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John Calvin on Death and Grief

by Sara Jane Nixon

It is difficult for many of us to imagine John Calvin doing something so human and vulnerable as grieving. Nor is it any easier to picture him being interested in compassionate pastoral care to bereaved friends or to members of his flock. Often, our mental image of him is of a cold, academic man, interested in God's glory in a way that excludes too much kindness or tenderness towards fellow human beings. This is not an accurate image: as will be shown, Calvin felt his grief intensely and wrote long letters to bereaved friends and acquaintances in order to comfort them. But be as that may, it is not part of our cultural picture of Calvin or his tradition.

A result of this perception in some strains of the modern Reformed tradition is the sense that when we are seeking to comfort our friends and congregants, we have somehow stepped outside of our tradition. Reformed theology and practice may be strong and rigorous, we think, but it is not comforting. Certain aspects that might be theoretically true, it is felt, might need to be glossed over or rejected outright to avoid causing more grief than comfort to the suffering. However, this understanding of Reformed theology may well have been strange to Calvin, who seemed to find, and expect others to find, great comfort within his understanding of the Christian gospel.

His theology of grief included two major insights. First, he expected himself and encouraged others to keep a rule of moderation in grief, based on the tension between our humanity and the obedience we owe God. Second, though perhaps more fundamental, Calvin believed that Christians should cultivate a firm, hopeful trust in God's fatherly goodwill towards his children,

even in the darkest of times. These two guideposts can be seen in the ways Calvin commented on grief when he read about it in the Bible, and they were worked out in practical ways as he sought to console the dying and the bereaved in his community and correspondence.

Calvin's Own Experience of Grief

It seems right to begin with Calvin's personal life, in order to establish some credibility on Calvin's behalf. It is, after all, easier to say what ought to be thought and felt about grief when one has not experienced much of it personally. But Calvin was no stranger to grief in his own life, and far from treating grief as a mere theological or academic exercise, he spoke out of experience and familiarity. Two of the greatest tragedies he experienced in his life were the deaths of his infant son, Jacque, and his wife, Idelette.

Though Calvin had initially been reluctant to enter into marriage, he was eventually persuaded by his friend Martin Bucer to marry Idelette, the widow of an Anabaptist man and several years his senior. She already had two children from her previous marriage. Despite his initial hesitation to marry—he seemed to have been convinced only by the thought of having more time to work, being freed from household demands—he grew to love her. Soon they had a child

Table of Contents

John Calvin on Death and Grief.....	p. 1
The Reformed Pastor Confronts the "Last Enemy"....	p. 6
Finding Joy on the Journey of Grief.....	p. 13

together, a son, but he died only twenty-two days after his birth. They never had more children. Though Calvin cared for his wife's children and toward the end of his life comforted himself with the thought of his spiritual children in Geneva and elsewhere, he remained sorrowful over the loss of little Jacque.¹

Seven years later, Idelette was also dead, having suffered from long illness and never having really recovered from the death of her son. Calvin, who was far less stoic than popular imagination makes him out to be, was devastated, going so far as to call himself "half a man."² He frequently spoke of being overwhelmed with emotion in his letters to close friends. In a letter to Farel four days later, Calvin expressed his anguish, saying that he "do[es] what [he] can to keep [him]self from being overwhelmed with grief." In a similar letter to Viret, he says this:

Although the death of my wife has been exceedingly painful to me, yet I subdue my grief as well as I can. Friends also are earnest in their duty to me. I confess that they profit me and themselves less than could be wished, yet I can scarcely say how much I am supported by their attentions. But you know well enough how tender, or rather soft, my mind is. Had not a powerful self-control, therefore, been vouchsafed to me, I could not have borne up so long.³

To those who grew up with an image of Calvin as harsh and unyielding, his assessment of himself as overly emotional and even soft comes as a bit of a surprise.

Nor did Calvin suffer grief only at the deaths of his family members. In a letter that is more fully examined below, he writes of his sadness upon the plague death of a student who had been boarding in his house. Upon hearing the sad news, he was so utterly overpowered that "for many days I was fit for nothing but to weep. And although I was somehow comforted and upheld before the Lord by those aids wherewith He sustains our souls in affliction, with regard to human society, however, I felt as if I were not at all myself."⁴

Here again, we find a Calvin at the mercy of his emotions, overpowered and struggling to work normally. We find Calvin similarly affected in a letter after the death of another friend:

Couralt's death has left me such a wreck that I can no longer put up with the pain. By day there is nothing that can occupy me without continually thinking about it. Added to this terrible pain by day are the severe agonies by night. Not only do the sleepless hours continually torment me, to which I am accustomed, but the entire nights in which I do not

even close my eyes drain all my power, and there is nothing that could be worse for my health than that.⁵

Some interesting facts come to light in these letters. First and most obviously, Calvin was not afraid to admit that he suffered intensely when people close to him died, though he seems to have considered his propensity to intense grief with mixed feelings. At any rate, he felt like it was proper to subdue his grief and not simply let it have its way over him. It seems he felt a middle way was best, between the extremes of stoicism on one hand and undisciplined mourning on the other. This becomes even clearer in his treatment of grief in the Bible.

Calvin's Treatment of Grief in the Bible

Considering how highly Calvin prioritized the words of Scripture, it seems appropriate before going any farther in Calvin's personal life to stop and consider what Calvin has to say about death and mourning as they appear in Scripture. To this end, we will examine the commentaries he wrote, especially on the deaths of Sarah, Rachel, and Isaac in Genesis and on the death of Lazarus in the Gospel of John.

The primary impetus in the commentaries on these texts is to encourage a moderation that avoids the extremes of emotionless stoicism on the one hand and wholehearted, despairing grief on the other. First, Calvin explicitly refuses to criticize Abraham for mourning over the body of his dead wife. Though he acknowledges that it would have been a sin if Abraham had done so in order to "cherish and augment" his grief, he denies that Abraham did so. It is perfectly legitimate, he says to mourn privately over the death of someone you love, so long as you exercise self-control and do not give yourself entirely over to the grief.⁶

Not only is it a perfectly human thing to do, it has theological value in that you mourn at the same time over the fruit of sin and the doom to which it has put all humanity. It is theologically justified to mourn over death, because it is the result of sin. We, even more than Abraham, have reason both to mourn and to avoid the extremes of grief because of the resurrection, whose comfort Abraham had to largely go without.⁷

This moderation in grief applies not only to the bereaved but also to the dying themselves: Calvin criticizes Rachel's death because she despaired so much that her son did not comfort her, and she gave him a name reflective of her despair: Son of My Suffering. Even the dying shouldn't despair in light of God's providence and kindness, and should rather be full of a gratitude to God that "infuses ... sweetness to mitigate our grief."⁸

Another mark of moderation comes in the burying of the dead. Calvin is firmly in favor of burial rites, seeing in them the hope of the resurrection. This holds true even of the patriarchs, though their hope was dimmer and less fully realized than ours, who live on the other side of Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection. Though pagans might bury their dead only in order to comfort themselves, God's people must never lose sight of the fact that burial is a sign of expectation rather than a useless, empty gesture.⁹

In his comments on the death of Isaac, we see another aspect of a good death. As we should exercise moderation in our grief both as bereaved and as dying people, so should we avoid the fear of death. Calvin speaks of old men who still cling to life with all the enthusiasm of a young man with a certain amount of disdain: long life is a blessing from God, but it is blighted and incomplete if, having lived a long life, a person still fears death. Believers should use their lives in part to prepare for death, so that, having a good conscience, they should have used their life to prepare for their death, and, having a good conscience, they are not afraid to meet God once they have died. Only the wicked need fear what comes after death.¹⁰

While his reasoning on these texts can strike the modern reader as extremely speculative, especially on the subject of the patriarchs' hope for the resurrection and the intense meaning he gives even the smallest actions, Calvin's dual argument—for the appropriateness and humanity of grief on one hand and for a pious moderation in grief on the other—finds even firmer footing in the New Testament. In his commentary on John 11, when Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead, Calvin finds ample vindication.

