

GOOD GRIEF

17 David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. ¹⁸(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: ¹⁹Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! ²⁰Tell 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. ²¹You 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. ²²From 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. ²³Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. ²⁴O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. ²⁵How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. ²⁶I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. ²⁷How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

(II Samuel 1:17-27, NRSV)

Have you boarded an airplane under dark, heavily clouded skies? As the plane leaves the ground and rises through the clouds eventually the darkness lightens until at last you sail above the clouds in brilliant sunshine. As the

old song says, “Above the clouds the sun is always shining.” And yet for people who grieve it often seems that the clouds of sadness only gather and the glories of sun-filled days have permanently passed.

In his classic little book, *Good Grief*, Lutheran minister Granger Westberg observes that, “We spend a good portion of our lives working diligently to acquire those things that make life rich and meaningful—friends, [a spouse], children, a home, a job, material comforts, money...and security. What happens to us when we lose any of these persons or things which are so important to us? Quite naturally we grieve over the loss of anything important. Sometimes, if the loss is great, the very foundations of our life are shaken, and we are thrown into deep despair” (*Good Grief*, p. 9, Fortress Press, 1971).

We find the great loss and deep despair that Westberg describes in today’s scripture lesson from II Samuel. In the story, David, who is not yet king, learns of the deaths of King Saul and Jonathan. David’s grief pours out in the words of this tragic lament. Before examining the details of the lament, let’s first refresh our memories about David’s relationships with Saul and Jonathan.

Recall that God intended for ancient Israel to be a theocracy. The prophet Samuel begrudgingly agreed to anoint a king because the Israelites forced his hand. Saul was likely chosen because of his military prowess. God intended for the king to take divine orders, but Saul had other plans so he fell out of favor with God rather quickly. Samuel follows God’s lead and anoints David, only a shepherd boy at the time, to be Israel’s next king. Hoping to steer clear of trouble, David and Samuel kept the news quiet.

When Saul learned that he had fallen out of favor with God he went into a deep depression. Ironically, the

only person who could help was David who soothed Saul's soul by playing beautiful music on the lyre. After David killed the Philistine giant, Goliath, it seemed that he and Saul might become the closest companions. But when word of David's heroic deed spread Saul became insanely jealous. From then on Saul tried to kill David, who had become best friends with Saul's son, Jonathan.

Jonathan sided with David, which galled Saul all the more. Saul's son risked his own life for David on more than one occasion. The depth of love and devotion that existed between David and Jonathan cannot be overstated. A verse in I Samuel says that, "The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (18:1). Jonathan loved David so much that he agreed that David should be the next king of Israel, a position rightly belonging to Jonathan. David lived as a fugitive from the wrath of Saul and depended heavily on Jonathan for help and protection.

While Jonathan continued to assist David, he remained as loyal to his father as he could. When the time came for Israel to battle the Philistines again, honorable Jonathan dressed for war and joined his father. The Philistines overran the Israelites that day and Jonathan died in battle. There are two accounts of what happened to Saul. In one, the king, being mortally wounded, begged someone to put him out of his misery and the bystander obliged. In the second account, Saul committed suicide by falling on his own sword. Word of this tragedy reached David, who was devastated by the news.

David poured out his broken heart in today's scripture lesson referring to Saul and Jonathan as the glory of Israel saying, "Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen." David cursed the mountains where Saul and Jonathan died in the words, "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.” David exposed his deep feelings for Saul and Jonathan as “beloved and lovely.” He reflected on the situation in idealized words, “In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.” Near the end of the lament David spoke solely of Jonathan saying, “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.”

David was crushed. His best friend, the man who was like a brother to him, died a violent death. And why was Jonathan in this battle in the first place, because his father, King Saul, went marching off to war. No doubt David had mixed feelings about Saul. Once Saul had been a father figure, someone who took David under his wing. Then Saul turned David into his archenemy. While David evaded Saul’s death threats, he never tried to kill Saul, even when given the perfect opportunity. David not only grieved Saul’s death, but he likely grieved the fact that his relationship with Saul turned sour. David’s grief was complicated because life is complicated and rarely as simple as we’d like.

When we grieve it is no simple matter either. Grief is a universal experience, but no two people grieve in quite the same way. Nevertheless, some people grieve better, in a more healthy manner, than others. In *Good Grief* Westberg notes that, “...parishioners who [face] up to their loss by wrestling openly and honestly with the problem [come] through the grieving experience stronger, deeper, and better able to help other people with their grieving” (p. 19).

