

## 1 Sermon, July 24, 2011

Texts: 2 Samuel 12:15b-23, Matthew 5:1-12

Title: "On Grieving" based on "On Mourning the Dead" Sermon 135  
**Preached at Epworth, January 11, 1726, at the Funeral of John Griffith:  
A Hopeful Young Man.**

1. Wesley's view
2. Wesley is mostly wrong
3. Scripture affirms grieving
4. We grieve in proportion to how we love
5. Grief should not be paralysis, but working through

### Introduction

I think it's important to preach on grief every so often, because it's something that most of us go through in life. When we lose someone we love, we are deeply affected; our life is different, and it's important to put our loss in perspective.

### 1. Wesley's view

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had a perspective on grief that is very different from what most grief counselors would have. Wesley's attitude could be summed up in three words:

Get over it.

Wesley wrote:

Grief, in general, is the parent of so much evil, and the occasion of so little good to mankind, that it may be justly wondered how it found a place in our nature.

Wesley refers to the story of King David grieving over the deathly sickness of his infant son. When his son died, he gave up his fasting and suffering. David said,

While he was still alive, I went without food and cried because there was still hope. I said to myself, "Who knows? Maybe the LORD will have pity on me and let the child live." <sup>23</sup>But now that he's dead, why should I go without eating? I can't bring him back! Someday I will join him in death, but he can't return to me.

Basically, Wesley says that grieving is useless. It takes up time that could be put to better use. It makes us focus on the sorrows of this world, instead of the joys of the next. He wrote:

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Why should I add grief to grief; which increases the affliction I already sustain? Have my tears or complaints the power to refix his soul in her decayed and forsaken mansion? Or, indeed, would he wish to change, though the power were in his hands, the happy regions of which he is now possessed, for this land of care, pain, and misery?

Be it my comfort, when my sorrows bear hard upon me, that I shall shortly, very shortly, go to him! That I shall soon awake from this tedious dream of life, which will soon be at an end; and then shall I gaze upon him; then shall I behold him again, and behold him with that perfect love, that sincere and elevated affection, to which even the heart of a parent is here a stranger! when the Lord God shall wipe away all tears from my eyes."

Wesley did find one useful thing about grief, however. He said that sometimes grief leads of to repentance, and a serious sense of our faults. This could increase our faith.

### 2. Wesley is mostly wrong

John Wesley, I believe, is mostly wrong here. There is evidence that he was uncomfortable with emotion, and so weeping and wailing at loss would have disturbed him.

"Get over it" is still what some people say to someone who is coping with loss. Those who work with death and dying say it's the wrong approach.

Instead, we need to affirm that, when you lose someone who is important to you, there is going to be a process of readjustment that will often last years. When grieving, we need to cope with the fact that life is extremely different. Sometimes life becomes harder, if the person we lose helps us in our daily routine. Sometimes life becomes easier – if we were spending a great deal of time caring for the other person. But even when it becomes easier, it a tremendous adjustment.

Yes, we can be happy if we believe that the deceased person is now enjoying a joyful resurrection life with God. But life is still profoundly *different* here. Not necessarily bad, but different.

Grief is work. It is work that adjusts our heads, our emotions, our direction. As such, it is some of the hardest work there is. Grief is relationship work, but without the active relationship. So grief may be harder even than when we have the other person present to react and share feedback.

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#### 3. Scripture affirms grieving

The scriptures generally affirm the work of grieving. In today's reading from 2 Samuel, King David had an infant son born to Bathsheba, and the baby was sick. David wept, and prayed, and fasted, hoping that God would save the baby. The baby died.

After the baby's death, King David got up, washed himself and got back to work. Not that he stopped grieving; no, he started grieving in a different way. He decided to grieve through his work, through his active life. The loss would still weigh upon him, but the loss itself reminded him that he had some spiritual work to do. He had committed a great sin by sending Uriah to the front so he could spend time with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. He had essentially sentenced Uriah to death, and the child's death was a reminder of David's own sin. So David had some things to do to make up for his sin.

For David, grief was important work.

Jesus himself affirmed the work of grieving. In the beatitudes, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Who would do the comforting? Jesus did not say, but we know that the Holy Spirit is the great Comforter. Grieving is a work of the Spirit.

Ecclesiastes 7 also affirms grieving:

It's better to go to a funeral than to attend a feast;

funerals remind us that we all must die.

Grief can humble us, and the Bible reminds us that humility is a good thing.

Maybe the greatest affirmation of grief is that Jesus himself wept at the death of Lazarus (John 11). Jesus joined the others in grieving over the death of his friend; and this is *despite* Jesus knowing what he would do, and that the outcome was assured. Jesus knew that death was not forever, and yet he still grieved.

#### 4. We grieve in proportion to how we love

Grief is important work, because love is important.

If we did not love, we would not grieve.

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Wesley acknowledges this when he writes:

The tender meltings of a heart dissolved with fondness, when it reflects on the several agreeable moments which have now taken their flight never to return, give an authority to some degree of sorrow. Nor will human frailty permit an ordinary acquaintance to take his last leave of them without it. Who then can conceive, much less describe, the strong emotion, the secret workings of soul which a parent feels on such an occasion? . . . At the tearing asunder of these sacred bands, well may we allow, without blame, some parting pangs. . .

But then Wesley follows it up by saying that the sad feeling should be put to as speedy an end as reason and religion command us.

I say to John Wesley, "No!" Don't rush grief. If we grieve in proportion to how much we love, then the greater the love, the greater the grief. A great love cannot be put to rest in a short period of time. If the love is put away quickly, it was not a very big love to begin with.

Grief is more than just an adjustment of your habits, getting used to the routine of life being different. It is more than just the loss of companionship. Grief is not just an adjustment to our thinking. Grief is a total change in perspective. Once, when this person I loved was alive, I was over there. Now that this person is gone, I am over here. The world looks different from here. Even God looks different from here.

In many cases, God becomes a closer companion in our grief. We walk with God more regularly and closely than before. Our prayer becomes deeper, more reflective.

#### 5. Grief should not be paralysis, but working through

John Wesley was right, I believe, insofar as grief should not be a kind of paralysis. Grief should not be something that keeps us inactive, stuck in one place. But I find that there are very few occasions when grieving is that kind of experience of paralysis.

More often, grief is slower than we'd like, but every moment is somehow necessary and, in the long run, useful.

And in the midst of grief can be great moments of shining joy. I have seen this in others. I have witnessed others experiencing moments of transcendent thankfulness for all that they had received from the other person.

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In 1993, my grandmother died at the age of 97. There were no regrets. She had lived a good, long, faithful life. She had, up until the last few months, been mentally clear, with a remarkable memory and wisdom and contentment. We could praise God for a wonderful life, lived to its fullest.

It was my privilege to preach at her funeral; the words were easy, they flowed naturally. The only regret I had was that our boys had not gotten to know their great-grandmother better before she died.

Ideally, our grieving is the work by which the greatest love for someone becomes transformed into thankfulness for their life. Grief is the process by which our love for someone who was alive is transformed into wisdom and love in the present moment.

Thanks be to God. Amen.