To begin with, Calvin is deeply impressed with Christ's grief and tears when he comes face to face with Lazarus's death. His weeping arises out of his own humanity and experience with grief and also from sympathy with Mary and the others who were crying—another mark of humanity: do not most people struggle to stay dry eyed in a funeral, even if they did not know the bereaved well? Calvin is of the opinion that Jesus also weeps for the sad situation of the entire human race, which is subjected to evil. Calvin insists that Jesus feels our sorrow as strongly as if it had been his own. If Christ, both God and perfect human, is able to feel grief and to mourn, it is certainly not sinful for us to do the same.

Calvin thinks that if our grief is sinful (and some grief certainly is), it is because we suffer ours without restraint. Jesus's grief never got the best of him. His feelings were "adjusted and regulated in obedience to God." He goes on to say that human grief can be sinful

in two ways. The first, which has already been covered, is impetuous and ungoverned grief that leads us to despair. The second way grief can be sinful is if we grieve over something we should not grieve over, if it arises from an unlawful cause or goes to an unlawful end, for example, if we grieve over small, unworthy things, or if we grieve because we are too devoted to earthly existence. Grief in itself, especially grief over the death of someone we love, is not inherently sinful on either count.¹¹

Calvin's Care for the Dying and Bereaved

Calvin expected and understood that the time just before death would be especially terrifying and spiritually trying, even for the faithful Christian. He therefore instructed the pastors of Geneva to pay special attention to visiting the very sick in order to encourage and reassure them. This was to be done by reading scriptures, reminding the dying person of the guidance and protection of Jesus Christ even in death, and taking their spiritual temperature. If they are not taking God's judgment seriously enough, the pastors are to remind the dying person both of their own sinfulness and God's coming judgment. On the other hand, should the dying person be at the other extreme, scared of death because of a troubled conscience or excessive fear of God's judgment seat, the minister is to remind her of Christ's goodness, so that the dying person is comforted and is no longer so afraid. All of these exhortations must be scripturally based.¹²

Furthermore, Calvin instructs the pastor to care for the physical needs of the afflicted as well as the spiritual. And they were to do so even at great danger to themselves. This was illustrated particularly graphically when the Genevan Company of Pastors visited victims of the plague that periodically swept Geneva, and occasionally died themselves as a result.¹³

Besides visiting and comforting the dying themselves, Calvin comforted, and instructed the Company of pastors to comfort, those who were bereaved.¹⁴ Returning to the letter already mentioned, which Calvin wrote to the father of a student boarder in his home who had died of the plague, we can see his sense of pastoral care at work.

First, Calvin fulfilled the apostolic command to "*mourn with those who mourn*" (Rom. 12:15). From this section comes the quote already highlighted, that "for many days [Calvin] was fit for nothing but to weep." During this section, he also provides a kind of eulogy for the son, saying that he was "a youth of most excellent promise," whom he loved "as [his] own son" because the son for his part treated Calvin with all the love and respect of a father. Thus, Calvin legitimizes the father's grief by acknowledging his own, and lets

the grief be specific: he is not speaking academically of grief in general, but of the particular grief of a lost son, and of a particular lost son: Louis.¹⁵

Then, Calvin names and acknowledges the grief of the family. In this case, he is particularly worried for Louis's younger brother, Charles. They were apparently especially close brothers, and Calvin says he does not doubt "but that the poor child would be steeped in sorrow and soaked in tears." For this he provides a specific comfort: he hopes that his brother, with whom Charles was staying, would be able to provide help and solace. Potentially, he hoped to ease some of the father's own worry about his other son, who apparently was also living away from home. Closing his account of his own grief and worry, he demonstrates what he must have hoped was true also for the letter's recipient: refreshment by prayers and meditations on Scripture. Having expressed his own grief in order to provide solidarity and some form of credibility—he does not want the father to think he "boasts here of firmness or fortitude in dealing with another's sorrow"—he addresses the father's own grief, hoping to lighten it by communicating what he had found useful in his own experience of suffering.¹⁶

First, he names and rejects certain consolations, which must have been in his time as widespread and vacuous as certain phrases in our own—"heaven gained another angel," "he's in a better place." He explicitly does not tell the father, for instance, that he should not grieve because everyone is doomed to die. It is interesting to note that Calvin implicitly ruled this out by recounting his own grief without any sense of embarrassment. Nor does he shame the father into hiding his grief in order to protect his reputation. Instead, Calvin points the father to the "one sure and certain source of consolation," which is the knowledge of God.¹⁷

This consolation appears to rest in God's benevolent fatherhood towards both the father and his dead son. God's will toward us is for our good: this is the encouragement Calvin wants the father to take. Therefore, he is not to curse "cruel fate" or "blind death." These things are in the hands of a God who is neither cruel nor blind, and who "does not ordain or do anything except what He foresees to be just and upright in itself, and also good for us and our salvation."¹⁸ Therefore, out of a sense of piety and gratitude, we should accept whatever happens with as much equanimity and gratitude as we can.

The understanding of God as a kind Father who intends good for his children is especially vivid in another letter Calvin wrote, asking the recipient to inform a father of the death of his grown daughter. Though he fully expects his letter to cause the father a great deal

of pain, his first words of consolation to her friend, and through her friend to her father, is that God "guided her even to the last sigh, as if visibly he had held out a hand to her."¹⁹ The rest of the letter is essentially commentary on that sentence—an extended retelling of her death and the grace with which God eased her passing and encouraged those who were with her. The immense value Calvin placed on a good death is visible here and in similar retellings of his wife's death. It is enormously comforting to the living, he thinks, that a dying person clearly shows their love of God and knowledge of the gospel as they pass.

However, despite the emphasis on God's goodness and on putting bereavement in the perspective of the gospel and the rest of life, present in this advice and in Calvin's own words about his grief in the letter to the father and elsewhere, it is clear that he does not mean for the bereaved simply to shrug their shoulders, say a prayer, and move on with their life. He makes this clear a little later in a vivid way, denying that God "requires us to put off common humanity, that ... we should be turned to stones."²⁰ All Calvin is asking for is a sense of proportion based on the Christian gospel, recognition of other blessings in the bereaved man's life, and also a continued sense of gratitude to God.

