

Doctrines Of Scripture

Thoughts When Visiting Bereaved Ones

By

Rowan Jennings

Thoughts When Visiting Bereaved Ones

In my many years of helping arrange funerals, by taking them and visiting the sorrowing I have learnt a little about what to say in such circumstances. People very often do not know what to say or how to respond to another's bereavement, and falling back on cliché's, they make matters worse. Some of those I have heard are:

- a) *"Time heals"*: The fact is that after a long time one gets used to the loved one being gone, but at each family gathering thoughts come into the mind of: "He/she should have been here"; "What would he/she look like now"? The first year will be especially difficult for in it there will be the loved one's birthday, possibly wedding anniversary, going places where they oftentimes went together and now going for the first time without them. The individual must not be rushed into these things. I have known a widow who kept her husband's study exactly as he left it for months, his shirts etc. were still as they would be if he were there. In time life will take on a new normality, and although it may appear the individual is contending with difficulties and getting over it, there will be a song sung, a hymn played, a certain fragrance, a certain tree, and suddenly all the emptiness will flood the soul again. This is to be expected. It must never be suppressed. I have known those who have gone to the grave, and despite knowing the loved one was not there, have stood and talked as if they were. It is really speaking out of their grief.
- b) *"You have so much to be thankful for."* How can one talk about being thankful if they are able to walk with their spouse or child whom the bereaved ones have lost"? Under no circumstances tell them you know how they feel because your dog died after many years. Some of the most cruel things can be said at the death of a child such as: "It was as well you did not really know the baby"; or "You can have another one". Does one honestly think another baby will replace the one lying in the coffin? There are times when I felt like telling some to get up and leave for a statement such as: "Thank God they are not a vegetable". Some of the worst statements are: "You would not want them back" or "They are better off now". This may be true, but this is not the time or place to say this.
- c) *"Why not get a little dog, they can be such a companion" or, "You need to go out and meet people, perhaps you may get married again"*. Believe it or not, I have heard this word for word while helping in making funeral arrangements for a spouse!
- d) Do not tell them how to grieve even if you have walked this road. Each heart knows its own bitterness (Prov. 14:10).
- e) Do not judge them because they do not mourn immediately or in the following months the way you would. I knew a young lady whose husband died after a prolonged illness and the night of his death she was laughing and functioning as if nothing had happened! Do not judge her hastily for the reality of his death had not dawned upon her. There have been others who went to the grave every day, come rain or shine. Another, who in the first wedding anniversary after his death, walked some four miles on a cold January day to visit his grave.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "An odd byproduct of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll say something about it' or not". (A Grief Observed).

When Adam and Eve looked back they must have wondered: "What were we thinking of when we took the forbidden fruit?". It no doubt was the darkest day of their lives. Then came another dark day, and I am sure they blamed themselves as they learnt of the death of their son Abel. They knew death had come into the world and had seen dead animals, but for the first time to know death had come into their family and that their son had killed his own brother. Many years ago I met a family, mum, dad, son and daughter who were in the same situation. During the mid week the father and mother went to the weekly prayer meeting and Bible study, but life was suddenly to change. They came home and discovered their only son had murdered their only daughter. What can anyone say in such a situation? I have wept with bereaved ones, I have been when the family have said their last goodbye, but nothing, absolutely nothing could prepare anyone for that situation and what to say or do. The scriptures give us a very graphic narrative of a father whose son died.

Absalom was a rebellious son who brought unspeakable grief to his father David.

- a) On one instance he slew his brother Amnon and, had it not been that the other brothers fled, he may well have killed them. What sorrow that must have brought to the heart of David (2 Sam. 13:27, 30).

- b) Another time he sat in the gate and sought to overthrow his father's kingdom (2 Sam. 15:1-13), getting it to such a situation that David had to flee (2 Sam. 15:14, 17).
- c) He had even agreed to the slaying of David his father (2 Sam. 17:1-3).
- d) In time there was a "sort of" reconciliation between Absalom and David, but when Absalom went to war against his father, David told his men of war: "Deal gently . . . with the young man" (2 Sam. 18:5).

When Joab saw Absalom hanging from a tree by his hair he thrust him through with three darts, and then the young men with Joab slew him (2 Sam. 18:14-15). When news of the death of Absalom came to David, he mourned one of the most plaintive wailings in the scriptures. A father thinks about his son, not banished from him alone, but banished from God for eternity. David wept as he walked the road to the chamber over the gate and cried with a loud voice: "O Absalom, my son, my son! (2 Sam. 19:4); "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33). I have heard the wailings of a father and mother who knew that their son was in hell. I preached the gospel on the Sunday, and the following Saturday he was killed, having had no time for God. That was forty years ago, and eternity has not yet begun! What can be said at such a time? Do not go to one in such agony and say: "All things work together for good". That is like a knife being plunged into an open wound. Reality is, there is nothing anyone can say. Sufficient it is to be with such a one and weep with them. That is what Job's friends did when they first came.

Job, what a tragic lot was his.

