

The Contours of Grief

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Job 13:28-14:6, Psalm 22:1-11

Grief-stricken people are always looking for words. Grief is disorienting, and so people in deep grief are always looking for words that help them get their bearings, words to help them ‘make sense’ of what they’re going through. Tonight, we will share some words for grief. They are not just any words; they are words from the Word. Let me say up front: if you are person wrestling with sorrow and loss I don’t think the words I have chosen will ‘make sense’ of your grief. But they might help describe what you’re feeling. In fact, these two Bible passages reveal two different things that happen to a person who has experienced loss. They show us two things that grief does to our mind and our heart.

What do these two passages reveal about grief? Each of them tell us a different way grief can disorient a person. Let’s start by looking at Job. How is Job disoriented by his grief? We know why Job was grieving. Job was a successful businessman with a big loving family: 7 loving sons, 3 loving daughters, 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 oxen. Job was living the Hallmark Card life. Then he lost everything. His children died when his house collapsed on them. His wife left him in anger. His business collapsed, and now Job is penniless and alone and sitting on an ash heap. Grief and anger swamp him. For the next 30 chapters Job vents his anger and his grief. For 30 chapters he tries to put what he’s feeling into words. We read a few of those words. What do Job’s words tell us about how grief feels and what it does to a person? Notice that Job piles up images of impermanence and frailty. Garments devoured by moths. Spring flowers that wither in a hot afternoon. Fleeting shadows that pass without leaving a trace. Multiple images of frailty. What are all these images referring to? Human life of course – human life is like a fleeting shadow. Human life is like a withering flower. But we can be more precise. ‘Yes, human life is brief,’ says Job, ‘but do you know what is really brief? Human happiness. One minute you think you have it all; the next minute it’s all gone. Life is hard. Our days are full of trouble. We put in time like a hired laborer.’ Job speaks from experience.

Grief shows us how thin happiness can be. When you are in the middle of good times - sitting around the Thanksgiving dinner, the table filled with children and grandchildren, the air full of conversation and laughter, the plates full of food – your family’s happiness can seem so strong and so solid. It can seem like an immovable object. But a person who has experienced deep grief knows how quickly that can change. Untested happiness feels immovable, but one doctor’s appointment, one car crash, one collapsing house and it can all vanish. Job says human happiness is a fleeting shadow, a spring flower. So Job suggests, grief doesn’t just rob you of a person; you lose track of happiness. You become disoriented. It’s not like happy things don’t happen to you; it’s just that they don’t stick the way they used to. You have trouble trusting your happiness. Most of you know that Nick Wolterstorff, the former Calvin College Philosophy professor, lost his 25 year old son in a mountain climbing accident. Here’s how he explained what that did to his own sense of happiness: “Sometimes I think that happiness is over for me. I look at photos of the past and immediately comes the thought: that’s when we were still happy. But I can still laugh, so I guess that isn’t quite it. Perhaps what’s over is happiness as the fundamental tone of my existence. Now sorrow is that. Sorrow is no longer the islands but the sea.” I think Job would say the same thing. So that’s the first thing grief does: it changes your

orientation with respect to happiness; happiness won't stick to you like it used to. Sadness becomes your sea.

The Psalm reminds us that grief also causes you to lose your bearings with respect to faith. Let me be clear: Psalm 22 doesn't describe a person losing their faith; it describes a person losing their bearings with respect to faith. We all have certain touchstones in our faith. We have these orientation points that help us get our bearings with respect to life and God. In verses 3-5 the psalmist describes his touchpoints. It reads like a list of things he learned in Sunday school. You are the powerful Holy One of Israel. You are the one who helped our ancestors. They trusted in you, and when they got in trouble they called out to you and you delivered them. Those are basic orientation points by which a person might steer through life: God is strong. He hears you when you cry. He will deliver you. Trust in him. But the Psalmist's trouble has made him uncertain of these Sunday school truths. He's lost his certainty about these touch points. Lord, will you answer when I cry out? I cry out night and day, but you do not answer. Do you deliver those who trust you? I trusted you but I find no rest. Do you keep your loved ones from being put to shame? Because I'm surrounded by people mocking my faith and I feel like a worm. He hasn't lost his faith; in fact I would say he's desperately trying to hold onto God. It's just that he's lost his orientation points. The old answers don't sound quite the way they used to.

This too is what grief can do to you. Your childhood faith is a nice neat system, with straight lines and clear views. But grief knocks those certainties around. To a person in grief, those old certainties sound different. Here's how Wolterstorff describes it: "Everything looks different now. Hymns and songs have re-ordered themselves so that lines I scarcely notice before leap out, "He will not suffer thy foot to stumble!" Words that used to sooth with warm comfort; now echo with hard questions. In another place he writes: "The worst days now are holidays Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost – days meant as festivals... are now days of tears." A person in grief wants to find their way back to God. They want to feel the joy at Christmastime. They want Easter to lift them. They want to sing 'Now Thank We All Our God' and feel it. They just can't seem to find their way when all the old markers look so different.

Tonight we remember that Jesus comes for our grief. Jesus comes to this world for grief stricken people. "Surely he has born our griefs and carry our sorrows." And tonight we will remember and relive how Jesus comes to us in our losses. Part of what we will acknowledge is that Jesus doesn't do this quite the way we might want. We want Jesus to come and take away our trouble and answer all our questions. That's the rescue we humans always want. Trouble gone, questions answered. We want the trouble gone so we can get our happiness back. We want the questions answered because that will give us back our orientation points. Jesus doesn't work that way. Instead of delivering us from our sorrows, Jesus shares them. Instead of taking us down from our cross, Jesus gets up on a cross beside us. Instead of explaining things so that we can have our orientation points back, Jesus says: 'I am your orientation point. Hold on to me. Keep your eyes on me. I'm not here to spare you trouble and grief – in this world you will have trouble and if you follow me you will know sorrow – but I know a way through the valley. It's a narrow path, but there's love along the way, and good people, and maybe not always happiness, but always hope and joy, and if you walk with me I will show you a path all the way through your dark valley to a place where loss will be overcome, ears will be dried and all things will be made new.'

Tonight we will walk a few more steps with Jesus through the valley of grief and loss. We will start that walk by acknowledging our grief. We will name the people we've lost and remember why we loved them. We will specifically name the people that have died in the

LaGrave community in the last year and then we will invite you to remember your losses on the insert in your bulletin. We will invite you to carry those names forward and place them on the communion table. Then, using our new funeral pall, we will be reminded how our loved ones and our griefs are clothed in Christ, and held by resurrection promises. None of this will end your sadness. You will not leave this place with your grief gone. But I hope that you will be somewhat re-oriented. I hope leave here knowing that Jesus is with you in your grief, that he knows the way through the valley, and you have taken another step with him through the valley and toward his everlasting light.

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