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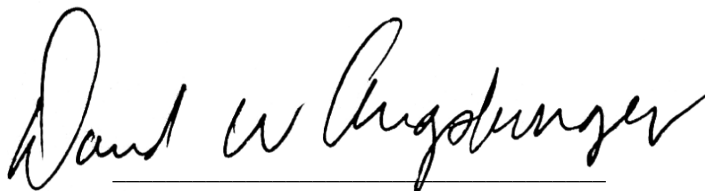
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Doctor of Ministry

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GROWING THROUGH GRIEF:
HELPING THE HURTING TO HEAL AT SIERRA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

MICHAEL GRIFFIN
FEBRUARY 2015

ABSTRACT

Growing Through Grief: Helping the Hurting to Heal at Sierra Presbyterian Church

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Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2014

The purpose of this project is to help people grow through grief, which is a journey with many detours that can lead in many directions. Despite the great potential for discouragement and despair, people can find healing if they incorporate the critical elements of staying in communication with God, in community with others, and caring for others out of their experience. To encourage those who are grieving and those who care for them, the project presents a practical plan for how to help people grow through grief. The thesis was tested at Sierra Presbyterian Church in Nevada City, California. The project begins by exploring the prevailing model of stages of grief that was developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. It then takes up the two-track hypothesis of Kubler-Ross's mentor, Carl Nighswonger, who showed that grief does not always lead to acceptance, but may lead to resignation or forlornness instead. Building on this hypothesis, this project addresses the cyclical nature of grief that is explored by a number of other writers. It will also look at a number of biblical examples of those who have grown through grief and what Reformed theology has to say about God's role in the process. What results is a practical plan for how to help people grow through grief. This is accomplished by encouraging people to: stay in communication with God by praying the Psalms, in community with others through a grief workshop and grief groups, and to play a role in supporting others who are grieving through sharing their own grief stories. An evaluation and assessment plan is presented to show how this strategy has enabled people to grow in the context of Sierra Presbyterian Church.

Theological Mentor: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD.

Words: 285

This doctoral project is dedicated to my wife Beth and to all who have come alongside us
in our own journey of grief

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INTRODUCTION

The soul of another is not something you can visibly see, but God uses a variety of circumstances to encourage its growth. Certainly experiences of grief and loss can play a role in the growth of the soul. As Jerry Sittser writes in *A Grace Disguised*, “Catastrophic loss leaves the landscape of one’s life forever changed.”¹ The trouble is that change can be for good or evil. As a result, this project explores how to offer pastoral care in a way that encourages the growth of the soul through experiences of grief. To explore how the soul can grow through experiences of grief and loss, this project will address the barriers to such growth and give a number of biblical and contemporary examples of those who have been transformed through trials. Finally, the project looks at the central characteristics of staying in communication with God, in community with others, and caring for others as a redemptive response to one’s own loss, so that the members and friends of Sierra Presbyterian Church (hereafter, Sierra Presbyterian) can heal and grow through their grief. All of this will lead to a practical approach which will involve praying the Psalms, participating in grief workshops and groups, and encouraging people to share their stories with others who are seeking to grow through their own grief.

Clearly the movement of the soul is mysterious. It is not something one can quantify or qualify. Much like the work of a famous impressionist painter, an understanding of the soul or an attempt to capture its movement will not be exact; rather it will reflect the impression one has. Yet, there are signs when it happens. One may see

¹ Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 16.

it in another's countenance through the lifting of a head that had previously been bowed down by grief. Growth may be seen in the strength of one's voice, or the extending of hands reaching out in love that had previously been withdrawn, wrapped up in comforting themselves. It can be seen when people who have clearly received God's comfort become a conduit of comfort for others as Paul suggests in 2 Corinthians 1: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 Cor 1:3-4).²

It would be great if each person who had been troubled by grief grew through his or her experience so that they became a source of comfort for others, but that is not always the case. Many are familiar with the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, who, in her book entitled *On Death and Dying*, discusses the stages of dying. Kubler-Ross marks the movement of grief from denial to acceptance. People first face denial, she says, when they react to the reality of death. If denial is no longer possible, they often respond with rage because it does not seem fair. During this time they may particularly feel anger toward God as the one who caused or at least allowed their suffering. When a person comes to terms with the reality of the loss, it often leads to bargaining. They promise to do anything if God would only return things to normal. When bargaining fails, people often plunge into depression. They recognize that things will not be the same again. The hope is that people eventually arrive at acceptance. In Kubler-Ross's words in *Death and Dying*, "Finally, we may achieve peace-our own inner peace as well as peace between

² All Scripture quoted is from the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

nations-by facing and accepting the reality of our own death.”³

Unfortunately, while loss is a part of life, not every person who goes through a journey of grief arrives at this point of acceptance. It is interesting to note that Kubler-Ross’s mentor Carl Nighswonger had a model that offered two different pathways. As David Augsburger notes, “One [model], his colleague Kubler-Ross developed after his own sudden death, moves from denial to acceptance; the other to resignation and forlornness. Many people die in despair, stoic resignation, or bitter forlornness. Perhaps hope and acceptance are much less common than defeat.”⁴ In fact, many people get stuck at some point in their grief journey. Rather than grow, they may remain frozen in denial, depression, or despair. For instance, Sittser writes about denial, “denial puts off what should be faced. People in denial refuse to see loss for what it is, something terrible that cannot be reversed. They dodge pain rather than confront it. But their unwillingness to face pain comes at a price. Ultimately it diminishes the capacity of their souls to grow bigger in response to pain . . . In the end denial leads to a greater loss.”⁵

One form that this type of denial can take is denying death itself. Ernst Becker says that at the core of most human problems is the “denial of death.” In the *Denial of Death* he writes that “the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is the mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid

³ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969), 16.

⁴ David Augsburger, *The Call to Soul-Making and Soul-Mending* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2008).

⁵ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 47.

the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man.”⁶ Sadly the denial of death or grief itself will not lead to growth.

Everyone experiences circumstances that are out of their control. What they do have control over is how they respond. As a result people may choose to believe that there is a bigger picture, that their losses are part of some wonderful story authored by God himself. By the grace of God those willing have made of their experience a source of spiritual growth. As Sittser asserts, “The decision to face the darkness, even if it led to overwhelming pain, showed me that the experience of loss itself does not have to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be *our response* to the loss. It is not what happens *to* us that matters as much as what happens *in* us.”⁷

According to Murray Bowen, “grief is the residue of the unworked-out part of the relationship.”⁸ As a result, when someone dies who is in mid-life, there is much that has not been worked out and can leave a family gripped with grief as they struggle with the loss of roles and identity in relation to that person. A loss like that affects our crucial roles of father and son, mother and child, breadwinner or homemaker. Stripped of these roles we can feel that we have been stripped of the self. The death of someone later in life can leave the next generation searching for new ground or orientation from which to live life. The death of a child sends shock waves throughout a family because so many of the hopes and dreams of parents are wrapped up in children. Studies show that separation

⁶ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), ix.

⁷ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 36.

⁸ Augsburger, *The Call to Soul-Making and Soul-Mending*, 86.

or divorce occurs in 70 to 90 percent of couples who experience the death of a child. The death of a child, my daughter Kylie, has been my most profound experience of grief in my life and part of my interest in this topic. While my wife and I are still together and have had two other children since Kylie's death, now ten years later I still feel like I am coming out of the fog of grief that I plunged into when Kylie died.

This fog-like feeling following an intense experience of loss is reflected by others who have written about grief. In the raw emotion of the recent loss of his wife expressed in *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis suggests that grief "feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me."⁹ In another place he states, "You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears."¹⁰ During this time he liked to have people around who talked to one another but not to him because this gave him a sense of activity without involvement. Sittser observes, "I remember those first moments after the accident as if everything was happening in slow motion. They are frozen into my memory with a terrible vividness. . . In the hours that followed the accident, the initial shock gave way to an unspeakable agony. I felt dizzy with grief's vertigo, cut off from family and friends, tormented by the loss, nauseous from the pain."¹¹ In *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott illustrates the emotional fog that a fresh experience of grief brings by saying that it is much like snorkeling. You have a sense of others being around you but you feel like you are floating in your own little world, just

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹¹ Sittser, *A Grief Observed*, 17-18.

you and the few fish you can see through your mask.¹² Like looking through a snorkeling mask, grief can give us tunnel vision.

Similar to these others, in the days following my daughter Kylie's death I felt dazed and numb. There were spikes of anger at God and others, and the sting of sadness was so painful at times that it seemed that all I could do was cry and ache. It was the worst at night. My wife tends to go to bed earlier than I do, and it was then that I was often alone with my thoughts and my tears. I always cried. Often I cried myself to sleep or simply sat in the dark and cried out to God for help. It was then that I learned what St. John of the Cross meant by the "Dark Night of the Soul."

I can remember that prayer did not come easily during this time; I did not know what to say. Sometimes I would start to pray, and all I could say is "God, help!" Other times all I could do was cry out to God and the words and the tears would flow. At first I was not sure how much I wanted to talk to a God who would allow this to happen. But soon I found that despite the mystery and my incessant "why's?" I had nowhere else to turn if it was not to God. Believing and relying upon a God who did not act the way I expected was almost unbearable; a world without God was unbearable.

After a number of weeks I went back to church and started reassuming my pastoral responsibilities. Somehow I got through those early hours and days by God's grace. It felt like if I just kept moving I would be alright. I can remember getting up to lead the congregation I served in prayer and admitting that I was not sure how to pray or that the extent of my own prayers during the last week had been "Help!" and "Please!"

¹² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 77-78.

All I can say is that it hurt, but slowly and surely God entered into that hurt and gave me hope. Journaling my prayers, or rather my complaints to God, helped the most. During that season, my prayer journal was filled with entries like these on January 29, 2004:

Lord, I am at a loss. It has only been five days since Kylie passed away, so suddenly, without warning. What does moving forward look like? What does life look like after such a terrible tragedy? After bearing the burden of parenting a special needs child for the last eight years, how do Beth and I cope with the void that is left? You alone know Lord, you alone know the purposes and plans you will reveal. But right now there is such pain and sadness, such grief that I don't really know how to go on. I can't stand the thought of seeing her casket, to know that Kylie's dead and lifeless body is inside of it. And to be so close without the ability to hold her and bring her back to life. Only you can do that Lord, only you can receive her into your arms in heaven and give her a new, imperishable body that she will be in for all eternity. That is my hope and in you Lord I place my faith. But for now I hurt, I feel the tremendous void that her passing has left and I know that it will always be there to some extent. How can I go on with that void? How can I be filled with your Holy Spirit and joy when my little, young, beautiful girl has been taken away? Help Lord!

Slowly but surely my prayers seemed to turn a corner. Though still filled with a lot of confusion, I also experienced the seeds of hope that would grow into a deeper experience of faith in God's faithfulness. This can be seen in journal entries like the one written on February 2, 2004:

Lord, so many times I prayed for healing during Kylie's lifetime, all the way up to the point of her death, but it never came in the way I had hoped. I never got to see her walk or hear her talk in this life. Never got to hear her say "Daddy," or "I love you." Reading the story of how you healed a young girl (Matthew 9) brings the hurt and void in my heart to bear once more. I firmly believe that you healed that girl, bringing her back to life and I believe you can still heal today, but in Kylie's case you didn't. Maybe you did bring healing in other ways though, healing the way many people view those with disabilities, healing me and others of how we falsely measure the worth of a life. You have brought healing into my life in terms of developing mercy and compassion in me through her. In that sense, her short life taught me so much and touched me in so many ways. While I don't understand your timing and your plan for her life, I thank you Lord for the eternal healing and wholeness that I believe Kylie now has and for the hope that you can slowly fill this large void that is left by her death. Fill me God,

for I am empty and broken, fill me with the reservoir of your Spirit. Sustain me with your unfathomable love that knows no height nor depth. Thank you that your love is always near me. Search me and know me, receive me in my grief and loss.

That same day I went for a run along the beach to clear my mind. I was a cross country runner in high school and college, and running has always been a way that I have processed my feelings. It was during this run that I started to reflect on how grief plays a role in our transformation. In fact, since that time, I have come to hold that we cannot grow to become more like Jesus, to be changed for good, unless we learn how to grieve.

There are many things that can be learned from loss. First, a person can gain knowledge that they are not alone in their experience of grief. They may find their perspective shaped by seeing the loss in light of the eternal purposes of God. Perspective can help people when they cannot see clearly through the fog of their own feelings of disorientation. Conviction is also necessary for growth in the journey toward Christ-likeness. Often suffering is the seed-bed of a deeper, heart-felt conviction. Suffering may also impart new skills for ministry; new levels of compassion may be developed within a person through the experience. Finally, and most fully, grief and loss impact our character. There is nothing that shapes character like the challenges people face in life.

These five areas of growth in Christ-likeness, developed by Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Church*,¹³ can be seen through a number of people in Scripture. I believe they are being formed in my own life, and that these qualities can be developed in anyone who seeks Christ out in the midst of his or her suffering. This type of growth is the focus

¹³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 350-362.

of this doctoral project in order that it might encourage those who are grieving and those caring ministry professionals who support them in their suffering.

Though no one knows why God allows certain trials to come into someone's life, it is certain that God wants people to grow and mature through them, and that experiences of grief can lead to growth in character and Christ-likeness. In fact, grief is unlike any other experience in life in its ability to bring spiritual growth. My own experience is one of tremendous mystery and tragedy as well as grace and redemption. In and through that experience I have found that grief enlarges our capacity for relationship with God.

Unfortunately, at the same time, it also creates a larger space that sometimes is allowed to be filled with other things. As a result, life crises are doors of change—for good or evil. Just as grief can lead people into the arms of God, it can also lead into addictions that fill people but do not satisfy. Grief can lead to isolation and anger, or it can lead to a place of hope and a deeper experience of community. Sittser adds that “the soul is elastic, like a balloon. It can grow larger through suffering. Loss can also enlarge its capacity for anger, depression, despair, and anguish, all natural and legitimate emotions whenever we experience loss. Once enlarged, the soul is capable of experiencing greater joy, strength, peace, and love.”¹⁴ Thus, grief leads to an opportunity for growth. “It is therefore not true that we become less through loss-unless we allow the loss to make us less, grinding our soul down until there is nothing left but an external self entirely under the control of circumstances. Loss can also make us more.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

The seventeenth-century French physicist and theologian, Blasé Pascal, held that each person has a God-shaped vacuum in their hearts that only God can fill. So, when someone faces the inevitable griefs of life, he or she can allow God to fill them or other things will. Lewis states it similarly in *The Problem of Pain*, “And as to God, we must remember that the soul is but a hollow which God fills.”¹⁶ To stay united with God through an experience of loss, so that space that was created through suffering leads to growth instead of deprivation, the sufferer has to be open to the gifts only God can bring.

Pain produces fruit in our lives, but the kind of fruit it will produce depends on how each responds. Through loss people can experience a process in which God fills them with the fruit of the Spirit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). For instance, in my own experience, there is the fruit of faithfulness in my family life and ministry that also emerged as a result of my experience of grief. That does not mean I have it all together; far from it. What it does mean is that I have embarked on a journey of growth and maturity in response to my experience of grief and that I have identified some barriers as well as keys to that growth. Through an exploration of Scripture, what I have seen in the grieving members of the congregations I have served, as well as through my own personal journey, I have come to see three primary characteristics in those who grow through grief: they stay in communication with God, in community with others, and seek to care for others as a redemptive response to their own grief. The pages that follow will reflect on these qualities and detail a strategy for ministering to the grieving that it leads to growth.

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1962), 151.

PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

COMMUNITY CONTEXT—THE CULTURE OF NEVADA COUNTY

Writer Anne Lamott once referred to San Francisco as a “city in grief.”¹ In a similar way, in the short time I have been here, I have come to see the ministry context here at Sierra Presbyterian in Nevada County, as being set in a county that is in grief. That does not mean that people do not experience joy and happiness in this environment, they do. Western Nevada County is a beautiful place to live and it abounds with recreational opportunities. At the same time, there a number of factors which lead to feelings of grief and loss being prevalent in this community.

A Community in Grief

For instance, Nevada County, and particularly the towns of Grass Valley and Nevada City that the church adjoins, consists of a large retirement population. The county tripled in size between 1970 and 1990, mostly through “equity refugees” who cashed out of the Bay Area housing boom and moved to a slower, more rural environment. These demographics, with a significant aging population, have led to a

¹ Lamott, *Traveling Mercies; Some Thoughts on Faith*, 68.

large amount of people in the church and community who have had significant experiences of grief and loss. Life is different now than it was before, with a majority of people in the community having faced a significant loss in their lives. It is not only the loss that comes with death; having retired, many people are separated from the careers which once gave them a significant sense of their identity and relational network.

Large Retirement Community

Having moved into the area in their retirement, many people have sought to live less hectic and yet more isolated lives. People have moved here to be left alone and in some ways have forgotten how to be neighbors. Sadly, there is a higher suicide rate among seniors in rural areas. They have left the communities where they raised their kids, served through various organizations, and were in the same neighborhood for a number of years. As a result, they have experienced a significant loss of identity that exposes them to feelings of grief and loss.

Gold Country: The Glorious Past

Living near Empire Mine, which was one of the most lucrative open pit mines in California, makes this an area that celebrates its glorious past in the Gold Rush. The influence of this historical memory is continually reflected in the preservation of the architecture in both downtown Grass Valley and Nevada City. During the Gold Rush, people came to this area seeking to get rich quick. There is a gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” due to the few who did experience wealth and their families who continued to benefit from it. In fact, Nevada City is where the mine owners, engineers,

and managers lived up the hill from the mine workers who lived in Grass Valley. With the congregation I serve residing right between these two communities, this differential is reflected in the church as it is in the community.

The Generational, Political, and Economic Divide

The division between those who have seen their dreams fulfilled and those who are disillusioned by the fact that they cannot see a path to prosperity, is reflected in the generational divide in our community. The older conservatism, politically and economically, is contrasted with a younger liberalism. There is little industry or opportunity in this area for younger generations to achieve success, and they are largely disillusioned as a result. Underlying attitudes that older generations have towards younger generations continue to express the “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” kind of mentality of making something of yourself which has impacted this area for generations. Underlying attitudes that younger generations carry include feeling that by contributing to social security they are footing the bill for the retirement of older generations, but that the same benefits are unlikely to exist when they will need it in the future. Older generations are facing an uncertain financial future themselves in that their retirement savings have not held up in the way they thought, with their investments (401ks, etc.) not yielding the kind of returns they anticipated; and younger generations are finding it hard to make a living much less plan for the future.

Local Economics

Unfortunately, the search for gold in this community has left the residue of a spirit

of greed. As people's search for wealth did not come to fruition, it has led to an experience of grief. Coming to this area and experiencing the death of their hopes and dreams for prosperity has left generations in grief.

Gold Country—The Pursuit of Affluence

Two specific resources have fueled the economy of this area for years. The one, as mentioned previously, was mining. Mining for gold gave this area its initial growth and still impacts its present culture through the community's historical memory and physical evidence through mining equipment being incorporated in its architecture and memorials. Later, as the lucrative gold mines ran their course, timber took over as the primary resource that stirred the economy. Rich in timber, the Sierra Nevada foothills were a center point for logging during a significant portion of the last century. As environmental concerns and expanding laws restricted the amount of lumber that could be cut, cutting and selling timber has become less lucrative and is no longer the center of economic activity in the area.

Retirees Moving from the Bay Area

With the equity brought by refugees who came from the Bay Area and other places in their retirement, one could say that a false economy was built with no industry driving it. While the area has been a hub for video technology over the past few decades which has led to a number of jobs in the technology industry, those jobs also seem to be going away, as was evidenced by two members of our church losing their jobs due to corporate down-sizing this past week. Sadly, in recent years the area has become known

for the growing and selling of pot or marijuana, which comes with its own type of grief. If laws are changed to legalize the growing and selling of cannabis beyond medicinal use, it may encourage the economy, but it will come with a significant moral cost to those who sell it, protect it, or become addicted to it.

Lack of Industry and Opportunity

Presently there are groups who are experimenting in job and industry incubation. This is an exciting prospect as the area sorely needs to develop new industries if it is to keep younger generations from moving away and attract new people to the area. A recent article reflected on the fact that in general, rural areas and counties are shrinking and such things as the declining enrollment in schools and job lay-offs are evidence that Nevada County is no different.² While no one knows exactly how these economic factors will impact the area in the years to come, at present it causes a great amount of anxiety for people which can lead to the death of their dreams or a type of “living grief.”

Isolation

As my family and I were preparing to move into the neighborhood here and were searching for housing, several things about the community quickly became apparent. For instance, people here like their space. They have either always lived in this community and have become accustomed to living on spacious properties or have moved into this area with a desire to have more space. Either way, it has created a dynamic where people live largely in isolation from others and live very independent lives.

² Tina Kleist, “Nevada County by the numbers,” *The Union*, November 12, 2011, 9-10.

People Living on Large Properties

This isolation and independence impacts the way people grieve or face loss when it comes. Many have no established community to draw upon for support, and as a result their grief process can become stunted or prolonged. People here do not know their neighbors very well, and so as their health changes they often do not find the support they need through their neighbors or established relational networks. This can create a crisis of care that the church must discern how to address. In most places in the area, you would have to be very intentional about getting to know your neighbors. Otherwise, you could easily go years without any contact with people in your neighborhood and have very little crossover with their lives.

Lack of Neighborhoods

The lack of connectedness is also reflected in the few neighborhoods that exist in the area. My wife and I went into our home-buying process with openness to some type of intentional living in mind in relation to our neighbors. Soon, we were struck with the few opportunities that existed to live in close proximity with others. While we have moved into a neighborhood, with a home we enjoy, and are starting to build relationships with our neighbors, it is not as easy as it might be if we were living in a larger city with homes that are closer together. While some live on a property with other family members, the majority live apart from other family with no significant relationships formed with their neighbors who might fill in the gap.

Hunger of Body and Soul

While the factors listed above create challenges and potential barriers for people to grow through grief, there is also an evident spiritual hunger in this community. The poverty in the area has created a physical hunger in people that has them looking for ultimate answers and meaning in their lives. This spiritual hunger is expressed in the many different spiritualities reflected in the community. From New Age, to Eastern Mysticism, to Naturalism, there are variety of expressions of belief and spirituality. Sadly, those belief systems do not tend to stand up under the stress and strain of suffering. When the inevitable “why?” questions of life emerge as a result of experiences of grief and loss, people need to find the only One who can truly be with them in their suffering. They need to find community that cares for them and the catharsis that can come from helping someone else through their own life-altering experiences.

Angle of Repose

One of the great American novels was written in the context of this community and its history. As stated above, Nevada County was initially formed through the experience of the Gold Rush, which drew people who hoped to get rich quick or at least improve their prospects. Many people also came to escape the situations or circumstances in which they previously lived. More recently, in the late 1980s through early 2000s, Nevada County experienced a large influx of retirees from the Bay Area who cashed out during the housing boom and moved to a smaller community. In a similar way that people came seeking to improve their prospects during the Gold Rush, people have come to this area in recent years to enjoy their retirement years in a less rushed and

more serene setting. These people tend to have a reflective posture to life in looking back to former glories, but as experiences of grief occur in their lives this can cause them to be gripped by the past and prevent them from being engaged in the present. Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 and is based out of this geographical region (Sierras), reflects many of the values and themes of this community. Stegner describes the main character of the novel, Lyman Ward, as someone who

married Ellen Hammond and begot Rodman Ward and taught history and wrote certain books and monographs about the Western frontier, and suffered certain personal catastrophes and perhaps deserved them and survives them after a fashion and now sits talking to himself into a microphone-he doesn't matter that much anymore. I would like to put him in a frame of reference and comparison. Fooling around in the papers my grandparents (who lived during the Gold Rush), especially my grandmother, left behind, I get glimpses of lives close to mine, related to mine in ways I recognize but don't completely comprehend. I'd like to live in their clothes for a while, if only so I don't have to live in my own.³

Living in the Past to Avoid the Present

The desire to "live in someone else's clothes for a while, if only so I don't have to live in my own," or at least to live in the glorious past of one's own life, is a desire that many in this area share. In Nevada County, living in the past is a primary way people seek to avoid the painful present. An interaction between Lyman and his son expresses the view towards history that different generations espouse: "The world has changed, Pop, he tells me. The past isn't going to teach us anything about what we've got ahead of us. Maybe it did once, or seemed to. It doesn't anymore."⁴ For older generations, it may

³ Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), 17.

⁴ Ibid., 15-16.

feel like the past is all that they have. For younger generations, they do not find the past helpful in terms of how to live in the present or the future. The nature of discontinuous change that is present in our society today often polarizes people in one way or another. For older generations it may cause them to want to grasp and cling to the past; for younger generations the perspective can be much more about embracing the ongoing nature of change in society today. Being a paraplegic, Lyman, both physically and metaphorically, believes he can only look in one direction at a time, and he chooses to look back. While looking back can be part of one's healing journey through an experience of grief and loss, a person can also get lost there and not allow the past to inform their engagement with the present.

The *Angle of Repose* is the "angle I am aiming for myself, and I do not mean the rigid angle at which I rest in this chair."⁵ In other words, it is angle of passive reflection, of looking back. In an additional metaphor, Lyman describes his life as like that of being on the other side of the Doppler Effect, not that it tells you what is coming but that it tells you what was there. Stegner writes, "You yearned backward a good part of your life, and that produced another sort of Doppler Effect. Even while you paid attention to what you must do today and tomorrow, you heard the receding sound of what you had relinquished."⁶ In contrast to his own inability to engage the present, Lyman spends more of his time reflecting on his grandmother's life which had a tremendous sense of place

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Ibid., 25.

and story, of presence. He is constantly wrestling with his inability to engage in the present because of his own painful past. At one point in particular when there are some interpersonal challenges Lyman is facing, he responds by thinking, “I am going back to Grandmother’s nineteenth century, where the problems and the people are less messy.”⁷ So, the story goes on, “It is only Lyman Ward . . . living a day in his grandparent’s life to avoid paying too much attention to his own.”⁸ His investment in isolation is something that is reflected by many in this area who seek a similar type of solitude in order to avoid the painful present. The *Angle of Repose*, then, can mean a similar kind of living death where people have lost themselves in the losses of life and are no longer engaged in the present. They have never come to the place of acceptance that Kubler-Ross talks about, but have become stuck somewhere in the journey of grief with no apparent way forward.

