

# **Worship to Shepherd God's People Through Grief**

**Calvin Symposium on Worship**

**January 27-28, 2006**

**Session E**

**Presented by**

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## **I. Introduction**

### **II. A Theological Perspective on Death.**

- A. Why death? What caused it? Examining God's role and humanity's role.**
- B. The earthly body ceases to exist (Gen. 3:19 – "dust to dust").**
- C. The soul is immediately in heaven.**
- D. And is united with a radically new body (1 Cor. 15:37-44).**
- E. Have left behind completely all the circumstances, situations, and relationships of this earth – both those that are evil and those that are good (Rev. 21:4; Matt. 22:30).**
- F. Therefore, there remains no connection, including spiritual, between the deceased and this world.**

### **III. A Theological and Psychological Perspective on Grief.**

- A. Christians grieve.**
  - 1. Grief: A natural, complex response to loss (see attachment).**
  - 2. Christian grief as differentiated from a non-Christian orientation.**
  - 3. Grief as an intentional journey that necessitates grief work – not time alone.**
  - 4. Grief is affected by a multitude of individual factors.**
  - 5. Grief has an important public (systemic) dimension.**
  - 6. Grief can reach resolution and healing.**
- B. A healthy grief journey recognizes that death brings an end to this world's relationships.**
  - 1. Task One: Accepting the reality of the death with the realization that this person will not return.**
  - 2. Theological: Avoid the projection of earthly relationships into heaven as a source of comfort and consolation.**

3. **Psychological: Cognitive realization precedes the emotional.**

C. **A healthy grief journey expresses all the emotions associated with the death (Task Two).**

1. **Theological: Understanding the biblical model of lament.**

a. **Forms of lament**

**\*Personal (Ps. 13, 35, 86).**

**\*Communal (Ps. 74, 79).**

**\*Societal.**

b. **Typical pattern of lament and resolution (hope).**

**\*The Plea**

-an address to God

-the complaint

-the petition

-motivations (reasons why God should act)

-imprecation (calling down God's vengeance)

**\*The Praise**

-assurance of being heard

-payment of vows

-doxology and praise

c. **Lament and praise throughout the church year.**

2. **Psychological**

a. **Experience vs. expression of grief – gender differences.**

b. **The (devastating) power of unexpressed emotions.**

c. **Use of song to give expression to one's lament and praise.**

-Psalter Hymnal: Cf. Topical Index "Laments" and "Afflictions"  
(34 Psalms or hymns are listed)

-Sing! A New Creation (69, 71, 131, 141, 142, 221, 227, 233, 266,  
270, 272).

d. **Use of prayer and litanies to give expression to one's lament and praise.**

e. **Use of scripture to give expression to one's lament and praise:**

**Psalm 13, 35, 74, 79, 86.**

D. **A healthy grief journey embraces "remembering" as a basic scriptural premise and a psychologically necessary component of the grief process.**

1. **Task Three: Store memories that can be easily retrieved in order to prepare to move on.**

2. **Theological implications:** Scripture frequently invites us to remember the past in order to proceed toward the future (e.g., Passover, Joshua 4, Psalm 78, the Lord's Supper, etc.).
3. **Psychological implications:** The power of retelling stories, activating memories, but avoiding sanitizing or sanctifying those memories.

**E. A healthy grief journey realizes that the bereaved person continues with purpose and direction hopefully leading to a potentially richer and fuller investment in life.**

1. **Task Four:** Separate the identity of the bereaved from that of the deceased to understand who he/she is *now* in Christ.
2. **Task Five:** The bereaved reinvests in a new phase of his/her life with a re-configured sense of self.
3. **Theological implications:**
  - a. Scripture is full of new beginnings (e.g., Sabbath, Year of Jubilee, 2 Cor. 5:17).
  - b. A Christian believer's "vocation," created in God's image with purpose.
  - c. Understanding the corollaries of scripture (strength in weakness, joy in sorrow, etc.).
  - d. A deepened faith.
4. **Psychological implications:**
  - a. Better understanding of self-concept and self-esteem.
  - b. Difference between grief and momentary sadness.
  - c. Bereaved did not die, the loved one did.
  - d. Worshiping community needs to differentiate the bereaved from the deceased.

#### **IV. Implication of Grieving for the Worshiping Community.**

- A. Death and grief are an integral part of life and living, and they will continually be a part of the worshiping community.
- B. A grieving person may find church attendance and worship extremely difficult for a while.
- C. Getting to the point of being able to participate in worship with others as a bereaved individual may be difficult but is beneficial: e.g., litany reading, unison prayers, lighting of candles, singing about grief, etc.
- D. Grief often alters what a bereaved person may want to do within the worshiping community. Do not assume that former patterns of involvement will remain the same.
- E. Encourage those who have completed their grief journey to share their personal testimony with the worshiping community.
- F. Use realistic, specific words and phrases in addressing grief in prayers, announcements, and sermons, rather than euphemisms.