- a) In a single day he lost all his animals, but worse still was the deaths of all his children in a single day (Job 1:13-19).
- b) Later his health was taken from him and he sat scraping his boils and sitting among the ashes (Job 2:7-8).
- c) Then his wife came and said: "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9).

What can be said to one who has lost all their sons and daughters, all their goods, and now even the support of a spouse? Cliches would only make the wound worse. Wise were the men when they all sat on the ground with him and wept, but did not say a word (Job 2:12-13). Then Job speaks, and better had his friends never spoke, but like us they tried to help, but would have been better saying nothing. Eventually, Elihu began to speak because the others had no answer (Job 32:5). Job had sought to justify himself rather than God (Job 32:2), but later seeing the error of his ways said: "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer Thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth" (Job 40:3-4). The question is why did God let this happen to Job? There are several reasons:

- a) God was seeking to unveil Himself to Job in a way he could never otherwise have done. While we know this, it must never be said to a breaking heart. In time God will teach them that truth. He knows when the appropriate time is.
- b) He will know what it is to comfort others. Paul informs us in 2 Cor. 1:3-7 that our afflictions are for us to learn the comfort of God in order that we will be able to comfort others. Again, do not tell this to someone who is breaking their heart. God will help them learn that when they come to their teaching moment.
- c) God was permitting Satan to afflict Job so that both would learn the fulness of Job's devotion to God. I have seen times when after a death loved ones got so bitter against God, even at times denying His very existence.

At the grave of Lazarus the Lord said nothing until after they had poured out their grief and remonstrating against Him. Let us not forget that people are human and in times of distress they may talk in an unseeingly way, or in such a manner unexpected of them. At such a time it is immaterial whether one had sat at His feet or not, they both expressed their displeasure at the Lord (Jn. 11:21, 32). Observe that even though Mary fell at His feet (Jn. 11:32), she plainly expected Him to come earlier. We must never be surprised or call down a believer due to what they say in their grief.

The Lord responds to Mary and Martha as individuals. Martha does not stop after her expression of disappointment at the Lord but says: "But I know, that even now, whatsoever Thou wilt ask of God, God will give it Thee" (Jn. 11:22), and therein starts one of the greatest five clause discussions the world has ever known. Not a word longer than three syllables and the longest response after the opened expression has only 33 words! Listen as the Lord speaks, not to Mary who sat at his feet, but to Martha who was cumbered about with much serving He

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unfolds the glorious truths saying: “Thy brother shall rise again”; “I am the resurrection, and the life, he that believeth in me, (lit) even though he die, He shall live” (Jn. 11:25). The one who was the server in the home was led into deeper appreciations of Christ. This is not something we can say but it is a matter we can pray about, that the one “less spiritual” will be led into deeper appreciation's of the wonders of the Lord.

This is the next suggestion when visiting a bereaved one. No long discourses on the resurrection and new bodies, or what heaven is like. Simply state words that can assist to heal the broken hearted.

When Mary comes and remonstrates, the Lord sees her down at His feet weeping. What a picture of utter brokenness and grief (v.33). Even though she was “the more spiritual”, there is no discussion about the resurrection and living again. It is a major lesson for us. Just because a person is deemed, and possibly is more spiritual than another, does not mean when the actual crunch comes they will be able to handle it in a more spiritual manner. I have seen this over and over again. The more spiritual was the more broken. In this case the Lord does four things which were not done with Mary:

- a) He groans in the spirit and was troubled (that is His own spirit, v. 33). The word translated “groaned” does not mean a sound of sorrow, but rather a deep agony, an agitation of grief. It was not only seeing the weeping of Mary and those with her, it was not the sympathetic Jesus being moved by emotion. I suggest it was a groaning because of the grief that sin had brought into the world.
- b) He is troubled in Himself. It would seem to me that there was a hatred or detesting of that which sin had wrought and a strong emotion to enter death and defeat it. A burden to bring about the glorious condition where man would never die again, where: “there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying” (Rev. 21:4).
- c) He asks where they have laid him. In other words, lead me to the cemetery. One of the things a person can do is request, if it is acceptable, after the funeral to bring the bereaved one to the cemetery. There the individual who brings the sorrowing can excuse themselves for a little while and leave the bereaved one alone with their grief and thoughts, or at other times they may want the person who brought them to stay. We must remember that that piece of ground, whither it is where the ashes are scattered or the body is buried, is precious to the bereaved. I am aware that many of the saints are very opposed to cremation and they have grounds for it. One argument is that our Lord was buried and so should we. This is a very valid argument. There is no debating it. These saints argue that the scriptures are for setting the example. For example:
 - i) Abel was buried (Gen. 4:10, 11)
 - ii) God told Abraham that he would die in old age and be buried (Gen. 15:15)
 - iii) Abraham buried Sarah (Gen. 23:19)
 - iv) Isaac was buried (Gen. 35:29)
 - v) Joseph’s sons carried the body of the father to the burial (Josh. 24:32).
 - vi) Mariam, Aaron, Eleazer, Samuel, Asahel, Abner, David.
 - vii) Even those who died in the wilderness were buried. (Num. 11:34)
 - viii) Also the wicked Pashur (Jer. 20:6)