In other words, a sense of submission and gratitude should temper our grief, and our grief should not run away with us. Perhaps this is why Calvin insists in his letters that he is striving to keep to his daily work schedule as much as he can, even when in the depths of grief for his wife or his friends. Both grief and comfort come from the hand of God. Because of this, Calvin advises avoiding asking such questions as "Why did this happen?" or "Why me?" as essentially useless, tormenting the asker for no reason. It was not done as punishment, but by the will of a good, loving, and fatherly God. We must "do Him this honor, to believe that He is more wise than the smallness of our understanding."²¹

Finally, at the very end of the letter, Calvin makes known that he has asked other pastors—Bucer and Melancthon in this case—to write similar letters of sympathy and consolation.²² Calvin is not intending to be the only pastoral voice the father hears. It takes a community to walk with a grieving person. As an institutional reflection of that fact, pastors in Calvin's Geneva were expected to visit the recently bereaved and the dying—in fact, anyone who had been confined to bed for three days or longer.²³

Calvin's message is similar, if more spirited and urgent, to those facing imminent death. In two letters he wrote to pastors trained in Geneva who were awaiting martyrdom in Lyons, we find encouragement

in the untamed goodness of God, even in the face of something so terrible as death by burning. Though he says some things to them that are peculiar to their situation of impending martyrdom, some is applicable to any Christian facing their final days or hours.

First, Calvin does not sugarcoat the situation. Once all the likely sources of help for the prisoners have been exhausted, he tells them so. Though he is gentle about it and expresses his wish that it had not turned out this way, he tells them that God has closed all the doors to their help, and they must prepare themselves for martyrdom.²⁴ It is interesting that Calvin does not hesitate to attribute this apparent failure to God, or deny that it is God's will they die.

The strong belief in the essential benevolence of God comes into play here: even in a bad situation, even in prison facing being burned at the stake, God's will is good and we should receive it with as much calmness and gratitude as possible. They are to pray that God would "subdue [them] to his good pleasure." The word "good" is operative here: even now, God's will for his people is not evil or arbitrary, and their death is not useless. In the other letter, this theme is even stronger:

Now, although these tidings have proved sorrowful to the flesh ... yet we must submit ourselves to the will of this kind Father and sovereign Lord; and not only consider His way of disposing of us just and reasonable, but also accept it with a gentle and loving heart as altogether right and profitable for our salvation, patiently waiting until he palpably show it to be so.²⁵

Even when we cannot see or understand it, or when it involves things that are evil on their face, God's will is good and ordered to our benefit. One day, Calvin suggests, we will be able to understand for ourselves. Meanwhile, we must trust that it is so.

Nor does Calvin think that God has abandoned the prisoners to their fate. He expressly cuts his own condolences short, because he seems to believe they are extraneous. He is sure that God is providing them with much sweeter consolations than any he or another pastor would be able to give. This does not, however, stop him from giving some.²⁶

Much as he does not deny the grief of the bereaved, he does not deny the anxiety and even the anger of those preparing to die. Indeed, in the exhortation mentioned above, it is assumed that there must be a part of them that does not want to submit meekly to martyrdom, or else they would not have to pray to be subdued to God's good pleasure. He acknowledges that it must rankle and hurt to see that enemies have defeated them

so completely.²⁷ Still, just as he holds out hope that one day we will understand God's good will, so he denies that the apparent victory of the wicked will last forever. Even the dying have good reason to hope.

Conclusion

There is comfort to be found in Calvin for the dying and for the bereaved. At best he provides a "boost," a place of higher ground where those dealing with grief or tragedy can see beyond their immediate situation into the broader, hopeful future of God's good will towards them. At worst, he offers hope and encouragement that things will get better, and that one day the bereaved and dying will be able to understand and rejoice in God's plan. There is a promise that even the things we do not understand or cannot bear to face will turn out to be for our salvation, and we will see it clearly soon enough. Calvin's theology of grief provides an antidote to despair and excessive inwardness or self-occupation.

On the other hand, it provides ample room for human emotion, even overwhelming human emotion. Grief cannot be allowed to rule the Christian—self-control and submission to God's good will is paramount. Nevertheless, it is proper, even good, to allow oneself to grieve. No one is expected to be a machine, suppressing hurt and shock at losing close friends or family, or remaining emotionless in the face of impending death.

All of this is possible because the sovereign, kingly God is also God the Father. Without the strong sense that God's will for his children is unfailingly good, that no matter what happens, it is his will for our salvation, Calvin's whole theology of grief would become nonsense. That God has his way and his way is good is absolutely paramount, and is the light that sheds hope through Calvin's understandings of the darkest places of human experience.

Editor's note: This essay was originally a final paper for a course on Calvin this past fall at Princeton Seminary. The topic was chosen in the aftermath of the death of the author's father, Dr. Michael D. Bush, Vice President of Theology Matters, who died on Oct.23, 2017. She relates: "This course of study turned out to be providential: Calvin was my best friend through the early stages of my grief. His words helped more than those of any living person."

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¹ Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 168–170.

² Selderhuis, *John Calvin*, 170–172.

³ Elsie Anne McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 52–53.

⁴ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 293.

⁵ Selderhuis, *John Calvin*, 196.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, v. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 23:2.

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, v. 1, 23:2.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, v. 1, 35:17.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, v. 1, 35:17.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, v. 1, 35:28.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on John v. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 11:33.

¹² McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 292.

¹³ Scott Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 284–285.

¹⁴ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 284–285.

¹⁵ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 293–294.

¹⁶ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 294–295.

¹⁷ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 295.

¹⁸ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 296.

¹⁹ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 301.

²⁰ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 300.

²¹ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 296–297.

²² McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 300.

²³ Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, 284.

²⁴ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 324.

²⁵ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 324, 327.

²⁶ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 324.

²⁷ McKee, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 325.

The Reformed Pastor Confronts the “Last Enemy”

by Allen C. McSween

Every aspect of pastoral ministry can and should be viewed as an occasion for theological witness and reflection. Nowhere is that more important than in the face of death with the depth of the issues it raises and the intensity of the grief it provokes. The stark reality of death blows away our empty clichés like an umbrella in a hurricane. In this essay I will focus primarily on the theological significance of the funeral service and sermon. That is not meant to denigrate other aspects of the church's pastoral ministry on the occasion of death which are vitally important, but it is to insist that in the work of comforting the bereaved the pastor on behalf of the Church universal has a unique Word to proclaim that is and always will be “*of first importance*” (1 Cor. 15:1).

The Prerequisite of Kindness

The late Dr. John Leith, well known to many readers of this journal, names the challenge death poses for the Christian community. “The funeral is a critical moment in the life of any Christian congregation. Death breaks community and threatens faith and life with meaninglessness. It also, at least frequently, leaves a painful void in the depths of the personal existence of those who are bereaved. Hence on the occasion of death the church is challenged to confess the faith and to assert the reality of its communal existence.”¹

But Leith goes on to insist that “good taste,” kindness and pastoral sensitivity, are necessary prerequisites for the church's ministry at death. We all know people who

have been emotionally wounded by an insensitive remark at a time of grief or by a pastor's inappropriate use of the funeral as an occasion for emotional or theological manipulation. “In my own experience,” writes Leith, “death and the burial of the dead is a time in which kindness should take precedence over our own ideas or preferences.”²

That is not to say that the wishes of the family of the deceased should always take precedence. There are times when a clear and gracious No must be said to requests that would not be appropriate for a service of Witness to the Resurrection. Yet in saying No, the pastor has the opportunity to say Yes in good conscience to things he or she might not have suggested but which can appropriately be used in a service of remembrance and witness to the resurrection. The bottom line is this. The planning of a funeral service should never be the occasion for an arrogant display of the pastor's authority. Kindness and pastoral sensitivity are necessary prerequisites for effective ministry at the time of death.

