt a 1963 Ford Falcon for Mark. About a month after Dave died, the transmission went out on the Mustang. The cost to replace it was more than the car was worth.

But in my grief, I was torn. That car represented my brother to me. It was made worse by the fact that he was mechanically inclined, and whenever we had car issues, I would call him up and ask him what to do. So, we spent the money to fix the transmission. It may have been wise, it may have been foolish, but it was a decision based on grief and not logic. I simply could not dispose of a car that represented my brother.

In a way, I was keeping my brother "alive". I had not yet buried him. I had not yet come to the finality of his death. I was still protesting, somehow thinking it would be alright if we just fixed the transmission.

But there comes a point at which we all have to accept the death of a loved one. No matter how ill-timed. No matter how unfortunate. No matter what the circumstances. They are now dead and gone. And our life will go on.

Burial is not forgetting. Not a day goes by when I don't remember my brother. Every time I see a fire truck, I think of him and pray for the firemen.

Burial is not betrayal. It is not being disloyal to our loved one. Burial is recognizing the finality of death

But burial is also an act of faith, entrusting a loved one to God, so that we can move on.

How have you done with the burial of your loved ones who have died?

When we look at the story of Jesus, we recognize that without his burial in the tomb, there would have been no resurrection. So with us, without the burial, there is no resurrection. That is, there is no new life for us without the burial.

The 1 Thessalonians passage this morning affirms that, yes, we do grieve! But we grieve in hope! Because we believe in resurrection. Because we believe in Jesus' resurrection, we also believe that our loved ones will be raised someday, and we will be reunited with them. And that is our hope. Death is terrible, and tragic. But it does not have the final word.

Let us pray for those who were affected by the events ten years ago today. And let us pray for all who grieve and mourn, whether it is a recent loss or one that is a long time ago. Let us pray for good grief, in hope, and for the comfort of God's Holy Spirit.