

## **“A Time for Mourning”**

Genesis 49.33 – 50.3; Deuteronomy 34.5-8

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I got to enjoy a long run yesterday on the River Trail in Lansing, my first such opportunity in a few months. My gosh, what a gorgeous afternoon, with the fall colors, and the leaves floating down the Red Cedar River, and the bright sun in the glorious blue sky. I wasn't the only one out enjoying the afternoon; I saw dozens – hundreds – of people at leisure: couples, young and old, walking and holding hands; families out for bike rides, moms pushing strollers; dads pulling tag-a-longs; teenagers playing basketball; children on playgrounds; lots of people at Potter Park Zoo; numerous people in kayaks; a few people walking dogs, and one dog walking a person – it was refreshing and encouraging, in the midst of all the stress and strain our society is under, to see so many people just *having a good time*. Relaxing, enjoying one another's company, enjoying the beauty and grandeur of creation on a splendidly warm and gorgeous fall day, enjoying *life*. 'Tis a good thing, a very good thing, to be alive.

But today I want to talk about life's opposite. I want to talk about death. Death is one of the few certainties in life. Or perhaps I should say, “virtual certainty,” since the scriptures tell us that there have been a couple people who managed to escape death, namely Enoch, in Genesis 5, who “walked with God” and “disappeared because God took him;” and Elijah, in 2 Kings 2, who was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. Two people, out of countless billions, managed to escape death. The odds for any of the rest of us – or the people we love – somehow managing to escape death are pretty slim.

Unless God has some truly special plans for you, odds are, you're going to die someday. Your body will take its last breath, your soul will depart, and the people who love you will weep bitter tears. Your body will be either buried or cremated. There will probably be a funeral or memorial service for you. Maybe you will have left behind some wishes and desires; maybe you'll leave it for your loved ones to come up with a plan; that's really up to you and your family. People will come. People will minimize your flaws and extol your virtues. Depending on how you've lived your life and what kind of impact you've had on people around you, there might be more or less extolling. There might be some laughter. There will probably be some tears. And then people will go home, and try to get on with their lives, as best they can, knowing that there will never be a day here on this earth when they will have an opportunity to see you again, talk with you again, love you again. Time marches on ... and so will they.

Thankfully, for us Christians, that's not the end of the story. What a dreary picture it would be, if that's all there were. A life ended, like a candle snuffed out, except the candle can't be re-lit again.

Are you prepared for the reality that someday, sooner or later, you are going to *die*? Have you come to terms with that? Or with the fact that sooner or later, the people who are nearest and dearest to you are *also* going to die? And that you don't get to choose which of you will go first?

I have buried 44 people since moving here to Mason eight and a half years ago. Some of those died young. Some died after a long and full life. Some died after a long decline; others suddenly, unexpectedly, out of the blue. I have prayed and wept with family after family ... and it hurts, every single time.

I've learned a few things along the way. I knew a lot of this already, but seeing the process unfold time after time has reinforced a few things.

First: funerals are expensive. Funerals can be *very* expensive. At many funeral homes, you can make pre-arrangements and pre-pay, but even then, one family told me recently how surprised they were at how many *additional* expenses there were they hadn't planned for. Some families are choosing to have limited funeral home involvement to cut down on costs. A couple years ago I learned that there is a place in Jackson that specializes in low-cost cremations, to help low-income families. It's worth taking a trip to your funeral home of choice to begin making plans and thinking about the costs. Many people are reluctant to do that, afraid to face the reality of their own mortality. But unless God grants you a special dispensation like he did with Enoch or Elijah, *your day is going to come*, sooner or later. It's just a matter of time. Do you want your family to have to face it – and the costs – on their own? Or do you want to help them prepare? It's up to you. You might want to talk with your family about that.

Second: Grief is messy. Grief can be *really* messy. People can experience everything from shock to sadness to anger to despair to hopelessness to a need for control to an unwillingness to risk loving someone for fear of losing them, and so much more. There is no such thing as “stages of grief” – despite the title of that popular book from the 1960s; even the author herself later regretted calling it “stages” of grief. You're not going to be able to predict how you will feel one day to the next, even one moment to the next, after someone you love has died. I remember my first experience of grief; I was 13 years old, and my grandfather, my dad's dad, had died. It was expected; he had cancer; we got the phone call in the late afternoon; my parents started packing so we could drive down to Tulsa the next day. I went about my business, pretty much like normal, until I went to bed. Once my head was on the pillow and the light was out, I started to cry. Soon I was sobbing. My mom heard me and came in to comfort me. Soon we were both crying. It was good, and healing, for both of us.