- G. Recognize that the faith of a bereaved person is challenged, sometimes to the core, but can emerge from doubt to be stronger, richer, and more nuanced.**
- H. As a worshipping community, balance the focus between societal and personal grief experiences so that the one doesn't overshadow the other.**
- I. Holidays can be especially challenging, but spiritually necessary and meaningful, for those who are grieving (especially Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Eve and Day, and Easter). Attempt to integrate grief into the regular service, delineating specifically how the meaning of the holiday offers healing and hope for eternal life. Inclusion of these elements in a regular service may be more beneficial than offering a separate "memorial" service.**
- J. In some locations, the climate of the seasons of the year can be used to symbolize the grief journey.**

**BOOKS WRITTEN BY SUSAN J. ZONNEBELT-SMEENGE  
AND ROBERT C. DE VRIES**

*Getting to the Other Side of Grief: Overcoming the Loss of a Spouse*

1998; ISBN 0-8010-5821-X

A comprehensive book on how to handle the grief journey following the death of a spouse.

*The Empty Chair: Handling Grief on Holidays and Special Occasions*

2001; ISBN 0-8010-6377-0

A small gift book for handling all types of grief on holidays and other special occasions in a family's life (fits nicely in a sympathy card).

*Living Fully in the Shadow of Death: Assurance and Guidance to Finish Well*

2004; ISBN 0-8010-6507-0

A major book addressing issues of understanding and accepting one's own sense of mortality whether healthy, facing a potential terminal illness, or facing an imminent death from both the individual and family's perspective.

*Traveling Through Grief: Learning to Live Again After the Death of a Loved One*, in press with Baker Publishing Group for release late spring or early summer 2006.

An easily readable book outlining specific approaches to working on five basic tasks of grief. Suitable for all types of death, and makes an excellent gift book for individuals and families.

**ALL BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE AT 50% DISCOUNT OR MORE WHEN PURCHASED IN QUANTITIES OF 10 OR MORE DIRECTLY FROM THE PUBLISHER FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION (40% OR MORE IF YOU WISH TO RESELL THEM).**

**Baker Publishing Group (800) 877-2665**

Zonnebelt-Smeenge and DeVries have also produced, through Calvin Theological Seminary, a four part training video entitled *Ministering to the Widowed* for use in churches for the training of care-givers in the congregation. This video is available at the Calvin College Bookstore or online at [www.calvin.edu](http://www.calvin.edu).

## Sample Litanies and Prayers

### **Welcome and Invitation**

L: Like the changing of the seasons – summer to fall, fall to winter, winter to spring, and spring to summer again – so our lives are in constant transition beginning with birth and ending with death.

C: *We remember our loved ones who have died before us.*

L: Through this memorial service, you are invited to cherish the memories of that loved one as the holidays approach.

C: *Sorrow has replaced our joy; we acknowledge the empty chair at our holiday table.*

L: As you carry their memories in your heart, we invite you to experience God's strength and comfort to give you courage for tomorrow.

C: *We take one step at a time toward an unknown future, certain of one thing in our uncertainty, that God will walk with us and hold us in the palm of his hand.*

### **Opening Prayer**

*Dear Lord: We are left without our loved ones as we approach each new moment.*

*Sorrow replaces our joy;*

*Fullness has become emptiness.*

*Special days now appear as agonizing moments to live through.*

*We pray for strength and courage to face our unappealing todays that seem like endless tomorrows.*

*We pray for your presence to comfort and strengthen us to face our future.*

*We are thankful you have promised never to leave us*

*And that our tomorrows may shine brightly through the promise of your grace.*

*Amen.*

### **Communal Prayers (responsively)**

Leader: O God, you have promised that you will be with us and never forsake us.

*Response: Lord, thank you for your presence in our lives.*

Leader: O God, you have declared that you will not give us more than we can bear.

*Response: Lord, give us the strength to deal with our sorrows and grief.*

Leader: O God, you have told us to trust in you and have no anxiety about anything.

*Response: Lord, we pray for your continued help in the face of our loss.*

Leader: O God, you have promised that we will be lifted up on wings of eagles and find joy from our sorrows.

*Response: Lord, help us to have the faith to believe that your grace will sustain us through our grief.*

Leader: O God, you have given us the clear message that all of us are valuable to you.

*Response: Lord, help us to discover a new sense of purpose this holiday season while we hold memories dear.*

Leader: O God, may your peace, comfort, and strength be with us into the new year.

*Response: Lord, thank you for the hope we have in you to embrace us with your love as we journey to the other side of our grief.*

All: Amen.

