

‘Growing through loss’. (3)

There was a young man who was opening a new branch office of his business and a friend wanted to encourage him, so he sent a floral arrangement for the grand opening. Later that day the friend went by the opening to see how things were going and was rather appalled to find that his wreath bore the inscription ‘rest in peace’. Rather upset, he went by the florist to complain, and after apologising, the florist said, ‘Well, look at it this way, somewhere a man is buried under a wreath that says, ‘Good luck in your new location!’

All of us know how awkward it can be when somebody passes away and we’re afraid so desperately that we might say the wrong thing and so often we don’t say anything. But the pain of loss is not going to be diminished by our refusal to talk about it. Loss is a very real and hard part of life and loss is a subject, which is awkward to talk about. It’s a subject that we would rather ignore sometimes and some of us have had to deal with loss at a deeper level than others. And some people are still trying to come to terms with their loss.

Therefore, the question, which I would like to pose to you now, is, **can gain come out of loss, if you know Jesus Christ?** I want to begin with a few fundamental principles, the **first one**, no one will disagree with. No matter how faithful you are to God, **you will have to deal with the pain of loss and loss can come to us in a variety of distressing ways.**

We can talk about the loss of a job, being very unsettling, loss of our health and some of you have dealt with that or are dealing with that right now. Another kind of loss is the loss of a marriage and there are a few things more painful than that. And certainly all of us will have or will have to deal with the loss of a loved one.

Have you ever noticed that when it comes to selling life insurance, the advert or the sales person talks in terms of possibly, perhaps, should happen, in the event of? Do you not find it upsetting to hear salesmen or read adverts that talk about life’s only certainty, as if it was just a possibility? When in actual fact, death is a reality.

The Bible says in **Ecclesiastes 3:1+2** “**There is a right time for everything: A time to be born; a time to die; a time to plant; a time to harvest.**” I would like to remind you that everything you see around you today is temporary. There is nothing permanent you could look at today, except for the souls in the people sitting next to you. And so, dealing with the absence of things we once enjoyed is going to be our constant reality, until Jesus comes back. Mourning is an inevitable part of life.

Here’s **the second** very crucial principle, the Bible says **there is a uniquely Christian way to grieve.** That’s one of the first things people noticed about the early Christians. They noticed their faith, they noticed their incredible love for each other. But one of **the first** things that was noticed about the first Christians was that they had a very unique way to grieve.

Christian history has been blessed by a number of documents written by or about the first Christians. Here’s an extract from one of the very first ones. **A man named Aristotle wrote it, about AD 125, and he was trying to explain why the Christian religion was growing so rapidly. He said, ‘This is something about them that is most unique. Any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God and they accompany his body with songs and thanks giving, as if he were setting out from one place, to another, nearby.’**

Now, that’s not how the world knows grieving. **When the poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar died, his mother preserved his room exactly like it was. There was his very last poem finished on his desk and the tragedy is, because she turned his room into a shrine, the sun came through the window and bleached the paper and his last poem was lost forever.** The tragedy about secular grief is that life gets lost in the midst of it.

When you think about secular grief, what words would come to your mind? One word that comes to mind is **denial**, non-Christians want to either deny death is going to happen or they’re going to deny the person they lost was very important.

Another word is **anger**, people get very angry. They can get angry with the doctors that didn’t take care of the person better. They can get angry with the people who didn’t care enough about the person. They can get angry with the person for leaving or for leaving life in such a reckless way. They can even get angry with themselves for all the things that they regret.

Another word when we think about secular grief is **guilt**. Guilt over the things you wish you had said. The things you did say, you wish you could take back. The things you wish you could do, but can't do. The things you wish you had never done.

Now, what word do you think of, when you think of Christian grief? The word the Bible uses is the word **hope**.