Reengaging in the Present to be Part of the Mission of God

Sadly, Nevada County seems to have a significant number of people who have become stuck in their journey of grief for a number of reasons. Whether it is due to the loss of a prominent career position, their declining health, or the death of a spouse, people can become lost in these losses and left in despair, wondering whether life can be good again. If Sierra Presbyterian is to serve as the salt and light of Jesus (Mt 5) in Nevada County, we will need to engage those who are grieving with the good news of the gospel and a theology of grief that can impart hope and lead to growth. Encouraging church members to stay in communication with God and in community with other Christ-

⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁸ Ibid., 409.

followers can help them heal and grow so that they are able to go out into the community as witnesses to God's power to heal our deepest hurts. Growing through its own personal and corporate grief as a church can help members reengage in the mission of God, who enters into and seeks to transform the grief of those who do not yet know him, as Lord and God. According to Ammerman, Carrol, Dudley, and McKinney, this is the essence of what it means to be a congregation:

Congregations influence in varied ways both the individuals who belong to them and the communities in which they are present . . . By the very presence of their buildings, their steeples and stained glass, they call people beyond themselves . . . They contribute to the sustenance and uplifting of their communities and play an irreplaceable role in the moral education of children and adults . . . Establishing a congregation's unique balance between gathering with one's own and remaining connected to a larger community is at the heart of what it means to congregate.⁹

When considering who Sierra Presbyterian is as a congregation, I look to her connection to the community around her for clues to her identity and how the life that God is shaping within connects with the needs of the larger community. In other words, the church is present within the community, and a reflection on its history, hopes, and dreams is an interaction with the context in which the church calls home. By exploring the glorious past of Sierra Presbyterian, her challenges at present, and hopes for the future, it will be evident that growing through experiences of grief are a central factor.

⁹ Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carrol, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 8-9.

CHAPTER 2

CHURCH CONTEXT: SIERRA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH—A CHURCH IN GRIEF

Sierra Presbyterian is a forty-six-year-old congregation with a glorious past that has faced significant challenges more recently. Once a vital six hundred member congregation with 550 people in worship, and a long-tenured pastor, it declined drastically during the previous pastor's tenure. Once a program-oriented church with an attractional-model of ministry, its programs were cut and its younger families were disenfranchised. The church has since refocused its mission statement which reflects the desire to engage in ministry to younger generations and to give the church a future. However, the experiences of grief and loss that both individuals and the congregation as a whole have gone through must be addressed if the congregation is to reengage more fully in the mission of God or, as Ammerman, Jackson, Dudley and McKinney state in *Studying Congregations*, "to discover what they need to know in order to move ahead."¹

¹ Ammerman, Jackson, Dudley, and McKinney, *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, 10.

Remembrance of the Glorious Past

In Selma Wright's *Reflect... Connect... Expect!: A View of Sierra Presbyterian Church 1967-2002*, she shares that in the early 1960s, people moving to the Grass Valley, Nevada City area began to gather information and show interest in having a Presbyterian Church in the community.² After research showed a significant number of unchurched people in the area who were seeking a church home, the Sacramento Presbytery approved starting a new work in the Grass Valley-Nevada City area on September 21, 1965. In March 1966, Reverend Bob Meyer was called as the organizing pastor. From twelve interested people in March 1965, the group swelled to seventy-five worshipers for the first worship service on Palm Sunday, April 3, 1966. December 10, 1967, was the official date for the formal organization of the congregation. There were ninety names on the list of charter members. During this time, the church has been described as “nomadic,” moving from place to place in search of a permanent home. By 1970, the future of the church was shaky—growth was slow and money was tight. The founding members had a food booth at the county fair selling ravioli's to make money. They continued to do that for the next few years. The church continued to share space with the Seventh Day Adventist and also with the Nevada City Methodist churches.

The property Sierra Presbyterian currently sits on was purchased in January of 1976, and by July of that year enough money had been raised to begin the building project. On Sunday, July 31, 1977, after worshipping at the Nevada City Methodist

² Selma Wright, *Reflect... Connect... Expect: A View of Sierra Presbyterian Church 1967-2002* (Nevada City, CA: Sierra Presbyterian Church), 2002.

Church, the congregation gathered for lunch and a ground breaking ceremony. Ed Ryosa led the building project, and Ryosa Hall was built by members of the church. The first worship service was held in Ryosa Hall in December 1978.

The founding pastor, Rev. Bob Meyer retired in January 1981. Rev. Bob Clapham (a retired Presbyterian pastor) and Stacy “Stick” Roberts (a retired Navy chaplain) served as interim pastors as the congregation searched for a new senior pastor. Rev. Bruce Heiple was called as pastor in January 1982 and served for the next twenty years. The church began steady growth. In March 1982, building plans began for an education wing, Renner Hall, which was named after the project chairman, Keith Renner, and built by church members.

During this time, the church began steady growth so that membership peaked at around six hundred members. In 1985, plans began to build a sanctuary. It was decided this big project would be built by a contractor. Work began in January 1987. On October 16, 1988, after worship in Ryosa Hall, the congregation (in true Scottish form) was piped over to the new sanctuary for the dedication ceremony. The church continued to grow, and in 1993 Rev. Tom Patterson was called to be the associate pastor for youth and young families. He served at Sierra Presbyterian until 2003 when he accepted a call to a senior pastor position in Washington.

With the retirement of Pastor Heiple in 2002, the search began for a new senior pastor. Rev. Toby Nelson served as the interim pastor during that period. In 2004, Rev. Scott Dickson was called to the senior pastor position. In 2006, Rev. Dr. Linda Line was called as associate pastor. Rev. Line also served as interim pastor when Pastor Scott

accepted another call in 2010. Again, the search began for a new senior pastor and in 2012, Rev. Mike Griffin accepted the call as senior pastor-head of staff.

Through the years a number of other building projects have taken place. In 1997, the property behind the sanctuary was acquired and Hatcher Hall was built. It is primarily used by the church's youth group. The prayer room was built in 2004—an answer to much prayer as it had been a challenge to find a place on church property to build it.

Other aspects of ministry that developed over the years, include Sonshine Pre-school which began in 1991. In 1999, the preschool expanded to include Sierra Christian School which grew to a K-6th grade school. The downturn in our local economy brought difficult times for the school, and it has closed; but Sonshine Preschool continues to this day and is populated by children of church members and of people in the community.

Even before Sierra Presbyterian became a recognized entity, people began reaching out to each other and organizing groups to better serve each other. Among these are the deacons who watch over their parish, offer emergency assistance, and serve as the hands and feet of Christ whenever they are needed. Adult classes and Bible studies have formed over time, including the Sierra Presbyterian Women's study, and a significant small group network which includes eighteen such groups today. In 1984 Janet Lowell joined the staff as Program Director. Under her leadership, many new programs were started. Mid-week fellowship offered dinner for the family followed by programs for both children and adults each Wednesday evening. This total family event averaged one hundred and thirty-five people.

Another new program was Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministers are trained to

come alongside those who may be experiencing challenges in their lives. Since 1984 twenty Stephen Ministry classes have been held, each class taking fifty hours of training. Roughly one hundred and fifty Stephen Ministers have been trained. Now under the leadership of Membership Director, Audrey McIntosh, the Stephen Ministers at Sierra Presbyterian have cared for countless people and contributed significantly to the culture of care in the life of the church.

Sierra Presbyterian is also known as a praying church. The staff is committed to pray for one another and the congregation on a weekly basis. The prayer team prays for the pastors and parishioners following worship every week. Both men's and women's mentoring groups have a particular emphasis on prayer ministry, and there are many other special times of focused prayer that the church is called to.

Forms of outreach that the congregation is engaged in include Vacation Bible School which is attended by 175 children, and PTO (Parents Time Out) which provides a date night for parents while their children have their program. Perhaps an even greater testament to Sierra Presbyterian is the members' commitment to individual involvement in the community. People have volunteered, organized and worked to help in a variety of ways. Many of the retired members of the congregation are engaged in service, in the community, though often out of a sense of altruism and volunteerism that falls short of Jesus' call to be salt and light in the world. In order to strengthen the connection between faith, witness, and service, the church recently had a worship and service day where the congregation gathered for one worship service before going out to serve in the community in the variety of ways. Some of these included painting steps at the local high school,

prayer walks through both nearby downtown areas, work projects at local para-church organizations, and a backpack ministry where close to three hundred backpacks were distributed to needy children.

1987 appears to have been a seminal year for missions. Sierra Presbyterian, which started as a mission church, became the “mother church” to a new project, the Auburn Presbyterian Church. Financial assistance continued for several years. The first trip to Baja Mexico was a youth ministry outreach in 1990. Since then trips to Baja have become an almost annual event with some trips being intergenerational and some youth-oriented. Several young people decided to make mission work a lifetime commitment after their short-term experiences. In addition, Sierra Presbyterian supports nine international missionaries today and is currently preparing to support a church plant in inner-city San Francisco.

It remains to be seen what needs will arise within the Grass Valley/Nevada City community and throughout the world which Sierra Presbyterian is called to respond to. As a church set on a hill, overlooking a freeway that links her to the rest of the world, the church is seeking to be faithful to God’s call. If the church is to be faithful, there are a number of issues that must be worked through first.

Rebuilding Trust in the Pastoral Office

A few key turning-points that occurred in the life of Sierra Presbyterian include the “Sabbath season” that the church experienced during the interim period when Toby Nelson was serving as pastor. This was helpful in terms of stepping back from the programmatic-driven church that it had become. An unfortunate result however was that

as children's and youth activities were paused a lot of young families went elsewhere, feeling that the needs of their children and youth were not being met.

As the church moved forward under the leadership of a new senior pastor, the pressure to return to its earlier dynamism was high. Unfortunately, that pastor did not respond well to that pressure placed on him by a number of strong personalities and as anger issues and other unhealthy dynamics emerged in his life, people left. As pressure increased, staff bore the brunt of the pastor's frustration and participation in various ministries dwindled. Much of my work in the first year of ministry at Sierra Presbyterian has been to restore trust in the pastoral office that had been broken. This is a primary source of grief for the congregation that continues today. For just as individuals face experiences of grief and loss which they must work through, so must groups and congregations. As a large family, Sierra Presbyterian, like all congregations, struggles with dynamics that can deter it from growth. Distrust and disillusionment and a desire to return to the glorious past all impact the way the congregation views its present opportunities. As a result, the congregation will need to process its grief over the changing place of the church in society if it is to grow.

Regular Experiences of Grief and Loss

At a recent Youth Specialties conference, speaker Pete Wilson discussed the dynamics that can take place at a time when there is a "dip" in life and ministry.³ Much like the process of grief, it never proceeds in a straight line without bumps and detours

³ Pete Wilson, *Youth Specialties Convention* (San Diego: Youth Specialties, 2013).

along the way. When these dips or challenges to a church occur, there comes a heightened sense of vulnerability and a diminished sense of power. As members witness a decline in health among their long-time friends, loss of membership, or a decrease in resources, it can lead to a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness. The good news in what Wilson says is that it is often at times when there is a heightened sense of vulnerability and diminished sense of power where God does his best work of character formation. At the same time it comes with unique temptations that must also be addressed. Some of those temptations include being tempted to think we are in control, the temptation to ditch our God-given values in the pursuit of our God-given dreams, or the temptation to feel abandoned, that God is not with us. Each of these temptations can emerge in a time of grief or uncertainty for individuals or for a church. In response, an organization or individual must recognize that they are not called to control or manipulate their way out of these situations as much as remain and abide in Christ and prayerfully turn to him. It is important to retain God-given values rather than chasing after quick fixes or solutions like giving in to addictive behavior to try to numb the pain of loss rather than being positively transformed through the experience. Finally, people must remember that for us individually and for a church, suffering will be part of our experience in this world. No one can avoid it and a community should not make the assumption that God is not with them when it occurs. Rather, a church can find a deeper communion with God when they find that God suffers with them.

Reflecting on this dynamic, a primary biblical paradigm for the congregation of Sierra Presbyterian comes from Ezra 3. Here it says, “When the builders laid the

foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: ‘He is good; his love endures forever.’ And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away” (Ezr 3:10-13). Like the Israelites who had seen the former glory of the temple, many of Sierra Presbyterian’s older members recall the former glory of the church in terms of attendance and membership. Sadly, the desire to return to those glory days can keep the church from participating in what God is doing in the present. Like the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple and wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple, there is a lot of corporate grief there. The challenge for me as pastor and for other caring ministers is to come alongside those who are grieving so that we “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Rm 12:15). This comes through listening to their stories, grieving with them, but also painting a picture of a preferable future that they can participate in now. If these members can heal and grow through their corporate grief, they can become reengaged in the work of God’s kingdom.

Nehemiah 8 tells us that after the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt and the temple restored, Ezra the priest read from the Book of the Law. While doing so, it says that the

Levites “instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (Neh 8:7b-8). In following this paradigm, the church can present biblical teaching that can encourage those who are grieving to know that God is still with them, and with the congregation and that the church has a future and a hope in God that can transcend their suffering.

A Church in Transition

Sierra Presbyterian is in a place of transition. Having been a historically attractional, program-based congregation, with many people serving in the community without a full understanding of why, the church is developing a more missional identity as she looks for creative ways to serve the community. To accomplish this shift, the church is attempting to bridge generations and engage younger generations. As the church does so, growing through personal and corporate issues of grief and loss will be critical.

Historically Attractional

In developing an attractional model of ministry over the years, Sierra Presbyterian had an array of fellowship groups, developed a significant small group network that still has roughly twenty small groups in existence, and a number of need-based ministries. As the population of the church has aged, a significant number of these ministries have been geared toward older adults, such as health fairs, safe-driving classes, and fall-prevention seminars. These ministries are a benefit and support to those facing life transitions or experiences of grief, but they also must be seen in light of the overall missional call to

connect and care for the community in Christ's name.

Involvement in the Community without a Missional Identity

Today, the church is excited about engaging our community for Christ. The church is becoming more focused on reaching out to younger families with children and youth. However, the church must also recognize that in order to support this outreach and care for and connect with the significant retired population in the community, it must help people work through experiences of grief and loss for their own spiritual health and in order to help them reengage in God's mission.

Attempts to Bridge the Generations and Engage Younger Generations

In a mission study done prior to my coming, the church recognized weaknesses or growth areas in terms of involvement in local evangelistic ministries and that it needs to grow in living out its faith in the community. The church saw strengths in caring for one another, and that it ministers well to members who are hurting. To connect these two, the church is seeking to help those who are hurting as a result of an experience of grief so that they are able to share the compassion they themselves have received from God.

Growing through Grief to Engage in God's Mission

One way to help those who are hurting to heal is by identifying the barriers that exist for people to work through their experiences of grief and loss. Believing that as these barriers or emotional landmines are identified they can be better navigated, part of this project includes a survey of those who have faced a significant experience of grief or loss in order to learn from them. The respondents have given insight into ways members

and friends of Sierra Presbyterian have become stuck or have experienced detours in their grief journey. This information can assist pastors and other caring ministers that come alongside the grieving to help them grow through their grief.

Barriers to Growing through Grief

Through the stories that have been shared at the grief workshop that has been developed, as well as through the grief groups that have been formed, and a feedback survey that I conducted at Sierra Presbyterian, I have encountered a number of barriers that can keep people from growing and healing through their grief. These are not just barriers that are present among those who grieve in my congregation, but they are barriers that I have had personal experience with as well. While I have grown through my grief, at the same time, I can also say that I still struggle. Occasionally anger still crops up at those who failed to care for my daughter, and guilt can remain in the back of my mind. The “woulda,” “coulda,” “shouldas” of bargaining still crop up every now-and-then when I wonder anew what would have been happened if I had responded differently when Kylie became ill. As Sittser reflects, “We cannot change the situation, but we can allow the situation to change us. We exacerbate our suffering needlessly when we allow one loss to lead to another. That causes gradual destruction of the soul.”⁴ Experiences of suffering will change people one way or another. In order to ensure that change is for good one must identify the barriers that exist to working through grief in healthy ways.

⁴ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 87.

A Linear View of Grief

This project questions those who assign periods and dates to those in a grief process. While the majority of disbelief may be overcome in the first month, yearning may reach its high point around four months, anger at month five, and depression peaking at six months, as in accordance with a 2007 Yale study on stages of grief.⁵ The reality is that those facing a deep loss may cycle back through these experiences, though to smaller degrees or for shorter periods, long after many pastors, counselors and communities of faith have forgotten about them. Sittser states it this way,

I do not find it helpful, therefore, nor did I find it true in my experience, to identify these various responses as “stages” through which I had to pass on my way to “recovery.” For one thing, I have still not moved beyond these stages, and I am not sure I ever will. I still feel anger, I still want to bargain with God. I still face the temptation of indulging my appetites, and I still want to deny that the tragedy is true. Not that I feel the urge to escape as intensely as I used to, but that is because my internal capacity to live with loss has grown. I have more perspective now; I have more confidence in my ability to endure. The problem with viewing these avenues of escape as stages is that it raises the false expectation that we go through them only once. Again, that has not been true for me. I have revisited them again and again.⁶

For those who have not faced a significant experience of suffering they may think in terms of how long it will take to get over the loss, but this is a misnomer. Lewis was among those who saw this logic as faulty,

Getting over it so soon? But the words are ambiguous. To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he’s had his leg off it is quite another. After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce, continuous pain will stop. Presently he’ll get back his strength and be able to stomp about on his wooden leg. He has “got over

⁵ P.K. Maciejewski and H.G. Prigerson, “An Empirical Understanding of the Stages of Grief,” *Journal of American Medical Association* 7 (2007): 716-723.

⁶ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 50-51.

it.” But he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life, and perhaps pretty bad ones; and he will always be a one-legged man. There will be hardly any moment when he forgets it. . . . His whole way of life will be changed. All sorts of pleasures and activities that he once took for granted will have to be simply written off. Duties too. At present I am learning to get about on crutches. Perhaps I shall be given a wooden leg. But I shall never be a biped again.⁷

In another place Lewis responds to a linear view of processing grief by writing, “An admirable program. Unfortunately it can’t be carried out. Tonight all the hells of young grief have opened again; the mad words, the bitter resentment, the fluttering in the stomach, the nightmare unreality; the wallowed-in tears. For in grief nothing ‘stays put.’ One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral?”⁸ That is the hope in our growth, not that we get over our grief but that we move forward. In what is often a “two-steps-forward-one-step-back proposition,” we take baby steps getting our legs back under us but also aware that we are likely to fall again. The difference is in the continued desire to pick ourselves up, or allow God to pick us up rather than resigning ourselves to wallowing in self-pity. Lewis acknowledges, “I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.”⁹ That is why the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM IV) treatment planner rightly questions the diagnosis of depression until after a year following a loss and writers like Thomas Moore have noted that a number of experiences have been

⁷ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

labeled depressive, “but not all dark nights are depressive.”¹⁰ Simply put, it takes time.

People who face a tragic loss need a special kind of grace if they are to move forward.

Raymond Mitch and Lynn Brookside contend,

we process our grief in cycles. It impossible to say with any seriousness, “There now, that’s over. I’m done with my grief.” We do not ascend the hill of sorrow and blithely descend the other side, never to feel another twinge of grief again. Our ascent is more of a spiral. We continually circle around and face the pain again from a slightly different vantage point. It is true, however, that if we face it courageously we will never have to face it in quite that way again.¹¹

By not putting ourselves on a specific timeline but dedicating ourselves to processing our grief as it comes, we can be transformed. Sittser believes that;

Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery. It will transform us or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same. There is no going back to the past, which is gone forever, only going ahead to the future, which has yet to be discovered. Whatever that future is, it will, and must, include the pain of the past with it. Sorrow never entirely leaves the soul of those who have suffered a severe loss. If anything, it may keep going deeper. But this depth of sorrow is the sign of a healthy soul, not a sick soul.¹²

Loss is never benign in its influence. The good news is that it can become a source of growth for those who let it.

Augsburger notes that there is type of progression in our communication with the Triune God following an experience of grief, but, while that progression may reflect the kind of stages mentioned above, we should not view it in a predetermined or strictly linear way.

¹⁰ Thomas Moore, *Dark Nights of the Soul* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004), XI.

¹¹ Raymond Mitsch & Lynn Brookside, *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993), 201.

¹² Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 63.

No series of stages is invariable, no chronological plotting of what is expected is without exception. They may overlap, occur out of order, appear simultaneously in response to differing tragedies, or one may remain in a single stage and venture no further. However, these stages of progression in God-image are a true assessment of the human end of the bridge, the human abutment, as it were, of the suspension span reaching toward contact with God. They are worthy of thoughtful application to our problems of theodicy.¹³

It is clear that people respond to tragedy differently. As Mitch and Brookside note, “There is no standard for grieving. Loss affects each of us differently so, of course, people do not grieve exactly the same.”¹⁴ There is no one “right way.” Our personalities differ, and people face losses differently. So for a person to project the way they would respond to a loss upon someone else as the right way can cause great harm and hinder rather than help someone grow. John Claypool in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* is right to reflect, “There are no experts in this field, for we all grieve in our own unique ways.”¹⁵ All one can do is to come alongside another and invite them to grow as they gain new perspective from the impact of the loss.

A Faulty Understanding of Forgiveness

A second barrier to growth is a faulty understanding of forgiveness. It is easy to see when someone does not receive the forgiveness of God that they could easily become stuck in a stage of guilt. It takes a continual act of faith and trust in the new life that God has offered to move through grief. As Lewis states, “We find that the

¹³ Augsburg, *The Call to Soul-Making and Soul-Mending*.

¹⁴ Mitsch & Brookside, *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love*, 12-13.

¹⁵ John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1974), 18-19.

work of forgiveness has to be done over and over again.”¹⁶ However, when you embark on that process you are then also able to offer forgiveness to others, but it takes time. As Sittser asserts, this is a process: “Forgiveness rarely happens in an instant . . . forgiveness is more a process than an event, more a movement within the soul than an action on the surface, such as saying the words, ‘I forgive you.’ In one sense, forgiveness is a lifelong process, for victims of catastrophic wrong may spend a lifetime discovering the many dimensions of their loss.”¹⁷ Too often people see forgiveness as a one-time action verses a continual process of giving the wrong someone has done to us over to God. As one survey respondent said: “I find some unremembered times of lack of forgiveness that are clogging my ‘pipes.’” Another commented on the process of forgiveness that she needed to experience following some hurts she experienced as a child: “It has taken me years of therapy and talking with God to really unravel my feelings about all of that and truly forgive because she did not know the harm she was causing . . . I’m not denying the hurt but have tried to get beyond it and think I am truly forgiven.”

Filling the Void in Unhealthy Ways

Another barrier to growth through grief is when people seem to try to fill the void that is left with many different things. Sometimes it is an addiction to drugs or alcohol that is inherently unhealthy. Other times it is taking an inherent good to an unhealthy extreme. In Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, a senior demon, Screwtape, says

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Reflection on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Publishing, 1958), 25.

¹⁷ John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 129.

to junior demon Wormwood,

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. All the same, it is His invention not ours. He made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula.¹⁸

Sadly, all too often people in grief retreat to addictions. As Sittser notes,

Many people form addictions after they experience loss. Loss disrupts and destroys the orderliness and familiarity of their world. They feel such desperation and disorientation in the face of this obliteration of order that they go berserk on binges. They saturate their senses with anything that will satisfy them in the moment because they cannot bear to think about the long-term consequences of loss . . . In so doing, they hold suffering at a distance.¹⁹

The detour of addictive behavior can therefore become a barrier to growth. For instance one man in the congregation I serve responded to the survey by saying: "Several years after we moved to Grass Valley I was running out of money. Also, at that time my wife found another man. She left and I filed for a divorce. Jobs were scarce and I had no money. Finally I had to file for bankruptcy. When you are not trusting the Lord things can go from bad to worse! I was a 'born again believer' but I had walked away from the Lord. I was alone. There are consequences for our actions. I drank way too much." Fortunately for this man, he could also say: "Somewhere during my down in the dumps time, I remembered that the Lord is faithful. Psalm 34:18 says 'The Lord is close to the

¹⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961), 41-42.

¹⁹ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 48.

broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.’ I cut way down on drinking, and after a few years was remarried. We both went to church.” The two things that seemed to make the difference were an encounter with God through his word in the Psalms and a supportive church community that would come alongside him in his grief. Later when this man’s second wife faced a lengthy illness and eventually passed away he could say: “Things were bad but I put all my trust in the Lord. The Lord gave me true peace as in the scripture Psalm 34:19 ‘A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.’ Soon the cancer traveled to her brain, and she passed on. I knew she went to be with the Lord because the night of her passing, she assured me that Jesus was in her heart. She was at peace, as I was. Isaiah 26:3 says: ‘You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you.’ My life was starting again alone. This time all my trust was in the Lord. I was not really alone, I felt his presence. I had totally quit drinking years ago.” Similarly Augsburg recognizes,

the impact of the loss is directly proportional to the amount of self invested in that area of life... When a marriage is all absorbing in care-taking, co-dependency, unilateral dependency etc., its loss is a death crisis . . . When one’s work (life project) defines identity and usurps other life agenda, its loss will be devastating... A usurping life-project impoverishes personal/marital/relational development and thus diminishes work effectiveness . . . Absorption marriage impoverishes personal/parental/professional wholeness and overloads a single relationship destructively.²⁰

In other words, if you overemphasis one area of life, trying to get too many needs met in any one area, it can be devastating to suffer a loss in that area. In the same way when people suffer loss, the tendency is to take on another relationship or area of responsibility

²⁰ Augsburg, *The Call to Soul-Making & Soul Mending*, 2.

