

Grief to Joy

Life is a journey. I don't know who first said that, but I think they're right, don't you? And on this journey, we have all kinds of adventures and experiences. But of all these experiences within our larger journey, I don't think any is more difficult than the part where we have to go from grief to joy. All of us in this room, no matter how young, have experienced some sort of sadness in life. And some will have to deal with a very deep, painful and long lasting grief. Some of you are dealing with it right now.

New York Times' best-selling author, Mary Karr, who once described herself as a "blackbelt sinner and lifelong agnostic," surprised the literary world several years ago by converting to Christianity. She wrote:

I don't think any of us get off this planet without suffering enormously. And one of the chief ways we suffer is by loving people who are incredibly limited by the fact that they're human beings, and they're going to disappoint us and break our hearts... Your parents – no matter how great their marriage was, at some point it trembled on its foundation, and it was terrifying. [Or] you fell in love with someone who didn't love you back. Or whatever. We are all heartbroken. It's the human condition.¹

At one point in Mary's life, while she was struggling with a very painful part of her "human condition," someone suggested that she pray about it. She did and things began to change. Not her circumstances, but her! She now says, "I just felt this presence that was not me. I know it wasn't me because it wanted to do things that I never wanted to do before I prayed... It's completely through prayer that I came to believe in God."²

In the last verse of our Scripture today, Jesus says: (John 16:33)

"...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

If we're ever going to be able to successfully make the journey from grief to joy, we're going to have to understand what Jesus meant by these words. So, let's begin by examining the first step, which is, "Be patient." God will induce a supernatural process that will move you not around, but through the pain. In short...

I.First, We Wait

In Warren Wiersbe's commentary on this passage, he says, "God brings joy to our lives, not by substitution but by transformation." We sometimes try to replace grief with joy. It seldom works. We have to wait for God to transform our grief.

Shortly after the massacre of first graders and their teachers at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, Philip Yancey came to address the community. He said he did more listening than speaking. For him, a volunteer ambulance driver captured the mood that everyone in the community seemed to share. He told Yancey:

Everyone experiences grief... Usually, though, you bear grief as if in a bubble. You go to the grocery store. You go back to work. Eventually that outer world takes over more of you, and the grief begins to shrink. Here in Newtown, we go to the store and see memorials to the victims. We walk down the street and see markers on the porches of

those who lost a child. It's like a bell jar has been placed over the town, with all the oxygen pumped out. We can't breathe for the grief. ³

Is that how your grief felt or feels for you? How do you get out of that 'glass dome'?

Jesus told His disciples that He would be leaving them and then He said...

"...You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy." (John 16:20)

He then illustrated this principle by referring to childbirth. The same circumstance that brings the mother pain, eventually, by God's design, brings the mother joy. What does the mother do? What's her strategy for moving the process forward? Are some mothers capable by better planning and of having a fully formed baby in four months rather than nine? No. What must every mother do? She must wait, through the pain for the joy.

Jesus is saying that your grief is like a pregnancy. It has a schedule. Unlike a pregnancy, your schedule will be different from someone else's schedule. But you must wait. You must learn patience. How does someone learn patience? By waiting.

In the Bible, there are not many impatient heroes. There are impatient people, but not many impatient heroes, men and women who were examples of great spiritual strength. The impatient people in Scripture are criticized, even condemned, for their impatience – people like King Saul, who couldn't wait for Samuel to come and offer the sacrifice before a battle. So he did it himself and was condemned by God for doing so. Or Abraham and Sarah who were great people of faith but they couldn't wait for God's way of fulfilling His promise of a son. So Abraham had a son through Sarah's maid and thus created what we see today as the Arab-Israeli conflict. Impatience is never honored in Scripture.

But those who learn to wait are not only honored but rewarded. Joseph was promised in a dream that he would be placed in a position of authority over his older brothers but he had to go through 13 years of pain and grief before it was realized. David was anointed king at the age of 15 but had to go through 15 more years of being hunted by King Saul before he finally became king. Remembering the promises of God, King David later wrote these words:

I am still confident of this:

I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

Wait for the LORD;

be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD. (Ps. 27:13-14)

The first step in the journey of seeing our grief turned to joy is to wait on the LORD.

Secondly, Jesus says...

II. We Need to Believe

Believe what? Believe anything? No. In verse 20 Jesus tells His disciples...

"I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy." (John 16:20)

Jesus is asking them to believe His promises. If those first disciples believed His promises, their grief would be transformed into joy. That's His promise to them.

Why did Jesus give promises? He gave promises because everything can't be learned by experience. A first-time mother has no personal experience that tells her that the intense pain of delivery will result in the joy of a child. But she has seen it happen for other mothers. In fact, she's seen it happen for EVERY mother! So, she believes that her pain, too, will not be a permanent grief but will result in joy.