Let's look at an important Bible text on Christian grief, **1 Thessalonians 4**, and be encouraged with these words, starting in **verse 13-18**, "And now, dear brothers, I want you to know what happens to a Christian when he dies so that when it happens, you will not be full of sorrow, as those are who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and then came back to life again, we can also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him all the Christians who have died. I can tell you this directly from the Lord: that we who are still living when the Lord returns will not rise to meet him ahead of those who are in their graves. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a mighty shout and with the soul-stirring cry of the archangel and the great trumpet-call of God. And the believers who are dead will be the first to rise to meet the Lord. Then we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and remain with him forever. So comfort and encourage each other with this news".

The Bible doesn't say Christians don't grieve, the Bible says that Christians grieve **in hope**! We grieve first in the hope Christ has conquered death and there's going to be a reunion of all the saints of God. But we also grieve in the hope that we're going to survive this loss and that we're not going to miss out on the life that God wants us to experience. The hope that even in loss, there's gain, if you know Christ.

So let's move on and look at some ways we can grieve in hope. We can practice Christian mourning with these. **1. To grow through mourning, release your grief**. In other words, you need to allow your grief to happen. Or to put it this way, admitting your feeling is the beginning of healing.

You see, grief is a God given emotion. It is a gift from God to help us struggle through and survive the pain of loss, so, we need to use grief properly. The Bible says in **Matthew 5:4**, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Calmly handling life as if nothing ever hurts you is not faith, it's mere pretension.

That's why when you read your Old Testament, one of the Biblically accepted forms of worship in the Bible, a form which we don't practice today is a form called **lament**. And many of the **Psalms** in the Bible are simply laments, people pouring out their complaints and broken hearts out to God and mourning before the Lord and the Lord received it as worship.

And I'll tell you something else the Bible will teach us about mourning and that mourning is not a moment, **it is a process**. And so we read in the Old Testament people would often take **a week**, or they'd take **30 days** or they'd take **90 days** to mourn and that's something we know. You don't mourn for a day, it takes a long time to mourn a great loss. Months later, you can come across a simple thing that reminds you of the person you have lost and you just lose it and break down and weep, that's normal.

It's just normal there are going to be times in the process of mourning that the flood and the pain are going to come back and hit you again. This is God's gift to us, to help us survive the loss. You need to admit that feeling, you don't need to be afraid to cry and you don't need to be afraid to cry out to God. The Bible says in **Psalms 62:8** "Trust in Him at all times, O people: Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us".

We know something about our God through Jesus Christ, because our Lord went into the tomb, for a friend of His who was dead, and He wept according to **John 11:35**. Now He wasn't crying because Lazarus was dead, after all He's about to raise him back to life. No! He was crying because He saw the full consequences of sin. But men, if your Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ can weep openly, follow His example and do the same instead of bottling it all up inside of you. There is no shame for a man to weep openly for the loss of a loved one. Our God understands tears and the best thing you can do with your tears is just to weep before the Lord and let Him comfort you. Releasing your grief is the first step to healing, but don't stop there. If all you do is release grief, you are never going to get better, you're not going to grow through loss.

2. You need to receive from others. Often when loss happens in our lives, what we want to do is build walls around ourselves and go into solitary confinement. When in fact, this is important, God intended for the grieving process to happen in community.

The Bible says in **Romans 12:15** “**Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep**”. It’s a direct command from the Holy Spirit that the church needs to practice the process of corporate mourning. If someone in the body is mourning, we need to respond by mourning with them. Other people need to enter into our pain, we need to let them do what the body of Christ is designed to do.

Not only does God want to let others mourn with us, but He will expect something of us some day. God is going to expect of us, someday to go and be a mourner with others and extend to them, the comfort God gave us through other people. **2 Corinthians 1:3+4** “**Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles so that we may be able to comfort those experiencing any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.**”

Now please don’t misunderstand what Paul is saying here. He’s not talking about the kind of comfort that says, “**there, there, there you’ll be fine**”. The word ‘**comfort**’ literally means to strengthen. The God of all strength, Paul says, strengthens His people when times are tough. And Paul says because He strengthens us when times are tough, we should also strengthen other people when they are going through tough times.