(such as work if they are hyper-vigilant) and put it into the center, seeking to make more of it than they should. In either case, if God is crowded out, not depended on, or turned to, people will not grow through our experience of grief. They are only plugging the leak that will one day shoot up, often when they are least expecting it, when they will have to process or respond to loss anew and afresh. Joni Erickson Tada, in *A Glorious Intruder* states “So it is with suffering. With profound potential for good, it can also be a destroyer. Suffering can pull families together, uniting them through hardship, or it can rip them apart in selfishness and bitterness. Suffering can file all the rough edges of your character, or it can further harden you. It all depends on us. On how we respond. By what we choose to do in the middle of our suffering. Do we use it-or let it use us? Do we go to God-or try to battle it out on our own.”²¹ In ones sinful nature, the tendency is to place other things at the center of who they are. When they face an experience of loss, it is all too easy to try to fill the void with something less than the God who truly satisfies. “Is there any way out of this?” Mack asks in a passage from William Young’s *The Shack*. “It is so simple, but never easy for you. By *re-turning*. By turning back to me. By giving up your ways of power and manipulation and just come back to me.” Jesus sounded like he was pleading, “Women, in general, will find it difficult to turn from a man and stop demanding that he meet their needs, provides security, and protects their identity, and return to me. Men, in general, find it very hard to turn from their own quests for power and security and significance, and return to me”²² To grow we must make such a return.

²¹ Joni Erickson Tada, *Glorious Intruder* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1989), 147.

²² William P. Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007), 147.

Unhealthy Expectations

Another barrier to growth through grief has to do with expectations. If people move through their experience of grief with a sense that they will somehow triumph over it, breeze through it or rise above it, they may find ourselves disappointed and confused. The writing of C.S. Lewis in *A Grief Observed* reflects this as he begins by openly acknowledging that at first he was keenly disappointed in what his faith had meant to him in the experience of grief following the death of his wife Joy. “He located the problem as one of expectation more than experience. He realized he had taken certain notions of what ought to happen into that valley, and that when those specific things didn’t occur, his disappointment almost blinded him to the things that were occurring.”²³ Rather than help someone anticipate what might be next, expectations can inhibit growth by giving a false roadmap that does not lead everyone in the same direction, because the journey is different for each person. Mitch and Brookside agree that,

One of the most disconcerting aspects of grief is that grief never “stands still . . .” The first obstacle we need to overcome is the one presented by our own expectations. Most of us have some preconceived notion of how long the grief process is supposed to take. When we find ourselves feeling our pain and sorrow more intensely than we think we should, given the amount of time that has passed since we first suffered our loss, we are likely to condemn ourselves or assume that others are condemning us. But each of us is different. The relationship we have lost is different. Our ability to process our sorrow is different. There are a vast array of variables in our grieving.²⁴

John Claypool, in a series of sermons following his daughter Laura Lue’s illness and death, looks at expectations in light of Isaiah 40 that “they who wait upon the Lord

²³ Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 49.

²⁴ Mitsch & Brookside, *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love*, 73.

shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Is 40:30-31). Here is the definite promise of divine help, but it is important to notice that such help is described in three different forms, and not all of them ought to be expected in any one situation. This realization is of crucial importance in saving us from false expectations:

For example, there is the promise here that God’s strength can take the form of ecstasy, enabling one ‘to mount up with wings as eagles,’ to soar away in an atmosphere of sheer exuberance, and many times in the past I have known such moments of abandon and celebration and joy. Yet for all its reality, if one were to conclude that this is the only way God gives God’s strength to humankind, such a one would be vastly disappointed in the kind of darkness through which I have just been walking . . .

A second way that God’s help is described in Isaiah is in terms of strength for activism-“they shall run and not be weary.” Here, too, is another valid shape of religious experience-the inspiration to do a job or to solve a problem or get on with some task... But once again, this is not the *only* way we experience God. If it were, then the depths would still be a place of disappointment, for more often, there is really nothing one can do . . . Fortunately, there is one other form that the promise of God’s strength takes: “They shall walk and not faint . . .” That may not sound like much of a religious experience, but believe me, in the kind of darkness where I have been, it is the only form of the promise that fits the situation. When there is no occasion to soar and no place to run, and all you can do is edge along step by step, to hear of a Help that will enable you ‘to walk and not faint’ is good news indeed.²⁵

For Claypool, he found that his faith in God did make a difference when the bottom dropped out. It kept him from giving up. He found that God gave him just enough power to hang in there and not give up. And that was enough for him. “Therefore, I was not disappointed. At the bottom of the darkness, my faith truly did make a difference. Why? Partly because I did not erect false expectations; I let God be

²⁵ Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 49-51.

God and give me what God willed to give and what was appropriate.”²⁶

For many that is not enough. Rather than receive God’s strength to put one foot in front of another following a loss, they lose themselves in their need for an answer to the question, why. When they do not receive the answer they are seeking, they become disillusioned with God. Pastorally, it is important to listen and care for people who are experiencing the anger, loneliness and confusion that often accompany the asking of such questions. But it is also important to come alongside people as they pursue answers. This must always be done with humility, confessing the partial nature of all our answers, offer the convictions that lie beneath all our faith and trust, and speak the word of hope.

Not Letting Go of the Need to Know

The why questions naturally emerge when people seek to reconcile the basic Christian belief that God is omnipotent, that God brings about the current state affairs in which they exist, and that God is perfectly good, while at the same time recognizing that evil exists. Suffering happens, and life begins and ends in pain. The challenge comes in reconciling these basic beliefs: God is omnipotent and good, yet evil exists. This is behind the questions of theodicy that people who are suffering so often ask. If they are not able to resolve these questions to their satisfaction, they may find themselves disillusioned with a God who has the power to prevent suffering but for some reason seems to limit that power in particular events and circumstances. David Hume in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* questions, “Is God willing to prevent evil, but

²⁶ Ibid., 56.

not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? Why do the evil prosper and the righteous suffer?”²⁷ As Augsburgers says, “These are the questions of heart-break.”²⁸

Wrestling with God’s presence in the midst of his grief, Lewis suggests that questions of theodicy did not cause him to question God’s existence, but God’s character: “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe in such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but, ‘so this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”²⁹ These kinds of questions may cause people to become disillusioned with God. It is in these times that it is important to remember that if there is no God then there is no one to turn to and nothing to complain about. With God, there is One the grieving can come to for answers. As Sittser expresses, “I knew that God was somehow in control. If I had anyone to turn to for help, it was God. Then again, if I had anyone to blame, it was also God . . . I held God responsible for my circumstances, I placed my confidence in him; I also argued with him. In any case, God played the key role.”³⁰

That is at the root of the wrestling that Mack, the main character of the bestselling novel, *The Shack*, goes through. Mack is led into a redemptive encounter with God following the abduction and tragic death of his daughter Missy. Reflecting on what

²⁷ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (New York: Penguin Classic, 1779)

²⁸ Augsburgers, *The Call to Soul-Making & Soul-Mending*.

²⁹ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 5.

³⁰ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 131.

becomes known as “The Great Sadness,” Mack questions God by saying;

“You may not cause those things, but you certainly don’t stop them.”

“Mackenzie,” Papa (God the Father) answered tenderly, seemingly not offended in the least by his accusation, “there are millions of reasons to allow pain and hurt and suffering rather than to eradicate them, but most of those reasons can only be understood within each person’s story. I am not evil. You are the ones who embrace fear and pain and power and rights so readily in your relationships. But your choices are also not stronger than my purposes, and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome.”

“But the cost!” Mack was staggered. “Look at the cost—all the pain, all the suffering, everything that is so terrible and evil.” He paused and looked down at the table. “And look what it has cost you. Is it worth it?”

To which God replies; “You see pain and death as ultimate evils and God as the ultimate betrayer, or perhaps, at best, as fundamentally untrustworthy. You dictate the terms and judge my actions and find me guilty.”

“The real underlying flaw in your life, Mackenzie, is that you don’t think that I am good. If you knew I was good and that everything—the means, the ends, and all the processes of individual lives—is all covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing you would trust me. But you don’t.”³¹

Comparing Losses

Comparing losses, seeking to quantify or qualify them can also become a barrier to growth. Each loss is unique and each of us faces them as unique creatures. Yes, some losses may seem more severe, but as Sittser asserts, “I question whether experience of such severe loss can be quantified and compared. Loss is loss, whatever the circumstances. All losses are bad, only bad in different ways. No two losses are ever the same. Each loss stands on its own and inflicts a unique kind of pain. What makes each loss so catastrophic is its devastating, cumulative, and irreversible nature. What value is there to quantifying and comparing losses?”³² He goes on to reflect,

³¹ Young, *The Shack*, 125-126.

³² Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 25.

Catastrophic loss of whatever kind is always bad, only bad in different ways. It is impossible to quantify and to compare. The very attempt we often make in quantifying losses only exacerbates the loss by driving us to two unhealthy extremes. On the one hand, those coming out on the losing end of the comparison are deprived of the validation they need to identify and experience the loss for the bad thing it is . . . Whose loss is worse? The question begs the point. Each experience of loss is unique, each painful in its own way, each as bad as everyone else's but also different. No one will ever know the pain I have experienced because it is my own, just as I will never know the pain you may have experienced. What good is quantifying loss? What good is comparing? The right question to ask is not, 'Whose is worse?' It is to ask, 'What meaning can be gained from suffering, and how can we grow through suffering?'³³

As people compare losses with the losses of others it can cause even more confusion. If you try to be someone else or grieve in a way that someone else does you will continue to struggle to find your authentic, true self. Instead, one can work through their loss as they grieve in a way that is true to who they are. Sittser believes, "This crisis of identity, however, can lead to the formation of a new identity that integrates the loss into it. Loss creates a new set of circumstances in which we must live . . . Loss establishes a new context for life."³⁴ Accepting that things will never be the same again but that we can build something new in our lives is central to the process of growing through grief. "We should shun all notions that we hurry and 'get back to normal.' The very thought is ridiculous. 'Normal' has been changed forever. We can never 'get back' to it. We must take the time to build, slowly and painstakingly, a new life, a new 'normal.'"³⁵

³³ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁴ Ibid., 73-74.

³⁵ Mitsch & Brookside, *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love*, 53.

Isolating the Impact of Grief into Only one Area of our Lives

A final barrier to growth through grief is seeing the impact of grief on only one dimension of life. Dorothy Soelle, in *Suffering* notes that Simone Weil calls the impact of suffering “affliction.” “She analyzes suffering in terms of its three essential dimensions: physical, psychological, and social. ‘Affliction’ involves all three.”³⁶ Each of the three dimensions (and I would add a fourth, spiritual dimension) is present in all true suffering. So people must see grief from its multi-dimensional impact upon the soul.

Overcoming Barriers to Spiritual Growth and Renewal

Despite the many barriers to growing through grief that have been identified in the context of the community of Sierra Presbyterian there are also many examples of those who have grown through their grief. As one congregation member who filled out the Growing Through Grief Survey commented: “How do others survive without a loving, caring church such as this has always been?” Another congregation member responded to the question of how grieving makes a person grow with this reflection:

After thirty-two years of marriage my husband passed away in August 2011. I remembered what Jesus said: ‘Blessed are those who grieve for they will be comforted’ (Mt 5:4). So crying wasn’t a cause to lament. I kept thinking I would see Bob around the corner... listen to him get up or call because he wanted something. Of course that didn’t happen. But how marvelous when I was able to look at his passing as God’s plan! Looking back at the BIG picture, I began to see God in everything. Now, I look back and thank God daily for his answers to so many prayers. The comfort of family and friends, the fabulous memorial service, and the ongoing care I receive. I smile with the warmth of God’s love that surrounds me. I am getting along well being single after so many years, changing gears to being a new me. I can’t say that I always like it, but I see the room for growth and the provisions God has made. I can use this experience to help others, to reach out and love them. What a blessing.”

³⁶ Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 13.

Another spoke to the loving support she received during her husband's military deployment: "This entire church family has been so caring and supportive, with open arms they welcomed our family here. Through my husband's last deployment, the birth of twin daughters, and through some struggles, the prayer team and the entire church family has been there and more supportive than I ever imagined."

These examples, along with many others that will be explored, show that when people turn to God in trust, find support in the context of Christian community, and look for ways to care for others out of their own experience, they can work through the barriers or detours that can come with grief. As this project explores a biblical theology of grief that is less linear and more cyclical, grief is seen as not so much about stages one gets over but seasons one moves through. The Bible presents a different model and is full of examples of people who have grown in their relationship with God through various types of grief.

PART TWO

A THEOLOGY OF GRIEF: LEARNING FROM THE PIONEERS

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Grief is a process with various cycles or seasons that impacts each person differently. Unfortunately, western culture has adopted a model that is more linear and lacks a recognition that not everyone grows through their experience of grief. Many of those who live through an experience of grief and loss reflect that the process is less linear and more cyclical, that it is not so much about stages they get over but seasons that they move through. The Bible also presents a different model, and is full of examples of people who have grown in their relationship with God through various types of grief.

On Death and Dying

by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

The ground breaking work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross focuses on what the dying have to teach us through the final stages of life with all its anxieties, fears, and hopes. Kubler-Ross addresses her work to professionals such as chaplains and social workers in trying “to outline the changes that are ultimately responsible for the increased fear of death, the rising number of emotional problems, and the greater need for understanding of

and coping with the problems of death and dying.”¹ While humanity has always wrestled with the fear of death, what has changed is our way of coping and dealing with the impact of death that can keep people from coming to a place of acceptance

According to Kubler-Ross people come to a place of acceptance by identifying and progressing through the stages in the drama of dying. For instance denial, “Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news, allows the patient to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses . . . Denial is usually a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance.”² This early stage, that is often associated with shock, is not one someone can stay in. As Kubler-Ross writes, “When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment. The logical next question becomes: “Why me?”³ Anger over what has occurred is a natural human emotion and as Kubler-Ross believes, can even be helpful to express for a season, if processed productively. Like all the stages however, it is not helpful to stay there. “The Third Stage, the stage of bargaining, is less well known but equally helpful to the patient, though only for brief periods of time. If we have been unable to face the sad facts of life in the first period and have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening.”⁴ While much of this

¹ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 2.

² Ibid., 35.

³ Ibid., 44.

⁴ Ibid., 72.

bargaining may not be verbally expressed, it is often an unconscious reality that the grieving or dying enters into. A fourth stage, depression, is often the most common or prolonged part of the grieving or dying process. It is here that caregivers often try to talk patients out of their feelings or encourage them to look at the bright side of things instead of honestly dealing with their emotions. Depression is often however a necessary part of preparatory grief and calls caregivers to come alongside others by sitting in silence with them rather than trying to fix or talk them out of their feelings. As Kubler-Ross writes:

In preparatory grief there is no or little need for words. It is much more a feeling that can be mutually expressed and is often done better with a touch of a hand, a stroking of the hair, or just a silent sitting together. This is the time when the patient may just ask for a prayer, when he begins to occupy himself with things ahead rather than behind. It is a time when too much interference from visitors who try to cheer him up hinders his emotional preparation rather than enhances it.⁵

Again, one should see this stage as a necessary part in the grieving process rather than an experience to be avoided or eliminated. “They should know that this type of depression is necessary and beneficial if the patient is to die in a stage of acceptance and peace. Only patients who have been able to work through their anguish and anxieties are able to achieve this stage.”⁶ These various stages culminate for Kubler-Ross in a place of acceptance where the patient has been able to express and work through their previous feelings. “If a patient has had enough time (i.e., not a sudden, unexpected death) and has been given some help in working through the previously described stages, he will reach a stage during which he is neither depressed nor angry about his “fate.” He will have been

⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶ Ibid., 78.

able to express his previous feelings.”⁷

While Kubler-Ross rightly states that a shift has taken place in society related to belief in God and the life hereafter, which brought some relief to suffering and pain, the limitations of her material for supporting the suffering are also exposed in the process. In one place, she writes “the belief has long died that suffering here on earth will be rewarded in heaven. Suffering has lost its meaning. Well, if we cannot anticipate life after death, then we have to consider death. If we are no longer rewarded in heaven for our suffering, then suffering becomes purposeless in itself.”⁸ Kubler-Ross is right to say that fewer people are drawing upon the resources of faith, but that does not mean that the benefits of belief in the redemptive nature of suffering have died. If suffering has lost its meaning then any benefit from understanding the stages of the grief process has been lost with it. Rather one can consider the reality of suffering and death and still believe. In fact, ministering to those who are suffering in a helpful way requires both recognition of the reality of suffering, and the hope of eternal life that will put an end to all suffering.

Where the resource also comes up short is in presenting the stages as somewhat linear in nature with little discussion of how one moves from one stage to the next. While Kubler-Ross writes that “these means (different stages) will last for different periods of time and will replace each other or exist at times side by side,”⁹ the reality is that the stages have become seen in a more linear, progressive fashion. Rather than

⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 122.

stages that people get through from one to the next, the aspects of grief that Kubler-Ross highlights are often seasons that they experience to a greater or lesser degree. One will only progress through these stages as he or she lays hold of resources that often reside outside themselves. There is also inevitability in coming to a place of acceptance according to Kubler-Ross. One only needs time. Sadly, anyone who works with the grieving or dying knows that acceptance is not inevitable, but often difficult, for people to come to. While not highlighted, it is also clear that those who are interviewed who have a relationship with God are able to arrive at a place of acceptance more readily. At one point she says, "Religious patients seem to differ little from those without a religion . . . Those few have been helped by their faith and are best comparable with those few patients who were true atheists. The majority of patients were in between, with some form of religious belief but not enough to relieve them of conflict and fear."¹⁰ One's reading of Kubler-Ross' patients who expressed faith in God gives evidence to the contrary to her assertion that faith matters little in the dying process. In contrast, people of faith stand up much better under suffering than those who suffer without such support.

The Call to Soul-Making and Soul-Mending

by David Augsburger

In contrast to the reductionism of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Professor Augsburger identifies the two-track hypothesis of Carl Nighswonger as a more balanced or nuanced perspective on how people respond to their grief. Nighswonger, who is acknowledged by Kubler Ross in *On Death and Dying* as one of her chaplains or mentors, invited Kubler-

¹⁰ Ibid., 237.

Ross to participate in the ministry to the dying in the University of Chicago hospitals. As Augsburger writes, “Her (Kubler-Ross’) summarization (of Nighswonger) is more linear, more simplified, more easily understood and applied to all kinds of grief experiences and responses to loss.”¹¹ Rather than a unified drama that follows a singular path, Augsburger rightly reflects, “Death, the final drama of life, takes a unique form for every person, especially because in death, multiple dramas intersect and interact. It is not the denouement of a single dramatic climax or conclusion, but all the plots of one’s life come up for review and press toward integration and release.”¹² This unique and multi-faceted approach is more reflective of reality. In this way, Nighswonger “saw it not as five sequential stages, but as a cluster (sometimes series) of dramas that deal with six aspects of termination. These may be triggered by events, persons, decisions or the short time left to consider options. They may flow in linear fashion but are often simultaneous.”¹³

As Augsburger notes, “Nighswonger’s model offers two different pathways. One that his colleague Kuebler-Ross developed after his sudden death, moves from denial to acceptance; the other to resignation and forlornness. Many people die in despair, stoic resignation, or bitter forlornness. Perhaps hope and acceptance are much less common than defeat.”¹⁴ Nighswonger’s model is what leads to the need for effective pastoral care for those in the grief process. In a way, Kuebler-Ross’ model is just one of observing

¹¹ Augsburger, *The Call to Soul-making and Soul-mending*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

what will inevitably happen, whereas Nighswonger's model, as Augsburger interprets it, presents an uncertain destination that those involved in pastoral care can participate in.

Building upon Nighswonger's two-track hypothesis, Augsburger is able to look at the grief process in a wider way in terms of its potential for growth. "Suffering is the process of soul-making, of moving toward the likeness of God, of calling us to personal and to spiritual growth in an evolving and unfinished creation. Obedient discipleship is our task."¹⁵ In this model not everyone follows the same pattern of grieving, but this is the most common sequence. It recognizes that each person grieves in unique ways, but that there are trends that can be identified. Sensitive pastoral care to the suffering acknowledges that there are profound differences in responses to the same loss by different persons or by the same person at different points in the grief cycle.

Augsburger's coalescence of resources on grief and loss for "The Call to Soul-making and Soul-mending" class at Fuller Theological Seminary to be immensely helpful. There is a strong focus on the implications of attachment theory for how we process our grief in either normal or abnormal ways. In my research, I have come to place more of a focus on what one can do in response to their grief rather than on other, outside, determinative forces, that are more of the focus in attachment theory. At the same time, early life experiences do continue to have their impact upon the way people respond to the challenges they face. This is especially true when someone faces the dynamics of complicated grief. For instance, if a person experiences the death of a parent who they were never attached to in a healthy way, it may significantly impact their grief.

¹⁵ Ibid.

In that case, they are not only grieving the loss of their parent's presence but may need to grieve the relationship they never had. The potential for getting stuck at any given stage or to never enter into the grief process at all is that much higher in experiences of complicated grief than in a normal grieving process. Augsburger is also right in saying that our society tends to try to short circuit the grief process rather than go through the stages of withdrawal, reflection, return, release, and reconstruction as he outlines them.¹⁶

Augsburger's model is much more true-to-life in terms of how people process their grief. "Coping with grief does not take a continuous course. Rather, there are days of positive coping followed by new attacks of apathy and despair and periods of regaining the world followed by days of unreality similar to the beginning of the process."¹⁷ Drawing upon the work of Sigmund Freud, Augsburger is able to outline what normal grief work looks like in terms of a series of tasks which must be fulfilled in the process of grieving a loss. In this way, rehearsing the sadness, expressing unacceptable feelings, sorting out agenda, coming to terms with reality, choosing life, reframing the loss, internalizing the loss, and recovering hope, are part of the overall process of recovery. Finding a place for one's loss while moving forward in life has outer ramifications as well, growth within leads to growth in relationship with others. As people make an emotional journey back to different aspects of the lost relationship, they do not have to get frozen in the past, but can eventually move into the future, where life can be good again.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

Pastoral Theology

by Thomas Oden

Thomas Oden is excellent in walking the line between the good and the growth God can bring from grief and loss without losing sight of the evil that is at the root of all pain, loss, and death. Growth can only come about through pain and struggle of some kind according to Oden. Oden builds on the belief that much growth comes through the pain people experience if they correctly understand God's place or role in it and the potential for growth that experiences of grief can bring. Among his pastoral consolations related to God are:

God does not directly will suffering. God is the author of all things that are good and He only gives good things. However, suffering does not occur through the permission of divine authority. God does not violate human free will. In order for humanity to share in God's intention for creation being more than mere robots or rocks, humanity must be accorded free will. God's power can draw good out of any evil. God's loving desire for His Creation and humanity sets itself to work for the good of all things. Evil does not limit God's power. Evil does not challenge God's power but it is in God's infinite power that he is not threatened by evil's opposition . . . Only God is so unsurpassably powerful that he is willing to take the risk of living in intimate dialogue and communion with a foreseeably fallen, sinful, self-alienating creature, and all this without any threat to God's own identity or holiness.¹⁸

In addition to his understanding of the identity and personhood as it relates to suffering, Oden is also able to shed much light on the place that sufferings play in our growth. He is able to avoid a sadomasochistic view of the way God relates to humans, and yet provide hope in how God may be at work in experiences of loss. He avoids the mistake of seeing the affliction itself as good while maintaining the good that can be

¹⁸ Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1983), 226.

brought out of grief. Some of the pastoral consolations that relate to what can be experienced as a result of suffering include:

Affliction can help to promote growth. The affliction itself ought not to be considered as a positive thing, but it can be a useful tool to help coax a person to a greater understanding of the afflictive oppression of the innocent, or it could help to pull a community away from idolatry. It is important to be careful of this lesson so as not to claim that God wishes people to suffer. It is also important to curb one's praise of the lessons of affliction with some sort of qualification so that people do not become masochistic by seeking affliction as some sort of tool which can be harnessed for personal gain. Suffering can be God's way of cleansing one from sin. Christian faith does not despair over the social mysteries of evil and suffering. Christ has been revealed in history and will complete that which God has set in motion. Suffering may give us a greater capacity to fully know the joy of life. Growth can only come about through pain or struggle of some kind. It may be postulated that evil is not necessary for this kind of growth; however, evil and suffering are realities in this world. And they serve this purpose as such. In the end, much of our growth will come about as a result of the suffering and pain we experience.¹⁹

Oden is therefore able to reflect a theology of grief that has integrity in terms of a biblical understanding of God's nature as good and powerful, but also show how in allowing evil, suffering can become the seed of growth. While the reality of suffering causes many to shift their understanding of God or to say that there is good in suffering itself, Oden is able to help them see that God is still sovereign, but has allowed for free will which has led to the presence of evil and suffering. The only limitation of this classic pastoral resource is that it is somewhat dense. Otherwise, it is rich in providing understanding of the nature of suffering and ministry to the grieving from a pastoral perspective.

¹⁹ Ibid., 226.

A Grace Disguised

by Jerry Sittser

Jerry Sittser explores the transformation that can occur through catastrophic loss. Of particular importance as an ecclesiological resource within the Reformed tradition is how he helps people see suffering in light of the sovereignty of God. He also explores the place the Church, as the priesthood of all believers, can play in someone's healing process. Sittser's central argument is that,

It is possible to live in and be enlarged by loss, even as we continue to experience it. That is why I will emphasize the power of response. Response involves the *choices* we make, the *grace* we receive, and ultimately the *transformation* we experience in the loss. My aim is not to provide quick and painless solutions but to point the way to a lifelong journey of growth . . . We will find our souls healed, as they can only be healed through suffering.²⁰

For Sittser, there is an inevitability to suffering. People have to suffer in order to grow through it. There is no way of getting around grief you have to go through it. So he did, intentionally entering into his journey of suffering rather than trying to avoid it. "I realized that I would have to suffer and adjust; I could not avoid it or escape it. There was no way out but ahead, into the abyss. The loss brought about by the accident had changed my life, setting me on a course down which I had to journey whether I wanted to or not."²¹ In grief, the darkness is something one will experience, it cannot be denied. To enter into the darkness actually becomes the quickest way to the light. Sittser writes, "a willingness to face the loss and enter into the darkness is the first step we must take.