The Funeral Service

The form and order of the funeral service will vary according to one's denomination or context in ministry. Denominations with clearly defined service for the burial of the dead free the pastor from at least some of the pressures for improvisation that I will discuss later. But pastors in non-liturgical churches can also use appropriately the best resources from across the

liturgical spectrum to provide theological grounding amid the crises of life. The more intense the emotion in a service the more important it is to let the emotion find voice in well-ordered liturgy. Liturgies shaped by centuries of pastoral and theological reflection can speak “out of the depths” without falling into bathos or sentimentality.

Here, however, those in the mainline North American context face the challenge posed by a culture which is largely disdainful of liturgy, afraid of authentic emotion, contemptuous of the wisdom of the past, and lacking in the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual resources to face death realistically. A daunting challenge indeed.

In a wide-ranging essay on “Death and Politics,” Joseph Bottum explores the intriguing proposition that “*The fundamental pattern for any community is a congregation at a funeral*” (emphasis his). Bottum argues that the loss of rituals dealing with death have profound and disturbing social and political consequences.

A culture that closes down its public forms for the expression of mourning’s irrationality—a society that eliminates rituals and ceremonies with at least a claimed origin in the most emotionally meaningful portions of its history—has forgotten the hazards that those rituals and ceremonies once channeled and controlled. ... The inexplicability of mortality can, under the pressure of grief, issue in astonishingly destructive hunts for someone to blame. Grieving people are dangerous people.³

In the Reformed tradition there is no required liturgy for the funeral service. Indeed, there has often been an antipathy toward anything more than the most austere funeral service. The first *Westminster Directory for the Publique Worship of God* (1645) specified, “When any person departeth this life, let the dead body, upon the day of burial, be decently attended from the house to the place appointed for public burial, and there immediately interred, without any ceremony.” The Westminster divines went on to insist that “praying, reading, and singing both in going to, and at the grave, have been grossly abused, are no way beneficial to the dead, and have proved many ways hurtful to the living, therefore let all such things be laid aside.”⁴ No one I know would go that far anymore, nor should they. But given the fact that funeral services and sermons in particular have at times been “grossly abused,” it is understandable why some are leery of funerals in general. A long history of abuses legitimates their concern. A pastor and congregation’s first responsibility in the crisis of grief is to “do no harm.”

The Limitations of Eulogy

If at times funerals have been an occasion for emotional exploitation, more often they have been used merely to eulogize the deceased. Instead of offering a thoughtful wrestling with the meaning of a particular person’s life under God in light of the stark reality of death, funerals too often have been used to extol, sometimes in a less than honest way, the supposed virtues of the deceased.

After the death of Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, Dr. James C. Goodloe conducted his funeral at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia, where Powell had been a member. He did so with such theological integrity that Justice Antonin Scalia was moved to write a letter of appreciation that said in part:

In my aging years, I have attended so many funerals of prominent people that I consider myself a connoisseur of the genre. ... I am surprised at how often eulogy is the centerpiece of the service, rather than (as it was in your church) the Resurrection of Christ, and the eternal life that follows from that. I am told that in Roman Catholic canon law encomiums at funeral masses are not permitted—though if that is the rule, I have never seen it observed except in the breach. I have always thought there is much to be said for such a prohibition, not only because it spares from embarrassment or dissembling those of us about whom little good can truthfully be said, but also because, even when the deceased was an admirable person—indeed, especially when the deceased was an admirable person—praise for his virtues can cause us to forget that we are praying for, and giving thanks for, God’s inexplicable mercy to a sinner. ...

Perhaps the clergy who conduct relatively secular services are moved by a desire not to offend the nonbelievers in attendance, whose numbers tend to increase in proportion to the prominence of the deceased. What a great mistake. Weddings and funerals (but especially funerals) are the principal occasions left in modern America when you can preach the Good News not just to the faithful, but to those who have never really heard it.⁵

Scalia’s point is well taken. The essential task of the preacher at the funeral is not to eulogize the deceased but to bear witness to the faith of the Christian community—that in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus the living God is triumphant over death and will raise to life eternal all who are in Christ. The preacher rehearses for the gathered community the promise of the resurrection, not in general, but for a particular life lived amid the ambiguities of life in a fallen world. The funeral sermon proclaims the promises of God as it declares God’s eternal Yes to life, to love, to hope in the face of Death’s relentless No.

In the funeral service the pastor is not merely seeking to offer comfort, as important as that is. He or she is engaging Death, “*the last enemy*” (1 Cor. 15:26), in a combat that, while essentially verbal, is nonetheless real. In that combat the Christian community has a unique witness to offer. Over against Death’s claim to have the last word in the life of everyone who ever lived, the Christian faith declares that the final word belongs, not to the death that destroys us, but to the living God who has named and known us and from whose love nothing in life or death can separate us.

Death as “Appointed End” and “Last Enemy”

In seeking to delve more deeply into the ministry of the church on the occasion of death, it is important to distinguish between death as a biological event that comes to all that lives and Death as a spiritual power that seeks to negate the meaningfulness of life and the preciousness of love.⁶ There is no single “theology of death” in scripture. Death is viewed both as the appointed end to human life and as “*the last enemy*,” the spiritual power that seeks to rob life of its meaning and value. Both aspects must be taken into account.

Physical death is the universal human condition. It is the assured ending of life which, when acknowledged honestly, can make the passing of life more precious and the living of life more meaningful. Death serves as a stark reminder that we are vulnerable, radically dependent creatures who cannot secure our own being. We need to name death honestly, not bury it under euphemisms like “passed away.” It is not morbid—it is an act of grace—to be reminded regularly of the fact of our mortality. “*You are dust, and to dust you shall return*” (Gen. 3:19). Thomas Oden sums up the reciprocal relationship between death and life succinctly: “Those who take life seriously take death seriously. Those who take death seriously take life seriously. Where death is avoided, life is avoided. Only one who has accepted the reality of death is prepared to accept life.”⁷

In a profound and moving essay written while he himself was dying of cancer, Dr. Alan Lewis of Austin Presbyterian Seminary distinguishes three aspects of the biblical understanding of death. He names them Consent, Confrontation, and Conquest. Lewis sets God’s Confrontation and Conquest of death in the resurrection of Jesus in the context of our Consent to the limits of our mortality in God’s good creation. Before death is seen as curse or “*enemy*,” it first must be acknowledged as part of the finite creation that God declares “*very good*.” Lewis writes,

Perishability, which God has both given and indwelt, enhances rather than distracts from the loveliness of life; just as real flowers transcend the beauty of

indestructible but artificial substitutes, precisely because they are so precarious and frail, teetering on the verge of dissolution. And along with beauty, fragility brings trust, thanksgiving, wonder. Coming from dust and returning to it, we are summoned to value our dependence on Another, to accept our limitations and restrictions, to throw off the heavy burden of sole responsibility for our existence and entrust it back to its transcendent source. Likewise, our knowledge that it will not last forever, adds immeasurably to our gratitude for life, however short.⁸

Lewis goes on to insist: “the pastoral challenge is to help the dying give their own consent” to the boundaries of death, “freely and without rancor.” Understood as the gracious limit to life in creation and embraced in faith, death for the believer can be experienced as “the final chapter,” an “open door,” the offering back to God the gift of life received.

