

At the end of 2 Samuel 18 we have recorded for us David's reaction at the news of the death of his son Absalom. It is a deeply moving record:

"Then the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said thus: 'O my son Absalom - my son, my son Absalom - if only I had died in your place! O Absalom, my son, my son!'"

Even though this son had brought considerable grief to David, and indeed, had rebelled against his father and tried to wrest the throne away from him, yet David found his death to be a crushing blow. He was still his son, and David found this bereavement hard to bear. Bereavement is not a subject that we find easy to discuss, and yet we know perfectly well that we must all face it. Let me then suggest some aspects of this subject which ought to be considered in the hope that these few thoughts might be of practical help to some.

Dangers

There are some dangers connected with the experience of bereavement.

First there is the danger of giving way to excessive grief. Bereavement is a difficult thing to cope with as even the great King David found. It is often profound in its impact and sometimes seems shattering to our lives, but we must be careful that we don't allow grief to overwhelm us and make us non-functional. It is normal for a person, after suffering bereavement, to want to take time away from regular activity; we all need time to cope and adjust to the new realities in our life, but some people allow this to go on for years and seem incapable of resuming normal activity. This needs to be guarded against.

Second, there is the danger of withdrawing from friends and from society in general. The bereavement might feel so wounding and painful that the bereaved person just doesn't want to see anyone, nor talk with anyone. Again, that is understandable, and it may be perfectly legitimate to want time alone, but the bereaved person needs to be careful not to isolate themselves from friends, other family members and other people in general. It might take real self-discipline where a person has to virtually force himself to get among other people, but better that than isolating oneself and withdrawing.

Third is the danger of bitterness against God. A stream may appear to be beautifully clear, but when a little boy puts his stick in and stirs it around, plenty of mud and silt comes to the surface, completely changing the picture. So it is sometimes even in a Christian's life. What seems to be so serene and peaceful may soon be radically changed when "hard" providences enter into the life, especially bereavement. Job, who responded to terribly trying circumstances in chapter one, nonetheless gave way to bitterness against God under ongoing trials:

"I am blameless and yet I do not know myself. I despise my life. It is all one thing; therefore I say 'He destroys the blameless and the wicked. If the scourge slay suddenly, He laughs at the plight of the innocent. The earth is given into the hand of the wicked. He covers the face of its judges. If it is not Him, who else could it be?' If I wash myself with snow water, and cleanse my hands with soap, yet you will plunge me into the pit, and my own clothes will abhor me."
Job 9:21-24; 30,31

Satan will often try to incite us to bitterness against God. After a painful bereavement we find ourselves thinking: "After all, is not God all-powerful? Why did He not prevent this from happening? Why did He not spare this loved one to me? does He not have ultimate power over

life and death? Why then did He not act and intervene and restore this child, this husband, this wife? And if we are not careful, bitterness creeps into the soul. It must be repudiated by every Christian!

Fourth is the danger of making unwise decisions after a bereavement. The bereaved person feels that the memories are too painful and makes a hasty decision to relocate into a completely new area; perhaps a new town altogether. But when a little time has passed and some healing has entered into the soul there is regret that he or she has left the place of her old friend and acquaintances; he is lonely and misses the old familiar sights and sounds. Sometimes a bereaved person will re-marry hastily after losing a spouse, and maybe live to greatly regret it. The point is to beware of making important decisions, which will greatly affect the rest of your life, in the early aftermath of bereavement. Allow things to settle properly; allow yourself time so that you can make wise and thoughtful decisions.

How can we help?

How can we help those who have been bereaved? How can we be of practical support to those going through this deep trial? Here are some practical suggestions.

1. Pray for them

As Christians we believe in the efficacy of prayer. It is our privilege as children of God through Jesus Christ, to come with confidence and boldness to the throne of grace; we have access through Christ. And it is one of our most sacred responsibilities to bring before God in prayer those who are suffering and going through times of trial and affliction. Pray that God would comfort their hearts; pray that God would give them strength; pray that God would encourage them and keep them firm in their faith. In time of bereavement above all, we should heed the apostolic exhortation to "pray for one another".

2. Be understanding and sympathetic

It is one of the glorious things about our Saviour that He is a sympathetic high priest, and he people ought to try to emulate Him in this. We are exhorted to "weep with those who weep", and there is nothing more helpful in a time of distress than having someone who really cares and enters into our afflictions. The bereaved person might need someone just to talk to in the time of sorrow; it might not be anything profound; it might simply be rambling conversation about the one they have lost in death, but a sympathetic and understanding person will provide a listening ear and be a blessing to the needy person. It really does help to know that someone cares.

3. Give expression to your sympathy

You may not feel that there is a lot that you can do, but it is surprising how much little things can mean in difficult times. Send a card; write a few apt words briefly. A phone call just to let them know that you care and that you are praying for them will provide encouragement. If you are able to drop in for a few minutes without being obtrusive, all the better. Don't overstay; just a matter of ten or fifteen minutes will probably be adequate unless the person urges you to stay longer.