²⁰ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

Like all first steps, it is probably the most difficult and takes the most time.”²²

As a sufferer intentionally faces their loss, Sittser says that it will open up opportunities for growth. One of those opportunities is that loss gives us an opportunity to evaluate one’s life. “Loss provides an opportunity to take inventory of our lives, to reconsider priorities, and to determine new directions.”²³ Other gifts that come through grief may not be asked for or expected, but they are gifts nonetheless. One central gift that can come is simply the belief that life can be good again following a loss. “Gifts of grace come to all of us. But we must be ready to see and willing to receive these gifts. It will require a kind of sacrifice of believing that, however painful our losses, life can still be good-good in a different way than before, but nevertheless good. I will never recover from my loss and I will never get over missing the ones I lost. But I still cherish life.”²⁴ Another gift, which certainly does not seem like a gift initially, is the gift of coming to the end of your resources so that you really learn to understand what it means to depend on God. “In the experience of loss, we come to the end of ourselves. But in coming to the end of ourselves, we can also come to the beginning of a vital relationship with God. Our failures can lead us to grace and to a profound spiritual awakening. This process occurs frequently with those who suffer loss.”²⁵ Many losses are indeed identity shaking. The loss of a spouse or a child deprives people of a central aspect of who they are and what

²² Ibid., 37.

²³ Ibid., 65.

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁵ Ibid., 78.

has given meaning to their lives. To reform or reshape one's identity following an experience of loss someone else is needed. Thus Sittser writes,

We need someone greater than ourselves to help us forge a new identity. God is able to guide us on this quest, to help us become persons whose worth is based on grace and not on performance, accomplishments, and power. We can learn simply to be, whether we are divorced, unemployed, widowed, abused, sick, or even dying. We can allow ourselves to be loved as creatures made in God's image, though our bodies are broken, our thoughts confused, and our emotions troubled. And we can start to become hopeful that life can still be good, although never in the way it was before.²⁶

Sittser's model shows that restoration of identity in relationship with God is central to our healing following a significant hurt. He is hopeful that even traumatic, landscaping-changing losses such as he faced, can be worked through and growth can occur. "Even the saddest things can become, once we have made peace with them, a source of wisdom and strength for the journey that still lies ahead."²⁷ Sadly, for some, they never recover following a deep grief. The loss becomes like a fork in a road in which they become disillusioned or deny the reality of the loss, and they never recover. For others, their grief can both confirm the good aspects of their life but also cause them to take stock of their lives in ways that can lead to new growth and maturity. As Sittser writes, "Loss can be transformative if we set a new course for our lives. My loss reinforced much of what I already believed; it confirmed that I was headed in the right direction. Still, I realized over time that I was too ambitious at work and too selfish at home."²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 79.

²⁷ Ibid., 80.

²⁸ Ibid., 90.

A Lament for a Son

by Nicholas Wolterstorff

It is important to acknowledge at this point that while people can grow through grief, God does not will or take pleasure in our suffering. While God can bring good out of any loss, that does not make the loss good in itself. Nicholas Wolterstorff captures this quality when he says; “I have changed, yes. For the better, I do not doubt. But without a moment’s hesitation I would exchange those changes for Eric (his son) back.”²⁹ So Wolterstorff, a philosopher who teaches at Yale, who lost his adult son in a tragic mountain-climbing accident, writes in his journal entitled *Lament for a Son* that “the valley of suffering is the vale of soul-making.”³⁰ In other words, while the tragic events the suffering experience are indeed tragic, they can also see them as the ways and means in which their souls are shaped.

The words of Wolterstorff give voice to the pain of many forms of loss. He recognizes that his loss is not something he will be able to put behind him, to get over it, or forget it. He believes that the loss of his son belongs within his story, that lament is part of his life.³¹ Wolterstorff’s journal sojourns in the regret that many do not cherish the moments they share in life with their loved ones. Unfortunately, they often do not realize this until people are gone. “We took him (Eric) too much for granted. Perhaps we all take each other too much for granted. The routines of life distract us; our own pursuits

²⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 73.

³⁰ Ibid., 97.

³¹ Ibid., 6.

make us oblivious; our anxieties and sorrows, unmindful. The beauties of the familiar go unremarked. We do not treasure each other enough.”³² This leads the grieving to recognize that in their loss, one is always gone. All the rest of their lives they will live without them. When it comes to the loss of a child, loss is complicated by the death of one’s dreams or sense of future for that child. “I lament all that might have been and now will never be.”³³ Wolterstorff is able to reflect on the uniqueness of each death and the solitude of each suffering in his reflection upon his own loss. He writes of the importance of remembering: “it means not forgetting him. It means speaking of him. It means remembering him. *Remembering*; one of the profoundest features of the Christian and Jewish way of being-in-the-world and being-in-history is remembering.”³⁴ Remembering is the great antidote to denial in loss. Yet remembering will not bring a return of the one which is gone. That leaves a void or gap that is never to be filled.

Wolterstorff’s contribution also comes through reflecting upon what it is like as a sufferer and the support that is needed. “What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench . . . And later, when you ask me how I am doing and I respond with a quick, thoughtless ‘Fine’ or ‘OK,’ stop me sometime and ask, ‘No, I mean really.’”³⁵ In

³² Ibid., 13.

³³ Ibid., 22.

³⁴ Ibid., 28.

³⁵ Ibid., 35.

this way, those who suffer become interpreters of their grief for others but also need to show that they are open to support of others who really want to give it. Wolterstorff also contributes the acknowledgement of how grief isolates us as each grieve differently: “I have been daily grateful for the friend who remarked that grief isolates. He did not mean only that I, grieving, am isolated from you happy. He also meant that *shared* grief isolates the sharers from each other. Though united in that we are grieving, we grieve differently. As each death has its own character, so too each grief over a death has its own character-its own inscape.”³⁶ Wolterstorff is also right to see the ultimate answer to our suffering coming in the suffering of God’s only son. “The Bible speaks of God’s *overcoming* death. Paul calls it the last great enemy to be overcome. God is appalled by death. My pain over my son’s death is shared by his pain over my son’s death. And, yes, I share in his pain over *his* son’s death.”³⁷ Thus our suffering can be drawn into God’s own suffering. Suffering can lead to communion with God if people let it. Suffering is also a result of our loving. Wolterstoff writes, “In commanding us to love, God invites us to suffer.”³⁸ Wolterstorff sees the intimate connection between love and the inevitability of suffering when we lose the one we love. In these and other ways, *Lament for a Son*, is a wonderful resource for those who want to understand the nature of grief and loss. While it can be seen as a subjective expression of Wolterstorff’s own personal grief, as an academic his thoughts are well-reasoned and resonate with many.

³⁶ Ibid., 56.

³⁷ Ibid., 66-67.

³⁸ Ibid., 89.

The Dark Night of the Soul

by St. John of the Cross

The writings of the sixteenth century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, have significant implications for understanding the role of suffering in spiritual growth. God is in the process of stripping the soul of its imperfections and preparing people for union with himself. This perfecting process is not one that people can undertake in their own strength or ability. So, St. John of the Cross writes,

The saint here postulates a principle of dogmatic theology-that by himself, and with the ordinary aid of grace, man cannot attain to that degree of purgation which is essential to his transformation in God. He needs divine aid more abundantly. 'However greatly the soul itself labors,' writes the saint, one cannot actively purify itself so as to be in the least degree prepared for the Divine union of perfection of love, if God takes not its hand and purges it not in the dark fire.³⁹

In the pride and self-sufficiency that human beings operate out of they will not of their own free will seek God. So God draws people into dark nights of the soul in order to draw them to him. "For this reason . . . God leads into the dark night those whom He desires to purify from all these imperfections so that He may bring them farther onward."⁴⁰ It is God then who takes the initiative in purifying us by his perfect love. Central to this purification process are the fires of affliction. According to St. John, God is taking us from a dependency upon sensual experience (feelings) to a true communion with himself. So, God will often withhold consolations and sweetness of sense in order to bring us into a deeper relationship. "These persons have many other imperfections . . .

³⁹ St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1959), 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

of which in time the Lord heals them by means of temptations, aridities and other trials, all of which are part of the dark night.”⁴¹ The challenge comes in seeking God during these seasons rather than trying to do something to escape them. Normal human tendency when you do not feel God’s presence is to take action, to do something which is believed will return God’s favor instead of seeking him in the silence and the quiet of the soul. Relating this to suffering, many people miss out on the growth and maturity than can come through grief by busying themselves in order to avoid the pain or to avoid God. “What they must do is merely to leave the soul free and disencumbered and at rest from all knowledge and thought, troubling not themselves, in that state, about what they shall think or meditate upon, but contenting themselves with merely a peaceful and loving attentiveness toward God.”⁴² Once attentive, people can find that God makes use of suffering to prepare them for a deeper union of loving relationship with himself:

As a rule these storms and trials are sent by God in this night and purgation of sense to those whom afterwards He purposes to lead into the other night (though not all reach it), to the end that, when they have been chastened and buffeted, they may in this way continually exercise and prepare themselves, and continually accustom their senses and faculties to the union of wisdom is to be bestowed upon them in that other night.⁴³

It is clear in Scripture that God wants us grow, and for those who he desires to mature the most he may allow the greatest trials. This of course is the inverse of the “prosperity gospel” that is propounded by pastors today who teach that those whom God loves he blesses with physical and material benefits. Rather union of the soul with God is more

⁴¹ Ibid., 58.

⁴² Ibid., 71.

⁴³ Ibid., 89.

often brought about through experiences of suffering. St. John writes, “all this God brings to pass by means of this dark contemplation; wherein the soul not only suffers this emptiness and the suspension of these natural supports and perceptions, which is a most afflictive suffering . . . but likewise He is purging the soul, annihilating it, emptying it or consuming it.”⁴⁴ Thus God allows experiences that empty us or humble us in order to fill us. He takes the sad experiences of the soul and sows the seeds that bear the fruit of love. So, while initially counterintuitive, St. John of the Cross believes that the suffering and anguish which come with the thought that the suffering have lost God and are fearful that God has abandoned them, leads to a deeper desire or thirst for God. Suffering becomes the school of virtue where we step back to give God an opportunity to act upon us:

There is another reason why the soul has walked securely in this darkness and this is because it has been suffering; for the road of suffering is more secure and even more profitable than that of fruition and action: first, because in suffering the strength of God is added to that of man, while in action and fruition the soul is practicing its own weaknesses and imperfections: and second, because in suffering the soul continues to practice and acquire the virtues.⁴⁵

Thus times of suffering can be the means God uses to draw the soul nearer to himself. Conversely this theology could create a sense of spiritual superiority in those who have had such experiences. Another potential limitation of the resource is that it is not as accessible to some due to the antiquated language of even the best translations. Still St. John of the Cross is effective in showing us how suffering can lead us upward on the ladder of love.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 155.

Bruce Demarest

Seasons of the Soul

Demarest's writing is helpful in capturing the central metaphor of the journey in the Christian life. Trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is only the beginning of a lifelong process of spiritual formation and training as followers of Jesus. This journey occurs in seasons or phases as a Christian grows continuously in the spiritual life. Rather than in a linear way, growth in the Christian life comes through seasons. Demarest writes:

Rarely does spiritual growth advance in a straight line toward heaven; it's more like an upward spiral. The Christian spiritual journey involves starting and stopping, digressions, and sometimes even reversions to previous stages. While God invites us to grow and mature, we retain the freedom to resist his gracious call, and at times we may backtrack. Since believers still retain the sinful nature in this life, our journeys of transformation are ongoing throughout our lives.⁴⁶

As part of this process Demarest reflects on life's inevitable trials as being central to the way God brings us growth. "Through life's distressing seasons God gets our attention and points out a better path to maturity and fruitfulness."⁴⁷ Demarest goes on to show that scripture records the journeys of many of God's servants who experienced afflictions, desolation, and even moments of despair. Abraham, Joseph, the Israelites, Job, David, and even Jesus himself faced a life of hardship, rejection and ultimately death on a cross. The evidence from scripture, history, and his own experience leads Demarest to declare that "God accomplishes his most profound work in the lives of his children not in times of tranquility but in seasons of hardship."⁴⁸ He goes on to show some of the redemptive

⁴⁶ Bruce Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 50-51.

outcomes of trials and afflictions. Among these, include how hardship and suffering can enhance self-knowledge, offering insights into our imperfections, how distressing afflictions loosen sin's grip on our lives, and that seasons of distress can deepen our relationship with God. In one sense obstacles and afflictions have the potential to break people's spirits, leading to a loss of hope and despair, but they can also be a source of growth. As Demarest summarizes, "The trials and suffering we experience in this life ultimately make our character and our souls stronger as we journey toward heaven."⁴⁹ What does that character shaping and strength look like? "Through a distressing event, God may be calling us to engage unfinished spiritual and emotional business from an earlier stage of our journey. A trial may represent an invitation to surrender some cherished area of our life that we need to release to our Lord."⁵⁰ In fact, it often turns out that the greater our sufferings, the greater our fellowship with Christ becomes. They are central to how we can become more like Christ. So, Demarest hold that "a fundamental truth of the spiritual life is that to become like Jesus we must be formed by testing and trials . . . As much as we dislike and resist it, suffering is one of the primary means God employs to nurture us in godliness."⁵¹ One can recognize then that suffering is part of life and that if they seek God in the midst of their difficulties they can grow.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 57-58.

⁵¹ Ibid., 113.

CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

A true understanding of Reformed theology can give a deeper understanding of God, humanity, and relationships with others which can help people grow through grief. There are however, many ways that Reformed theology has been misconstrued and can be destructive to those who are grieving. With a fresh understanding of Reformed theology people can be encouraged to come to God in their grief and can become a source of comfort for others. Research shows that while each loss is unique, there are certain characteristics which emerge in those who grow through grief and with a solid understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, a congregation can become an environment of healing and growth for those who are grieving.

How Reformed Theology Can Help the Grieving to Grow

Reformed theology helps you see how God in his sovereignty is someone you can turn to and trust in your suffering. It can help people to understand the love of God when they face the mystery of suffering. Reformed theology also points to the context of the Church as the place God has designed for the suffering to find the support they need.

Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

A central theme in Reformed theology as it relates to suffering is that of the sovereignty of God. This emphasis reflects the belief that God is actively involved in the world and solid enough to turn to in ones suffering. John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* describes his understanding of the sovereignty of God in this way:

My meaning is: we must be persuaded not only that as he once formed the world, so he sustains it by his boundless power, governs it by his wisdom, preserves it by his goodness, in particular, rules the human race with justice and judgment, bears with them in mercy, shields them by his protection; but also that not a particle of light, or wisdom, or justice, or power, or rectitude, or genuine truth, will anywhere be found which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause: in this way we must learn to expect and ask all things from him, and thankfully ascribe to him whatever we receive.¹

Such a high view of God's sovereignty is then what plunges people into the mystery of suffering. Thus a central problem for humanity and especially for the people of God is to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering in a world created and sustained by a good and gracious God. As Thomas Oden states, "there are three sides of the perplexing triangle of any serious theodicy: God is unsurpassably good. God is incomparably powerful. Suffering and evil nonetheless exist. Why?"² Similarly to Oden, Lewis describes the theological problem of pain (theodicy) in his famous trilemma; "If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty, He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness or power, or both. This is the problem of pain, in its

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 41.

² Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 224.

simplest form.”³ To affirm God’s goodness and power accords with the teaching of scripture, however it still leaves people with the struggle over why God does not reflect these qualities in ways they expect. Peter Kreeft reflects the struggle this way,

I believe in God, the God of the Bible, the all-powerful creator, the all-loving Father. That does not solve my problem of suffering; that makes it worse. Maybe God is going to be part of the solution, but he starts out being part of the problem. For how can an all-powerful and all-loving God allow his innocent babies to suffer? That is the problem; not just suffering but the scandal of suffering in a God-made and God-ruled universe.⁴

Some theologians have solved this dilemma by saying that God initiated the world in his sovereignty and power but then at some point stepped back from it and is not as involved in events today. As Joseph Hill points out, “A rather common belief is that when God created the world he turned it over to natural forces and let the world run itself—implying that bad things just happen.”⁵ In contrast, the Reformed stream of Christian faith is built on the belief that God is reigning and ruling even now, not simply some day when he returns. This means that what happens on earth falls under God’s providence and will. At the same time, Calvin writes that “the Son of God, who came to destroy the works of the devil, is not the minister of sin.”⁶ So, on the one hand, God governs heaven and earth by his providence and nothing happens without his counsel but on the other, God is not the originator or author of evil, sin, or suffering. The Westminster Confession of Faith states the balance this way, “God from all eternity did

³ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 26.

⁴ Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986), 17.

⁵ Calvin, *Suffering—understanding the love of God*, 47.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 19.

the most wise and holy counsel of his will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”⁷ So God, in his sovereignty has given the gift of free will which has led to sin and suffering. Similarly, Thomas Oden captures this quality when he says;

God does not directly will suffering. God is the author of all things that are good and He only gives good things. However, suffering does occur through the permission of divine authority. Yet, as it is permitted, evil and suffering are fully the consequences of finitude and sin. Overall, God’s direct purposes are for the good of humanity and he works in every situation to amend what has become broken in his creation.⁸

So, while God does not directly will sin or suffering, God does exploit evil for his redemptive purposes. In his sovereignty God allows suffering to turn people back to himself. Suffering then becomes part of the “all things” that God works together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28). Suffering is not good in itself, but God accomplishes his purposes through suffering.

Thus in Reformed theology, the sovereignty of God and the mystery of suffering are held together. Joseph Hill describes it this way, “Although we cannot fully comprehend God’s providence in our lives, especially in our personal adversities, sorrow, and distress, we can take courage knowing that God is not only sovereign over all things and events, but also infinitely gracious, and that in due time ‘He will make things

⁷ The Book of Confessions, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 129.

⁸ Augsburg, *The Call to Soul-Making & Soul Mending*, 7/21/2008.

plain.”⁹ In some way then, God sees the necessity of allowing for suffering to bring about his will or intentions for humanity. Kreeft puts it this way, “In a universe created and maintained by a God powerful enough to abolish all suffering at once, loving enough to want only our blessedness, and wise enough to know always what makes for our blessedness, the only reason serious enough to justify God’s continued tolerance of suffering is our need for it.”¹⁰ Thus one can believe in the love and power of God and see his purpose for allowing suffering at the same time.

One central answer to the dilemma of the problem of evil then is that it becomes part of the soul-making work of God who works through suffering to mold people and shape their character. Unfortunately, suffering does not always seem to be distributed proportionally to the soul-making need. The ultimate answer then must be God himself in his sovereignty entering into our suffering through the suffering of his Son, Jesus. Keller captures the comforting quality of a belief in God’s sovereignty in his recent book, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* this way, “God is sovereign over suffering and yet, in teaching unique to the Christian faith among the major religions, God also made himself vulnerable and subject to suffering. The other side of the sovereignty of God is the suffering of God himself.”¹¹ So people can see that God is both a sovereign and a suffering God. God too is upset about the problem of evil and he does something about it. God, in his sovereignty suffers with his creation.

⁹ Calvin, *Suffering—understanding the love of God*, 74.

¹⁰ Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering*, 117.

¹¹ Tim Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 147.

Suffering and Our Own Depravity

If suffering is not then initially caused by God, its' source must be found in another place. Scripture says that suffering is a result of the impact of sin upon the world. Keller writes that "the first chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1-3, say that suffering in the world is the result of sin, particularly the original sin of humankind turning away from God... The world is now in a cursed condition that falls short of its design. Human beings were not created to experience death, pain, grief, disappointment, ruptured relationships, disease, and natural disasters."¹² Rather than project the source of sin or suffering upon God then, humanity is ultimately responsible. As Peter Kreeft writes,

Moses, or whoever wrote Genesis, tells the beginning, or genesis, of the story of the origin of suffering in sin, in the fall of Adam, who is both individual and all mankind, i.e., also ourselves. We suffer because we sin . . . Once Adam declares independence from God (sin), the whole chain falls apart; death, the alienation between soul and body, and suffering, the alienation between body and world, necessarily follow from sin, the alienation between soul and God. All three evils, sin and death and suffering, are from us, not from God; from our misuse of our free will, from our disobedience. We started it!¹³

So, though evil in itself, sin came into the world through the good gift of free-will from God. God in his sovereignty has chosen to allow humanity the will to choose whether to be in relationship with him or not. Augustine is the principle proponent of the free will defense that evil in itself points back to a greater gift God gives us, namely, free will. Building upon Augustine's free will defense, Lewis writes, "Again, the freedom of a creature must mean freedom to choose: and choice implies the existence of things to

¹² Ibid., 131.

¹³ Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering*, 106-107.

choose between.”¹⁴ In his sovereignty then, God is free to extend to his creatures free will. It is here that one can believe in God’s goodness and the reality of suffering without contradiction. Timothy Keller describes the tension this way,

The Bible teaches that God is completely in control of what happens in history and yet he exercises that control in such a way that human beings are responsible for their freely chosen actions and the result of those actions. Human freedom and God’s direction of historical events are therefore completely compatible. God’s plan works through our choices, not around or despite them. Our choices have consequences, and we are never forced by God to do anything—we always do what we most want to do. God works out his will perfectly through our willing actions.¹⁵

All who come into this world then are tainted with the contagion of original sin. It is the common lot of the whole human race. Our sin then, in whole, not in part is due to our corruption and not the cause of God. As Calvin writes, “Let us remember that our ruin is attributable to our own depravity, that we may not insinuate a charge against God himself, the Author of our nature.”¹⁶ So our own sin can lead to suffering and God is not the cause of sin. An awareness of sin and its’ consequences is then meant to lead us into confession that sinners might be brought back into a place of peace with God.

The call then is to turn from all known sin as sin and receive the forgiveness God freely offers through the coming of his son into our suffering. What is lost in Adam’s original sin is recovered in Christ. While sin and death were brought in by Adam, they are ultimately abolished in Christ. This hope is not only that suffering will be redeemed in Christ in the end, but that he is with those who suffer now. God is a God who suffers

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 29.

¹⁵ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 140.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 219.

with and for. His response to sin comes centrally through the crucifixion of Christ. As Calvin affirms, “By the sacrifice of his death, he wiped away our guilt, and made satisfaction for our sin.”¹⁷

Christ is God’s response to the problem of pain that comes through sin. As Kreeft writes, “God’s definite answer to the problem of suffering [is] the Lamb of God, the one who would solve the problem of suffering by suffering, who would solve the problem of death by dying, and in so doing transform the meaning of suffering and death.”¹⁸ It is not that Christ gives the answer to suffering as much as he is God’s answer to sin. As Keller upholds, “Suffering produces growth in us only when we understand Christ’s suffering and work on our behalf.”¹⁹ This is good news for the sufferer that is unique to Christianity. That God is for us. Amidst various competing worldviews, Sittser could propose that rather than try to avoid suffering, “We should embrace it as one aspect of our calling to discipleship, for the goal of life in this life is not ease, prosperity or success but intimacy with God, maturity of character and influence in the world.”²⁰ God has provided the remedy for sin and suffering in the suffering of his son. He has suffered for us and that is the ultimate answer to the problem of sin and suffering. He has offered himself for us and invited us to follow him even in times of suffering and difficulty.

¹⁷ Ibid., 431.

¹⁸ Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, 127.

¹⁹ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 52.

²⁰ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 74.

Suffering and the Priesthood of all Believers

Reformed spirituality also has something significant to say about the opportunity that believers have to come before God in their suffering and to share in the suffering of others. Following a suffering Savior means that people enter into a fellowship of sufferers with the saints throughout the ages who have faced hardship in Christ's name. Paul expressed the desire to know Christ in his sufferings this way, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Phil 3:10). The apostles, of course, are the prime examples of fellowship with Christ through suffering. So Calvin affirms that, "It is therefore no small proof of the authority of Scripture, that it was sealed with the blood of so many witnesses, especially when it is considered that in bearing testimony to the faith."²¹ The church then experiences fellowship with Christ through their suffering, but they also experience fellowship with one another. "The members should have the same care for one another. 'And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it' (1 Cor 12:25-26). As believers are incorporated into the body of Christ they are then united to each other in a fellowship of shared suffering where the various members can minister to one another.

Amazingly, God has given people the ability to suffer with those who are suffering and to participate in their struggle. At times this means battling suffering and working to eliminate its causes, other times it means sitting with the suffering, so that they know they are not alone. So Kreeft writes, "And he shows us that we can henceforth

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 82.

use our very brokenness as nourishment for those we love. Since we are his body, we too are bread that is broken for others. Our very failures help heal other lives; our very tears help wipe away tears; our being hated helps those we love.”²² Suffering with others can be a central way that believers reflect the presence of Christ in their witness. Keller shares that,

Trusting God in suffering also glorifies him to others. When believers handle suffering rightly, they are not merely glorifying God to God. They are showing the world something of the greatness of God—and perhaps nothing else can reveal him to people in quite the same way. ‘It is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering out of a conscious commitment to God,’ writes Peter (1 Pt 2:19). Patient endurance of suffering, when onlookers know that the sufferers are Christians, can reveal the power of God.²³

Suffering then is intimately related to the role of the priesthood of all believers. Each Christ-follower can play their part in caring for others as a reflection of the presence of Christ. They can care for others in their suffering because God has cared for them in their own. Keller goes on to reflect that, throughout history the way Christians “handled their suffering had been a very powerful testimony to the truth of their faith and to the grace and glory of their God.”²⁴ If others see you bearing-up under suffering, it can show them that God is real. Suffering can lead to personal growth, training, and transformation then in relationship with God; but it also leads to serving, resembling, and witnessing to others both in the way Christ-followers face their own suffering and enter into the suffering of others.

²² Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering*, 136.

²³ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

How Reformed Theology can be Misconstrued

While Reformed theology has tremendous resources to offer those who are suffering, this stream of Christian faith can also be misconstrued in a way that could cause more damage or difficulty rather than assuage it. It is important to recognize what Reformed theology says and what it does not say so that we can receive the comfort that it provides as well as offer that comfort and compassion to others. A true understanding of Reformed theology can better enable us to grow through grief.