I was hammering some nails into a wall the other day but unfortunately on one occasion I missed the nail with the hammer and hit my thumb. So what was the first thing I did? My other hand wrapped itself around my thumb to strengthen it until the throbbing stopped.

You see loved ones, God designed the body to work that way. And when I say body I mean the body of Christ, the church. When you receive strength from God, you go some day and you strengthen somebody else with the strength you received. When we see people in our body going through loss, we need to go and mourn with them, not just for the first few days, we’re good at that. I mean for several months, for however long it takes, they’re in mourning, they need to mourn in community. That doesn’t mean you have to go and solve all the hard questions, it just means you have to be there to grieve with them.

When you’re in mourning you need to let the body do what God wants it to do. Don’t build up walls and don’t slam doors, but let the body come and do what God wants it to do. People say they’ll get their strength from God, well, that’s exactly how God sends His strength, He sends the church to you. We need to start building those relational bridges now, so that when loss comes, there are people who can walk into our life.

You see, the people who will encounter problems are the pew warmers and winter Christians, because when great loss comes nobody is going to be able to walk across the bridge. You need to build these bridges now, by participating in church life and activities, there is a **Sunday morning Bible Study, mid-week prayer meetings, outreach activities**. You don’t have to get involved with everything, but you need to get involved in something. So that people will be there when loss comes, because we need not only to release our grief, we need to receive from others.

To grow through loss **3. We need to refuse to be bitter**. Look at what **Hebrews 12:15** says, “**See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.**” That’s why we grieve in community. But now look at the second half of **Hebrews 12:15**, “**That no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled**”. It’s easy to get bitter when loss comes.

You can get bitter at the doctors, you can get bitter at friends you didn’t think gave enough support, you can get bitter at the person who has gone, you can even get bitter at God. But happiness will never come in until you kick bitterness out and kicking bitterness out is a conscious decision you have to make.

William Sangster, a preacher, spent the last years of his life, slowly dying from a progressive muscular disease, which caused his body to slowly weaken. When the doctors told him their diagnosis, there was no cure, that death was around the corner, Sangster made four resolutions, he said. 1. I will never complain. 2. I will keep the house bright. 3. I will count my blessings. 4. I will try to turn it into gain.

You don’t have to wonder, is God trying to teach me something! God is always trying to teach us something. And so when loss does come in to our life, what we can do is to decide, **what can we learn from this? How can we grow through this? How can we give God glory in this?** We are free to determine, what happens to what happens to you. You can’t always control what happens, but you get to choose what happens to what happens. You get to decide how to respond to whatever happens in life.

William Sangster went to the hospital to visit a young girl that was going blind. She said, 'Mr. Sangster, God is going to take my sight away.' After a long pause, he said, 'Well then Jessie, don't let Him, give it to Him. Try to pray this prayer, 'Father, if for any reason I must lose my sight, help me to give it to you.'

Mourning is inevitable but bitterness is a choice and so is growth. You need to refuse to be bitter and remember what can never be lost. To grieve with hope, we must 'build our lives on things that can never be taken away'. Look at what Peter said in 1 Peter 1:3+4 "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you".

There are some things we have in Jesus Christ that cannot be lost. We cannot lose their memory, their influence is not lost, our faith in God is not lost, our hope of heaven is not lost. Our confidence that evil, will lose, is not lost, our absolute conviction that we will be with them again is not lost. We don't really lose saints because we know where they are, we can't see them, but they're not lost.

Job was one of the richest men in the Bible, he had numerous possessions and he had 7 sons and 3 daughters, then, Satan came and took it all away. At the end of the Book of Job in Job 42:12+13, God rewards this Godly man and he gives him double of everything and he gives him 7 sons and 3 daughters. Why didn't God double the children like he doubled everything else? Why didn't he get 20 kids? I'll tell you why, he had twenty kids! God did double his children, he had 10 in heaven and he had 10 on earth. Job will have 20 kids forever and we need to remember that, we need to remember what can never be lost.

