

When Grief and Hope Dance Together: A Reflection on Loss and Faith

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning again, everybody. If you didn't catch it, my name is Anthony Parrott. I'm one of the co-lead pastors here at the table. And over the past few weeks in October, wrapping this up today in November, we've been going through a series called Shadow Boxing Facing, the monsters that we most fear. And we've talked about Satan, and we've talked about zombies, and we've talked about living half-life. And, you know, in a weekend before the election when anxiety is high, we thought it might make sense to talk about death today. You know, just a nice, easy topic.

You'll notice over here on the side, we have an ofrenda, a remembrance for All Saints weekend of some of the folks that we have lost to death, to that old enemy. And we'll have a portion of our service where we focus a little bit more on that. But what I want to talk about today is how grief and hope can coexist, and in fact, have to coexist. That's our main idea for today.

Authentic grief and defiant hope can coexist and must coexist as we face death and loss. We don't need to choose between them or rush through one to get to the other.

1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verse 13, and Paul writes to the church there, We do not want you to be uninformed about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, friends, family, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

I know in myself, and I know there is a modern tendency to rush past grief. And particularly in faith spaces, the faith spaces I grew up in, there was a tendency to want to skip over grief and move directly into positivity and all the ways that God is going to use our loss to bring about something good.

[2 : 15] To say all of the sort of horrible cliches around it was all part of God's plan, or God has another angel, or all of these ways that we look death and grief and loss in the face, and then turn away.

But I think Paul invites us not to skip over grief, but to grieve and to grieve well.

Now, there are two kinds of deaths that we encounter. There's biological death, the sort of circle of life that Mufasa talked about. There's decomposition, all the things that biologists and chemists know is necessary for the world to keep on moving. Natural death, and then there's death with a capital D sort of death. The way that scripture talks about it, death is the enemy, the thief, the one that takes away our loved ones, those who are young, those who are old, everyone in between. That enemy that we confront all too often. So the first thing I want to say is, please, for the love of God, grieve. Grief is the appropriate response to death. Paul does not say, not grieve. Do not grieve. No, this is the right thing to do. In the face of death, death that robs and steals, the right thing to do is to look it right on in the face and grieve and be sad and to cry and to be angry about it. Fighting grief is kind of like fighting a riptide. If you're in the ocean and the tide is trying to pull you out, and if you're just trying to swim against it, you will exhaust yourself. Rather, the better thing to do is to move right along with it. Follow that riptide right out, so then you have the energy to move forward. Grief is sort of like culture shock. There's before and there's after in every death and loss. And like a culture shock, grief isn't something to get over. It's something that you just have to sort of immerse yourself into. Now, there are definitely things not to do while you grieve.

The first is that sort of toxic positivity. Everything happens for a reason. Everything that happens to me is ultimately good. And that is something that makes me want to barf whenever I hear it. And it is a great way to exhaust yourself because if nothing is ever worth grieving about, then that's also a really quick way to move to nothing's ever worth truly loving.

[4 : 53] If no loss is ever worth a tear, is ever worth your anger, then was it truly a loss? No, we're much better off saying, no, this really was as bad as it seems. Related to this is the idea of spiritual bypassing. Well, if you were a true believer, if you really had faith, you would have peace about this. But again, this is not the way of Jesus. This is not the way of scripture. The Psalms are filled with people who were the sort of stat, the monuments of faith who confronted loss and were upset.

They were angry. And it would be foolish to say that these folks did not believe in God. And of course, Jesus himself comes to her funeral and weeps. He sees the mother who has lost a son and is moved with compassion and pity within himself as he sees the loss.

So it is not more spiritual. It is not, you know, some sign of your faith or trust in God to skip over grief, to skip over loss and just say, oh, you should have peace about it. It is not a sign that you don't have faith in God to grieve. Rather, you join with God because we see in the prophets, we see in the ministry of Jesus that when there is loss, when there is death, when there are things that profoundly rip apart our lives, God is grieved as well.

Similarly, it's never worth playing the at least game. Well, at least they didn't suffer. Well, at least you still have this family member. Well, at least that's a game no one wins. It is not worth playing. It is the opposite of empathy that joins with others in compassion and that joins with others in their sadness. So please, for the love of God, grieve. And while it's true that while there is no wrong way to grieve, not all roads lead to healing. And that is why Paul says to grieve, but not as those without hope. To grieve, but to grieve in such a way that death doesn't also take you too.

