

COPING WITH GRIEF

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Text: 2 Samuel 12:16-23

Few stories of someone's grief are as touching as that of Horatio C. Spafford, who lived from 1828-1888.

■ Spafford had known peaceful and happy days as a successful attorney in Chicago. He was the father of four daughters, an active member of the Presbyterian Church, and a loyal friend and supporter of D. L. Moody and other evangelical leaders of his day. Then, a series of calamities began, starting with the great Chicago fire of 1871 which wiped out the family's extensive real estate investments. When Mr. Moody and his music associate, Ira Sankey, left for Great Britain for an evangelistic campaign, Spafford decided to lift the spirits of his family by taking them on a vacation to Europe. He also planned to assist in the Moody-Sankey meetings there.

In November, 1873, Spafford was detained by urgent business, but he sent his wife and four daughters as scheduled on the S.S. *Ville du Harve*, planning to join them soon. Halfway across the Atlantic, the ship was struck by an English vessel and sank in 12 minutes. All four of the Spafford daughters--Tanetta, Maggie, Annie and Bessie--were among the 226 who drowned. Mrs. Spafford was among the *few* who were miraculously saved.

Horatio Spafford stood hour after hour on the deck of the ship carrying him to rejoin his sorrowing wife in Cardiff, Wales. When the ship passed the approximate place where his precious daughters had drowned, Spafford received sustaining comfort from God that enabled him to write, "When sorrows like sea billows roll... It is well with my soul." What a picture of our hope!

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll--
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well with my soul.

Tho Satan should buffet, tho trials should come,
let this blest assurance control,
that Christ hath regarded my helpless estate
and shed His own blood for my soul.

And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll:
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,
"Even so"-it is well with my soul.

Chorus: It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul.

Ask yourself if you can truthfully say, "It is well with my soul," no matter what the circumstances may be that surround you.

As we live, it becomes more and more evident that tragedy and heartache are no respecter of persons. It comes to us all. But all may not deal with grief in the same way. Why is it that some let grief destroy them and others triumph over it?

As we consider the grief of David concerning the loss of his infant son we can draw several *conclusions* about how to deal with our grief.

I. **DON'T HOLD GRIEF IN (vv. 16-18).**

■ *“David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. On the seventh day the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they thought, “While the child was still living, we spoke to David but he would not listen to us. How can we tell him the child is dead? He may do something desperate.”*

A. Don't expect everyone to understand your grief—it is unique to you.

■ Author Edgar Jackson poignantly described grief when he wrote: “Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children, alone. Grief is the man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person. Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few moments before going about the task of the day. She knows that a part of her is in the cemetery, just as a part of her is in her daily work. Grief is a silent, knife like terror and sadness that comes a hundred times a day, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there. Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years. Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying goodnight to the one who has died. Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will be again. Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life. (Leadership, Vol. 5, no.1)

B. Don't allow anyone to judge your grief—God understands and that is enough.

II. DON'T LET GRIEF FIND A HOME (vv. 19-20).

■ *David noticed that his servants were whispering among themselves and he realized the child was dead. "Is the child dead?" he asked. "Yes," they replied, "he is dead." Then David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request they served him food, and he ate.*

A. We can grieve just so long until it begins to hurt us.

■ Walter Brueggemann writes, "David's reaction to the death of his child ... is an act of profound faith in the face of the most precious tabus of his people.... David had discerned, for whatever reasons, that the issues of his life are not to be found in cringing fear before the powers of death, but in his ability to embrace and abandon, to love and to leave; to take life as it comes, not with indifference but with freedom, not with callousness but with buoyancy." (In *Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1972], p. 36)

C. We must use our grief to deal with our loss and then leave it behind.

I've always said that the saddest part of death for those left behind is that life goes on without pausing for even a moment. Maybe that's good in some ways. David realized that there came a point at which he had to reconcile himself to the loss and move on.

It wasn't that he was callous, on the contrary, he was deeply affected. But he realized that life continues on.

III. DON'T LOSE HOPE (vv. 22-23).

■ *He answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."*

A. David's prayers were not answered, as he wanted.

He prayed because there was a chance. There was a present hope. And as long as hope existed in the here and now he sought God.

B. However, David knew that this is not all there is to our existence.

His child had gone straight to paradise. His weeping was not for his child as much as it was for himself. He wanted the child here with him, but knew that his absence here would not prevent a future reunion.

CONCLUSION

Some years ago Alexander Wollcott described a scene in a New York hospital where a grief-stricken mother sat in the hospital lounge in stunned silence, tears streaming down her cheeks. She had just lost her only child and she was gazing blindly into space while the head nurse talked to her, simply because it was the duty of the head nurse to talk in such circumstances.

"Did Mrs. Norris notice the shabby little boy sitting in the hall just next to her daughter's room?"

No, Mrs. Norris had not noticed him.

"There," continued the head nurse, "there is a case. That little boy's mother is a young French woman who was brought in a week ago by ambulance from their shabby one-room apartment to which they had gravitated when they came to this country scarcely three months ago. They had lost all their people in the old country and knew nobody here. The two had only each other. Every day that lad has come and sat there from sunup to sundown in the vain hope that she would awaken and speak to him. Now, he has no home at all!"

Mrs. Norris was listening now. So the nurse went on, "Fifteen minutes ago that little mother died, dropped off like a pebble in the boundless ocean, and now it is my duty to go out and tell that little fellow that, at the age of seven, he is all alone in the world." The head nurse paused, then turned plaintively to Mrs. Norris. "I don't suppose," she said hesitantly, "I don't suppose that you would go out and tell him for me?"

What happened in the next few moments is something that you remember forever. Mrs. Norris stood up, dried her tears, went out and put her arms around the lad and led that homeless child off to her childless home, and in the darkness they both knew they had become lights to each other! (Hewett, 265-6)

One of the many *conclusions* at which I have arrived is that we need to allow God to use our grief and pain to help others. Like the mother who found someone to help in the form of a little orphaned boy, so God wants us to resist the urge to hold onto our pain. Instead, He wants us look for someone to help, to console and to lift out of their pain. In doing so we will be healed of our own hurt.

The Holy Spirit is challenging us today to look beyond ourselves and see the needs in the lives of others that are grieving. Then again, maybe we are the ones who are holding onto unshared grief from years gone by. The Lord can help you to triumph over it today.

References

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