Third, and probably the biggest lesson I have learned: there is a time for mourning. In the biblical stories, we hear about “periods of mourning” – designated time parameters for a mourner to mourn. When Jacob, the ancestor of all Israel, died, the Israelites mourned for 40 days, and the Egyptians mourned him for 70 days. When Moses died, the Israelites mourned for 30 days, and then “the time for weeping and for mourning” was over. At different points in biblical history there seem to have been different time parameters for the period of mourning, but invariably it was a period of *weeks*.

Over the years, I have seen a number of people have too *short* a mourning period, and some that have had too *long*. Our society today does not have a designated time period, but it is fairly

common that people in our society try to get on with their lives *too soon*. They'll carve time out to deal with the arrangements and have the funeral, but then they'll try to get right back to work or into their daily routines as soon as possible. In one case, a family member was so busy he claimed he didn't have time to help plan the funeral. I found myself wondering, is he *really* that busy – or is it just the case that he doesn't want to face his grief? Another time, a beloved spouse had died, and I literally had to *talk the surviving spouse into having a funeral*. They just wanted to go right back to work, and not deal with their pain, and not let anybody else deal with theirs either. I had to go that person's office, and say, "You need to reconsider this," because what they were doing wasn't fair or helpful for anybody. A healthier response was the comment that someone else made, after a loved one had died, indicating that they had no idea just how helpful and healing going through the funeral process was going to be. A lot of people in our society are trying to avoid dealing with their pain. Avoid dealing with their grief. Some people – and this is especially true for men – don't want to cry. Not even if their wife, or their mother, or their child has just died. Come *on*, guys. Grow up! You don't have to play "macho man" all the time. God gave you tear ducts for a reason. The people I know who have dealt with their grief the best are the ones who have let themselves cry and cry some more, until they didn't feel like they had any tears left. *You gotta let yourself grieve*. A day or two doesn't cut it. Take the time you need to *work through your emotions*. All of it – the anger, the rage, the sadness, the despair, the brokenheartedness, *whatever* – *have the courage to face it*. The biblical models suggest a period of *weeks* is appropriate. Don't feel like you have to rush back into "normal life" right away, because normal life just got dramatically altered, and there's a huge hole in your heart, and that takes time to heal. If you don't deal with it right away, your heart will *make* you deal with it later, and there may be a price you'll have to pay for delaying as long as you did. *Give yourself the time you need to grieve*. Tend to your aching heart.

The other extreme are those who never manage to get past their grief. This isn't as common, but I do see it from time to time. Months, *years*, have gone by since the loved one died, and this person is still *overwhelmed* by grief. They may have withdrawn from other people; their life may have become virtually incapacitated by their feelings of loss; they may have developed a despairing outlook on life. There is such a thing as *prolonged grief disorder*. It is a pathological condition that requires *professional treatment*. (Look it up!) If you have a friend who is still deeply grieving the loss of a loved one *years later*, do them a *huge* favor, and *persistently insist* that they get themselves to a professional counselor. There is a time for mourning, and there is a time for mourning to be *over*, at least, to a very large degree. You're still going to have that little ache in your heart till the day you die, but it shouldn't be immobilizing you, if it's been *years* since the loss. There is a time for mourning....

... and – finally – there's a time for *joy*. The fullness of joy, offered through the saving death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. To us belongs the precious gift of being able to follow in his footsteps. Death will not be the end for us, any more than it was for him. There is *life* beyond the grave. There is *hope* and *peace* and fullness of *joy*. My run yesterday afternoon gave me a whole new image. All those people, enjoying the beauty and the grandeur and the majesty of God's creation, enjoying that precious gift called *life*. Take all that beauty and grandeur and majesty and life, and multiply it exponentially. Imagine the *glory!* A glorious fall day is but a taste of the *joy* that is to come.

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