Do you have that faith concerning your current pain, your grief? Or, have you concluded that your grief is eternal? When Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, died, they were both only 42 years old. Queen Victoria was overcome by grief, so much so that she refused to even appear in public for the next three years. After that, she very gradually began to fulfill her duties as queen but wore nothing but black for the rest of her life and expressed in letters that her only hope was to die young. She lived to be 81, nearly forty years of misery. ⁴

This is not God's plan for us as believers. Now, someone might point out that, in this passage, Jesus is clearly talking about a short time of grief – the time between His death and resurrection - only three days. Yes, He is referring to that, but He is also referring to our much longer period of 'waiting' - the time between His resurrection and His second coming! We know this because Jesus also said to them:

"You believe at last... But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home." (John 16:31-32)

This can't refer to the disciples. They didn't go to their homes while Jesus was in the grave. They all lived in Galilee. This is referring to all Christians who live between the resurrection and the Second Coming. So, what promises of God can we focus on so that we don't become Queen Victoria's, frozen in the grief of this world?

Jesus has given us different promises that are applicable to specific kinds of grief. For example, if your grief is tied to the death of someone you love, Jesus promised through the apostle Paul:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. (I Thess. 4:13-18)

And what if your grief is caused by horrible and painful circumstances that seem as though they will never end? The apostle Paul experienced that too and wrote about it:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure... But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. (II Cor. 1:8-11)

Jesus promised that He would be with us to end of the world! He didn't promise that we wouldn't have pain or grief. No, He said we would grieve. What He promised is that our grief would not last forever, but His joy would. If you believe His promises, you won't grieve like Queen Victoria because you'll believe something she obviously didn't – that this world is full of trouble, but thanks to Jesus, this world is not our home. Lastly, to travel from grief to joy-

III. We Act by Faith

We wait, we believe Jesus' promises and we act by faith. Jesus said in verse 24:
Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. (John 16:24)

This is not the first time Jesus has said this, is it? Back in chapter 14, which also took place on the night Jesus was arrested, He said to them:

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (John 14:12-14)

What's the qualification for getting whatever we ask for? "...*anyone who has faith in me...*" Have you ever said you believed something but, when it came to acting on that belief, you found it to be a bit more difficult? "I believe that ice is thick enough to walk on!"

"Really? You first!"

C. S. Lewis had that experience with grief. In 1952 he wrote a book entitled, *The Problem of Pain*. It dealt intellectually with the problem of human suffering. But just eight years later, he would experience the reality of severe pain and crippling grief. In 1956, Lewis married Joy Davidman, a midlife marriage that brought them both great joy. But just two years into their marriage, Joy was diagnosed with cancer. Suddenly, Lewis' 'intellectual beliefs' were being tested by reality. He later wrote:

It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?

Just two years more, on July 13, 1960, Joy died. Lewis was catapulted into full-blown grief. His journey through it had distinct stages. First, fear. He wrote:

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

Next was darkness and doubt. Lewis, the man who had written *Mere Christianity*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Problem of Pain* and who had walked with Christ for thirty years, struggled with God's silence. He wrote:

But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence.

This was naturally followed by anger at God, even a desire to get even with the Almighty. He wrote:

In a way I liked [those thoughts]. I am even aware of a slight reluctance to accept opposite thoughts... It was really just 'telling God what I thought of Him.' Not that I am in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'

Have you been down this path of grief that Lewis traveled? Fear, then doubt, then anger? Are you on that road now? You've been waiting, you've continued to believe but now you feel like you are at a crossroads. What's next? Or is this the end?

No, this isn't the end. But this is where you must choose. Frederick Buechner shows you the choice:

The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being... transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.⁵

Gradually, ever so slowly, Lewis relaxed his grip on self-preservation and he began to notice that the cloud of grief was lifting. He described it this way:

It was like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight. When you first notice them they have been already going on for some time.

Lewis began, as well, to understand that the God he had been accusing of being absent, was, in fact, nearer than near all the time. It was his own grief that had blinded him to God's presence. He described it this way:

The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.

Over time, Lewis was able even to praise God. He completed the journey from grief to joy. All these notes about his journey were from a daily diary Lewis kept. They were later published in a book entitled, *A Grief Observed*. In the last pages of that diary, Lewis wrote:

These notes have been about myself, about Joy and about God. In that order. The order and the proportions exactly what they ought not to have been. And I see that I have nowhere fallen into that mode of thinking about either which we call praising them. Yet that would have been best for me. Praise is the mode of love which always has some element of joy in it. Praise in due order; of Him as the giver, of her as the gift. Don't we in praise somehow enjoy what we praise, however far we are from it? I must do more of this.⁶

Every part of Lewis' journey - the fear, the darkness and doubt, the anger and eventually the cloud lifting - all of it were acts of faith.⁷ Jesus knew that, in grief, we often lose sight of Him. He said:

"...Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." (John 16:22)

Can you imagine how personal that promise of 'no one taking away his Joy' was to Dr. Lewis? And it is just as personal for each of us. So, hear now, with your soul, Jesus' final words:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Amen.

¹ Mary Karr, interview, quoted in Wesley Hill, Writing in the Dust blog, (2-26-12)

² Beliefnet; "Mary Karr: Guided by Prayer," 2006/06

³ Philip Yancey, "National Tragedy and the Empty Tomb," Christianity Today (3-28-13)

⁴ Daily Mail, "She can only hope never to live to old age: In her own words, Queen Victoria's grief..." 13 Dec. 2011

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982)

⁶ All the quotes about Lewis' journey are from his book, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam, 1976)

⁷ These categories of Lewis' journey through grief are taken from Dr. Art Lindsley's article in the C. S. Lewis Institute's newsletter; Knowing & Doing, "C.S. Lewis on Grief" winter, 2001.