Part of our struggle is, we only see loss from our side. But the Bible says in Psalm 115:16 "The highest heaven belongs to the Lord, but he has given the earth to the descendants of Adam". It is precious to God, when one of His kids comes home.

Dr James Dobson tells the story of a little five-year-old boy who was dying of cancer. The nurse, who was looking after him, came into his room one day and the little boy was telling his mother he could hear the bells. The nurse assumed he was hallucinating and said to the boy's mother, 'Now listen, this is the late stage of his life, he's just hallucinating.' The mother said, 'No he's not. I told my baby that when God was coming to get him, He would ring the bells of heaven and know he would not be afraid.' A few hours later, cradled in his mother's lap, that little boy went to be with the Lord.

In the very last programme of the television series 'The Human Body', Lord Winston, tried to explain away what people see when they are dying. But the thing is, our hope is not in Lord Winston, our hope is in Jesus Christ and the promises that He left us with. The death of one of God's kid's is so precious to Him, that He makes sure that they understand that He is there with them. We don't see death on our side, like God does, our loss truly is their gain.

In the meantime, the last thing we can do is, 4. Rely on Christ and His strength. One thing a great absence can teach us is the reality of the great presence of God. When Jesus went to Nazareth and preached His first public sermon, He chose this text.

Isaiah 61:1-3 "The Spirit of the Almighty Lord is with me because the Lord has anointed me to deliver good news to humble people. He has sent me to heal those who are broken hearted, to announce that captives will be set free and prisoners will be released. He has sent me to announce the year of the Lord's good will and the day of our God's vengeance, to comfort all those who grieve. He has sent me to provide for all those who grieve in Zion, to give them crowns instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of tears of grief, and clothes of praise instead of a spirit of weakness. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, the Plantings of the Lord, so that he might display his glory".

Jesus said, 'that's who I am and that's why I've come.' In His first sermon, Jesus, made it clear that the very first thing God had sent Him to do, is to strengthen the mourner and to turn despair, into praise. Trust that Jesus will keep His promise and turn to Him.

Paul did in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 "Brothers, we want you to know about the trouble we went through in the land of Asia. The burdens were heavier than we could carry; we thought we were not going to live anymore. We felt we had been condemned to die. But, to make us put our hope upon God (who raises people from death) and not in ourselves. God has rescued us from such life and death situations and He will rescue us in the future. We have placed our hopes on Him. He will always rescue us".

Corrie Ten Boom wrote that when she was a young girl, a neighbour passed away and the thought hit her for the first time in her life, that her parents might die one day. So she asked her father about that and how she didn't think how she could handle that. Her father said, 'Now Corrie, when you and I go on the train to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket?' She replied, 'Right before the trip.' He said, 'That's right and I'm telling you for the rest of your life, whenever you face a great test, God will give you the strength right exactly when you need it.'

Paul said in **Philippians 4:13** "I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me". God will give you strength, when you face great loss. That's what He promises loved ones it's just a matter of us accepting God at His word.

Now if you're not a Christian this evening let me ask you, for you to live, **is what?** Having a nice car, owning a gorgeous home, my family, my career, my health or have a few thousand pounds in your bank account. **Do you realise that all of those things can be gone at any moment in time?** What about this question, for you to die, **is what?** A shame, a pity, tragic. Well if you're not a Christian that's the way most people think but not if you are a Christian.

Just before we finish turn your Bible to **Philippians 1:21** "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." You see knowing Jesus not only gives us a reason to live but also a reason to die. Jesus gives us a reason to live because no matter what life takes away from us, the world can't take away Jesus and His promise of eternal life for all those who love Him from us.

Loved ones, loss is a difficult subject to speak about because it's loaded with emotions and rightly so. And if you give your life to Christ you will soon discover that a life lived for Jesus is worth living for. And a life dying for Christ can only be a gain, if it's something better than what we experience whilst we're living. A life which is eternal life in the presence of Jesus Himself.