

*Dealing with Our Grief*  
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Mark 5:21-43

The opening chapter of Second Samuel records the death of King Saul and his son, Jonathan. Both were killed in the battle of Gilboa against the Philistines. Saul was the first king of Israel. Jonathan was his son, David's beloved best friend. When David heard the news, he was crushed. He wrote a national song of lament and ordered the nation to put it to memory. The last seven verses of that chapter contain the song of lament for Saul and Jonathan with the last two verses reading:

*O my dear brother Jonathan, I'm crushed by your death. Your friendship was a miracle-wonder, love far exceeding anything I've known—or ever hope to know. The mighty warriors—fallen, fallen. And the arms of war broken to bits. (2 Samuel 1:26-27)*

Grief has a way of wounding us and its pain can be far worse than most physical pain. Sooner or later, all of us become “a person of sorrow, acquainted with grief,” as Isaiah describes the suffering servant.

I remember the first time I encountered grief's hold. While visiting a cousin in Norcross, Georgia, my mom called my aunt to tell her about my dog's accident. He had been taken to the vet after being attacked by two larger stray dogs. My uncle drove me home. As my mom met me at the front door, she told he had died and held her arms around me. I cried for hours. Just a mangy little black pup when I got him, he became a best friend—constantly by my side. In a matter of a day, he was gone.

As a sophomore in high school, a classmate was involved in a freak swimming/boating accident on Lake Lanier. David Steward and another friend were swimming in the lake when a large boat, driven by two-young teenage girls steered directly over them, without ever seeing them. David and I had played on the same football team through junior high and into high school. His nickname was “Snake” because of his ability to weave his way through an onslaught of defenders. Standing around at the funeral home on the night before his burial exposed me for the first time to clichés and cheap explanations about death: “It's God's will;” “There's a reason he died at this young age; we just don't know

what it is;" and the worst of those sayings, "When God comes into his garden, He plucks the loveliest flower." The next day's funeral saw all of David's teammates sitting together in the Stewart's small, country church. The minister had a cadence in his preaching style in which every sentence ended with a dramatic gasping of breath and you knew that another such sentence was just behind it. Nonsensical explanations were given for Snake's death and we were all encouraged to sign up for heaven, and were warned about the consequences of not doing so. I was more focused on my friend who had died without any warning. Did he die instantly? How bad was the pain in the last moments? Was he invisibly present with us, grieving our grieving? How hard was it for his mom and dad and sister?

My dad and Jennifer's dad died within three months of each other in 2003. The responsibility of dispersing a collection of automatic mechanical musical instruments and two large shops filled with more pianos, nickelodeons, calliopes, parts, and over two thousand piano rolls fell to my lot. I had spent hundreds of hours in one of the shops. Its smell could instantly take me back to my childhood. The feelings were mixed with warm remembrance, anger for his not taking care of these last details years earlier, and thanksgiving for passing on his love of music, craftsmanship, and an appreciation for fine tools.

We learn to deal with our grief in the same way we learn to deal with life. Sometimes by asking lots of questions. Sometimes laughing, sometimes crying. Always by allowing ourselves to feel the emotions. And, always by seeing each season of life and each important person as a gift.

The truth of the matter is that life is not ours by entitlement. We do not deserve it. The friends we have are the gifts of life...the gifts of God. The opportunities, the special seasons of life, our friends, our jobs, our parents, our grandparents, our children, our grandchildren...are not ours by any right.

Sometimes parents ask me how to help children deal with death. My answer is...always be honest with them. If they want to go to a funeral home and see the deceased's body, let them. If they don't want to go see their grandparent or whomever, don't make them. Give them a "window" of opportunity, and let them make their own decisions. Treat their questions like sex questions—answer every question. Tell them enough, but no more than they want to hear. They will

let you know if they want to understand more...and they will know if you are uncomfortable with the questions. Better *you* answer their questions—someone they trust—than getting their answers from a less reliable source.

Saul was David's mentor and Jonathan was David's best friend. Though the relationship with Saul was significantly strained with Saul's jealousy, David nonetheless appreciated the leadership of Saul and handled their relationship with great respect. He obviously understood that such relationships were gifts of life to be regarded with gratitude.

During my seminary days, John Claypool, pastor of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church and pastor to many of the Baptist and Presbyterian seminary students, lost his ten-year-old daughter to leukemia after an eighteen-month battle. His first time back in the pulpit after Laura Lou's death was four weeks after her funeral. His sermon was unforgettable and extremely painful for the entire seminary community. The text he chose that morning was of Abraham's being called to offer his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice before the Lord. For months, he said, that passage had been with him. His daughter had asked him if he had asked God to make her well and remove the pain. She wanted to know what her dad had heard from God. Her questions voiced his own questions. For Abraham, on top of the mountain with the sacrifice prepared, God provided a young ram in the brush to take's his son's place on the sacrificial alter. Claypool confessed that he kept expecting the same type of last-minute rescue—a cure would be found, a miraculous healing would occur, a mis-diagnosis would be acknowledged. John said that is where Abraham's story and his own story broke off and went in different directions. Abraham got to go back down the mountain with his son. On the day his daughter died, John Claypool and his wife had to come back down the mountain alone.

In that sermon, Claypool went on to relate an experience that happened to his family when he was a child. As World War II started, their family did not own a washing machine. With gas rationed and the laundromat several miles away, keeping their clothes clean became an intensely practical problem. One of his father's business associates was drafted and his wife prepared to go with him. The Claypool family offered to let them store their furniture in their

basement. Quite unexpectedly, the couple suggested that John's family use their washing machine while they were away.

Since John helped his mother with the washing, over those few years he developed quite an affection for that old green Bendix washing machine. Eventually, the war ended and their friends returned to get their things from the Claypool basement. By then, young John had forgotten how the washing machine had come to be in their basement in the first place. As they moved the washing machine out of their house, he was openly upset about their taking it. At that point, his mother helped put things in perspective for him. "You must remember, that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. So, instead of being mad at its being taken away, let's use this occasion to be grateful that we had it at all."<sup>1</sup>

There, in a simple story, is the gist of what it means to understand something as a gift and to handle it with gratitude. That is the only healthy way down from any mountain of loss. Getting lost in bitterness or nostalgia is a live possibility. Gratitude doesn't make the pain any less easy, but it does make our losses more bearable. All of life, with its many wonderful relationships and opportunities, is a gift, pure and simple. When we remember that the appropriate response to any gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then we are better able to thank God that we were ever given the gift to begin with. The only way through our grief and out of such darkness is the way of gratitude. AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* (Waco, Word Publishers: 1974), 81-82.

## **2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27**

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag.

David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said: Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult. You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more. From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty. Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!