When the appointed limits to life are embraced in faith, the dying and the pastor may together rediscover trust and wonder, thankfulness and peacefulness, in acknowledging that they are finite creatures and that that is very good. ... Even when death comes tragically and prematurely, it is possible in retrospect to judge the abbreviated life not by its extension but by its quality and content; and to be grateful from the vantage-point of its last chapter for every page and word of the preceding human story, however short.⁹

Viewed biologically, death is a natural event that comes to all that lives and can be accepted in faith as a given part of life in creation. While all deaths bring sadness, not all are tragic. When my father died of dementia, none of us in the family would have wished for him to suffer a day longer. When death finally came, it came more as an awaited friend than a dreaded enemy. It was the expected and not the feared end of a long, full life lived intensely in service to God and love for others.

But the fact that the ordained limit of death can be accepted in faith does not make Death less of “a spiritual enemy” against which God contends and over which God is triumphant. Lewis goes on to speak forcefully of “how implacable is God’s own resistance to the demonic enemies of life.”

Confrontation is the *divine* response to death. Forget the spinelessness of ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’; jettison the shibboleth that makes ‘reconciliation’ God’s wimpish posture toward everything. Between the cross and resurrection we see confirmed once and for all and without ambiguity God’s absolute *refusal* to be gentle with the aggressor, the divine determination *never* to make peace with death or to be

reconciled to its destructiveness. God's passion for life has as its obverse an infinitely passionate anger—against the disfigurement of beauty, the disruption of harmony, the spoliation of the body, the rupturing of good life. Surely it is *God's* instincts, first and foremost, that Dylan Thomas captured with his quivering “rage, rage against the dying of the light.”¹⁰

Under the power of Sin, death is not merely the appointed limit to life. Death is the demonic Power that seeks to say No! to the promises and purposes of God—most of all a final and decisive No to love! In the Christian funeral we are not called to make our own “separate peace” with Death but to confront Death with that “Word above all earthly powers.”

Tom Long, who has written extensively and helpfully on the Christian funeral, sums up the purpose of the funeral sermon:

When all is said and done, we do not preach at funerals primarily to provide comfort—though solace and support are, thank God, often given through the sermons. And we are not there to explain why all this happened—though the hunger for meaning in the face of meaninglessness, thank God, is often addressed in what we say. What is more, we are not there to supply spiritual solemnity to an already somber situation. What we *are* there to do is unmask a lie.¹¹

Death understood as a spiritual power proclaims the great lie that love is futile and ultimately absurd. Death says in effect, “Love anyone who is under my power, and sooner or later I will tear your beloved from you and leave you heart-broken. Love, if you dare, but you’ll be sorry. Those who love much, suffer much.” In a world where Death wins every time in the life of everyone who ever lived, we must ask in one way or another, “Is the pain of love really worth it?” We answer with our lives if not with our minds.

In arming for battle with the “Prince of Darkness grim,” we need to probe deeply the relationship between death and love. The more we love life and the more we love those with whom we share the precious gift of life, the more painfully we grieve our separation in death. Death can be a matter of indifference only to those to whom life and love have ceased to matter deeply. Jürgen Moltmann is right:

If [death] is experienced as the destruction of a beloved life, then love rises up in rebellion against death and does not ask just about the meaning of this particular death; it calls death itself into question. Love wants to live, not die, to endure, not pass away.

The life of love is ‘eternal life,’ so as long as we love we shall never accept death.¹²

Love is never “resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.”¹³ Neither is God, not if we take our cues from the New Testament. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's own refusal to be resigned to the shutting away of love in the darkness of death. God does not allow the beloved Son to be lost in Death's dominion. God meets Death head on and triumphs over it. “*For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive*” (1 Cor. 15:22). In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God engages Death in mortal combat. “*He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*” (1 Cor. 15:25-26, see also Psalm 110—the most quoted psalm in the New Testament).

Preparing for Battle with the “Last Enemy”

As the living God engaged Death in mortal combat, so the preacher in the funeral sermon engages “Death's lies in pitched battle.”¹⁴ But how is the pastor to be formed for such deadly combat? What basic training is necessary? I suggest that the pastor is best formed by: 1) an ongoing immersion in the biblical witness to the resurrection of the body; 2) wide reading in the best resources of the Christian tradition, and; 3) years of reflecting on the nature of Christian hope.

Formation does not happen quickly, but it can happen in those open to its disciplines. A pastor would do well to read at least one serious treatment of eschatology each year.¹⁵ Preaching a series of sermons or teaching a course for the congregation on “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” would encourage the pastor to deal both with the biblical witness and the actual questions and concerns of the congregation. Over time it could serve to lay the groundwork for the congregation's ability to participate more meaningfully in services of Witness to the Resurrection and in offering authentic Christian comfort to one another.

In a remarkably helpful essay, “Is There Life After Death?” Jürgen Moltmann names and addresses the specific questions people most often ask in the face of death. The questions he identifies can serve well as an agenda for ongoing theological reflection. The questions include: What remains of our lives when we die? What awaits us? What lasts? Where are the dead? Moltmann also addresses issues of Death and Love, Death and Sin, the nature of the soul, and the relationship between the living and the dead.¹⁶ Sustained reflection on such issues over the years can serve to form pastors who are able to articulate the faith

of the Christian community on the occasion of death in light of the real questions grieving people ask.

To this point we have dealt primarily with the *theological* work of the pastor in the face of death. But that is not to denigrate the *pastoral* aspect of the funeral service in which we remember and give thanks to God for a particular life lived among us. The funeral service and sermon must not remain at the level of theological generalities. They must lift up a unique life in thanksgiving to the living God.

For all the problems with eulogies as previously stated, the service must deal with the concrete particularities of the life of the deceased in an honest and recognizable way. This particular life, however unfinished and incomplete it may have been, was a gift of God for which we give thanks. We do not counter Death's great lie with our own little lies about the deceased, as if somehow Death itself could be buried under a thick resume of good deeds. We tell the truth in love about a part of a person's life, a person known and loved by the gathered community of faith. We lift up to God the "narrative thread" of grace woven in and through the tapestry of the life of the deceased, even if there were many loose ends. Most often we do so through stories and remembrances. Time spent with the family of the deceased in which they are encouraged to tell stories, to laugh and cry together, is deeply precious. As the life of the deceased was God's gift to us, so in the funeral service and especially in the funeral prayer we can offer that life back to God with thanksgiving.

In addition to the theological and pastoral aspects of the service there is also an educational component. The word "educational" may sound overly didactic, but every service should offer a Christian understanding of "life, death, and destiny." Over time a congregation can be given a vocabulary of faith and a grammar of hope. As the Christian community gathers in worship on the occasion of death, it bears witness to what it most surely believes as it rehearses the faith of the church universal.