Grief often follows a common pattern. At first we are in a state of shock, and have trouble believing what has happened. We’ve probably said or heard others say, “I can’t

believe it happened. I know it intellectually, but I just haven't accepted it emotionally." Westberg describes this stage as "temporary anesthesia" that "keeps us from having to face grim reality all at once" (p. 21). Soon the emotions flow and this is as it should be for bottled up emotions will harm us. At some point we may feel terribly sad and lonely, even in the depths of despair. These too are normal emotions. Sometimes we have feelings of guilt about things we did or did not do, said or failed to say. We need to forgive ourselves in order to move through the grief process. It's even natural to feel anger at God or others, even the deceased who left us in such a state. In time this anger must be worked through as well. Eventually we will need to get back involved in the normal routine of life. Failing to do so could lead to being stuck in our grief, unable to move on with the rest of our lives.

The final stage of grief is learning to affirm life again. Please note this final stage is not becoming our old selves again. Rather, as Westberg observes, "When we go through any significant grief experience we come out of it as different people. Depending upon the way we respond to this event we are either stronger people than we were before or weaker" (p. 62). Even when it seems like all is lost, many who grieve "...eventually come to understand that *everything* has not been taken from them. They realize that life will never be the same again, but they begin to sense that there is much in life that can be affirmed. And to affirm something is to say that it is good" (p. 63).

Some people respond to grief in a creative way that blesses others. Our closing hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," is a perfect example of this possibility. This most famous of all gospel songs was written by jazz and blues pianist, turned gospel composer, Thomas Dorsey (not to be confused with the big band leader, Tommy Dorsey). Thomas Dorsey wrote the hymn in response to a terrible tragedy. In

August of 1932 Dorsey kissed his wife goodbye and left Chicago to sing in a church service in St. Louis. At that time his wife Nettie was pregnant with their first child. In the midst of the service Dorsey received a telegram that his wife had died in the midst of childbirth. Later Dorsey recalled, “People were happily singing and clapping around me, but I could hardly keep from crying out” (*Today’s Christian*, July/August 2003, p. 16). On his way back to Chicago he learned that his wife had given birth to a baby boy. “‘I swung between grief and joy,’ he recalled. ‘Yet that night, the baby died. I buried Nettie and our little boy together in the same casket.’ He managed to get through the funeral visitation and service. But when it was all over, he withdrew from family, friends, and even his beloved music. ‘I felt that God had done me an injustice. I didn’t want to serve [God] anymore or write gospel songs. I just wanted to go back to that jazz world I once knew so well,’ he said. In the midst of despair, a friend visited Dorsey and arranged for him to be left alone in a music room with a piano. ‘It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows,’ Dorsey recalled. For the first time in many days, he sat at a piano using his fingers to browse the keys. Soon, the young artist experienced a personal revival: ‘I felt at peace. I felt as though I could reach out and touch God. I found myself playing a melody, one I’d never heard or played before, and words [for “Precious Lord”] came into my head—they just seemed to fall into place”’ (Ibid.). This beautiful hymn went on to become wildly popular. Eventually the song was recorded by everybody from Mahalia Jackson to Elvis Presley. To date, the song has been translated into 32 languages (Ibid.).

Following the deaths of his wife and son, Thomas Dorsey found himself in deep despair. While I’m sure many things helped him, several stand out—his good friends, his willingness to take even the smallest step, and ultimately his faith in God. Part of Dorsey’s healing came in the form of,

“Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” which in turn has been a hymn of healing for so many. As we sing “Precious Lord,” let the words offer you hope and healing this day. AMEN.

*Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the
light:
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*

*When my way grows drear, precious Lord, linger near,
When my life is almost gone,
Hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand lest I fall:
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*

*When the darkness appears and the night draws near,
And the day is past and gone,
At the river I stand, guide my feet, hold my hand:
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)
Memorial Sunday
May 29, 2005

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, before whom nations rise and fall, we pray this day for our nation and our world, beset by violence and fear. How we need your healing, peaceful presence. Too many lives have been lost, too much blood shed in the name of cruelty and injustice. Help leaders use their power wisely with the goal being justice and peace, liberty and freedom for all people. We thank you this day for men and women of integrity who have made the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of others. We ask your help this day for people whose hearts are breaking over the deaths of those they love. May your Holy Spirit, the Comforter, ease their pain and encourage them to place their trust and hope in You.

Draw us nearer to you and to one another for having worshiped together this day through Jesus Christ we pray.
AMEN.