Misunderstanding God's Sovereignty

Lewis is famous for saying that “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”²⁵ This phrase can give people hope that there is an overall purpose for pain. At the same time it can cause people to view God as cold and calculating, unconcerned with the pain he causes as long as it fits his purposes. That is why it is important to realize that in a later passage Lewis also wrote, “No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul.”²⁶ In other words the pain itself will never be a good thing but it is a central part of God’s maturing process. Otherwise it could be seen that suffering is something to be actively pursued. So Lewis notes, “but if suffering

²⁵ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

is good, ought it not be pursued rather than avoided? I answer that suffering is not good in itself. What is good in any partial experience is, for the sufferer, submission to the will of God, and, for others, the compassion aroused and the acts of mercy to which it leads.”²⁷

Dorothee Soelle raises thoughtful questions about the theology of suffering that so many have assumed through the writings of Lewis, Calvin, and others. Seeing their theology as a type of Christian masochism, that God chastises us for our benefit, she writes, “Masochism’s presuppositions that God is almighty (proposition one), and loving and just (proposition two), lead to the conclusion that all suffering serves either to punish, test, or train. It is God’s way of drawing near us in order to win souls for himself.”²⁸ Soelle questions this presupposition by noting that “suffering produces fruits like curses, imprecations, and prayers for vengeance more than reform and insight. Suffering causes people to experience helplessness and fear; indeed intense pain cripples all power to resist and frequently leads to despair.”²⁹ Certainly, this can be true, but Soelle seems to minimize the good and the growth that can come out of suffering. Her reading of Reformed theology is that God sends all suffering, when instead God does not do evil or initiate evil. In God’s sovereignty he has allowed for humanity’s turning away from him and as a result of the fall, suffering has come into the world. So, in a way, her warning is helpful. But, while Soelle believes that such a view of God’s sovereignty takes away from humanity’s own call to battle suffering and eliminate its causes, scripture presents a

²⁷ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 110.

²⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 24-25.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

God that does both. In his sovereignty God allows suffering to occur, but he also ultimately works to relieve it in Jesus' own suffering on the cross. While Christ's death is the ultimate answer or solution to eliminate suffering, God also invites believers into the work of mitigating suffering as those who are able to share the comfort of God. God would be masochistic or sadistic only if he stands aloof from the suffering of the world which he made, but in Christ he does not. Rather, God is indeed on the side of the sufferer. God the sovereign judge becomes God, the suffering victim. Sadly, Soelle and others believe that God's sovereignty is a sign of his apathy, but in the incarnation and suffering of Christ it can be said that God is anything but apathetic.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the brothers, Ivan, presents similar accusations toward God through the image of the Grand Inquisitor. In Ivan's estimation it is the fact that God has given men freedom that is the source of all suffering, and therefore it is God who is at fault.

Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering. And behold, instead of giving a firm foundation for setting the conscience of man at rest for ever, Thou didst choose all that is exceptional, vague and enigmatic. Thou didst not love them at all-Thou who didst come to give Thy life for them! Instead of taking possession of men's freedom, Thou didst increase it, and burdened the spiritual kingdom of mankind with its sufferings forever. Thou didst desire man's free love, that he should follow Thee freely, enticed and taken captive by Thee. In place of the rigid ancient law, man must hereafter with free heart decide for himself what is good and what is evil, having only Thy image before him as his guide. But didst Thou not know he would at last reject even Thy image and Thy truth, if he is weighed down with the fearful burden of free choice? They will cry aloud at last that the truth is not in Thee, for they could have been left in greater confusion and suffering than Thou hast caused, laying upon them so many cares and unanswerable problems.³⁰

³⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1995), 234-235.

But if God is ultimately at fault for granting humanity free will, he also takes on that fault by freely laying down his life on the Cross. Dostoevsky does not just present the questioning character of Ivan in his novel, he also presents the Christ like Alyosha who enters into the suffering of others in a similar way as Christ. Soelle summarizes the power of this illustration by stating,

Ivan rises against the God who causes or allows such suffering. He wants nothing to do with his harmony. His gesture is that of accusation, of rebellion. Alyosha directs his attention not to the power above but to the sufferers. He puts himself beside them. He bears their pain with them. During this conversation he says almost nothing. He listens in agony as Ivan introduces examples of suffering he had assembled as witnesses against the compassion of God. Later Alyosha arises, goes up to Ivan, the rebel and insurrectionist, and kisses him silently on the lips. It is the same gesture with which Christ departs in the legend of the Grand Inquisitor. He is silent, he shares the suffering, he embraces others. Alyosha's strength is the silent sharing of suffering... Throughout the whole book Alyosha represents the behavior of Christ. If one can speak of humility, then it lies in the fact that his relationship to the sufferers is so strong that all other questions become subordinate.³¹

Reformed theology would say that God retains ultimate control. He has created us in his love and has not left humanity to its own devices, to orchestrate its own destiny. Rather God, in ultimately orchestrating history, brings about a redeemed future through the suffering love of Christ; and humanity is called to trust in God's providence even when they face confusion and questions about God's character when suffering comes. In contrast, Clark Pinnock, a proponent of open theism writes:

God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the

³¹ Soelle, *Suffering*, 175-176.

changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.³²

A member of the church who responded to the Growing Through Grief Survey stated the value of her Reformed theology this way, “God is sovereign and in control of my life and all that happens around me. He loves me, provides generously for me and cares about my pain and joy. I believe I have forgiveness of my sins through Jesus and through him an assured eternal life. I have learned to trust God with my life, with my loneliness with my fears. And he continues to bless me, surprise me and grow me.”

Another could say that, “Somehow even in the brain fog of grief, I came to believe—God knew best—God took my husband before he would have had intense suffering—when I accepted that God knew best—peace began to arrive in me. I began to heal, bit by bit.”

This type of trust in God can help humanity find meaning in suffering. Victor Frankl, reflecting upon his experience in a Nazi death camp writes, “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering.”³³ Similarly, Kreeft holds, “We cannot know what the meaning of every event is, but we can know that every event is meaningful.”³⁴ So, while suffering has its roots in sin that comes through the seduction of Satan, God is still working out his purpose through it. So, Keller affirms that,

According to Christian theology, suffering is not meaningless—neither in general nor in particular instances. For God has purposed to defeat evil so exhaustively on the cross that all the ravages of evil will someday be undone and we, despite participating in it so deeply, will be saved. God is accomplishing this not in spite of suffering, agony, and loss but *through* it—it is through the suffering of God

³² Clark Pinnock, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 7.

³³ Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1946), 88.

³⁴ Kreeft, *Making Sense out of Suffering*, 144.

that the suffering of humankind will eventually be overcome and undone . . . So suffering is at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is not only the way Christ became like and redeemed us, but it is one of the main ways we become like him and experience his redemption. And that means that our suffering, despite its painfulness, is also filled with purpose and usefulness.³⁵

Trusting in God's sovereignty but also fighting against the suffering that is caused by sin and injustice is the call of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If people are to grow through their experiences of grief they must hold out hope that God is sovereign and powerful enough to be present with them in their suffering. They must trust that God is working out his purposes in creation and in their lives even when it is not easily understood.

Misunderstanding the Place of Sin in Suffering

While we might say generally that suffering is a consequence sin, there is certainly not a one to one correlation to be made. If the Reformed view of suffering due to sin seems harsh, people may find some consolation in knowing that not all suffering is punishment. It may help us to gain a clearer perspective if someone considers, for example, the case of Job. Job suffered great suffering, even though he was 'blameless' (Jb 1:1)." In a similar vein, is the story of the man who was born blind in John 9. When the disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus replied, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned." This man, he says, was born blind so that the works of God should be seen in him. (Jn 9:3).

In reflecting the reality that not all suffering is due to direct sin, Kreeft writes, "But not all suffering is punishment for sin. Not all suffering is deserved. Good people

³⁵ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 163.

suffer too, people who do not need a kick in the pants repent. Why does God allow them to suffer so much? . . . Briefly, they are, first, that even good people need repentance, and the better they are, the more they see and say this. It is the saints who say they are the greatest sinners. The second is that the good suffer not only for themselves but for others.”³⁶ Avoiding what he calls a once-size-fits-all approach to why suffering occurs, Keller puts it this way, “Some suffering is given in order to chastise and correct a person for wrongful patterns in life, some suffering is given not to correct past wrongs but to prevent future ones, and some suffering has no purpose other than to lead a person to love God more ardently for himself alone and so discover the ultimate peace and freedom.”³⁷ When you cannot make a one to one correlation between sin and suffering it is easy to want to then question the reasons God might have for so called “unjust suffering.” But simply because one thinks suffering is unjust or there is no good reason for it, does not actually make it so. In other words, the very reasons (the existence of evil) that someone might have for concluding that God does not exist, actually prove that he does, because essentially you are relying on God to make an argument against God. As Keller holds, “So abandoning belief in God doesn’t help with the problem of suffering at all and, as we will see, it removes many resources for facing it.”³⁸

³⁶ Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, 114.

³⁷ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 47.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

Misunderstanding our Role as Part of the Priesthood of all Believers

Scripture is clear that Christ alone has the power and ministry of forgiving sins. So, while the people of God have the ability to come directly to God and to reflect his presence to others in need, they do so as only as they reflect the presence of the one mediator, Jesus Christ. In Christ alone having the power to forgive, he alone has the power to judge. This means that Christ-followers reserve all judgment to him who alone will set all things right. Freed from this role as judge, Christ-followers are then freed to be joined with people in their suffering and give up the place of serving as the judge and jury in deciding or declaring why someone is suffering. In this way, people can avoid becoming the kind of false comforters that Job experienced when his three “friends” came to sit with him. Rather than trying to set people straight, those who desire to be a source of comfort are called as part of the priesthood of all believers to simply sit with people in their suffering. They don’t have to, or get to, explain it. Rather comforters follow God into his own ministry of forgiveness, mercy, and comfort. The suffering need the Body of Christ to move into their lives in very tangible ways through the support of their prayers, meals, and just being present. What they don’t need is someone trying to play God by seeking to explain why their suffering occurred in the first place. As has been shown, what the suffering need is empathy and understanding, to be encouraged to direct their communication to God, to find support in community, and the care and comfort of fellow sufferers. Expressing this type of care keeps people from trying to guide or direct someone else’s journey through grief versus allowing God to do so.

Examples of Those who have Grown through Grief in the Church

Thus far it has been shown that suffering can come in a variety of ways and there are a variety of responses to it. There are general affirmations one can make as to its cause as well as different destinations depending on how people respond. Keller acknowledges, “suffering is an important way to grow. People who have not suffered much are often shallow, unacquainted with both their weaknesses and strengths, naïve about human nature and life, and almost always fragile and unresilient. But we know suffering does not deepen and enrich us automatically . . . It is critical to recognize the remarkable variety in the Bible’s teaching on pain and adversity.”³⁹ Understanding there are various types of suffering, there is also tremendous variety in ways people respond. So Keller reflects that “The Bible accordingly shows us the many kinds of suffering and points to just as great a range of possible responses. A one-size-fits-all prescription for handling suffering is bound to fail, because not only does suffering come in so many different forms but sufferers themselves come with so many different kinds of temperaments and spiritual conditions.”⁴⁰ Individuals are wired differently, therefore the way they will respond to suffering will be unique as well. So while understanding this uniqueness, there are certain types of loss that impact people in somewhat predictable ways. Whether it is the end of a relationship, the death of one’s dreams, the death of a business enterprise or career that shaped much of someone’s identity, or the death of a loved one, some of these losses will impact those who face them in similar ways.

³⁹ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 205.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

Grieving the Loss of a Spouse

It is one thing to look at loss from a general vantage point, it is quite another to face a particular loss. As a result of the death of his wife, Joy, C.S. Lewis went from being someone who could explain the problem of pain to someone who could personally make little sense of it. “C.S. Lewis (1893-1963) experienced a distressing dark night following the untimely death of his wife Joy . . . The penetrating insights into suffering Lewis had previously provided in *The Problem of Pain* (1940) no longer made sense to him. Overcome with grief, Lewis judged that God had abandoned him . . . In his book *A Grief Observed*, Lewis showed how even stalwart believers can lose all sense of meaning in the universe and gradually learn to trust God again.”⁴¹ Lewis would express the impact of the death of his wife in this way: “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but, ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”⁴² Later he writes, “Grief is like a bomber circling round and dropping its bombs each time the circle brings it overhead . . . I want her back as an ingredient in the restoration of my past. Could I have wished her anything worse? Having got once through death, to come back and then, at some later date, have all her dying to do over again?”⁴³ Thus Lewis experienced the unpredictable nature of grief that was somewhat cyclical but still hard to make sense of. He went into it thinking

⁴¹ Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 84.

⁴² Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

that he would process his grief through some very predictable stages but he found out that this was not the case. Lewis thought he could apply his intellect in a way that would bring him understanding of what he would go through but instead it led him into uncharted territory. Clearly when cancer claimed Joy after three years of happy marriage, Lewis had to undergo a reformation of his identity and allow his loss to lead him into a deeper understanding of the God he clearly did not understand in the early stages of grief.

Sheldon Vanauken, a friend of Lewis' reflects on the death of his wife in his book entitled, *A Severe Mercy*. Influenced by Lewis' thought and letters, Vanauken could affirm that "the joy was worth the pain." In other words, the pain of loss was worth the loved he had shared. "Since then grief, the immensity of loss, had filled his life. And yet, amidst the tears and the pain, there was a curious hint of consolation in one thought: the thought that nothing now could mar the years of their love."⁴⁴ It was Lewis "who had said that Davy's death was a severe mercy. A severe mercy-a phrase that haunted him: a mercy that was as severe as death, a death was as merciful as love."⁴⁵ The severeness of Vanauken's loss is expressed when he writes, "along with the emptiness, which is what I mean by loss, and along with the grief-loss and grief are not the same thing-I kept wanting to tell her about it. We always told each other-that was what sharing was-and now this huge thing was happening to me, and I couldn't tell her."⁴⁶ So the missing of Vanauken's loving companion was at the core of the loss of his spouse. Later he writes,

⁴⁴ Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 181.

The loss of Davy, after the intense sharing and closeness of the years, the loss and grief was, quite simply, the most immense thing I had ever known . . . If I must bear it, though, I would bear it-find the whole meaning of it, taste the whole meaning of it, taste the whole of it. I was driven by an unswerving determination to plumb the depths as well to know the Davy I loved: to understand why she had lived and died, to learn from sorrow whatever it had to teach. It was a kind of faithfulness to her. I would not run away from grief; I would not try to hold on to it when-if, unbelievably-it passed.⁴⁷

Vanauken's writing illuminates the emotionally exhausting nature of grief as well as its unpredictability. "Another reason for not going faster was that what I was doing was emotionally exhausting. There was no day, no hour, without tears, as I had known there would be. The music tore me with longing for her. And yet there was joy, too."⁴⁸ Speaking of the intentionality with which Vanauken entered into his grief he reflected, "Some people run away from grief, go on world cruises or move to another town. But they do not escape, I think. The memories, unbidden, spring into their minds, scattered perhaps over the years. There is, maybe, something to be said for facing them all deliberately and straight-away. At all events, it is what I did in the *Illumination of the Past*."⁴⁹ This reflection on the past as well as a wrestling over God's purposes for it all led Vanauken to come to a place of acceptance. "If her death did, in truth, have these results, it was, precisely, a severe mercy . . . I must not presume to answer, for God may have had purposes beyond my imagining. But I am at peace with the question."⁵⁰

Simone Weil observes that one of the marks of affliction is *isolation*. A barrier

⁴⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 196.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 218-219.

goes up between us and even our closest friends. “One reason is that you the sufferer suddenly sense a new gulf between yourself and almost anyone who has not experienced what you are going through. People who, you once felt, shared a common experience with you no longer do.”⁵¹ This is particularly true for those who experience the death of a spouse. Their consistent companion in life is not there and it plunges them into a type of isolation or loneliness they may have never experienced. For those who experience the death of a spouse, staying in communication with God and finding a community of support such as a grief group who can support them in their loss is critical as they no longer have the one who would otherwise be the primary source of conversation.

The story of Ruth is the best scriptural response to the death of a spouse. Ruth is an example of someone who moves forward in her life and faith. Rather than remaining rooted in her grief she believes that life can be good again, albeit different, and this prepares her for future possibilities such as being remarried to Boaz. When Naomi encourages Ruth to go back to her own people, her reply reflects someone undergoing an outward journey. “Don’t urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her” (Ru 1:16-18). In spite of her loss, Ruth clung to God and was able to grow through her grief as a result.

⁵¹ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 213.

Grieving the Loss of a Child

For many, the loss a child can be the most confusing kind of loss as parents place so many of their hopes and dreams upon children. While parents may experience good that comes out of the loss, it will never take the place of or fill the void that is left. Jerry Sittser who experienced the death of his daughter as well as his wife and mother in one car accident reflects, “my suffering is as puzzling to me now as it was the day it happened. The good that may come out of the loss does not erase the badness or excuse the wrong done. Nothing can do that.”⁵² Similarly I can remember people who spoke to me trying to put salve on the wound of my own loss of a child by trying to point to the good that could come out of it, but I was not ready to see it. Rather I initially resisted attempts to try to make such a connection and simply needed time to grieve. I needed time to wrestle with God rather than receive quick-fix solutions. As Wolterstorff writes,

I do not know why God did not prevent Eric’s death. To live without the answer is precarious. It’s hard to keep one’s footing...I have no explanation. I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrector of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son’s life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss. I am not angry but baffled and hurt. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question.⁵³

The loss of a child often comes with unanswered questions which remain an open wound. The good news is that those questions can be taken to God who is big enough to hear them. Reflecting this, Keller records the story of a woman who lost a baby. In her words,

⁵² Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 11.

⁵³ Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 68.

I believed that God could handle my emotions and I wasn't afraid to express them to him . . . often. There were moments of anger, but more often I felt anguish, despair, jealousy, bitterness, and profound sorrow. But somehow, in the midst of the range of emotions I felt daily, a strong and powerful peace found its way into my heart and brought comfort. I felt God's presence deeply, and slowly began the process of learning that, although He allows tragedies to befall us, he will not abandon us, nor deny us an intimate and life-giving relationship with Him. My relationship with him was growing in new ways and becoming more real. He was drawing me closer to him through each painful question and doubt. He was truly IN this dark place with us.⁵⁴

God can meet grieving parents in the dark place they find themselves in. In fact, it is the unique loss of a child that God perhaps knows most intimately. As Keller puts it, "But look at the cross! The Bible gives you a God that says, 'I have lost a child too; but not involuntarily—voluntarily, on the cross, for your sake so that I could bring you into my family.'"⁵⁵ With all the anguish that comes with the loss of a child it is amazing to think that God in his love would choose to suffer such a loss for sinful humanity.

Jack Hayford expresses support for those who have faced the unique loss of a child in his book, *I'll Hold you in Heaven*, by saying that in heaven there will be understanding and there will also be reunion, the day will come when those who have lost a child who have chosen Christ will meet them, greet them and forever be with that child. In the meantime, when it comes to grief, that which is not talked out is acted out. This points to the importance of communication with God and others. As Hayford affirms,

A major dynamic in the process of working through one's grief is found in the simple act of talking-to God, to family and to friends in your support system... Begin with prayer. I mean, just talk to God. Talk with the Lord about the child you once had. Openly describe your bewilderment, and ask your questions. Believe in His love's willingness to embrace you in your pain-and even to

⁵⁴ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 83.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 312.

understand your fears . . . He welcomes our coming to Him-even spilling out our tears, our sorrow and our heartache. Bring it all into His presence. He not only will accept your heart cry, but He will also comfort you.⁵⁶

This means that parents who may wrestle with feelings of guilt over what they feel they should have done to help their children can rest their guilt-driven grief on God's grace.

As John MacArthur notes in his book entitled, *Safe in the Arms of God*, reactions to a child's death often include feelings of anger, guilt, irritability, loss of appetite or sleep, and a profoundly deep sadness. In the midst of these feelings, MacArthur reflects,

To know and trust that God knew precisely how long your child would live and for what purpose your child would live, that your child's destiny was and is in his hands, can be a source of comfort but it certainly can also cause people to feel angry or at least disappointed with God . . . God has a unique plan and purpose for every child conceived. We may not understand his plan fully. We may not be able to comprehend God's purposes. But we can know with faith that our perfect God does not err.⁵⁷

King David is a scriptural example of someone who had to come to terms with the death of a child. As Michael Card writes, "through his psalms of lament, as perhaps nowhere else in Scripture, David reveals a God who uses and utilizes everything, especially pain. All true songs of worship are born in the wilderness of suffering."⁵⁸ When the child that is conceived through his affair with Bathsheeba dies, David laments the loss of his baby son and then, having exhausted himself in lament, he returns to comfort Bathsheeba, now his wife. Out of that comfort, Solomon is born, the boy God named Jedidiah, "beloved of the Lord." The same stubborn refusal to let go of God that

⁵⁶ Jack Hayford, *I'll Hold You in Heaven* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1986), 85.

⁵⁷ John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 23.

⁵⁸ Michael Card, *A Sacred Sorrow* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 63.

is expressed in his laments empowered David to stubbornly refuse to be destroyed by the grief of death and the despair of knowing it was all a consequence of his sin. The painful realities of death and sin had somehow been “dealt with” during his time of lament. They had been offered in worth-ship to God. David’s life illustrates the truth that Card teaches about lament,

Lament leads us in the direction of that kind of clarity. Only by realizing the reality of the pain and acknowledging through lament to God our powerlessness and hopelessness, we can arrive at such a place of freedom as David inhabited. Innocent children die as a result of the sins of others every second on this planet. As much as we can bear, the pain needs to be acknowledged. But on the other side, by God’s grace, comfort comes.⁵⁹

In fact, it is in ones grief that they may find a deeper intimacy with God than they had ever had before. It is then that they may know God as the One who suffers with them and for them. The loss of a child can actually lead one into a deeper intimacy with the God who also went through the death of a child. John Claypool reflects,

As I have stood and watched my child suffer, I have thought to myself that I could not stand it. But then I remembered what God went through with his Child. Suddenly I was not alone, but companioned by Another who seemed to say: ‘I know, O how I know. For you see, I watched my Child suffer too. I understand.’ Believe me, out there in the darkness this companionship of understanding really helps. God is not aloof to our suffering but as a loving father enters into it.⁶⁰

Hudson Taylor, who founded the China Inland Mission, is someone who knew the soul-making quality of suffering. After experiencing the death of one of his children he turned to God in way that led him into a deeper communion than he had known before. Reflecting this, he says, “What, can Jesus meet my need? Yes, and more than meet it.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁰ Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 35-36.

No matter how sad my bereavement, how far away my loved ones, no matter how helpless I am, how hopeless I am, how deep are my soul yearnings-Jesus can meet them all, all, and more than meet.”⁶¹ Of course this kind of understanding does not come right away. It often takes significant time to see what God was up to at the time.

Other biblical paradigms may be helpful to introduce to those that are facing a particular type of grief. For instance, a couple struggling with the grief of childlessness may benefit by exploring the story of Abraham and Sarah. They might find comfort in knowing that Abram and Sarah waited for a long time and their story may give them a sense that God may have a purpose in his waiting. Claypool suggests that there are three roads that seem to lead out of this darkness. The first he calls “the road of unquestioning resignation,” this however, he recognizes, is not the road of the Christian faith. We are invited through the Psalms and other places in scripture to address God with our wrestling questions. The second dead-end route is what he calls “the road of total intellectual understanding.” Any attempt to find an answer that will account for all the evidence will either end in failure or be a real distortion of reality. “For me, at least, the roads called unquestioning resignation and total understanding hold no promise of leading out of the darkness where I lost my child.”⁶² Finally, he presents a third road, “the road of gratitude,” which celebrates that life is a gift no matter how long one is given.

⁶¹ Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1933), 269-270.

⁶² Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 73.

Grieving the Loss of Security

While there are many other types of loss that could be explored, others can fall under the general rubric of the loss of security. The loss of a job, financial hardship, a move, retirement, a natural disaster or terrorist act, can all cause people to question their sense of security and take away their peace. Understanding that God can redeem those losses can bring people to a deeper, more substantial type of security that is essential in the midst of these losses. More deeply than a general sense of redemption, Christians place their security in the belief that redemption will be revealed to them in the end through Jesus. In fact, they may come to understand this as the very reason for which God has allowed certain types of suffering.

Too often people turn other relationships or possessions into their ultimate source of security. When that relationship or role in life is removed they can find themselves at loose ends. At the same time such losses can cause people to look to God's grace as the true source of security in this life and the next. Reflecting this, Calvin proposed that,

Humbled in this way, we learn to invoke his strength, which alone can enable us to bear up under the weight of affliction. Even the holiest believers, however well aware that they do not stand in their own strength, but by the grace of God, would feel too secure in their own fortitude and constancy, were they not brought to a more thorough knowledge of themselves by the trial of the cross . . . When God divests us of confidence in our own strength, or patience, or endurance, it is then that we 'take refuge in the grace of God.'⁶³

This in fact may be a central part of what God may be up to in allowing suffering that can cause us to question false sources of security. Losses that cause people to feel insecure

⁶³ Calvin, *Suffering—understanding the love of God*, 20.

can lead to the ultimate source of security. Supporting this view, Keller writes, “only when our greatest love is God, a love that we cannot lose even in death, can we face all things with peace.”⁶⁴

As Jane Maynard explores in her book, *Transfiguring Loss*, Julian of Norwich was a survivor of traumatic loss that came from her survival of at least three epidemics of the Black Death pandemic of the mid-fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries. Traumatic loss includes “experiencing sudden, unexpected, and untimely bereavements; witnessing horrific events; sustaining possible personal culpability for a death; experiencing death by suicide, murder, or manslaughter; witnessing multiple losses; or experiencing the death of a person for whom one has provided personal long-term care.”⁶⁵ Other grief stressors complicate the process of mourning, but all traumatic events or losses raise concerns about death, safety, or security. Amazingly, Julian grew while the loss of security was the prevailing experience of her time. But instead of becoming bound by fear or anger at God, “Julian lived, prayed, and wrote in this gloomy climate, and her distinctive voice offered a creative alternative to the prevailing theology of her day.”⁶⁶

Clearly, Julian of Norwich knew suffering personally, and faced similar challenges in counseling people around her. While she would have experienced the death of roughly half the people she knew, Julian was enabled to move from grief to hope as the pain and suffering and loss became transfigured through the presence of love. Julian

⁶⁴ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 44.

⁶⁵ Jane Maynard, *Transfiguring Loss* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

encountered the suffering savior, Jesus, and by participating in Christ's death in this way she was able to work through her own loss as a result. As Maynard writes, "In staying with the crucified Christ in her vision, despite the anxiety and pain that it caused her, Julian was able to move consciously through death to new life . . . In persisting with Christ in his pain, Julian's own experience of grief was transfigured as she witnessed the transformation of Christ's death to resurrection and the transformation of her own sorrow to joy."⁶⁷ In this deep experience of sitting with Christ in his suffering, Julian developed the "survivor mission" of being able to stay with others in their suffering. This led to Julian's decision to become an anchoress, walled into the exterior of the church with one window into the sanctuary for worship and the other faced out towards the world where she would witness to Christ and offer counsel to all who came by. Through the comfort and calling Julian received she could say in the midst of an amazingly traumatic time in the world that, "All shall be well; and all manner of things shall be well."⁶⁸ Julian's survivor mission then became one of sharing her own story and experience with Christ and suffering for the sake of others who experienced overwhelming loss. As Maynard observes, "it quickly became apparent how she drew on her own struggles in offering guidance and consolation to others."⁶⁹ Julian is a model for how believers may not only work through their own experiences, but be with others facing the loss of security as well. She increased her dependency on God and supported others in similar circumstances.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 92-93.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 106.

