

A Theological Reflection on Grief and Loss

Since its formation The Salvation Army has been called to support and care for those in need using Williams Booth's term 'heart to God and hand to man'. The Salvation Army's missional statement is to 'Love God and love others' and therefore there will be times when we are called to help and protect those in our care.

In this reflection, we will consider scriptural truths that help us understand how the Bible can speak into the lives of those who are living in and experiencing grief and loss, from the perspective of when someone we care for has died.



There are approximately 600,000 deaths every year in the UK, with an average of six million people experiencing bereavement. It does not matter the age of the person, nor the situation of the death when it comes to grief and loss – it hurts deeply, and most people long for comfort in what feels like the most uncertain time of life. This reflection considers what the Bible has to offer those who are grieving through words of comfort, whilst recognising the depth of despair we can feel when someone we love and care for has died.

If we believe that Jesus himself was 'truly and properly God and truly and properly man', as the fourth Salvation Army Doctrine states, then we have recognise that Jesus understood human grief and loss for himself.

In John's Gospel we read the story of Lazarus, Jesus' friend, becoming sick and eventually dying. The sisters of Lazarus sent a message to Jesus with the words '*Lord, the one you love is ill*' (John 11:3). What we encounter in that simple statement is an acknowledgement of the depth of love Jesus had for his friend, and the reality of sadness brought on by the illness and impending loss of a loved one.

This story continues with Jesus reminding the sisters, and those of us reading, that death is not the end and that we will all rise again in Glory. Jesus went on to perform a miracle bringing Lazarus back to life, but even Lazarus would not live for ever on this Earth. His earthly body would die again in later years, which is a reminder to us all that death, grief and loss are inevitable, but that what awaits, we believe, is far bigger and better than we could imagine.

In 2 Corinthians 4:17 is another reminder of this, saying that '*our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*'.

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Another Scripture verse of hope is found in 1 Peter 5:10: *'And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.'*

The story of Lazarus and the verses above remind us that grief and loss will come to us all; there is no escape, but there is hope. However, it is living through the grief and loss that we need to think deeply about. There will be many bereaved people within our corps/churches and communities – people who may be living in the early stages of grief and loss alongside people who have been on a journey of grief for many years.



Those who are bereaved could have faith questions that may be difficult to answer even if we are armed with every verse of Scripture about God's love and Heaven. Some may ask 'Does God even care?', 'Will my loved one be in Heaven?', 'What happens after we die?', 'Does contemplating suicide mean people go to hell?' So many questions – and as we reflect upon Scripture we need to be aware that we do not want to 'fix' the bereaved with Scripture, despite how well meaning we may be.

Sadness is a human emotion that people are encouraged and allowed to sit with. Psalm 34:18 reminds us that *'The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit'*. This is an assurance that God is walking with those who experience grief and loss, but that God does not mend that broken heart in an instant. His arms of love are open for those who are crushed in spirit, but that does not mean that people will feel an instant relief from grief and loss. Grief is a process that God journeys through alongside his children. God does not stop the feelings of grief and loss, but provides the assurance that death is part of life, and that eternity is promised for those who believe.

The Five Stages of Grief

In 1969 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed the idea of what has now become popularly known as The Five Stages of Grief. Originally designed for someone with a terminal illness, this idea of different stages has been adopted by many writers and organisations such as Cruse who support bereaved people. If we were to examine these five stages (which Elisabeth Kübler-Ross says are non-linear and do not always progress in a certain order) in the light of biblical truths, it may be of comfort and support in the process of grief and loss. It may look something like this:

1. Denial: *'My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen on me. Fear and trembling have beset me; horror has overwhelmed me. I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest."'* (Psalm 55:4-6)

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The disbelief of the bereaved person can be palpable. Death has taken a loved away from them physically and the feeling of wanting to flee the situation is normal. God understands the cries of a broken heart.

2. Anger: *'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'* (Matthew 27:46)

Jesus himself questioned his position as he hung upon the cross. Perhaps a disbelief of the agony and pain brought Jesus to that point of questioning his Father. Grief and loss can bring anger to the surface of anyone, as the bereaved question a loving God about their hurt and loss. Yet God holds eternity in his hands and has promised never to leave us (Matthew 28:20).

3. Bargaining: *'Father ... everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.'* (Mark 14:36)

Again we hear the words of Jesus pleading for the pain and suffering to be removed, – acknowledging God's supremacy whilst acknowledging that God's will prevails. Jesus understands the struggle and heaviness of life and the need to want a way out of what feels like an impossible situation. God understands the human heart and the human need for comfort.

4. Depression: *'Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;... my soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long? ... I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.'* (Psalm 6:1-3,6)

The Psalms are full of real people making real-life, heartfelt prayers in times of need. Depression causes persistent feelings of sadness and affects your feelings, thoughts and actions. For those who are bereaved, the comfort found in the Psalms can be a way of putting their own thoughts and feelings into words when they are unable to do so themselves. The Psalms are a reminder that God is big enough to be shouted at in despair and praised in the next breath.

5. Acceptance: *'The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.'* (Exodus 14:14)

Finding acceptance for the grief and loss that is felt and a healing of a wounded heart can feel unattainable at times and acceptance can be hard to reach. However, these words remind us that whilst the bereaved may feel as though their battle is lost, they feel alone, isolated and overwhelmed with sadness, there is One who is fighting for them. In the stillness, God will work. God will continue to hold them through their grief and loss and there will be, somehow, a way forward.

The Bible never diminishes loss. Rather it points to the One, Jesus, who truly understands loss, who understands grief and offers words of comfort, strength and peace when bereavement of a loved one is all-consuming and feels too much to bear.

'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.' (John 14:27)