



When a Child Dies

By: Richard D. Dobbins

In the natural order of life, children bury their parents. When a child's death reverses this order and confronts parents with the loss of their child, the unnatural circumstances of their loss aggravate their pain. In my 40 years as a therapist, some of my greatest challenges and most agonizing moments have come when trying to help parents find healing for their broken hearts after the death of their child.

For these parents and their families, life will never be the same again. The loss of their child will either leave them bitter or better, but they will never be the same. The goal of good pastoral care for families who face this sad challenge is to help them find hope and healing through the comfort of a loving God.

Healing from the death of a child is never easy. The process is much more difficult when the child has been living at home under parental care than when he or she is older and living on their own. Also, the cause of death can severely complicate and retard the recovery process. Birth anomalies (including stillbirths), Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, diseases, accidents, surgical complications, kidnapping, rape, murder, and suicide are just a few of the cruel ways our children can be snatched from us. The burden of grief that follows each of these tragedies is unique and requires a slightly different path to recovery.

The more atrocious the cause of the child's death, the longer and more aggravated the recovery process is likely to be. When a child is battling a terminal illness and death mercifully ends the pain and suffering, the loss is still agonizing, but it is easier for parents to accept than when death comes accidentally and suddenly to a healthy child. When a molester or kidnapper kills a child, it may be years before parents can move beyond the grief of such a tragedy. Unfortunately, some never do. What follows are some common challenges in recovery that all parents who have lost a child must take if they are to move beyond their grief.

Dealing With the Loss

Along with the family, the wise pastor will acknowledge that for parents who have lost a child, life will never be the same. Any attempt to convince them you know how they feel — unless you have lost a child — will sound hollow and calloused to them. God, however, knows how they feel. He can bring them the healing they need. Here are some ways pastors can help in the process. Encourage the family to:

Pour out their grief to the Lord

In their grief, many parents forget that God had an only Child whom He gave to be our Savior. The Father watched while those He desired to save cruelly murdered His only Son. God knows the grief of every parent who has lost a child. Encourage these parents to find in His everlasting arms a comfort that only He can give. After all, He is “the God of all comfort” (Deuteronomy 33:27; 2 Corinthians 1:3,4).

Tears are like a balm to the grieving heart. Encourage parents who have lost a child to cry as often and freely as necessary to express their grief. It will probably take from 18 months to 2 years for them to recover from the worst of their grief. In cases in which aggravated grief follows the accidental death or murder of a healthy child, recovery time can

extend from 3 to 5 years. Well-meaning friends and family members may grow impatient with the prolonged grief that follows a child's death. However, grieving parents need to know that this recovery time is normal.

Parents will need pastoral care through the entire process of their grief. How the church responds to the parents' loss can affect their attitude toward the church for years to come. People never forget those who care for them when they are hurting. Unfortunately, they never forget the people who neglect them during their pain.

The first year is the most difficult. Parents are quick to recall that this time last year the child was with them. Getting through the first year of birthdays and holidays without the child is painful. When the initial wave of grief begins to subside, reassure parents that even though life will never be the same it can be good for them again. They may resent hearing you say this, but extending this hope will encourage them to move through their pain.

I vividly recall a couple's initial visit with me after they had lost their teenage daughter in a tragic automobile accident. When I suggested that, at some point in the future, life could be good for them again, the mother could not contain her frustration. When I saw the couple several years later, however, they told me they had reached a place in which life was good for them again. It was not the same; nor, could it ever be. The scars of their loss, however, had transformed into memories of God's faithfulness during the years of their grief.

Do not try to make sense out of their child's death

Some things in life do not make sense. The death of a child is one of them. When parents try to figure out why their child has died, they are more likely to complicate their recovery than they are to simplify it.

The Christmas story confronts us with Herod's heinous slaughter of the infants in his vain effort to kill Jesus. Such a senseless outburst of violence left hundreds of parents paralyzed by grief that defied any effort to explain it.

Trying to make sense out of a child's death is usually an attempt to undo the reality after the fact. It is as though, if the parents had known what was going to happen, they could have taken steps to prevent it. This process is part of the struggle to come to grips with the heartbreaking reality of the child's loss.

Refuse to live in denial

Years ago I saw a couple whose only son had been killed in an automobile accident 17 years earlier. They had refused to accept the reality of his death. His room had not been touched since his death, except to clean it. Every meal they set a place for him at the table. Occasionally, they would carry on a conversation with him as though he were there. In many respects, they had stopped living when their son died.

After hearing their sad story, I suggested that they begin healing from their son's death by ending the practice of setting a place at the table for him. This was difficult for them to do, but after a few weeks they noticed they were enjoying their meals more.