My own Example of Growing through Grief in the Context of the Church

Reflecting upon my own experience in light of the theological model that is forming I can say that when I experienced the death of my daughter I took a risk on the church. Being a pastor there were particular barriers to being real and honest with people about my grief, but I chose to be. I chose authenticity, not simply in private settings, but also in public forums such as worship and in other teaching opportunities. I told the truth, that the loss of my daughter stripped me down to my core and that the journey that followed carried me to places that I could never expect to go. At the same time however, I chose to enter into my grief and to let the people of God join me on that journey.

I remember one particular visitor who came to our home soon after our daughter passed away. Jean was the wife of the previous lead pastor of the church where I was serving as an associate pastor. Jean shared that when her husband Jimmy was sick with cancer that they did not let the church in. Instead, they chose to isolate themselves rather than open themselves to the care and support of the church. Reflecting upon this experience she said, “you have to let the church in, they will be there for you if you let them.” Through the encouragement of Jean and others in our church community and through the affirmation of writers such as Jerry Sittser, we chose to take a risk on the church by opening ourselves up to their care and support and they showed up.

The comfort and care of the church took the form of visits and meals and simply allowing us to be where we were in our grief process. There were particular visitors who came who knew of the loss we were facing, they too had experienced the death of a child and rather than allowing that loss to grind them down and make them less, they had

chosen instead to open themselves to God healing mercy. Their marriages were still intact and they were deeper people for their experienced. One of those couples was a retired pastor and his wife whose son had died in a plane accident in his twenties. While I do not remember much of what they said, my wife and I remember vividly watching them walk down our steps and down our walk way. We turned to one another with a knowing look that acknowledged that Bob and Carolyn were living proof that we could make it, that we could put one foot in front of another in our grief journey and even remain in ministry. Bob and Carolyn had made it and it made Beth and me feel like we could as well. Other couples who had experienced the death of a child simply came and sat with us. They shared their experience of how they had gotten through difficult anniversaries and even used them as a time to honor and celebrate the gift of the child God had given and mysteriously received back to himself.

Other forms of community that cared for us included our small group. Though made up of young families who lacked a lot of life experience or experience with loss, they stood by us all the same. They came to our home for our group meetings which must have been difficult and they allowed us to share as we felt led to. Still part of why we were able to function in healthy ways is that my wife and I knew that the group would play a limited role in offering the care we needed. The group was not designed to be our primary source of care and the group was not designed to primarily care for us, so, we did not expect them to. Having realistic expectations of the support they could provide kept us from blowing them out of the water or overwhelming them with our grief. But we did

give them an opportunity to listen to us at times and pray for us through our grief and that gave us strength and was a piece of the puzzle in terms of the support we needed.

Knowing that our small group was not designed to be or capable of offering the full extent of the care we needed, we looked for resources within the church that could help and found it in Stephen Ministers. My wife and I both opened ourselves up to the care and support of lay people who had received the training that Stephen Ministers go through. These people became guides alongside us in our grief journey. They did not try to solve our suffering or present easy answers they just empathized as they were best able and as a result became some of closest spiritual friends and mentors we know. Long after I had moved through the earlier stages of my grief, the retired pastor who was my Stephen Minister continued to meet with me regularly to listen and offer support related to life and ministry. When my grief resurfaced in a way that I had to continue to work through, the routine of meeting every other week, gave me the opportunity to process it with him and was a significant part of my healing. Similarly, the Stephen Minister that my wife met with has become a dear spiritual friend who she remains in contact with.

Still the support of the church that stood with us through our suffering was also supplemented by the professional counselor we went to see. Sandra was a safe person for us to name our hurts with and encouraged us to express our anger and sadness to God in ways that church members may not have felt comfortable with. This was encouragement we needed both individually and as a couple that helped us tap into some of the deepest aspects of our grief so that we could heal and grow. This level of support also enabled us to be realistic about what other relationships could provide and what they could not.

Forming an Environment Where People can Grow through Grief

When people face loss, they must move toward compassionate community. They are not meant to enter into a journey of grief alone. Rather believers who form the body of Christ are meant to suffer with one another. In both Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes of the interdependent image of the church as the Body of Christ. In being connected to Christ, believers are also connected to one another and are meant to exist within a community of support and encouragement where the gifts of believers are used interchangeably. This is particularly important for the grieving who need a group of Christ-followers to come alongside them and support them through their suffering. The church is meant to be an environment where people can grow through grief by developing a theology of weakness, where people can be open about their brokenness and vulnerability, and where authentic community can be formed. Paul writes that the comfort we received from God, is comfort we are then called to offer to others. God is, “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Cor 1:3-4). Creating an environment where people can heal and grow through experiences of grief is central to the purpose of the church. The church that would desire to be a mission station that is engaged in Christ’s incarnational ministry of love in their community must first be a hospital for the hurting in need of healing. In order for churches and individuals to move forward in fulfilling God’s mission they must learn what barriers exist to people growing through grief and what the central qualities of those that experience such growth are.

CHAPTER 5

A THEOLOGY OF GRIEF

The journey of grief leads people in many different directions. Those who have grown through their grief reflect certain characteristics; they stay in communication with God even though they face great difficulty, they connect in community in the face of their suffering, and come to a place of comforting others with the comfort they themselves received from God. This reflection of the inward, upward, and outward movements of the soul, historically known as tripolar spirituality, give us a balanced perspective on the various ways people can grow through grief. As Augsburg writes, “Tripolar spirituality, by definition, possesses three dimensions: it is inwardly directed, upwardly compliant, and outwardly committed. The spirituality of personal transformation (the inner journey), the experience of divine encounter (the God-ward journey) and the relation of integrity and solidarity with the neighbor cannot be divided. Tripolar spirituality sees all three as interdependent.”¹ Reflecting this type of spirituality, it is the contention of this project that increased communication with God, an increased sense of

¹ David Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 13.

community, and serving as a support for others who are suffering, can enable people to heal and grow through grief.

In tripolar spirituality, there are three stages in the journey, often called the threefold way. As it turns out, each is important for a person to grow spiritually, through an experience of grief, or otherwise. This approach focuses on the Contemplative Way (Orthodoxy), the Communal Way (Orthopraxy), and the Missional Way (Orthopathy) as a way of nurturing holistic discipleship. McLaren describes the three-fold way in terms of:

Via contemplative-Is about the upward journey-where we descend into our deepest soul and then from there rise upward toward God. Via communitiva (The Way of Community)-Is about the inward journey, not the journey into me but the journey into we. Via activa-Is about the outward journey-where we express our inner transformation in the outward world.²

Perhaps one could more accurately say that all three journeys are adventures into God, but that upward, inward, and outward journeys explore God in solitude, community, and in service. This approach keeps people focused on God rather than simply on themselves and connects their inward journey with their outer relationships. Tripolar spirituality models the fact that in spite of an experience of grief and loss, people can remain in communication with God, they can remain connected in community, and can remain with others as a source of support and care in their grief. Seeking God in their suffering people can enter into other relationships from more healthy places, and can remain engaged in service without losing Christ as their center.

² Brian McLaren, *Find Our Way Again* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 99-100.

Communication with God

One of the unmistakable signs of those who have grown through grief is that they have remained in communication with God. When someone is thrust into an experience of grief it can turn them away from God. In their disappointment they may come to the point of doubting that God exists. But this is not the answer. It is deeply challenging to trust in a loving God who would allow tragedy to come into one's life, but the alternative is a world where we have no one to turn to and no ultimate redemptive hope. This is where the Psalms come in directing us to God. As Eugene Peterson writes,

The Psalms are the best tools available for working the faith—one hundred and fifty carefully crafted prayers that deal with a great variety of operations that God carries on in us and attend to all the parts of our lives that are, at various times and in different ways, rebelling and trusting, hurting and praising . . . If we wish to develop in the life of faith, to mature in our humanity, and to glorify God with our entire heart, mind, soul, and strength, the Psalms are necessary.³

Reflecting the resonance with the human experience found in the Psalms, John Calvin called them “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.”⁴ In other words, people can find both a true understanding of God and themselves in the pages of the Psalms which can help them move forward in their grief. Peterson puts it this way, “no matter how disordered our speech, no matter how disoriented our experience, the act of putting it into words puts it into form: order is worked back into our systems in the very act of praying our formlessness, our ugliness, our chaos.”⁵ The Psalms give language for life experience.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

From Orientation to Disorientation to Reorientation

The Psalms give guidance in communication with God, in establishing the relationship, as well as continuing it even in times of crisis and difficulty. In this way, the Psalms reflect the reality of life experience. As Walter Brueggeman has noted, “the movement of our life, if we are attentive is the movement of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation, and in our daily pilgrimage, we use much of our energy for this work.”⁶ Brueggeman proposes that the life of faith involves moving with God through the pattern of orientation, disorientation, to reorientation, that is, experiencing spiritual renewal through a deepened relationship with God. As will be shown, the movement or journey that is reflected in the Psalms also gives a different paradigm or process than the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, which this project has earlier reflected on.

In the introduction to Brueggeman’s *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Patrick Miller notes, “that we are talking about something ‘formative’ that transcends a particular genre of biblical literature is further underscored in Brueggeman’s comparison and contrast of the form of the lament with human experience of death and dying as that has been analyzed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross into successive stages involving denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Brueggeman does not see an easy correlation.”⁷ The key difference is that in the Psalms human beings are given a place they can go in the highs and lows of life. Whether it is great joy, raw anger, or deep sadness, the Psalms say that there is a God who cares, who they can come to. The Psalms show that there can be

⁶ Walter Brueggeman, *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 24.

⁷ Ibid., xiv.

positive movement, that emotions can be worked out and that someone can come to a new orientation following an experience of disorientation. As Brueggeman writes,

This way of speaking can apply to our self-acceptance, our relations to significant others, our participation in public issues. It can permit us to speak of ‘passage,’ the life-cycle, stages of growth, and identity crises. It can permit us to be honest about what is happening to us. Most of all, it may provide us a way to think about the Psalms in relation to our common experience, for each of God’s children is in transit along the flow of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.⁸

In the Psalms of Orientation, there is an absence of tension, for instance in the Psalms of Ascent (Psalm 120-134). Thus songs of creation, wisdom, and blessing all function in the same context of good order and well-being. These Psalms encourage communication, enabling people to be oriented to who God is. These Psalms show that it is vital to build a relationship with God in non-crisis times to stand the strain of a crisis.

Psalms of Disorientation, follow a petition-please-praise pattern, where there is a readiness for a new orientation. The speaker is located at various places in the movement of living into and emerging out of disorientation. All the while however, the Psalmist stays in the conversation with God. The purpose is acute response, helping the person to call upon God to intervene in a time of trouble. As Brueggeman writes, in *Psalms and the Life of Faith*, “Times of disorientation are times when persons are driven to the extremity of emotion. Human persons are not meant for such situations of disorientation. They will, as able, struggle against such situations with all their energies. In so far as people are hopeful and healthy, they may grow and work through to a new orientation.”⁹

⁸ Walter Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 3.

⁹ Ibid., 8-9.

Such disorientation can come through a variety of experiences, such as a divorce, the loss of a job, a financial reversal, or a medical diagnosis. What the Psalms do is draw people out of denial and give them language for their disorientation. The Psalms do not deny the harsh realities of life but give help in moving through them. As Brueggeman writes,

These Psalms attest to us the life of faith does not protect us from the pit. Rather, the power of God brings us out of the pit to new life which is not the same as pre-pit existence. When one is in the pit, one cannot believe or imagine that good can come again. For that reason, the Psalmist finally focuses not on the pit but on the One who rules there and everywhere. It is the reality of God which makes clear that the pit is not the place 'where you ought to be.'¹⁰

The Psalms of Disorientation show that everything that needs to be said to God can be said and that God is strong enough and willing enough to hear those deepest cries. These Psalms can be of immense comfort in showing that pain and hurt do not have to be denied, that feelings of disorienting depression can be processed prayerfully.

In Psalms of Reorientation, surprise, wonder, and amazement are reflected when a new orientation has been granted to the disoriented. It is precisely the dispossession of false and deceptive positions that can lead to the recovery of faith. The purpose is to renew or reestablish relationship, to reorient relationship toward thanksgiving, even when reasons for giving thanks are hard to find. These are songs sung at the appearance of a new reality. Psalms of Reorientation show that following a loss life can be good again. This is the hopeful movement of the Psalms, that if one stays in communication with God they can experience reorientation in relationship with him. That does not mean it happens overnight, but that eventually recovery can be realized. As Peterson writes,

¹⁰ Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms*, 36-37.

All prayer, pursued far enough, becomes praise. Any prayer, no matter how desperate its origin, no matter how angry and fearful the experiences it traverses, ends up in praise. It does not always get there quickly or easily—the trip can take a lifetime—but the end is always praise. No matter how much we suffer, no matter our doubts, no matter how angry we get, no matter how many times we have asked in desperation ‘How long?’ prayer develops finally into praise.¹¹

Much of the disorientation that people experience is as a result of sin but God is also at work restoring and reorienting people to himself. What the Psalms do then, is give language to express ones deepest hurts and longings to God. When people pray their grief they become different people. That does not mean they get over their grief in a linear way but that they ultimately move forward as they offer it to God in prayer. As John Goldingay writes in *The Dynamic Cycle of Prayer and Praise in the Psalms*,

Each journey around takes him through a new experience of calling on God in need, of wrestling to keep faith in God despite affliction, of self-examination which will issue in confession or the cry of innocence, of experiencing God turning, answering, and acting, and of joyful confession that Yahweh is after all the one who hears and saves. A man who has been through that experience is not the same man at the end as he was at the beginning.¹²

Change becomes reflected in a new perspective wrought through a deeper, truer relationship with God. “Growth in the Christian life is shown in working through to a new orientation, reflecting a hopeful and healthy person that can work through (By God’s grace) disorientation and reorient themselves in relation to God. Entering more fully into a real relationship with God means first embracing honest helplessness. The Psalms express the human experience of exile and homecoming.”¹³ This homecoming is

¹¹ Peterson, *Answering God*, 122.

¹² John Goldingay, “The Dynamic Cycle of Prayer and Praise in the Psalms,” *JSOT* 20 (1981).

¹³ Goldingay, “The Dynamic Cycle of Prayer and Praise in the Psalms.”

the healing experienced in relationship with God that gives one the ability to let go of the greatest hurts. To let go or find release from the overwhelming burden of anger, fear, hurt, or depression it has to be prayed through. This is the way to find reorientation. The good news expressed implicitly in the Psalms is that God wants people to experience reorientation following an experience of grief or loss. Unfortunately, as has been shown, this does not always happen. As Demarest notes in his *Seasons of the Soul*, “God delights in seeing his children move on from the darkness of painful disorientation to the light of joyful reorientation. Some Christians, unfortunately, fail to make it through seasons of disorientation to experience the delight of joyful reorientation.”¹⁴ If reorientation or acceptance is not assured, then tools like the Psalms must be made accessible so that reorientation is more often realized. While this is central to pastoral work, it is also work the grieving must choose to enter into. The Psalms do not present a cure then, but they do present a prayerful process that can lead people to eventually come to a new orientation. Demarest reflects this realistically, “the good news is that although likely to revisit previous phases of the journey, by God’s grace we advance toward the goal.”¹⁵

The Psalms help people to overcome the potential barriers in the grief process. In this way, Brueggeman makes the connection between the Psalms and grief work, by writing, “grief is best handled by full articulation.”¹⁶ Brueggeman goes on to compare the movement of the Psalms with the stages of grief as outlined by Kubler-Ross. In this,

¹⁴ Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 127.

¹⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹⁶ Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms*, 68.

Brueggeman sees that Kubler-Ross's five elements correlate with the movements in Israel's laments discerned by Westermann. "Israel and Kubler-Ross begin at very different places, yet evidence striking similarities."¹⁷ While Kubler-Ross recognizes that each one of us will raise such questions as, "is this really how I want to live my life?"¹⁸ the difference is that, "Kubler-Ross's subject has no one to address and so will finally be depressed. Israel, always by form, has a partner to whom to speak."¹⁹ Without this covenant partner with whom to process one's feelings it is difficult to come to a place of acceptance or understand what acceptance looks like. As Brueggeman holds, "it is unclear, concerning Kubler-Ross, whether 'acceptance' is affirmation or whether it is resignation. I believe she, herself, is not clear."²⁰ In the case of the Psalms it is an encounter with the abiding, transforming presence of God that gives form to our formlessness. Without the presence of a sovereign God there is no one to draw upon. As Brueggeman affirms, "Israel has, by the form, decided about loss, grief, and death. They are real, and they are dangerous; but Yahweh deals with them."²¹ Rather sufferers can trust that they can have a relationship with God who is big enough to hear their lament.

The Psalms of Lament

The opportunity to grow through grief by remaining in communication with the

¹⁷ Ibid., 90.

¹⁸ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross & David Kessler, *Life Lessons* (New York: Scribner, 2000).

¹⁹ Brueggeman, *Praying the Psalms*, 91.

²⁰ Brueggeman, *Psalms in the Life of Faith*, 92.

²¹ Ibid., 96-97.

God who understands your pain is reflected most fully in the Psalms of Lament. John Ortberg talks about the nature of the Psalms of Lament and our need for lament,

Old Testament scholars tell us there are different kinds of psalms. Some are called psalms of thanksgiving, some are called enthronement psalms about the king, some are psalms of wisdom, and so on. But the single most popular category is called the psalm of lament. The most frequent psalm consists of somebody complaining to God. And God is apparently not put off by this at all. God allows people to do this—in fact, he encourages it . . . However, many people never have the courage to do this. Instead, they seek to bury their discouragement deep down inside. They put on a stoic exterior. They force smiles, but in doing so they avoid experiencing the pain inside.²²

The practice of lament is the way people express themselves honestly to God at a gut—wrenching level. Central to the good news of the gospel is the fact that the suffering do not need to pretend that things are perfect with God. God is already well-aware of the broken state of this world. That is why he came. In Christ's coming, dying, and rising, there is now a great high priest through whom people can come before God. Ajith Fernando holds, "Christians need not deny pain. At some time all Christians experience pain, discouragement, sorrow, and anger over wrong things and misfortunes that affect them. It is not helpful to deny these feelings. Often before we rejoice amidst pain we need to mourn or lament or express our pain in some such way."²³ It is as people communicate their grief, that they can grow through it.

With only one exception (Psalm 88) the Psalms of Lament reflect a movement from disorientation to reorientation in relationship with God. They give people an opportunity to see how they can grow if they stay engaged in communication with God.

²² John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 140-141.

²³ Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2007), 31.

The Psalms of Lament are honest in showing the kind of bargaining, guilt, and anger often associated with grief, but also give people hope that they do not have to stay there. Writers like Philip Yancey in his *Disappointment with God* and *Where is God When it Hurts?* recognize that people must wrestle with such questions if they are to grow.²⁴

Dan Allendar in *The Hidden Hope of Lament* shares the value of incorporating lament into our language of prayer as well as in the worship life of the people of God,

It is my premise that we must learn to lament in worship and prayer, both publicly and privately if our passion for God is to grow . . . Lament has the potential to change a heart. It compels a search, strips the heart of pretence and forces us to wrestle with God . . . Worship truly involves bringing every dimension of our lives to him, not forsaking the struggle of life to worship, but worshipping in the midst of our struggle.²⁵

For Allendar, the Psalms of lament are a primary way to process pain. Processing pain prayerfully with God not only draws people back into relationship with him but also enables them to go back into other relationships in healthy ways. As anger and sadness are shared with God in prayer, people find themselves able to avoid dumping that on others. As Allendar notes, “pain separates; pain, anger, and confusion deepen our loneliness. The awareness we are not alone increases our courage to honestly look at the pain and to struggle to know God. It gives us less excuse to withdraw from fellowship assuming either no one understands me, or everyone else has his or her life in order. Those assumptions destroy the integrity of Christian community.”²⁶ Finding freedom

²⁴ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).
_____, *Where is God When it Hurts?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).

²⁵ Dan Allendar, “The Hidden Hope in Lament,” *Mars Hill Review* I (1994), 25-38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-38.

through the Psalms people can stay connected with God and find the support they need.

Rather than lament being part of the loss of faith, Allendar believes that it is denial, not voicing honest lament that leads to people leaving the faith. Allendar thus,

Seems to hold that denial rather than lament is a quick slide into doubt and despair, that lament is actually necessary to grow in confidence and joy. Lament is like declaring war against God which eventually leads to surrender and turning our hearts over to God. So, lament is actually linked to sanctification for us as we are able to surrender in the midst of more and more intense conflict with God, dissolving our preoccupation with self and growing in our passion for God.²⁷

Like Allendar, Walter Brueggeman, in his chapter entitled, *The Costly Loss of Lament* notes that without lament an essential component in relationship with God is lost. “One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction with God because the second part of the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology.”²⁸ Real relationship with God necessitates rather than limits one’s ability to honestly express their suffering. Rather Israel was seen as faithful in their covenant relationship with God only when they voiced their complaints to him. When people fail to wrestle with God over apparent injustices or hardships, they stifle questions of theodicy. Instead the Psalms invite people into a deeper understand and experience of God. As Brueggeman affirms,

Lament makes an assertion about God: that this dangerous, available God matters in every dimension of life. Where God’s dangerous availability is lost because we fail to carry out our part of the difficult conversation, where God’s vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair and the world as we now have it becomes absolutized.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Walter Brueggeman, *The Psalms in the Life of Faith*, 102.

²⁹ Ibid., 108.

Brueggeman believes that God is dangerous and available, not safe and separated. God is vulnerable and passionate not aloof and uncaring. God can be mobilized on behalf of the speaker and can intervene in their circumstances. In this way one realizes that an available God correlates with the emergence of our genuine self and the development of serious justice. God is available. In God, there are great resources to meet a person's great need.

What is needed is to enlarge our language, and learning the language of lament enables us to do that. As Dorothy Soelle points out, the language of lament reminds us that "the first step toward overcoming suffering is, then, to find a language that leads out of the uncomprehended suffering that makes one mute, a language of lament, of crying, of pain, a language that at least says what the situation is."³⁰ Unless people learn to lament they cannot learn from or grow through their loss. It is indispensable to be able to say, that communication with God through the language of lament is not only okay, it is necessary. As Soelle affirms,

I consider the stage of lament, of articulation, the stage of psalms, to be an indispensable step on the way to the third stage, in which liberation and help for the unfortunate can be organized. The way leads out of isolated suffering through communication (by lament) to the solidarity in which change occurs . . . By giving voice to lament one can intercept and work on his suffering within the framework of communication.³¹

In fact it may even be said, that this is the true language of prayer. Pain in fact, becomes the environment in which people learn to pray. Eugene Peterson reflects on the place of pain in prayer, "The language of prayer is forged in the crucible of trouble.

³⁰ Soelle, *Suffering*, 69-70.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

When we cannot help ourselves and call for help, when we do not like where we are and want out, when we do not like who we are and want a change, we use primal language, and this language becomes the root language of prayer. Language gets its start under the pressure of pain.”³² To wait around until order is restored before one returns to a relationship with God is avoiding the very One who can bring about the necessary transformation. Rather the invitation of the Psalms is to turn to God in times of trouble. As Peterson writes, “the human condition teeters on the edge disaster. Human beings are in trouble most of the time. Those who don’t know they are in trouble are in the worst trouble. Prayer is the language of those who are in trouble and know it, and who believe or hope that God can get them out . . . Isaac Bashevis Singer once said, ‘I only pray when I am in trouble. But I am in trouble all the time, and so I pray all the time.’”³³

C.S. Lewis’s novel, *Till We Have Faces* is set in the context of the lament of Orual against the god of the grey mountain. “I will accuse the gods, she writes, especially the god who lives on the Grey mountain. That is, I will tell all he has done to me from the very beginning, as if I were making my complaint of him before a judge. But there is no judge between gods and men, and the god of the mountain will not answer me.”³⁴ This lament comes out of the loss of her sister Psyche along with the determination to rule over her father’s kingdom following his death. This decision leads her to a dedicated life of public service that mirrors her inner turmoil. It is in her suffering that her soul is

³² Peterson, *Answering God*, 35.

³³ Ibid., 36.

³⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1956), 3.

shaped as she learns to lament. Following her lament to the gods, Lewis has Orual say,

The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered . . . When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you'll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?" In and through her lament, Orual is led to a beauty of spirit that would not otherwise have been developed. She encounters God in her lament and is changed as a result. "I ended my first book with the words *no answer*. I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer."³⁵

Thus it is as the suffering learn to lament that personal identity is formed, and they are made ready for relationship with the One who hears their laments.

It is the language of lament that sufferers need to learn if they are to remain in communication with God and ultimately grow through their grief. Thus the suffering can cry out, "be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away . . . But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God. My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love'" (Ps 31:9-10, 14-17, NRSV). Learning to lament, then, becomes about entering more fully into life, not somehow becoming lesser as a result of our losses.

Like other writers, songwriter Michael Card affirms that our healing comes not so much in receiving answers to our "why?" questions as much as encountering God in the midst of those questions. That is why he writes,

³⁵ Ibid., 308.

Lament is the path that takes us to the place where we discover that there is no complete answer to pain and suffering, only Presence. The language of lament gives a meaningful form to our grief by providing a vocabulary for our suffering and then offering it to God as worship. Our questions and complaints will never find individual answers. The only Answer is the dangerous, disturbing, comforting Presence, which is the true answer to all our questions and hopes.³⁶

In the end, it is not even so much that people need to be taught how to lament as much as they need to simply be assured that they can lament. In fact, the scriptures call people to lament and if they lose the freedom to lament they will not grow through grief in the ways that God has intended. Instead the psalmists poured out their feelings of abandonment in inspired songs. “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps 10:1). “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Ps 13:1). “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God” (Ps 42:11). The good news in such expressions of lament is that as they embark on a search for God the seeker can know and trust that God is all the while searching for them and in the end, will find them.