# **COMPONENTS OF GRIEF**

## ***Physical***

Anxiety/heart palpitation  
Health concerns  
Dry mouth  
Lack of energy  
Tight chest/ throat  
Muscle weakness  
Psychomotor retardation  
Weight loss/ gain  
Over-reaction to loud noise  
Breathlessness  
Hollowness in stomach  
Loss of sexual desire/ hypersexuality  
Physical pain  
Anorexia/ GI disturbance

## ***Emotional***

Shock/ numbness  
Denial  
Depression  
Sorrow  
Sadness  
Relief  
Guilt/ self reproach  
Anxiety  
Loneliness\* (most prevalent and persistent symptom)  
Anger  
Helplessness  
Yearning  
Emancipation  
Abandonment  
Powerlessness

## ***Spiritual***

Loss of faith and belief systems  
Questioning faith and belief

## ***Cognitive***

Disbelief/ denial  
Confusion  
Thought pre-occupation  
Sense of presence  
Forgetfulness  
Concentration difficulty  
Depersonalization  
Visual/ auditory hallucinations  
Repetition of events

## ***Behavioral***

Sleep disturbance  
Appetite disturbance  
Absentmindedness  
Social withdrawal  
Dreams of deceased  
Avoidance of reminders  
Search/ calling out  
Treasuring objects  
Restless over-activity  
Crying  
Clinging to reminders  
Inability to initiate and maintain organized activities

# **WHEN A LOVED ONE DIES**

## ***Preparing Yourself For the Inevitable***

1. Grief is a normal response to any loss and affects the grieving person physically, emotionally, and spiritually often causing the person to think and act in ways different from their previous “normal” behavior.
2. You may have heard something to the effect of “just give it time and you will eventually feel better.” Time is necessary to the healing process, but it is only one aspect of effective grieving.
3. In addition to taking time, grief requires intentional “work” by the bereaved in order to achieve a healthy outcome from the process. Similar to someone taking action to seek medical help to set a broken leg so that it might heal properly, the bereaved must take action to move through grief.
4. The intentional “work” of grief can be summarized in five basic tasks which involve specific behaviors (things to do to help yourself work through grief). The five basic tasks facing a bereaved person are:
  - a. Recognize and accept that your loved one has died and is unable to return. Although this task may sound obvious, many bereaved have a difficult time accepting the reality of a loved one’s death and facing the harsh fact that the person is not coming back.
  - b. Experience all of the emotions associated with the death of your loved one. Rather than attempting to suppress emotions only to have them come to expression later in more detrimental ways, a bereaved person achieves a healthier state more quickly by giving full expression to all the emotions they are experiencing (as long as they do not express themselves in destructive ways).
  - c. Identify, summarize, and find a place to store the memories of the deceased person which will honor the memories of that person and make room for the bereaved to eventually move on to a new volume in their life. Resolution of grief *never* means forgetting the loved one. Memories are precious possessions, but appropriate memories do not control our emotions on a daily basis. We are free to live life fully again in the present and remember the deceased when we choose to.
  - d. Identify who you are now, independent of your prior connection with the deceased person. Basically we are all individuals – that is how we were born and that is how we die. In order to truly live a full and complete life, especially following the death of a loved one, we must once again (re)discover who we are *individually* and independent of the relationship we had with the deceased.
  - e. Reinvest in life as an individual without the deceased person. We must learn to accept that all of life is marked by change. Each day calls for a new form of

investment. A bereaved person has experienced a deep trauma, but eventually this can be seen as an opportunity to “begin again” in a new and fresh way.

5. Did you know that:

- a. The grieving process usually takes at least one year in order to experience all the “firsts.” The grief process may take as long as two or three years, but the intensity of the emotional pain should decrease during that period of time. It is important not to make important decisions too quickly because you will feel differently about things as you move through the grief process.
- b. A sudden or unexpected death may cause significant initial shock or numbness and may also lengthen the grieving process.
- c. Knowing in some way that a person is going to die (anticipating the death) does *not* reduce the intensity of the grief or pain. Anticipating the death may help motivate you to engage in some planning (e.g., concerning financial, funeral, and relationships matters) which might make the grief process less cumbersome.
- d. The grieving process is also affected by many other factors, including the personalities of the people involved, the type of relationship someone had with the deceased, and the present circumstances of one’s life (e.g., age, family structures, finances, health, employment, children, etc.).
- e. A person can “resolve” their grief and move again into a happy, healthy and satisfying life. “Resolution” means that the emotional pain of the death no longer controls your day to day activities and that you are once again able to develop a perspective on your life which is positive and future-oriented. Moments may arise which trigger a temporary emotional response to the death in the same way that emotions are associated with other past events in our lives. Resolved grief, however, means that you have been able to (re)construct a new “normal” lifestyle which is fulfilling and purposeful without holding on to the deceased person.

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