The Methodist theologian Will Willimon suggests:

In a death-denying culture where death is looked upon as a bizarre intrusion and the resurrection is regarded as naive fantasy, a pastor might see every funeral as a time for proclaiming with evangelistic and missionary zeal, the radically honest and hopeful Christian word at the time of death among modern people who are infatuated with youth and who delude themselves into thinking that they have a natural right to immortality on their own terms.¹⁷

Willimon wisely encourages the pastor to regard every funeral zealously and enthusiastically as a "teachable

moment," and not just for the congregation of believers. Present in every funeral service will be some who no longer or never did believe, as well as some who long to believe again. At least for the few moments the preacher has their attention. It is an opportunity to speak a gracious word of truth to the "cultured despisers" and the "untamed cynics" among us in a way that, as Scalia said, they are not likely to hear anywhere else. The opportunity to proclaim the resurrection of the body to ones who are "infatuated with youth" or who think only in terms of some form of natural "immortality of the soul" should not be squandered with pious platitudes.

Trends and Issues

We move now to consider briefly some emerging trends in funerals that will impact the church's ministry. Funeral customs vary from region to region across the United States and obviously from culture to culture. The pastor must be sensitive to regional traditions, while seeking over time to reshape the customs and expectations of the funeral service.

The vast majority of the funerals I attend are held in the sanctuary of the church where I worship. That is not the case in many other communities. To some degree it reflects the ethos of this particular community (Bible-belt South), but it also reflects expectations in the congregation that have been carefully nurtured over the years.

Yet even in Greenville, South Carolina, funeral customs are changing in ways that pose serious challenges to the church. In a study of the history of funeral customs and contemporary trends, Tom Long notes how swiftly and dramatically "a significant segment of North American Christians have over the last fifty years abandoned centuries of funeral traditions in favor of an entirely new pattern of memorializing the dead."¹⁸

The emerging pattern for funerals is still quite fluid. Long notes that the new funeral "rituals," (if they can be called "rituals") are marked by "variations, improvisations, and personal customizations." While there is a great variety of emerging customs, there is general consensus around certain elements that include:

- 1) "a memorial service" in which the emphasis is on remembering the deceased, often in very personal ways and often without the body or ashes being present;
- 2) a brief, simple, highly personalized, and sometimes improvised service, often involving a number of speakers other than or without clergy;
- 3) a focus on the life and life-style of the deceased complete with mementoes of that life-style;
- 4) a celebration of life marked more by joy than solemnity;
- 5) a private service of committal prior to the memorial service; and
- 6) an increasing preference for cremation

(now approximately 30% nationwide and over 50% in many western states.¹⁹

Three additional trends in contemporary funerals merit consideration: 1) the trend toward “designer funerals” that reflect the life-style of the deceased more than the life of the Christian community; 2) the replacement of the sermon by a video tribute to the deceased; and 3) memorial services in which no body or representation of the body is present and which seek to offer a celebration of life not a confrontation with Death.

In an article in the *New York Times*, John Leland describes the trend toward “designer funerals” orchestrated with the help of funeral concierge services. Leland says,

As members of the baby boom generation plan their final services for their parents or themselves, they bring new consumer expectations and fewer attachments to church, traditions, or organ music, forcing funeral directors to be more like party planners, and inviting some party planners to test the farewell waters.²⁰

A number of funeral homes now offer elaborate videos of the life of the deceased. While video tributes may serve well to remind the gathered community of the particular life of the deceased, they do not serve well to communicate the faith of the Christian community which comes “not from what is seen but from what is heard.” In the years ahead there will likely be increased pressure to substitute videos for the funeral sermon. The better funeral homes get at producing slick, upbeat video eulogies, the greater will be the pressure to eliminate the funeral sermon all together ... and then at least some, if not all, of the scripture readings ... and then the body itself ... and in time, of course, the clergy.

We have already moved a long way toward eliminating the body. For good reasons most churches require that the casket remain closed. The reaction against an over-emphasis on the “embalmer’s art” is theologically warranted. But the less the actual body or ashes of the deceased are present in the service, the greater is the danger of a disparagement of created bodily, physical life.

The poet, essayist, and undertaker Thomas Lynch, from his perspective as a funeral home director, insists that, “We deal with death by dealing with the dead, not just the idea but also the sad and actual fact of the matter—the dead body.”²¹ But Mark Duffey of Houston, who claims to have developed the first nationwide funeral concierge service, speaks for many of his generation when he says bluntly,

The body’s a downer, especially for boomers. If the body doesn't have to be there, it frees us to do what we want. They may want to have it (the funeral) in a country club or bar or their favorite restaurant. That's where consumers want to go.²²

The stark contrast between the perspectives of Lynch and Duffy makes clear one of the major challenges before the church. For those who believe in the incarnation of the Son of God and in the resurrection of the body, the body is *not* a “downer.” It is the ensouled material reality created by God and redeemed from death for eternal communion with the living God. In the final resurrection of the body, we are given a new embodiment appropriate for life in God’s New Creation. How we deal with bodies is at the heart of Christian morality. Pastors who conduct a significant number of services involving cremation need to give serious thought as to how to appropriately “honor the body” when no body is present.

A Presbyterian pastor was visiting an elderly relative of hers when the woman died. The hospice attendant asked if she would like to help “prepare the body.” She said she would. The pastor describes what a moving experience it was as they washed the body together. As they washed the feet of the deceased, the hospice attendant invited the pastor to imagine the places the woman’s feet had taken her on her many travels. As they washed her mid-section, she invited the pastor to think of the children and grandchildren she had held on her lap. As they washed her arms, she invited her to remember those whom the deceased had held in her arms. As they lovingly prepared the body for cremation, they remembered and rehearsed the life of the deceased in a way that truly honored the body. Few of us could or would do it that way, but all of us are challenged to find appropriate ways to honor the body of the deceased, especially when cremation is the option chosen.

The Christian faith does not offer a disembodied hope that seeks to deny the reality and sting of death. It is ruthlessly honest about the power and threat of death, and so must we be. There is nothing within us that “naturally” escapes death. “*God alone has immortality*” (1 Tim. 6:16). Excessively upbeat funerals at a club or restaurant are merely another form of our persistent denial of death. Viewing the bereaved as “consumers” reveals the widespread assumption in our culture that we are autonomous individuals called and claimed and answerable to no one but ourselves. All this the church must challenge in the name of the living God, the Creator and Redeemer of bodies made for eternal communion. Ministers do not wish to be thought gloomy and somber, but someone in our society has to challenge the lie of Death, not with “cheers” and warm remembrances, but with the proclaimed reality of God’s

victory over “*the last enemy*” in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and ours in him.

In the years ahead pastors and congregations will be challenged to find an appropriate balance between the expectation that the funeral service celebrate the life of the deceased and the imperative of the Christian faith that the service focus on the “*Author and Finisher of our salvation.*” Well thought-out, well-crafted funeral services and sermons done with theological integrity and pastoral kindness can serve as our final act of respect to the deceased and our best witness to the victory of the Lord of Life over “*the last enemy,*” Death itself.

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¹ John H. Leith, “The Message of Christian Faith on the Occasion of the Burial of the Dead,” *Journal for Preachers*, Lent 1983, 20.

² *Ibid.*, 21.

³ Joseph Bottum, “Death and Politics,” *First Things*, June/July 2007, 18–19, 27.

⁴ Quoted in Stanley Hall, “Renewing the Rites of Death,” *Insights: A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary*, Fall 1994, 49.

⁵ Letter from Justice Antonin Scalia to Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, September 1, 1998.

⁶ In this article I capitalize Death when speaking of Death as a spiritual power and use lower case for death as a biological fact.

⁷ Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology* vol. 3 (Harper: San Francisco, 1994), 379.