Faith is expressed then in voicing ones concerns and complaints to God. Calvin, for instance, perceives great faith in David when he writes, “although he was burdened with grief and ‘almost wholly wasted away with protracted sorrow . . . yet all the while he never ceased from praying to God.’”³⁷ Thus faith is expressed in recovering the lost language of lament. Real life experience is encountered in these words which draw us to

³⁶ Card, *A Sacred Sorrow*, 129.

³⁷ Calvin, *Suffering—understanding the love of God*, 155-156.

God. As Keller writes, “the book of the Psalms provides a prayer for every possible situation in life, and so it is striking how filled it is with cries of pain and with blunt questions to God about the seeming randomness and injustice of suffering.”³⁸ But, sadly as Keller believes, “There is seldom a place provided for lamentation in the church, and down to the present day, many do not give sufferers the freedom to weep and cry out, “Where are you, Lord? Why are you not helping me?”³⁹ For many grieving people, reading and praying the Psalms back to God would be good counsel, but sadly often believers are counseled to curb their communication with God. Those who feel they may have somehow lost themselves in an experience of grief and loss can be given hope through the language of lament that their experience can be processed before God and that they can pray through their situation and find the healing they need.

Spiritual Journaling

Finally, as part of this primary principle of staying in communication with God, spiritual journaling may be a helpful part of the journey through grief. In a *Grief Observed*, which essentially began as a grief journal, Lewis said “by writing it all down (all?-no: one thought in a hundred) I believe I get a little outside it.”⁴⁰ In other words, writing thoughts and prayers out can be another way that people process through their difficult emotions. Reading a Psalm gives language and voice for prayer and prepares

³⁸ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 5-6.

³⁹ Ibid., 246.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 10.

people to process their lament back to God. Rather than get lost in the verbal communication process when you are not sure what to say to God, it is immensely helpful to have a journal with you to write out your prayers. Through such a journal people will be able to look back on earlier stages of their grief journey and find that while they may not be where they would like to be, they can thank God they are not where they used to be.

Writers on the spiritual life down through the centuries have lauded the benefits of spiritual journaling. However, tying that in to one's journey of grief is the point to be made. Today the Psalms of Lament in scripture are there because David and others had the courage to write out their thoughts as they wrestled with God in prayer. Writing down one's prayerful lamentations to God, can be another part of the healing process, helping them stay connected to God. As will be seen in the practical plan that will follow, spiritual journaling can reorient the suffering in their relationship with God as another way forward in their journey through grief.

Community with Others

The second essential quality in growing and healing through experiences of grief and loss is being in community with others. In grief, it is easy to want to isolate yourself. After an initial burst of support often others stop asking about how someone is doing, or they may ask but not really want to hear that someone is in an ongoing struggle. However those who want to grow through their grief will find ways to continue to connect with community, in fact they often find a deeper form of community than they had previously experienced through the support of fellow travelers on the journey of grief. As Augsburg notes, it is through our experiences of grief that,

the Spirit leads us to a oneness with others not superiority over others... the Spirit-stage is the stage of solidarity with the suffering, joining with them in lament, struggling alongside them in working for change, recognizing that our hands are within God's hands as we work to alleviate pain, abuse and injustice... we follow the Spirit into the community of lament . . . So the problem of theodicy in the Spirit-stage is not pain on an isolated ash heap where one rubs the boils of suffering in solitude, rather it is shared with a community of fellow sufferers.⁴¹

The Church being the Church—Grieving Together in an Environment of Growth

As has been shown, grief has the potential to isolate individuals who may be prone to wallow in their sorrow. When sufferers wrestle with the “why?” questions that come from their experience they need the perspective that other sufferers can bring. Communities that learn how to grieve together provide an environment of growth for those who are hurting. In contrast, if people don't feel safe to share their hurt or have felt judged after sharing their true emotions, they will soon start to drift from community and become isolated in their grief. To create space for people to be who they are, where they are emotionally, is the call of Christian community. Like Christ, the community which bears his name is to meet people on their terms and invite them to wrestle with the deep questions of life within community rather than outside it. This must begin in the worship life of the church and can continue in small groups and grief groups, in Stephen Ministry, lay counseling connections, as well as through pastoral care; but it must find a place somewhere. Without intentional caring relationships people may soon feel like the Psalmist who said, “my friends and companions stand aloof from my affliction, and my neighbors stand far off” (Ps 38:11). The Church must create safe places for people to share their hurt and find support if they are to help them grow through their grief.

⁴¹ Augsburg, *The Call to Soul-Making and Soul-Mending*.

Gathering in Worship where People are given an Opportunity to Lament

The healing quality of Christian community that the grieving need to find starts in worship. As Eugene Peterson writes, “we are most ourselves when we are in relationships of grace and love; the relationships that are paradigmatic for our healed and holy lives are most evident in common worship.”⁴² Unfortunately much of the worship that takes place today in the American Church has removed lament. As a result, such worship has essentially told the suffering that their questions are unacceptable to express. Reflecting this concern, Fernando believes that “if corporate laments are not found in our community life, it would be good to restore the practice to the church.”⁴³ Similarly, Brueggeman rightly believes that, “a community of faith which negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because that seems to only be a place of praise.”⁴⁴ In his *Psalms in the Life of Faith*, Brueggeman points to the positive use of the Psalms of Lament in terms of the inclusion in community. “All the uses of this form of Israel insist that grief is formful. It can be supervised according to community forms that make it bearable and manageable in the community. The griever is kept in community or returned to the community by having it articulated that this experience does not lie outside the legitimate scope of the community.”⁴⁵ In other words, the question is not whether people will wrestle with these

⁴² Peterson, *Answering God*, 91.

⁴³ Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain*, 33.

⁴⁴ Brueggeman, *The Psalms in the Life of Faith*, 107.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

questions, but where? For people to grow through their grief, the church must create places for lament. As Michael Card rightly reflects,

Our failure to lament also cuts us off from each other. If you and I are to know one another in a deep way, we must not only share our hurts, anger, and disappointments with each other, we must also lament them together before the God who hears and is moved by our tears. Only then does our sharing become truly redemptive in character. The degree to which I am willing to enter into the suffering of another person reveals the level of my commitment and love for them. If I am not interested in your hurts, I am not really interested in you. Neither am I willing to suffer to know you or to be known by you. Jesus' example makes these truths come alive in our hearts. He is the One who suffered to know us, who then suffered for us on the cross . . . It follows then, that if our refusal to lament separates us from ourselves and others, it also separates us from God.⁴⁶

This aspect of community in the midst of tragedy was one of the central things that kept Elie Wiesel and others going during their time in the Nazi concentration camps. Though they were being treated inhumanely those who chose to treat others with respect found meaning in their suffering and the support they needed to carry on. So Wiesel writes,

Comrades, you're in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. There's a long road of suffering ahead of you. But don't lose courage. You've already escaped the gravest danger: selection. So now, muster your strength, and don't lose heart. We shall all see the day of liberation. Have faith in life. Above all else, have faith. Drive out despair, and you will keep death away from yourselves. Hell is not for eternity. And now, a prayer-or rather, a piece of advice: let there be comradeship among you. We are all brothers and we are all suffering the same fate. The same smoke floats over all our heads. Help one another. It is the only way to survive.⁴⁷

As I shared earlier in the paper, Simone Weil talked about the third essential element in suffering being the social dimension. Like her, many writers about suffering are astute enough to realize that finding true community in the midst of grief is no easy task. It is

⁴⁶ Card, *A Sacred Sorrow*, 29.

⁴⁷ Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), 38.

truly a mystery how people can connect with those who are grieving deeply. As Soelle notes, “the lack of solidarity with the afflicted is therefore the most natural thing in the world.”⁴⁸ Still sufferers need community in order to grow.

Supporting People in their Grief through Small Groups

As we have seen, growing through grief does not happen by accident. As Soelle posits, “that sort of thing is conceivable only in the context of a group of people who share their life—including their suffering with one another.”⁴⁹ To find supportive settings where the suffering can share their story is necessary for the integrity of Christian community. Those that are already a part of a small group Bible study may have such a setting already in place so that when a crisis comes they are not trying to create such a community, but can receive the care of a community that has already been formed.

Those who are suffering often experience the sense that they have been forsaken by God. They are therefore in great need of a community that will stand beside them and remind them that they have not been. In providing supportive community in the setting of a small group it is not about trying to assess the reasons for suffering or providing the answers, it is reminding the suffering that you are with them and for them. When a small group does this they experience a great level of community than they had ever experienced before. As Kreeft captures, “suffering together builds togetherness, and if togetherness is more important for us and for our joy than freedom from suffering is, then

⁴⁸ Soelle, *Suffering*, 14.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

God is good to allow that suffering.”⁵⁰ While each experience of suffering is certainly unique, each sufferer needs a small group of supportive people that walk beside them and help bear their pain when it threatens to become unbearable. As Leslie Allen notes in *A Liturgy of Grief*, caregivers who come alongside the grieving the can give them the encouragement to shed their tears, to talk out their grief, and to experience God’s healing over time.⁵¹

“People changed other people’s lives every day of the year.”⁵² This last line in Anne Tyler’s novel, *Saint Maybe*, encapsulates the legacy of the main character, Ian’s, life. Ian’s life was forever altered through the responsibility he took for the three children who are left behind following his brother and sister-in-law’s death. This heroic and redemptive act left an indelible imprint on them as well. Supporting these connections is the Church of The Second Chance. This congregation, that Ian stumbles into one night when he is wracked with guilt, becomes a supportive oasis over the course of his life. Standing up during a time of confession, Ian says, “pray for me to be good again . . . pray for me to be forgiven.”⁵³ Through the council of Reverend Emmett, Ian is called to practice a radical kind of atonement and complete forgiveness in raising the kids. As the novel expresses, Ian is only able to live this out through the support and love of his church community. Ian is the one who keeps his family together, but at the same time we

⁵⁰ Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, 72.

⁵¹ Leslie Allen, *a liturgy of Grief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 1.

⁵² Anne Tyler, *Saint Maybe* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1991), 337.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 119.

can see that it takes a community of people to hold him together as he does so.

While the Church of The Second Chance has a practice of doing good works every Saturday morning, it is the good work of giving his life away for his family that is the formative event in Ian's soul. "We believe our lives are our missionary outreach,"⁵⁴ Ian would say, and his life reflects that reality. Rather than seeing the challenge of raising the kids as an overwhelming weight, he comes to a place of acceptance, where caring for them is central to his call and to the fabric of who he is. "You could never call it penance, to have to take care of these three. They were all that gave his life color, and energy, and . . . well, life."⁵⁵ The quality of community that is expressed by the Church of the Second Chance is the kind of community that those who are grieving need to find and this experience is perhaps best found in small groups that can stand with the suffering or grief support groups that are specifically dedicated to that task.

Thus Christian community is filled with the possibility of being a space or place of healing. While relationships can be the sources of hurt they can also be the source of healing. As Young writes in his novel *The Shack*, "I suppose that since most of our hurts come through relationships so will our healing, and I know that grace rarely makes sense for those looking in from the outside."⁵⁶ Unfortunately people may not experience the community that they need and may become more isolated or angry as a result. That is why Sittser shares that "Loss does not have to isolate us or make us feel lonely. Though

⁵⁴ Ibid., 186.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 208.

⁵⁶ Young, *The Shack*, 11.

it is a solitary experience we must face alone, loss is also a common experience that can lead us to community. It can create a community of brokenness. We must enter the darkness of loss alone, but once there we will find others with whom we can share life together.”⁵⁷ Still this kind of community does not happen by accident but only through intentionality. Transformation and change both for the suffering and for those who would support them best occurs in the context of a small group. As a result of such a group and turning to the church community overall, Sittser could say, “I risked giving the church a chance, and the church came through for me and my family.”⁵⁸

A respondent to the Growing Through Grief Survey spoke of the power of community this way,

I really had little time to think about grief until after he (her husband of 35 years) was gone. When I look back on this time in my life, I’m amazed but not surprised because of my strong faith. I was still teaching full-time and that gave me great purpose and direction right away. However, I relied on my Savior, Jesus Christ each day. I couldn’t imagine how I would live the rest of my life, but I prayed daily, often times, not even knowing what to pray for. There was peace that is unexplained through deep sadness. My church family provided a great support system. Many friends, especially, non-believers, were so astonished that I never felt anger. It was difficult to explain at the time, but now I realize it was because I knew exactly where my husband was, with the Lord in heaven. I also felt protection and direction through the Holy Spirit even through my lowest times. I also realized that I needed to be a strong parent for my children. I was the one parent left to be a role model and surround them with love. The one and only true God that I know through a personal relationship is the only constant in my life. Happiness can be fleeting but joy and reliance on the Lord will always be with me no matter what circumstances I have to face. There is no question that I have grown through my grief because of faith and trust in the Lord.

The support of Christian community and the power of sharing your story were spoken of

⁵⁷ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 154.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

by one woman who said, “I am a survivor. I’m sometimes timid but have learned to reach out to others. Joining a small women’s grief group after my husband’s death was very helpful for me. Sharing the experience verbally with others was helpful in clarifying it all in one’s mind.” Still another spoke of the support that the church’s Grief Group gave to her: “my friends are particularly a part of my recovery—as is Sierra Presbyterian’s grief group. For me it is most helpful to keep going to the grief group and stay in contact with my widowed friends who are walking the same path as I am.”

Stephen Ministry-Having a Guide Alongside

Being a Stephen Ministry congregation, Sierra Presbyterian has another aspect of what is referred to as a caring ministry umbrella. In order for the grieving to find protection from the “winds and the rains” of grief, they need safe places to process their feelings in non-judgmental relationships that exude Christ’s grace. Having gone through the training required to become a Stephen Minister, lay people are better equipped to coming alongside a grieving or otherwise struggling member of the church and reflect Christ’s mercy in meaningful ways. In anything beyond the smallest church, clergy simply do not have the time and availability to sit with the suffering in long-term healing relationships. Rather the amount of caregivers and support given can be greatly increased by developing Stephen Ministry in the life of the church as is described in Appendix G.

Pastoral and Professional Counseling—Shepherding Care for the Suffering

Still in a church where there are supportive small groups and even Stephen Ministry in place there is still an important place for pastoral care and counseling to be offered to

those who are suffering. In order for the grieving to grow and become reengaged in the mission of God they need ministers who can reflect Christ's mercy in their time of need. Certainly others who may be stuck in a certain stage or season of grief would also benefit from the resources that a trained psychologist or professional counselor can bring. Pastors who have undergone further training to serve as counselors are better equipped to care for the grieving as are professional counselors who have experience with grief work. For a pastor to partner with other counselors it will take an understanding of their own strengths and limitations as well as what other helping professions can provide. In the collaboration between Carl Nishwonger and C. Knight Aldrich they stress that,

The successful application of such interdisciplinary cooperation requires the pastor's understanding of his own professional roles and purposes. He must be aware of the multiple dimensions of his pastoral relationships with parishioners. He cannot structure his pastoral relationships in the same way that the psychiatrist structures his therapeutic relationships. Most psychiatrists remain aloof from their patients outside the office; the clergymen continues to carry out his ministerial responsibilities with the parishioners whom he counsels.⁵⁹

Discerning which resource is the right one builds upon the recognition that Aldrich and Nishwonger make that "grief doesn't always run the same course . . . grief which is not actively expressed is likely to persist for a longer time. If grief is covered, or hidden from view, it remains like an abscess to cause trouble later on."⁶⁰ In order to help people move forward in their grief, then a pastor must encourage the true expression of their feelings. This can be difficult based on the prior relationship that has been built. As Aldrich notes, "if you, a pastor, can accept his anger and rage at a God who hasn't prolonged the life of

⁵⁹ C. Knight Aldrich & Carl Nishwonger, *A Pastoral Counseling Casebook* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 13.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 32.

his loved one, you show that you can tolerate these feelings, if he can express them to you, he can then perhaps risk communicating his grief and other disturbing feelings.”⁶¹ Pastors then can play a role as part of a parishioner’s community of support by encouraging the honest expression of emotions by those they counsel. This may mean pointing people to scripture and particularly the Psalms that show that the expression of negative emotions has been sanctioned by God. A pastor who can point to God being big enough and faithful one to hear the negative feelings that a person needs to express can be a great source of encouragement for them in the grieving and healing process.

Comforting Others

As I started with, experiences of grief and loss give people an opportunity to turn to God and grow. When they do so, they may also become a source of comfort for others. Unfortunately it is often seen that those who are suffering turn from God and limit themselves to their own resources. The good news, is that the grieving can go from being people that are supported by God through their experience of suffering to a place where they can be people that God works through to minister to others in the midst of their grief.

Comforting Others with the Comfort of God

Paul describes God as “the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our trials, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God” (2 Cor 1:3b-4a). Through God’s grace we can go from being people who are

⁶¹ Ibid., 52.

supported by God through our experience of suffering to the point where we minister to others in the midst of their grief. What this means, is that as Fernando suggests,

If God has comforted us, even though the memory of the event is still painful, the bitterness will be gone because we have experienced the love that is greater than the harm done to us. Having experienced God's comfort we are also able to face people, even people who have hurt us, with God's grace . . .⁶²

Ministering to others in the midst of their grief then becomes part of the process of finding redemption. As Mitch and Brookside affirm, "Comforting others with the same comfort you yourself have received from God will help you heal also."⁶³ In as much as someone has received God's grace, they can become a source of comfort for others.

We can actually turn our continuing grief into a witness for the Lord. Not a witness to the foolish notion that God will magically whisk away our grief, but to the fact that he walks with us in our grief. God is always available and his grace is sufficient. We can bear witness to God's goodness even in the midst of our sorrow. We can use this time-this sorrow-to bring us closer to God.⁶⁴

Through an experience of grief, one's loss becomes something they can share with others. They must always be careful to meet people on their terms, not expecting them to grieve in exactly the same way. So Soelle states that, "we can only help sufferers by stepping into their time-frame. Otherwise, we would only offer condescending charity that reaches down from on high."⁶⁵ Much like an Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor recognizes that they must continue their own recovery process if they are to help someone else with theirs, those who would help others, must continue to do their own grief work. Otherwise, they

⁶² Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain*, 33-34.

⁶³ Mitsch & Brookside, *Grieving the Loss of Someone you Love*, 194.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁶⁵ Soelle, *Suffering*, 15.

will not be able to offer the kind of sympathy and support that is needed. It is only those who continue to plumb the depths of their own grief who can serve as a helpful guide for others. As Soelle states, “suffering makes one more sensitive to the pain in the world.”⁶⁶ So, when someone is able to see their own suffering in light of God’s, they are then able to enter into the pain of others. In this way, one’s awareness of their own suffering can lead to sensitivity for the suffering of others. One’s own pain, when it has been accepted, will then be related to the pain of the people you connect with. They can then comfort others with the comfort they themselves have received from God.

Opening Oneself to the Wounds of the World

Those that become a source of comfort for others do not have all the answers; they simply seek to come alongside others in their pain, alleviate it when they can and listen and support when they cannot. They become more open-hearted to the hurts of others. Rather than simply continue to focus on their own suffering, those who grow through grief open themselves up to the sufferings of others. Wolterstorff commends people to, “Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity’s mourning, weep over humanity’s weeping, be wounded by humanity’s wounds, be in agony over humanity’s agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.”⁶⁷ Opening ourselves to the wounds of the world is the way of Jesus. As Keller observes, “Suffering is almost a prerequisite if we are going to be of much use to other people, especially when they go

⁶⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁶⁷ Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 86.

through their own trials. Adversity makes us far more compassionate than we would have been otherwise . . . When we have suffering, we become more tenderhearted and able to help others in suffering.”⁶⁸ Later, Keller spells out the place that those who suffer may someday play in the lives of others, “The implication is that these sufferers in turn become comforters to others—and on and on it goes. The church becomes a community of profound consolation, a place where you get enormous support for suffering and where people find themselves growing, through their troubles, into persons God wants them to become.”⁶⁹ The suffering have the opportunity to remain open to the wounds of others.

Sharing Your Story of Suffering and Serving Others who are Suffering

As spiritual friends, people can come alongside those who are grieving and offer the empathy and understanding of Christ. They can share the ways they are growing and can seek to make helpful connections between their story and the story of those who are suffering. As Augsburg suggests in *The Call to Soul-making and Soul Mending*,

We listen. We listen to their *story*. We listen for the crucial, deep, sometimes hidden and denied cries of the heart. We listen for pain, for trauma, hurt, wounds, for injuries from hurtful relationships. We also listen for where they may be feeling rootless, powerless, hopeless or helpless. We look for the signs of emptiness, meaninglessness, for the absence or silence of God in their lives. We listen to hear the voice of the soul—and we hear it in their *stories*.⁷⁰

Continuing to work through one’s own grief process and continuing to reach out to others who are hurting is how God shapes and sculpts people into the kind of creatures

⁶⁸ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 192.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 193.

⁷⁰ Augsburg, *The Call to Soul-Making and Soul-Mending*.

he has in mind. As he heals a person's hurts and fills their hearts with deep compassion for those who suffer, others can see something beautiful begin to take shape within them. Thus Sittser is right in suggesting that "Often the most helpful people have endured suffering themselves and turned their pain into a motivation to serve others."⁷¹ It is not easy to open one's heart up to the hurts of others, but when you do so you may have the privilege of being present when friends need you in the future as a result of their own crisis. By God's grace the grieving may come to a place in their own growth that they will be the one that God uses to help someone else through their own journey of grief.

One woman at Sierra Presbyterian who experienced the death of her husband from a car accident while on the mission field, responded to the survey that was sent out by saying that she is able to sympathize or empathize with those who have gone through similar losses and that it has drawn her closer to the Lord. Another, who went through the loss of his spouse in the past year felt called to say yes to the opportunity to serve as a Deacon. While some wondered whether it was too soon, he felt that God was calling him to come alongside others in their grief. Since that time he has been faithfully present at memorial services to support those who are grieving as part of the reception team. These people have chosen to open their hearts back up to the wounds of the world, choosing to love even when they do not fully understand their own suffering

It is as people reach out to others that much of the healing will occur and they will find renewed purpose in their lives. In a culture that is dominated by the goal of avoiding

⁷¹ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 173.

suffering the tendency would be to avoid human relationships and contacts altogether.

Rather, like Christ, we are called to suffer with; sometimes that means doing what we can to alleviate or remove suffering, other times it is a ministry alongside or a sitting with.

Bruce Demarest recognizes the call to comfort others as a result of one's own experience,

When we feel troubled or abandoned, we naturally tend to become self-focused. Rather than brooding over our troubles and wallowing in self-pity, we should shift attention from ourselves to others and their needs. The Great commandment to love our neighbor (Lk 10:27) remains important through all the seasons of our lives—the easy times and the hard times . . . As we compassionately serve others, God uses us to contribute to their transformation in Christ, and in the process we discover our own spirits are uplifted and enriched. Entering into the experience of others who are hurting, we often discover our own issues appear less daunting.⁷²

Those comforted by God, who are connected in community are then led to care for others. In the life of a given congregation there is then a continuum or cycle that occurs as people are cared for they are then able to offer the care that they themselves have received to others in need. As individuals grow through their grief, those who follow them on that path have a person who has been further up and further on in the journey.

⁷² Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 122.

PART THREE

PLAN, IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION: A NEW MAP OR MODEL

CHAPTER 6

PLAN AND GOALS

Chapter 6 will show how providing resources for praying the Psalms and the practice of spiritual journaling can encourage people to stay in communication with God. In addition, the creation of a grief workshop will be a time of teaching and reflection that will prepare people to participate in small groups and grief groups where a mutual sense of brokenness can be shared and healing experienced. Finally, more intensive forms of community will be incorporated including; Stephen Ministry, pastoral counseling, and professional counseling. Each of these avenues can help people find healing themselves and prepare them to become a healing agent in the lives of others who are grieving.

GOALS

1. To help people understand the faulty paradigms of what it means to grow through grief by identifying the barriers and how to work through them. This first goal will be accomplished by taking time during the grief workshop to go through the various barriers to growing through grief that are found in the earlier section of this project. This will build awareness of faulty understandings of grief so people

can avoid these potential detours in the grief process.

2. To present a new model of what it means to grow through the seasons of grief by offering a grief workshop, grief groups and opportunities for people to share their grief story. This goal will be accomplished through offering an initial grief workshop which will be evaluated for effectiveness. The workshop will lead to an invitation to a grief group and an opportunity for people to share their grief story.
3. To encourage people to stay in communication with God in their grief by incorporating the Psalms of Lament. People will be introduced to the Psalms of Lament at the grief workshop and invited into an opportunity to pray through the entirety of the Psalter over a three-month period of time that will culminate in a gathering for sharing and celebration.
4. To encourage people to stay in community with others when they are grieving by participating in grief groups and small groups who are sensitive to those who are grieving. While the grief workshop will serve as the entry point into exploring the topic of grief, grief groups and caring small groups will serve an ongoing role of support and care for those who are grieving.
5. To empower people to be present with others in their journey of grief by developing care-giving skills and sharing their own grief story. Small group and Stephen Ministry training will encourage people to serve as caregivers for others. Giving an opportunity for people to share their grief story in groups and in writing will enable their story to serve as a source of comfort for others.

Journeying through the Grief Process

By providing effective soul care caregivers can come alongside others and become a temporary pilot for people on their grief journey. Individual pastoral counseling, grief groups and the effective implementation of a Stephen Ministry, lay counseling model, may all play a part in such support. In these various contexts, scripture can be incorporated in a way that encourages people to move forward in their grief journey.

