



Sunday, August 15, 2021

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# WEST VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

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## 10 Lessons I Learned from Christians Dealing with Grief (continued)

**5. Self-blame is common** – In each of the people I interviewed, there was some degree of self-blame. Jeff and his wife probably experienced the least amount of this of those with whom I spoke, but Jeff still pointed out, “When negative things happen, it’s natural to blame yourself.” Josh reported feeling profound anger at himself and that this was the primary form of grief he experienced. Sherry’s husband has been gone for about two years, and in the lead up to his death there were signs both that he was going to die and that he was ready to die. However, in spite of the time that has now passed and the fact that she knew her husband’s death was coming, Sherry still continues to struggle with self-blame to this day.

The path out of self-blame looked different for each person I interviewed. Jeff and his wife came to believe that it was not God’s intent to punish them; in fact, over time they have begun to believe in the possibility that God could have used their daughter’s death to protect them or her from something worse. Sherry has only begun to find peace with herself after observing the same tendency towards self-blame in her grief support group. Josh said that one day he was standing in the chow line in prison and it hit him: “I am the reason I am miserable.”

Given that knowledge is helpful, perhaps the only thing a bystander can offer someone who is self-blaming is a simple reassurance that it is not his/her fault and that what he/she is doing is normal. Both reassurances might fall on deaf ears though, as it seems each person must plot his/her own path out of this struggle.

**6. Waves of grief** – All of the people I interviewed seemed to indicate the fact that grief flows in waves; in fact, Sherry and Jeff used this exact terminology. Josh did not, but he said, “It comes and goes.” Interestingly, in the context of marriage, Jeff said that inevitably when one of them was experiencing a “high” the other was experiencing a “low.” This aspect of grief ought also to be identified to the grieving as normal. Further, when someone faces a truly traumatic event, it might be reasonable to assume that the waves never cease, they simply grow less dramatic.

**7. Sufferers see benefits, but bystanders cannot point them out** – All of the people I interviewed who had experienced grief were able to see benefit in at least some of their grief. Sherry is probably still struggling to find real purpose in her life after having devoted so much time and energy to caring for her husband at the end of his life. However, she said the first trial her family faced, the plane accident, changed her husband. She said that from that point forward he said, “There must be something God wants me to do.” She also said that from that point forward they were on a search (though sometimes it took a back seat to other things in life); she believes that search ultimately led her and her husband to the Lord’s church. Josh thanks God that he has been able to find love, marriage, a family, and even a place in ministry since his tragedy. Jeff startled himself the other night, nearly two years after his loss, by saying to his wife, “I wish it never happened, but I’m so glad I’m not the person I was before it happened.” He described it as a paradox: if his daughter had been healthy, he would not have been as good of a parent as she deserved; she died, allowing him to be a better parent to the children he and his wife adopted.

Jeff was quick to point out that even his comment said to his wife with whom he had shared the same traumatic experience could have been inappropriate and that he had apologized to her immediately. Jeff said pointing out silver linings can always be inappropriate to a sufferer – any sufferer – and I tend to agree. What I learned through the interviewing process is that there are no categorical “right words,” and that even words that seem right or might be right at one time or another can be wrong when spoken at the wrong time.

(continued next week)