⁸ Alan Lewis, “The Theology of Death and the Care of the Dying: Affirmations, Attitudes and Actions,” *Insights: A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary*, Fall 1994, 10. Hereafter cited, “The Theology of Death.”

⁹ Alan Lewis, “The Theology of Death,” 11. See also *This Incomplete One: Words Occasioned by the Death of a Young Person*, ed. Michael D. Bush (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) for a very helpful collection of sermons by outstanding pastor-theologians on the death of a child or young person. Included are Karl Barth’s sermon on the death of his son Matthias, and William Sloane Coffin’s classic sermon “Alex’s Death”). Michael himself died much too soon.

¹⁰ Alan Lewis, “The Theology of Death,” 12.

¹¹ Thomas G. Long, “Telling the Truth about Death and Life: Preaching at Funerals,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 1997, 4–5. (See also Long’s *The Christian Funeral: Accompany Them With Singing* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, “Is There Life After Death?” *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 239.

¹³ Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Dirge Without Music.”

¹⁴ Thomas G. Long, “Telling the Truth about Death and Life: Preaching at Funerals,” 5.

¹⁵ In addition to the article by Jürgen Moltmann, see in particular N.T. Wright’s *Surprised by Hope* and his massive work, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.

¹⁶ Moltmann, 238–255.

¹⁷ William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 111.

¹⁸ Thomas G. Long, “Whatever Happened to the Funeral?” *The Cresset: A Journal of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs*, Lent 2005, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ John Leland, “It’s My Funeral and I’ll Serve Ice Cream if I Want To,” *The New York Times*, nytimes.com, 2006.

²¹ Thomas Lynch, “Good Grief: An Undertaker’s Reflections,” *Christian Century*, July 26, 2003, 21.

²² *Ibid.*

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Finding Joy on the Journey of Grief

By Peter B. Barnes

“No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. I am not afraid, but I’m experiencing the sensation of being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.”

“At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.”

This is how C.S. Lewis begins his little book, *A Grief Observed*, which tells his own story of grief after he lost his wife Joy Davidman to cancer in 1960.¹ Lewis’ book was one of the books I read this past year as a part of my own grief work in the wake of my late wife Lorie’s death on Wednesday, November 2, 2016. I knew I needed help to give voice to all that I was experiencing, and Lewis, among several others, helped me identify and express all the pain I was going through during this very difficult time.

But Lewis, and the others who wrote books I read or whom I met personally, also provided me hope that with God’s help I could get through it, and that, in fact, I could even grow deeper as a result of my journey through grief. They were right. I have learned that with Christ you can develop resilience and learn how not only to bounce back after significant loss but actually bounce forward.

I want to invite you into my personal story of grief this past year, and share with you some of the lessons I have learned along the way. This is not to say, “Hey, look at me! I’ve got it all together now,” because I do not. Instead, what I share with you is intended to invite you into my journey as a fellow struggler in Christ who has experienced deep loss and has tried to make sense of it all. Most days I simply put one foot in front of the other and tried to do the next right thing.

I pray that God might speak to you through what I share because, as my friend, Craig Barnes, says in his book, *When God Interrupts*, “We all just keep losing things: wives, husbands, friends, health, the dreams and security of the past. Nothing stays the way it was.”²

If you are not dealing now with grief over someone or something you lost, chances are you probably will, and it may be sooner than you think.

The Process of Grief

I have a picture taken of Lorie and me at Montreat in late September 2016 during our congregation’s fall church retreat. We are sitting in rocking chairs by the dam at Lake Susan. It was a beautiful day. Listening to the water falling down was so pleasant and soothing. Looking at this picture of Lorie, you would never know how sick she was. It is difficult to imagine that just five weeks later she would be dead.

I began to grieve losing Lorie the day we learned she had cancer in January 2015. There is no cure for multiple myeloma, and I knew that barring a miracle of God or a major medical breakthrough I would eventually lose her at some point. I can remember driving down Robinhood Road the day after we learned the sad news, and I was crying so hard I could hardly see the road. I kept calling out to God, and I asked Him to be with us. And He was every step of the way.

However, when Lorie actually died almost two years later, I entered a new phase of my grief process. Actually, it involved a number of phases in this new season of grief. No matter how long a person has been ill and you know that eventually they are going to die, when it actually happens the world changes all of a sudden. And you are left with the sobering reality that they are never coming back.

John Claypool wrote a wonderful book entitled *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, and it gave expression to the experience I had in the days following Lorie’s death. He explained how the process of grief parallels the story of Job in the Bible, and I want to share with you some of his insights.³

Numb Shock

John says the first phase of grief is *numb shock*. He sees this phase of grief in the story of Job when his three friends come after his many losses, and they simply sit together in silence for seven days. It is hard to get your head around it all, and sometimes you walk around in a daze not really able to make sense of anything.

Shortly after Lorie died, someone asked me how I was doing. I told them that I felt like I had fallen into an unknown country where I did not speak the language, and I could not find any landmarks to help me get my bearings or my sense of direction. All I knew to do is to put one foot in front of the other and try to take the next step. That is the numb shock Claypool writes about. Maybe you have been there before. Maybe you are right there now.

Despair

The second phase in the process of grief, Claypool says, is *despair*. This is when Job says that he wished he had never been born, and he is in utter despair at the thought of going on. Thoughts of suicide sometimes enter in, and you just want your life to be over and to go and be with your loved one in heaven. Last winter there were many times when I was convinced my best days were behind me, and my future was going to be an awful one. I just wanted to go to heaven and be with Lorie. Have you ever felt like that?

Nostalgia

The third phase in the process of grief is *nostalgia*. Claypool observed that Job looked back and remembered the good old days when his children were alive, his possessions were intact, and he had the esteem of the community. I cannot tell you how many times I said out loud to God this past year, “I just want her back. I just want Lorie back.” I would look at old photographs of happy days when the kids were growing up. Lorie looked so young and happy and vital. And I would just cry and cry as I remembered how good our life had been together.

Anger

Next in the Book of Job, Claypool observed a fourth phase in the process of grief, and it is the phase of *anger* when *we want some answers from God*. Job wanted an audience with God, and he felt like the Lord had some explaining to do. Job got his audience with God, but it was more than Job bargained for.

Many times this past year I asked God, “Why?” I wanted an explanation of my own. Why did Lorie have to die now, just when her grandchildren were getting to know her, just when she was doing so much good with Samaritan’s Purse? We had so many plans, so many things we wanted to do together. Why now? Why Lorie?

God never answered my questions, just as He never answered Job’s. And often I just sat in the silence wondering. I read many good books, which helped me make sense of the not knowing, but I never really got the answers I was looking for. However, what I

discovered God gave me was so much more important and valuable than answers. In the midst of all the questions, I realized that God had given me Himself. He gave me Jesus. And that has been the sweetest part of this journey—to discover when all you have left is God, He is enough.

There was a moment in my journey when I found myself in this place of anger and questioning, and in the midst of my sadness and confusion I remembered the passage where Jesus asked His disciples if they were going to abandon Him because some of His other disciples stopped following Christ when Jesus’ teaching got tough and demanding. But Peter said, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*” (*Jn. 6:68*). I have actually said those words out loud to the Lord several times this past year. And I have found that when Jesus is all that you have, He really is enough.

