

Grief

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These kids were doing the exact right thing, they were on the side of the road, they were walking to where they needed to go. You know, they had done nothing wrong at all.

(John Cortese, Principal of Red Cliffs Secondary College)

A housefire claims the lives of four children. A light plane crashes killing the pilot and all onboard. Three experienced fishermen die in a boating accident. A group of young people walking to a party are hit by an out-of-control car. The images projected into our homes from the scenes of these accidents are arresting, such as the sight of hundreds of teenagers gathering at church services to farewell their friends.

Smithton in Tasmania, and Mildura in Victoria, are just two recent scenes of events which have caused a nation to ask questions about life, death and injustice. In Smithton, three teenage girls, their pregnant coach and one of the girls' mothers were on their way to a basketball pre-season tournament. Their car crossed the median strip and collided head-on with two other vehicles. All five died. In Mildura, a group of teenagers were waiting to cross the road when a green station wagon lost control and hit them. Eight teenagers were injured while six lost their lives.

In tragedies such as these, the community experiences something very powerful, although we probably shouldn't call it 'grief'. That is reserved for those who knew and loved the dead, and we will return to it below. For many Australians, the reaction was rather of *angry bitterness at death*. 'How could such a thing happen!?' Their whole lives were ahead of them!' John Cortese (above) sums up the response of many: *the victims did nothing wrong!*

Christians often want to disagree. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, hence all must die, and there is no such person as the "undeserving".' *But that response is much too quick, and certainly does not seem to match that of Jesus in a moment of tragedy.*

Jesus' arrival at the home Mary and Martha was been deliberately delayed, it seems, until after the death of Lazarus (John 11). Jesus apparently intended to reverse Lazarus' death. But even so, "Jesus wept", "he was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled" and "once more [he was] deeply moved". Jesus' own grief is a deep empathy with the grief of those around him: he 'was moved by the grief expressed by Mary and Martha, and is consequently angry at the sin, sickness and death of this fallen world that wreaks so much havoc and generates so much sorrow.' (Carson)

Jesus, it seems, *is bitterly grieved and angered by the offence of death*. Modern Australians are not so wrong, then, to feel the same deep outrage. But we often go wrong in these three ways:

1. We too quickly decide that God is either absent, or hostile to us.
2. We search for a human to blame (for having deluded ourselves that humanity rules all, *someone* must be to blame!!)
3. In our anger, we forget that the grieving person has *different* needs.

God the Father is the one who created and gave the good things we love so much; and God the Son is so hostile to death that he gives himself up to death in order that we might be raised from death. This is not a God who can be said to be against humanity, and even in our deepest grief and anger, God asks for our trust.

What do the grieving need from us? 'Those who follow Jesus as his disciples today do well to learn the same tension—that grief and compassion without outrage reduce to mere sentiment, while outrage without grief hardens into self-righteous arrogance and irascibility.' (Carson)

'Grief' is a complex collection of emotions that people experience when they lose *anything* or *anyone* they care deeply about. It is not limited to death or bereavement. An amputee who loses a leg or arm goes through grief. Grief travels with anyone who loads all their belongings into a

van and kisses their family goodbye. A boy or girl may grieve when a romance breaks up, and husband or wife may grieve when a marriage breaks up. Grief may touch a worker who retires from a long-held position, or parents when a son or daughter leaves home for university or enlistment. It is the human response to the loss of what is good.

Those who grieve need us to be aware of the process that they will experience; and they need us to *stick with them long after we have moved on* to other things. Immediately after death or a divorce or a terrible diagnosis, sympathy is everywhere. But it can be months later when loneliness and loss make their strongest impact. Friends are needed more than ever then; perhaps we friends of the grieving should (in our weakness) *mark it in our diaries* to keep supporting them.

Although everyone grieves differently, observers have noticed some similarities and patterns.

1. A 'crisis' phase, characterised by numbness, shock, and disregard or denial of the reality of the loss, bordering on fantasy for some. During this phase, friends can offer the basics: babysitting, answering the phone, food shopping and preparation, laundry, errands, transport.

2. A 'crucible' phase, characterised by disorganisation, yearning, desperation, fear, anger, depression, isolation, guilt, and hopelessness.

Tonight all the hells of young grief have opened again; the mad words, the bitter resentment, the fluttering in the stomach, the nightmare unreality, the wallowed-in tears. For in grief, nothing 'stays put'. (C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.)

Friends shouldn't be alarmed at the normalcy of all these feelings, which might last for four or five months. Ongoing invitations to dinner might help (since evenings can be worst for some). Offering several different dates allows the person to choose to come when they are up to it. A child who has lost a parent might appreciate a trip to the circus or the footy. A widow might appreciate the lawn mowed or the car washed.

3. A 'construction' phase, where the person is coming to terms with the reality of the loss, and reorganising their lives in a way that is not tied to the past. Friends can help people to begin again, encouraging people to take up activities and relationships, but without forcing them in any way.

In all these phases, we do well to simply **shut up and listen**. There is a story of a little girl whose playmate dies. She says to her family that she was able to comfort her dead friend's mother. 'What did you say?' her father asked. 'Nothing,' the child replied. 'I just climbed up on her lap and cried with her.' Sometimes that is all that is needed. On other occasions, mentioning a conversation or a happy incident from the past can show that others, too, have loved and miss the person who has died. Questions may help: 'Would you like to talk about it?' 'Tell me how things are.' *We don't need to say too much in response.*

After the death of his child, Joseph Bayley wrote:

I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he'd go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me for an hour or more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left.

(The View from a Hearse)

"I was moved," Bayley said. "I was comforted. I hated to see him go."

*Andrew Cameron & Tracy Nodder,
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Questions

1. In the intriguing account of Luke 13:1-5, how does Jesus recommend we respond to tragedy?
2. How might the community best respond to tragedies that receive a lot of publicity?
3. What is best for Christians to say during these times?
4. How does 1 Thess. 4:13f help us to process tragedy? In the case of a Christian who has died, at what point during the phases above would it be helpful to point to this text?
5. How else might Christians offer support and show kindness to those who are in grief?

Sources/Further Reading:

- Matthew Denholm, 'Town mourns another tragedy,' *The Australian*, February 27, 2006. Online: http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5744,18281418%255E2702,00.html
- Les Kennedy, 'Aussie hit-and-run driver kills six,' 20 February 2006. Online: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/stuff/0,2106,3578363a12,00.html>
- Gary Tippet, 'The myth of closure,' *The Age*, 24 February 2006. Online: <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/the-myth-of-closure/2006/02/24/1140670261644.html?page=fullpage#>
- Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. Leicester: IVP, 1991, p. 416.
- *We also drew upon an article that was sent to us having been reproduced from the Christian Medical Journal and dating from around 1995, but without any further details. We apologise to the author(s) for our inability to acknowledge them, and will gladly do so if we discover the article's provenance.*

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