Coming to the New Testament:

- i) The rich man was buried (Lk. 16:22)
- ii) Also Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:9-10)
- iii) The disciples took the body of John and buried it. (Matt. 14:12)
- iv) The supreme example is the Lord (Jn. 19:41-42)
- v) Our baptism is viewed as a burial (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12)

Another valid argument is that we can’t pick and choose what we want to follow, whether it be too costly or not. This brings us to another argument which is that since a burial is more costly than a cremation, one must trust the Lord will provide. Again, imagine a widow with a small family or an unsaved family, and no income. Should she be looked down as being less than a good believer because she had her spouse cremated? In such cases, how many saints will step up to the plate and be the vessels through which the Lord will provide? On the other hand, there are places in the world where, due to limited

ground space, 99.85% of people are cremated. In earlier days cremation was done as a result of multiple deaths due to a famine or war, but these do not nullify the aforementioned arguments. In one modern city only several months ago, they were going to begin reusing the graves by removing any skeletons after approximately fifty years. I spoke to a brother recently who is giving his body to science. Is that wrong? Another question to be considered is: "At what point does the Holy Spirit no longer indwell the believer?". These are questions of deep conviction and exercise. I personally believe that I cannot legislate to another what should be done with the deceased. I may have my convictions but I must let each be persuaded in their own mind (Rom. 14:5).

- d) He weeps. Despite all appearance, the weeping of the Lord assured them of His love for Lazarus and them (vv 3, 35, 36). In those times of distress when it seems God is so far away, the evil one at times may seek to take advantage of our weakness and indicate God is unkind, and question His love. This teaches us that the Lord never will let His loved ones go through a darkness that is unwarranted, or a diminishing of His love for the dead one or the family. The words of the hymn writer stand true:

My times are in Thy hand, Whatever they may be;
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright, As best may seem to Thee.

My times are in Thy hand, Why should I doubt or fear?
My Father's hand will never cause, His child a needless tear.

For a bereaved one having another just hold them and weep with them, genuine tears, speaks more than any words. I say genuine because if what is said is only words, it will mean nothing. This is not for a display of your knowledge, but it is more important to know where the grieving one is in their journey of sorrow.

Finally, considering the two on the road to Emmaus. The scriptures records: "communications are these that ye have one to another" (Lk. 24:17). It is a very graphic statement which means to throw back and forward, as children with a ball tossing it between each other. They had broken dreams and blasted hopes, and now on this approximately eight mile journey they are recounting things one with another. The death of Jesus, the burial, and the women who said He was raised and they had seen Him (vv. 19-24). Then the wording: "Ye walk, and are sad" (Lk. 24:17) means to stand still and are sad. One can see this scene, two individuals walking along the dusty road on a Sunday afternoon, and amid the numerous people to and from Jerusalem, these two are in deep heart tearing agony, walking and then stopping, thinking and then walking again.

Then, the greatest psychologist the world has ever known "drew near, and went with them" (Lk. 24:15). He did that which bereaved ones need to do, talk about it! Let them tell the happenings again and again, and listen the tenth time as if it were the first. He asked questions that drew from them the perplexities they were going through, and then ever so gently, He opened to them the scriptures (v. 32). How often this has happened. Passages such as 1 Cor. 15:3-49 or 1 Thess. 4:13-18, passages which possibly had been read multiple times, or heard ministered from many times, suddenly become as clear shining after the rain. They had a depth of truth never known before and there is a burning of the heart (v. 32) and a consciousness of the Lord's presence unknown before. As one brother whose wife died said to me about a year later: "Rowan, I wish I could have those days again, when the Lord was so real and near to me". It is the opening of the scriptures.

As I close this subject, there is a blessing from it that one must mention. Death is judgment of God (Gen. 2:17) and is the result of sin (Rom. 6:23), yet that which God is superlative at is taking dark things and turning them for something good. Death is also a mercy from God, for had He not hindered man from eating of the tree of life he would have lived forever, and this was **AFTER** he had sinned (Gen. 3:22). How dreadful it would have been to have a loved one living for centuries with an emancipated body or mind, or living in pain and unable to die. Such a situation is found when men long for death, but it is deprived of them (Rev. 9:6). Our Lord said: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (Jn. 12:24). What an encouragement this is. Consider our Lord, because of His death we have life (Rom. 5:10). Satan is defeated (Heb. 2:14) and we were liberated (Gal. 5:1). It is only as we die to the flesh that we can bring forth fruit (Rom.

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6:2-4, 22), and thank God that at a point of time after death, and this body is sown, it will rise in fulness of life and glory (1 Cor. 15:43).

There must be the understanding that the bereaved family or individual will not feel like cooking meals, going to the stores, etc. Their whole world has been shattered and life seems so unfair. Others are laughing and living as if nothing has happened. Why do they not understand what I am feeling?

May God be gracious and use these thoughts to help us in our ministry to others and when the time comes to buoy us through those dark days.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

Rowan Jennings, Abbotsford, British Columbia