4. Provide practical help

If there are children in the bereaved family, could you take them for an afternoon or

two to allow the bereaved one and adult members of the family to make the necessary arrangements? What about sending a meal over to save the person having to worry about meals? May the person needs a ride somewhere, or perhaps it would help if you were to pick up groceries for him or her. There may even be phone calls that need to be made and which you could take care of. The Bible reminds us that we are not simply to love in word but in deed and in truth. Practical help is needed.

5. Include the bereaved in fellowship times

I am thinking here, of course, of the situation when a little time has passed by. There is sometimes a tendency to overlook the bereaved person; maybe you feel a little awkward asking them to a fellowship gathering in case it is viewed as inappropriate, or in case the person gets upset at the thought of attending without the loved one who has died. But this person needs fellowship and it is better to extend the invitation and give them the opportunity rather than overlook them.

6. Be mindful of the bereaved person subsequent to the funeral

During the period of the funeral, family and friends are gathered about; there are things that simply have to be done, and oftentimes the bereaved person goes "on nerves alone". But after the funeral, when friends and families have returned to their own places, it is often then that reaction sets in. Then, in those post-funeral weeks and months, there is often a sense of desolation and terrible loneliness and pain. It is good therefore to be aware of this and to make a point of contacting, and if possible, visiting the bereaved. These are just a few ways in which we can try to help in a time of need. We shall now consider one other aspect, of great importance for those who are Christians.

What truths can we share to help someone cope with bereavement?

Here are a few suggestions.

1. The knowledge that a believing loved one is with the Lord

Here is a most glorious truth for all believers, that "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord". Every child of God can say like the Apostle Paul, that to be with Christ is "far better", and the prayer of our beloved Lord will certainly be answered: "Father, I will that all those whom you have given me should be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory...." (John 17:24). The very essence of heaven is the presence of Christ. The most sublime word to a Christian is that of Revelation 22:4 - "And they shall see His face." For a bereaved person to know that this is true of their loved one is a source of enormous comfort and encouragement, and this truth should be very much in the fore in times of bereavement.

2. The Christian's life and times are in God's hands

David's words in Ps. 31:15 are significant: "all my times are in Your hands"; and Job 14:5 reminds us that our days are determined and that the number of our months is with God. John Ryland, a Baptist worthy of the 17th/18th century, expressed this great truth poetically in the words:

Sovereign Ruler of the Skies,

Ever gracious, ever wise;
All my times are in Thy hand,
All events at Thy command.

He that formed me in the womb,
He shall guide me to the tomb;
All my times shall ever be
Ordered by His wise decree.

If that truth can come home to the heart of a bereaved Christian, what an impact and encouragement it can have. The Christian doesn't believe in luck; he knows that with God there are no accidents, everything is under His sovereign control.

1. God's wisdom and love are perfect

In Romans 11:33 we read: "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and his ways past finding out!" Our wisdom and knowledge are so limited and finite; there is so much that we do not know or understand. But our God is the fount of all wisdom and His knowledge and understanding are infinite. This combined with the fact that His love for His people never fails, and that nothing can separate them from His love, provides a real anchor for the soul. If there is one thing that Satan would love to do it is to shake our confidence in God's love for us, and times of trial, and especially in bereavement, provide him with an opportunity. At such a time we are most vulnerable, but it is at such a time that we need to lay hold ever more firmly on the precious and comforting truth that God's love toward us never changes and never wavers. The bereaved person needs reminding of that often.

2. The Lord Jesus is a sympathetic Saviour and is able to help

The Christian glories in the fact that we do not have a God who is remote and detached from us. On the contrary our God has, in the person of the Son, assumed our nature: He is touched with the feelings of our infirmities; He Himself has trodden this way of tears before us and He is indeed a sympathetic High Priest. Those who are going through difficult times should be encouraged to reflect on the tenderness, compassion and gentleness of Christ, and to consider the fact that He is able and willing to help His people who are in need.

3. A glorious reunion is coming

Death is not the final word with respect to a Christian. Even the lovely thought of the soul being with Christ when it is "absent from the body" is not the last word. There is more to be said, for the Christian looks ahead to the great day of resurrection. And while it is true that human relationships are going to be radically different in that state so that there will be no "marrying or giving in marriage", yet at the same time there will surely be a re-union of those we have loved and who were "in Christ" with us. The second coming of Christ will result in the great gathering of all the elect from the four corners of the earth. In the most wonderful way the family will be complete, and as we rejoiced in the Lord with loved ones here in the earthly life, surely we shall rejoice with them on an even higher plane in the life to come. We may remind bereaved friends of this, that the separation is only until the "day breaks and the shadows flee away".

4. God promises His help to those going through times of trial

His word to His grieving, suffering, hurting people is: "Fear not for I am with you, be not dismayed for I am your God; I will strengthen you, yes I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand! (Isaiah 41:10) And again, speaking through Isaiah: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you! Isaiah 43:2 How precious the Word of God is in crisis situations. The Lord speaks to us through the Word and the Spirit of God ministers comfort to grieving hearts through the words of Scripture. And how precious is the Lord Himself in such times; His promise of help is not a vain one; He does grant His peace; He does draw near; He proves to be a "very present help in times of trouble". All of this the bereaved Christian needs to be reminded of. God is faithful and He has promised never to leave nor forsake His people. That itself is one of the most precious promises in the Word, and one which believers draw strength from in all circumstances of life.