Gratitude

The fifth and final stage, Claypool, says is key if we are ever going to make progress in our journey of grief, and this phase involves *gratitude* and *hope*. Instead of being resentful over what you lost and regret what you no longer have, you have to press on to discover what you can be grateful for, grateful for what you had for as long as you had it.

God reminded Job that everything he had been so indignant about losing never really belonged to him in the first place. They were gifts, and they were beyond his deserving. To be angry because a gift has been taken away is to miss the whole point of life. Gratitude and humility are the best ways to deal with our losses. And if you cannot find your way to gratitude, Claypool says, you are going to get stuck in your grief. I believe he is right.

In his book Claypool offers a story to illustrate what he is talking about. He says that when he was a boy he grew up during World War II, and during the war his neighbor enlisted in the Army and headed off to join the troops. But before he did, the neighbor asked John’s parents if he could store his furniture, which included a washing machine, in their basement. John’s parents said, “Sure,” so the neighbor moved his things over, and he said they could use the washing machine while he was gone.

John loved that old-timey washing machine with all the rollers and the fancy machinery. Washing machines were rare back then, and since John helped with washing the clothes as one of his family chores, it really made his job a lot easier.

Well, three years later the neighbor returned home from the war, and he took all of his furniture back, including the washing machine. John was so upset, and he complained bitterly to his mother. “Why did he have to take the washing machine back?” he cried.

John’s mother replied, “John, it never belonged to us. It was always a gift. And we shouldn’t complain that we no longer have it. We should be grateful that it ever came to us in the first place.”

Reading this story was a breakthrough for me, and I was able to change my perspective from one of resentment over what I lost in Lorie’s death to one of gratitude that I was ever married to her in the first place. Most people do not get to experience what she and I did for as long as we did—38 years. This change in perspective literally transformed my life.

Hope

There is another aspect of this phase or stage of grief. When you move on to gratitude, you discover that God also gives you the gift of *hope*. And it is a hope that expresses itself in two ways: the hope of heaven; and the hope of a future here on earth.

At the end of the Book of Job, the patriarch says, “*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that after this body has decayed I will still see God*” (Job 19:25, 26). I do not think I have ever thought as much about heaven as I have this past year, and I also do not think it has ever meant as much to me as it does now. The hope of heaven has provided immeasurable comfort to me as I think about all that Lorie is enjoying right now in the arms of Jesus and all the glories she is experiencing in the presence of God. Death is a reality we are all going to face one day, and the more work you and I do here on earth to prepare ourselves for heaven, the more ready we will be when that day comes.

The second aspect of hope that comes as a result of growing in gratitude is the *hope of a future*. God made it clear to Job that God had not been defeated by the events of the past, and the Lord was still able to give meaning to Job’s life. In other words, apart from all appearances, Job still had a future because God had a future for Job. And the rest of the book of Job begins to detail what that future was all about.

I shared with you earlier that I had some dark days last winter after Lorie died when I felt like my best days were behind me. I do not believe that anymore. I have come to realize that I have so much to live for in my children and my grandchildren, and I have never been more excited about our ministry here at First Presbyterian Church than I am now. In addition, the year after Lori died I invited a young man who is part of

the Winston-Salem Fellows Program in our city to live with me for the year. Patrick has been such a Godsend for me, and I think I have been for him too. It’s been one of the most unexpected blessings of the year so far. And I do not think I would have ever invited a Fellow to live with me if Lorie had not died.

A few weeks after Lorie passed away, a friend wrote to me an email, and in it he said: “I look forward to seeing God’s assignment for you, Peter, but I know that it may well be unlike anything you’ve anticipated. Such is the nature of God.”

My friend is right, and I have come to a place where I am excited about the new adventure God has for me. I do not know all of what it entails, but I believe by faith that it is going to be a good one. Make no mistake, I still miss Lorie every single day, and I wish she were still alive. Recently I cried more than I expected I would a year after her passing. But I have also come to a place where I can accept and trust that it was Lorie’s time to go, and God has a bigger plan than I can ever imagine or understand—for Lorie and for me. And I want to lean into my future knowing that God is already there, waiting for me. He loves us and He wants the best for us.

In the following passage, the apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Thessalonica, “*We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of humanity, who have no hope. 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. 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. 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. 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 with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words*” (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

Finding Joy on the Journey of Grief

There are many other insights into grief I would like to share. However, what I do want to share with you has to do with finding joy on the journey of grief. For many months after Lorie died, it felt like I had a weight tied around my heart that held me down and bound me and was keeping my spirit from experiencing joy. On occasion I would laugh at something funny, and I experienced little glimpses, little flashes of joy. But they were rare, and they did not last long.

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to equip and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416 or admin@theologymatters.com or at our web site: www.theologymatters.com.

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But somewhere along the way, and I cannot remember exactly when the change occurred, I noticed that my heart was lighter and I felt excitement about my future. I think it happened about the time last summer when I was with my kids and my grandchildren. All of a sudden I noticed that joy was returning to my heart. And I observed it was at a time when I began to focus on gratitude and tried to intentionally develop an attitude of praise. Gradually, I was letting go of the past and I was reaching for the future, and joy began to return to my heart.

In his book, *Finding My Way Home*, Roman Catholic writer Henri Nouwen says, "Your whole life is filled with losses, endless losses. And every time there are losses there are choices to be made. You choose to live your losses as passages to anger, blame, hatred, depression, and resentment, or you choose to let these losses be passages to something new, something wider, and deeper. The question is not how to avoid loss and make it not happen, but how to choose it as a passage, as an exodus to a greater life of freedom."⁴

In another of his books Nouwen writes about the first time he saw a trapeze artist at a circus.⁵ He was thrilled as he watched these artists "dance in the air" as he put it. They soared and all was dangerous until they found themselves caught by the strong hands of their partners. Henri told his father that he always wanted to fly like that and perhaps he had missed his calling!

Nouwen observed that at each performance the fliers let go of the bar and trusted that their flight will end in their hands sliding into the secure grip of a partner. They also knew that only the release of the secure bar allows them to move on with arcing grace to the next. Before they can be caught, they must let go. They must brave the emptiness of space.

He says that living with this willingness to let go is one of the greatest challenges we face. Whether it is a person, a possession, or our personal reputation, in so many areas of life we hold on at all costs. But the great paradox is that it is in letting go that we receive. We find safety in unexpected places of risk. And those who try to avoid all risk, those who would seek a guarantee that their hearts will not be broken, end up missing out on the glory God has in store for them if they would only let go and trust Him.

I still treasure all the wonderful memories of Lorie and the life we shared together, but I am learning to let go of the past and allow myself to be caught by the strong hands of our heavenly Father. In this scary process I find that He is worthy of my trust, and He is giving me joy again.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" The comfort of God almighty is there for each of us if we reach out and entrust our lives to His care. In the midst of your grief, allow the strong hands of God to catch you and hold you and to help you find joy on your journey of grief too. Amen.

The Reverend Dr. Peter B. Barnes is Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church (ECO), Winston-Salem, North Carolina. His wife Lorie died in November 2016 after a nearly two-year battle with cancer.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 7.

² M. Craig Barnes, *When God Interrupts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 9.

³ John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* (Waco, TX: Word, 1974).

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Finding My Way Home* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 135.

⁵ Henri Nouwen, *Turn My Mourning into Dancing* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 25ff.