[7 : 21] I was influenced particularly in this sermon by a book called A Grief Received by G.L. Gerhart. And she writes, death distracts you in any way possible from the one thing it least wants you to do. Live.

I'll say it again. Death distracts you in any way possible from the one thing it least wants you to do. Live. We are not powerless in grief. Slaves to death in our basest desires. No, we can find power in grief to deny those desires. Power located in Christ's presence and movement and the hope it proves.

If enduring and embracing grief means we are buoys in a stirred up sea receiving the waves, it also means that we are anchored to something. Something flexible, but stable and fixed.

And so the nature of hope while we grieve is that anchor to our buoy which is being tossed about by the waves. Now hope is not merely optimism. Optimism is that sort of positivity that pretends like nothing is wrong.

Hope, it doesn't undo or avoid a grief. According to poet Emily Dickinson, hope is the thing with feathers. But a different poet, Caitlin Seda, puts it this way. Her poem, Hope is not a bird, Emily, it's a sewer rat.

[8 : 48] Hope is not the thing with feathers that comes home to roost when you need it most. Hope is an ugly thing with teeth and claws and patchy fur that's seen some shit. It's what thrives in the discards and survives in the ugliest parts of our world, able to find a way to go on when nothing else can even find a way in.

It's the gritty, nasty little carrier of such diseases as optimism, persistence, perseverance, and joy, transmissible as it drags its tail across your path and bites you in the ass.

Hope is not some delicate, beautiful bird, Emily. It's a lowly little sewer rat that snorts pesticides like they were lines of coke and still shows up on time to work the next day.

Larky, no worse for wear. Hope is gritty and it's defiant.

It's transformative. It's not just a placebo. It's not fooling yourself into happiness in the face of despair. It's not putting off sadness for some other day.

[9 : 58] Hope affects. It rewires and reroutes and reshapes our lives and our mind. Hope is not just a luxury for those who can afford it.

Hope is for the desperate and the dissatisfied, for the broken and for the aching. Hope is not pretending everything is fine. But rather it gets to work because it will not let have death and sorrow have the last word.

As it's been said, hope is not magic. It is work. And so for those who follow Jesus, our hope is anchored in specific promises of Scripture.

That death will be defeated. 1 Corinthians 15 says, Then comes the end, the goal, when Christ stands over the kingly rule to God the Father, when he has subdued all rule and authority and power.

And he has to go on ruling, Jesus, you see, until he has put all enemies under his feet. And death is the last enemy to be defeated. And this is the great hope of our faith.

[11:10] That what happened to Jesus, although he was confronted by all the powers of death and empire and oppression and violence on the cross. That it was in the power of God to undo that power, to undo the work of death.

That what was true of Jesus will be true of all of us. As John said in Revelation 21, it's a belief that sorrow and pain will end.

He writes, And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride dressed up for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, and this is what it said, Look, God has come to dwell with humans. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and will be their God.

And God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or weeping or pain anymore, since the first things have passed away. And the one who sat on the throne said, Look, I am making all things new.

[12:20] And the temptation with Revelation 21 and the whole of Revelation is to sort of cast this off as some future vision that we just sort of have to wait for. But I don't think that's what John had in mind.

What John had in mind was, this was a vision of what God was doing today, what God was doing now. This was written by a prophet, by a disciple of Jesus, an exile during the Roman Empire, who also knows that the empire will ultimately be a failure.

And that Christ will ultimately be victorious. And the way that is true is not just for pining for some future day, but by getting to work now.

And so these promises, they don't negate our present grief, but they give context for it. They're not an escape from grief, but rather they get us to work today on what it is to grieve, but as one with hope.

Psalms 126 says, And again from A Grief Received, she writes, if we let God, God can make something good out of our grief.

[13:42] God's not going to tell us to stop crying. God simply asks us to let our tears water the soil of our lives, soil pregnant with potential.

We can be both. We can grieve deeply, and we can hope defiantly. And this is not a contradiction. It is the most honest way to face loss.

and I...

wash my feet. In Jacques' lie,