The next step out of their denial was to dispose of their son's things and turn his bedroom into a useful part of their home. This task was more challenging for them. I encouraged them to keep their family pictures of him and one or two articles that held special significance for them. These kinds of mementos help us appropriately remember loved ones, but it is never healthy to turn a room that once belonged to your now deceased child into a museum.

Accept the finality of the child's death

One of the most pathetic scenes in the Old Testament is that of King David pleading for the life of the child he had conceived in his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. Yet, when his servants finally informed him of the child's death, "David got up from the ground. After he had washed, put on lotions and changed his clothes, he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. Then he went to his own house, and at his request, they served him food, and he ate. His servants asked him, 'Why are you acting this way? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept, but now that

the child is dead, you get up and eat!’ He answered, ‘While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, ‘Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me and let the child live. But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me’ ” (2 Samuel 12:20–23).

David knew that his life would never be the same again. However, he refused to allow his child’s death to become the end of his life. Instead, his child became an eternal treasure for him, inspiring him to look forward to the time when they would be together again. A few months later David comforted Bathsheba by giving her another child — Solomon. The Scriptures faithfully record, “The lord loved him” (2 Samuel 12:24).

For many people, this is the most difficult step toward recovery. It is as though for them to enjoy life again is somehow to belittle or dishonor the loss of their child. Had David and Bathsheba taken this attitude, they might never have conceived Solomon.

Keep your love for God constant through your pain

The biggest challenge parents face is keeping their love for God constant through the pain of their loss. We have God’s Word that if we will love Him through all things, even the tragic ones, He will make them work together for our good (Romans 8:28).

This is not an easy assignment when you have lost a child. On the other hand, there are probably few, if any, other times when we need to feel nearer to God and experience more of His love. He has promised to draw near to us when we draw near to Him (James 4:8). Letting your grief drive you to God is the healthiest way you can respond to it.

Dealing With the Guilt

Pastors are better equipped to help people deal with issues of guilt in their lives than any other professional person. When a child dies, real and imagined guilt often confront parents. When a baby is stillborn or dies from a congenital disease, the mother or father may take the blame for the child’s death. Whether the connection is real or imagined, the mother and father need to deal with the guilt.

If parents imagine the guilt, remind the person of Satan’s role as our accuser and encourage him to deny Satan’s accusation (Revelation 12:10). Dealing with the pain of loss is difficult. The last thing a grieving parent needs is the unnecessary burden of self-imposed guilt.

If the guilt is real and the child’s death is the result of irresponsible decisions one or both parents made, you, as their pastor, will need to lead them through confession and forgiveness as outlined in the Scripture (1 John 1:7–9). You may feel that taking such a position is almost cruel. Compassionately understanding their guilt and enabling them to deal with it from a biblical point of view, however, will bring them tremendous relief.

Parents gain nothing by condemning themselves to live under a shadow of guilt for the rest of their lives because they cannot reverse their decisions. This is not what their child would wish for them. When you help them receive forgiveness from God and help them understand that their deceased child would forgive them as well, you aid in their recovery.

Dealing With Anger and Bitterness

The overwhelming nature of a child’s death creates a need to fix responsibility and blame. At times, parents direct this responsibility and blame toward God. Parents may feel uncomfortable discussing their anger toward God with their pastor. Sharing moments with them when you have been angry with God, and the relief you experienced by expressing this in your prayers, will make them feel less guilty for entertaining these normal feelings.

Reminding parents of Job’s trials can be helpful. By God’s own admission, Job was the most righteous person in the world (Job 1:8). When he felt his treatment was unfair, Job was angry with God. He was secure enough in his relationship with God to tell Him just how he felt. Let parents know they can express their anger verbally to God. Then, encourage them to meditate on God for His comforting response to their outrage. Any tendency one parent has to blame the other needs to be mediated so their pain will drive them closer to God and each other.

Often, a parent is angry with himself. Anger turned inward can create crippling burdens of depression. At times, the threat of suicide may be evident. In such cases, the parent needs someone to carefully monitor him. You also need to make a prudent referral to a competent Christian mental health professional to provide the person with adequate care. Remind the parent that punishing himself will bring added pain to the marriage and the family. It will not replace the loss of their child.

Remind parents that their other living children also feel the loss of their sibling. Often, the other children feel neglected and undervalued when a sibling dies. Healthy parents will redirect the love they had for the child they lost into the lives of their living children. This helps bring healing to parents and comfort to their other children.

Sometimes when death suddenly snatches teenagers or older children away from parents, parents agonize over whether their child will spend eternity in heaven or hell. Remind these parents that God has put us in sales and not in management. Reassure them that their child is in the hands of God. God loves them more than anyone on earth could possibly love them. Encourage parents to leave their child in God's care.

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