For this reason, this project will look at how scripture can be incorporated as a primary source of support for healing. Unfortunately, Scripture has often been used as platitudes that provide little healing if not further hurt. There are models, such as Jay Adams' Neothetic model of counseling that can come across that way. In my experience, that is simply not helpful. In contrast, we can help people enter into the story of scripture as part of their healing process, helping them to see how God has met others in the midst of their grief and has brought growth to their lives. This may open aspects of their grief that they have previously kept locked up from God and others, and may help release further healing into their lives. Sittser affirms the power of scripture by saying,

The Bible tells the stories of the great 'cloud of witnesses,' some of whom endured losses similar to the ones we face today and who have gone to the grave before us. They trusted God in their afflictions, loved him with their whole being, and obeyed him, even when obedience required sacrifice and led to death. This cast of characters-among them Job and Joseph-have helped me to believe. Their examples have kept me going, their songs have touched emotions in me that needed recognition and attention, their poetry has given me a language to express my complaints, pain, and hope, and their convictions have helped me decide what matters most in life. Their stories have provided me with perspective. I am not sure what I would have done or how I would have fared without the stories of these people who struggled and triumphed, just as I now struggle and hope to triumph. Because of them I see that I am only one of millions of people who in

suffering believe nevertheless that God is still God.¹

Part of what the scriptures do for its readers is to help them recognize that there are many pioneers in the grief process to be found in its pages. Just about any type of loss is mirrored in one or more of the characters in the Bible. Through reflecting on their stories people can better understand the various journeys they must also make in their grief.

Journey Backward-Overcoming Denial by Offering a Grief Workshop

For instance the approach may begin by taking a *journey backward* with grief workshop participants by asking them to share pertinent information from their family of origin. This can take the form of doing a genogram to get a multi-generational picture of the people you are seeking to help. This may uncover particular pain or disorders that have been experienced by previous generations and are impacting the person in the present. Using the family systems theory modeled by Edwin Friedman in *Generation to Generation*², August Napier and Carl Whitaker in *Family Crucible*³, or Monica McGoldrick's *Genograms in Family Assessment*⁴ may show how the person's family has mourned its losses, worked through their grief, or restructured relationships in a way that has created dysfunction. For instance, an emotional cut-off with someone who has died, where the family rarely, if ever, speaks of the person again, may lead to un-mourned

¹ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 169.

² Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985).

³ August Napier & Carl Whitaker, *Family Crucible* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978).

⁴ Monica McGoldrick, *Genograms in Family Assessment* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985).

losses that have an enduring impact on the family. Both individuals as well as their family system may be caught up in a cycle of guilt or anger they need to work through.

Fortunately, there are scriptural stories that speak to this dynamic and may be a helpful way to lead a person in their own journey back through past hurts so that they can experience further healing. Perhaps more than any other story in scripture, the story of Joseph has profound implications for taking someone through a journey backward into their developmental story. If the care recipient had favored child status as Joseph did, there may be some residual grief over the way their siblings related to them, or if they had a sibling who had such status, they may have never gotten over feelings of jealousy towards them or anger towards one of their parents. If they have experienced some painful events, trauma, or frozen memories in their personal history that have ongoing, negative effects, they may be able to relate to the story of Joseph and find healing.

Joseph could have allowed the painful or traumatic experience of being sold into slavery as a child by his brothers to forever haunt his memory, and yet by working through the past hurt he was given perspective on what God was doing in his life, and was able to say; “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gn 50:19-20). He was able to see God’s purposes. As Claypool states,

The brother’s hatred led them to sell Joseph into slavery and send him far away to Egypt- an act that bore every mark of sheer evil. Yet look at what resulted. The rigors of slavery in Egypt developed the character of Joseph in ways that might never have occurred under the pampering of a doting old father. And what is more, the brothers’ evil act eventually catapulted Joseph into a position where, decades later, he was able to save his family from starvation.⁵

⁵ Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 33.

Mike Flynn and Doug Gregg, in their book *Inner Healing* give several biblical examples of how a journey backward can lead to forward growth. Reflecting on the story of Joseph they write,

Biblical stories, too, show how reinterpreting a past hurtful event can bring freedom and healing from the pain of its memory. Joseph was treated shamefully by his brothers. They plotted to kill him, stripped him of his clothes, threw him in an abandoned well and then sold him into slavery. But later Joseph was able to reinterpret his brothers' betrayal in light of the purposes of God: 'So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God' (Genesis 45:8). And later he says to his brothers, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Genesis 50:19-20). Seeing God's purpose and plan being worked out through his loss and suffering has freed Joseph from bitterness, anger and the need for revenge.⁶

In Joseph, we see the heart and soul of a man shaped in the crucible of rejection, loneliness, depravation, and false accusation, a man who learned patience and obedience by becoming totally dependent on God, so dependent that God could use him as a conduit of blessing for others. Often we think that being a person of depth, character and integrity comes easiest to those who grew up in perfect family situations with wonderful parents in nurturing homes. The story of Joseph and his family presents quite a different picture and opens up the possibilities for people who have come out of difficult family backgrounds.

As a result of Joseph's reinterpretation of the past by faith, he could look to the future of God's work in faith. Joseph acts on his belief and it is verified in his experience. The Interpreter's Bible Commentary affirms that "Joseph looked at the events of his life from a point of view so high above the thick atmosphere of human intentions. He saw that what had been meant as evil God had turned to good, therefore he could be

⁶ Mike Flynn and Doug Gregg, *Inner Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 68.

an instrument of God's goodness now."⁷ Challenging experiences will not leave us unchanged. In Joseph's case it led to a deeper trust in God and was part of God's shaping purposes. As Robert Clinton reflects, "This shows that a person does not have to be bound by an early negative family experience (like Joseph had). For in spite of the hardships it was clear that: 'God was with Joseph' and was directing him toward a destiny."⁸ He goes on to affirm that "it is clear that people of all kinds, pursuing their own ends can be used by God for his own purposes . . . Joseph submitted himself in terrible circumstances. He never became bitter toward God because of them. He simply used his God-given abilities to do the best job he could in the circumstances."⁹ The story of Joseph reflects the providential power of God to unfold people's greatest hurts into his redemptive plan. As one commentary concluded, "behind all the events and human plans recounted in the story of Joseph lies the unchanging plan of God . . . Through his dealings with the patriarchs and Joseph, God had continued to bring about his good plan. He remained faithful to his purposes."¹⁰

Joseph therefore becomes a vivid illustration of the truth the Apostle Paul passes on in Romans 8:28, "and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose." Sittser is able to see

⁷ Interpreter's Bible Commentary, 827.

⁸ Robert J. Clinton, *Joseph* (Altadena, CA: Barnabas Resources, 1985), 22.

⁹ Clinton, *Joseph*, 29.

¹⁰ Kenneth L. Barker & John R. Kohlenberger, *NIV Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 62.

the part that pain and hardship play in God's overall plan by writing that,

The Joseph story helps us to see that our own tragedies can be a very bad chapter in a very good book. The terror of randomness is enveloped by the mysterious purposes of God. In the end, life turns out to be good, although the journey to get there may be circuitous and difficult . . . *I choose to believe* that there is a bigger picture that my loss is part of some wonderful story authored by God himself.¹¹

Having this perspective enables people to make a successful journey backward that then enables them to move forward. It helps them to see that life can be good again. For some however, it is not as easy to look back in the past to God's faithfulness, to strengthen their faith in the present. Some people have hurts that run so deep they will always be a part of who they are. But caregivers can help them prayerfully reflect on the past so they can see how God was present. As Flynn and Gregg commend,

When you are praying through a difficult past event in someone's life, or when a traumatic experience is suddenly brought to memory, it is critical to acknowledge that God was there, knows everything that happened, cares about the person and is able to act sovereignly through the event to bring healing and mercy. When people realize that God was present, loving them and identifying with them, they can trust him in new ways. Forgiveness and repentance become easier, and they gain new faith and confidence that God will be present in the future as well.¹²

Through a journey backward we can help people engage with such questions as, "As you look at your own family background and relational experiences, what negative factors can you identify that make you wonder if God is for you or can use you now?" "As you mourn the loss of your loved one, do you wonder if you will ever experience joy again?" Reflecting on such questions can encourage a healthy journey back that can bring healing.

¹¹ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 104.

¹² Flynn and Gregg, *Inner Healing*, 70.

Journey Outward-Embracing Community by Participating in Grief Groups

Making the journey outward, a grieving individual may need to face and redesign their present story in a way that informs and guides their relating to significant others. This may require learning new ways to deal with anger, manage conflict and closeness, release and complete unfinished grieving, or incorporate and practice new skills in marriage and community life. Linking people into an ongoing grief group can enable them to find a safe place to undergo this part of their grief journey.

Moses is someone who made this journey. While experiencing the grief of isolation, he was met by God in the desert. From the burning bush God spoke to Moses, placing a call upon his life that caused him to radically redesign his present story. Rather than remain in isolation he was called to redeem his Israelite brothers and sisters by returning to Egypt and being God's advocate for their release. Part of God's healing journey for Moses meant meeting him in isolation and calling him back into relationships. In a similar way grief groups can encourage people to make an outward journey, where they have a safe space to share the difficult feelings and emotions that come with loss.

Journey Inward-Resources for doing one's own Grief Work

Just about every biblical reflection on the nature of grief and loss looks to Job for insight. One aspect of his healing journey is how he is able work through his own inner feelings and emotions after facing the grief of catastrophic loss. Sittser has much to say about this kind of life-altering loss in his book *A Grace Disguised*. Of Job, he says,

He discovered that God is the answer to all his questions, even questions he had not thought to ask. Job learned that behind the apparent randomness of life is the

existence of God, whose greatness transcended Job but did not nullify the importance of Job's choices. Job ultimately found meaning in the ineffable presence of God, which he could not fully comprehend with his intellect but could only experience in the depths of his being.¹³

In other words, the necessity of the inward journey is a recognition that people cannot grow through grief simply intellectually, it is ultimately a matter of the heart. As Job undertakes this inward journey of wrestling with life's biggest questions he is also able to call upon God. Keller sees that "the crucial thing to notice is this: Through it all, Job never stopped praying. Yes, he complained, but he complained to *God*. He doubted, but he doubted to *God*. He screamed and yelled, but he did it in God's presence. No matter how much in agony he was, he continued to address God. He kept seeking him. And in the end, God said Job triumphed . . . the suffering did not drive him away from God but toward him."¹⁴ Too often people get stuck in the inward journey of grief. They must unhook from their own painful memories and at some point stop simply rehearsing the sadness so they can move forward. As Claypool writes,

In the grieving process, this is a crucial moment. The temptation to turn away from reality and to live only in the world of fantasy is very great once the values of the past are fully appreciated. Yet to make this into a way of life is tragic indeed. Just as fantasy images of food cannot nourish the body, so the realm of memories, precious and pleasant as they are, cannot provide us the support that is needed for the living of life.¹⁵

Because Job undertakes an inner journey, but ultimately does not get stuck there he is able to move beyond his own inner dialogue and do business with God. Eventually Job is

¹³ Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 103.

¹⁴ Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, 287.

¹⁵ Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 92.

then able to acknowledge, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes.” (Jb 19:25-27). As Card writes,

Lament keeps the door open, keeps Job on the dance floor with God till the music is over, until the two tunes are resolved. The frustrated outpouring allows him to stay in the ring while everyone on the sidelines shouts at him to throw in the towel. By the end of the book, I always imagine Job and God standing with their arms around each other like a couple of weary boxers.¹⁶

Caregivers can encourage the grieving to grow by providing resources that will encourage this inner journey. Having them read the story of Job or Ruth for instance can lead to inner points of identification that can encourage people in their inner journey. Often the inner journey of grief leads people to feel isolated and alone. Reading the stories of people who grieved various types of losses in scripture can encourage identification. Caregivers can also support the inner journey of the grieving by encouraging them in the practice of spiritual journaling. By writing out the inner ruminations of the heart it enables the grieving to somehow get outside of their experience or at least evaluate it better for what it is rather than continue to stew on it in an inner ways that does not go anywhere. By writing out ones grief story to God it can give them new or different understanding that can keep them moving forward on the path toward healing and wholeness. Many stories in scripture started out as personal reflections upon their journey with God through the highs and lows of life and as result they can speak into our own reflection on our experience today.

¹⁶ Card, *A Sacred Sorrow*, 45.

Journey Forward-Opening Ourselves up to Opportunities for Ministry by Sharing our Story and Listening to the Story of Others

Through embarking on the journey forward a person can grow by defining a clearer vision of life and its possibilities through discovering new meaning, clear purpose, and worthy goals for living. The person's story must have a "future story." Ruth, as she works through the death of her spouse, is someone who redesigns her central relationships and move forward with Naomi. Rather than remaining rooted in her grief she believes that life can be good again, albeit different, and this prepares her for future possibilities such as being remarried to Boaz. When Naomi encouraged Ruth to go back to her own people, her reply reflects someone undergoing a journey forward:

Don't urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her (Ru 1:16-18).

Again, grief groups can serve as a space for people to make the journey forward in the context of safe and supportive relationships. At other times, more intensive support is needed through a Stephen Ministry relationship or professional or pastoral counseling. In each case the caregiver can be a guide alongside to help the grieving to move forward.

Journey Upward-Staying in Communication with God by Praying the Psalms

The journey upward for those who are hurting, the journey God-ward, has been present in all four of the preceding journeys. It becomes more clearly focused in clear spiritual development and genuine spiritual encounter with God so that one's story

becomes part of *God's story* and the story of a community of people following a path of faith. It is Jesus who is the best example of having experienced the journey upwards. How does he do that? Writer and musician Michael Card is able to see how Jesus is the one who ultimately undertakes each of the journeys we have mentioned successfully. And so he writes, "all the various truths we've seen, scattered through the Old Testament, over centuries of time, through the lives of men like Job, David, and Jeremiah, come together and find meaningful unity (they "hold together") only in Jesus Christ. In him all these various truths become true."¹⁷ The coming of Jesus is God's answer to ages of expectant laments. Isaiah was able to prophecy this reality when he wrote, "he was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering . . . Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows" (Is 53:3-4). The incarnation of Jesus assumes a level of identification and understanding of grief and loss that is unparalleled. So Card could write,

The ultimate coming together of sorrow and joy was experienced by Jesus on the cross. When He lamented, "Why have you forsaken me?" Jesus voiced all our laments. The heartbreaking truth is . . . God did forsake him . . . Amidst crushing sorrow and confusion, Jesus endured. He suffered with the disturbing clarity that only the hope of joy can give. There He exhausted Himself against the God Whose Presence was nowhere to be seen... He won for us the assurance of Presence. Jesus' death and resurrection once and for all should give us hope that we can never be forsaken, forgotten, or overlooked by God. He is Immanuel, the God who is ever with us. The God who is moved by our tears.¹⁸

In other words, we can stay on the journey with God in the midst of our grief because Jesus made the ultimate journey to be in relationship with us. In his lament, we find our

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

own invitation to lament. People can remain in communication with God because in Jesus, there is a great high priest who cares and understands. So Card goes on to affirm,

Jesus, the man of sorrows, is our high priest . . . Jesus understood the honesty represented in the life that knows how to lament. His life reveals that those who are truly intimate with the Father know they can pour out any hurt, disappointment, temptation, or even anger with which they struggle. Jesus spoke fluently the lost language of lament. He is our best hope of recovering this forgotten vocabulary.¹⁹

In Jesus' journey downward, Christ-followers are enabled to journey upward in their grief. They can go to God because God understands. So Card shares his feeling that, "the God I know has experienced pain and therefore understands my pain. In Jesus I have felt God's tears, trembled before his death on the cross, and witnessed the redemptive power of his suffering. The Incarnation means that God cares so much that he chose to become human and suffer loss, though he never had to."²⁰ In Jesus we find our ability to undertake a grief journey that will lead us upward into the caring arms of God.

As I have previously said, the lost language of lament that is found on Jesus' lips is most readily found by praying the Psalms of Lament. Modeling this type of prayer in the grief workshop and giving participants resources to support their use of the prayer book of the Bible will give them the ability to stay in communication with God and make the upward journey. Ultimately each person must do their own grief work. Caregivers can support them by providing resources, and anchoring them relationally through a grief workshop or group, but ultimately the grieving must be encouraged to find their own

¹⁹ Ibid., 137.

²⁰ Ibid., 143.

language of lament with God. Again, the good news is that the Psalms can help even when that communication does not come easily. It can draw them back into a community of fellow strugglers who have journeyed through grief and come to a place of growth.

Preferred Future: A Community of People who have Journeyed through their Grief and
Experienced Spiritual Growth and Renewal

The end goal of undertaking a grief journey is a community of people who have journeyed through their grief and experienced spiritual growth and renewal. This “preferred future” leads to a group of people who have not only worked through the various parts of the journey through grief themselves but are then able to help others. They can help people make the journey forward because they have been there before and know the terrain better than those who are in an earlier season in their grief. By sharing their story or serving as a guide alongside they can help others make the journey forward.

Content of the strategy

The strategy for helping people to grow through their grief that has been outlined in these goals and through the biblical stories help us to envision what the grief journey may look like. By drawing people into community through a grief workshop they will be given awareness of the barriers that exist to growing through grief and resources that can help them make the journey. They will also be presented with ongoing opportunities to stay connected in community and to share their grief story as an encouragement to others.

A Grief Workshop led by the Pastor and Professional Counselor

This strategy for helping people grow through grief starts with a grief workshop that is facilitated by a pastor in partnership with a professional counselor. The partnership between these two caring ministry professionals is critical both in terms of relational support that is offered as well as resourcing the grieving. The participation of the pastor makes a critical connection to the overall church community context, while the participation of a professional counselor brings expertise and a relational connection that may serve as a bridge into either personal counseling or build trust that might lead to participation in a grief group. The workshop serves as a time of teaching in which the barriers to growing through grief are identified and a theology of grief is given. The workshop then provides time for a prayerful orientation to the Psalms, resources for praying the Psalms and journaling in response to what someone has read and prayed. Finally, connections are made to the resources that are offered for people to stay in community. This includes the times and dates for a grief group meeting or small groups that are prepared to support the grieving, as well as additional counseling resources.

Resources for Praying the Psalms

In the context of the grief workshop the grieving can be given resources for praying the Psalms. In Appendix C an outline for reading and praying the Psalms in a sequential way with questions for response can be found. The suggestion is that praying through two Psalms a day, one in the morning and one in the evening, for a specific season, such as the summer, encourages people to stay in communication with God by giving them language for their lament. As Eugene Peterson presents, “we do better to

simply enter the sequence of psalms as they are given to us in the Psalms, go from one to the next, one day to the next, one day to the next, one week to the next, taking what comes, learning to enter into what comes, whatever, practicing a sense of the presence of God, deepening that awareness into colloquy with God.”²¹ Establishing people in the prayerful language of the Psalms can enable them to make the upward journey of grief.

Spiritual Journaling to Reflect on the Psalms

By providing space and time in the grief workshop for people to journal their own prayerful lament to God in response to a Psalm that is read, the grieving are given the gift of realizing that such emotions are okay to share with God. Encouraging them to take time to regularly write out their own prayerful reflections to God gives them confidence to develop their own voice which will keep them in communication with God. These recorded responses to God can also be the source material for sharing in a grief group.

Small Groups (lay led) and Grief Groups (Pastor or Counselor led)

The transition from a grief workshop into grief groups or small groups that are prepared to support the grieving is critical. There is only so much ground that can be covered in the grief journey in the limited time of a grief workshop. A grief group, with specific times and dates for when it is meeting, and clear connection made with the pastor or professional counselor who will be leading it, gives people an opportunity to stay connected in a community of fellow strugglers and find the ongoing support they need.

²¹ Peterson, *Answering God*, 108.

Stephen Ministry

Being or becoming a Stephen Ministry congregation provides a supportive context for the grieving to have a listening ear that can guide them on their grief journey. The seventy hours of training that Stephen Ministers go through empowers them with the resources they need to listen deeply and share what they have learned with their care receiver. In Appendix G a basic understanding of Stephen Ministry is given that can be shared with the grieving. A Bruce Demarest writes,

To journey successfully through life's ups and downs, however, we need to partner with a discerning spiritual friend. Through the grace of spiritual companionship we receive a double blessing: the spiritual friend supports us in our struggles, and he or she helps us grow in our relationship with Christ . . . God designed the church to be a community of supportive brothers and sisters who open their hearts to one another to be formed together in Christ.²²

Stephen Ministry provides a context for such supportive relationships.

Pastoral and Professional Counseling

While the grief workshop lays the initial groundwork that the grieving need to grow, and the resources to pray the Psalms and respond through spiritual journaling encourages people to stay in community with God, community is needed to help people feel tethered and cared for. Grief groups and small groups provide this basic connection and Stephen Ministry provides another layer or level of support. At the same time, professional or pastoral counseling is often needed to help people make the journey forward. The solidity that such a trained, professional caregiver provides gives people an opportunity to process where they are in their grief. A good set of questions can give the

²² Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 120.

grieving an opportunity to talk through what barriers they face in their grief, how their grief has impacted their relationship with God, and how connected or not connected they are feeling towards community. Suggested questions for a leader to use can be found in Appendix F. This type of connection made with a grieving person can also serve as a blessing to the caregiver as well. As Oden affirms, “The pastor is often privileged to behold persons growing through suffering. There are times when the capacity for compassion is increased precisely through facing some difficult or limiting situation. We then learn to reason by analogy from our own suffering to the sufferings of others.”²³

Personal Testimonies-Sharing your Grief Story in Worship and in Writing

Those who are grieving are in a unique place to eventually serve as a source of encouragement to their fellow strugglers. Giving people a resource (See Appendix B) to frame their thoughts in written form can not only be helpful to them but those who are facing a similar grief or loss can learn from them by reading or reflecting upon their story. Giving people who reflected a particular type of growth or experienced a certain level of healing to share their story with the church community in the context of worship can also serve as a significant testimony to God’s power to heal our grief and enable us to grow.

²³ Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 232.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT

Chapter 7 presents a plan for implementation and assessment to see how the presented plan and goals have been accomplished. The thrust of the plan to encourage people to read through the Psalms and to journal their responses will be tracked through a gathering for review and reflection. The grief workshop and grief groups will give people an opportunity to reflect on and share their grief story and may lead to opportunities to share that story in writing and through testimonies in worship that encourage others to grow through their grief as well.

Pilot Project Summary

The pilot project will be a grief workshop that serves as an entry point for people to become aware of the barriers to growing through grief. The project will orient people to praying the Psalms, and encourage them to participate in grief groups and other small groups which are sensitive to those who are grieving. Resources will also be provided to empower participants to share their own grief story as a way of comforting others with the comfort they themselves have received from God (2 Cor 1).

Timeline

The following timeline is presented so that people who would like to implement this model of helping people grow through grief can prepare to initiate such a ministry. Preparation will involve theological research so that the resources of one's own theological tradition can be effectively tied to the journey of grief. Designing the grief workshop in terms of familiarizing oneself with the barriers to grief, choosing a Psalm that will be read and developing the leadership resources for people to stay connected in community will take time. The following outlines the process that was implemented.

Theological Research Completed–Winter-Spring 2013 and 2014

A three-to-six month period of time was needed to complete the theological research that undergirded the understanding of the barriers to growing through grief presented in this project. This initial research was completed in the winter and spring of 2013. However, another season of research was needed in order to ground the grief workshop in the Reformed theological tradition described in the paper and to develop a comprehensive theology of grief. This occurred in the spring of 2014 which included a month-long time of study leave to focus more intensively.

Designing a Grief Workshop and Developing a Pilot Project Resource Related to Praying the Psalms–Spring 2013

In the spring of 2013 time was spent developing the grief workshop in partnership with a licensed Marriage Family Therapist. This included identifying the primary barriers to grief and how they would be presented. It also included choosing a Psalm that would

be prayed and the resources needed to encourage people to stay in communication with God by praying the Psalms. Times and dates for the start of a grief group, and Stephen Ministry and pastoral or professional counseling resources were presented. The date of a celebration and reflection time for those who prayed through the Psalms was also given.

Scheduling, Promotion, and Coordination with Overall Programming

Scheduling the grief workshop was done three months in advance of the pilot workshop. Six weeks in advance, promotion of the workshop began and other details were coordinated such as the use of the church sanctuary, the production of written materials, room set-up, and sound equipment needs. At Sierra Presbyterian the workshop was scheduled in February, promotion began on Easter Sunday, and the workshop was offered in the middle of May. Participants were then encouraged to pray through the Psalms in the summertime and to reflect on their experience at the end of August. This was an ideal time frame, because many small groups are on hiatus during the summer and people could pray through the Psalms whether they were at home or on vacation.

Pilot Project Launch–Summer 2013

The pilot project was launched in May of 2013 by offering a first grief workshop. Resources for praying the Psalms and journaling ones one prayers over the course of the summer were presented and a time was identified to gather back together to share our experience of praying the Psalms. A grief group was launched that met bi-weekly during the summer and training was offered for existing small groups leaders to increase their understanding of the Psalms and the nature of grief (See Appendix G).

Evaluation and Analysis of the Grief Workshop and Utilization of Resources for Praying the Psalms and Incorporating People into Groups–Fall 2013

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the grief workshop a questionnaire was created in order for participants to reflect on their experience and for the facilitator to incorporate the feedback and make helpful adjustments in terms of content, time, and the resources that were provided (see Appendix C). Participants were also given a resource to reflect on their own grief journey in writing (Appendix B). At the celebration and reflection gathering at the end of the summer a set of questions were used to evaluate the utilization of the resources for praying and the Psalms and reflecting on them in writing (see Appendix E). Finally, the level of participation in grief groups and small groups who are sensitive to those who are grieving could be tracked by sheer participation.

Leadership Development

The development of a number of leadership resources is needed in order to effectively carry out this model for helping people grow through grief. No pastor or caring ministry professional should attempt to carry out the scope of this plan on their own. As has been detailed, a number of leadership resources are needed including a licensed marriage family therapist or other professional counselor, a Stephen Ministry leader and team, small group leaders who are trained, as well as administrative assistance.

Partnering with M.F.T: Conversations to Plan the Grief Workshop

I am indebted to licensed Marriage Family Therapist (M.F.T.) Karen Tyner for the effective development and implementation of this model for helping people grow through

grief. She partnered with me in developing the resources that were utilized in the grief workshop by reflecting on the various barriers to growing through grief. Developing such a partnership with a caring ministry professional is imperative. Not only does it add professional weight and authority to the grief workshop, but such a caring ministry professional may be the perfect person to lead the ongoing grief group that is offered.

Leadership Preparation: Developing Best Practices for Leading Grief Groups

The facilitator of the grief group will need to prepare by developing the best practices for leading such a group. This includes the resources that are needed as well as the best flow for the meeting. In partnership with the M.F.T. a plan was created for an opening devotional, which was often drawn from Martha Whitmore Hickman's *Healing After Loss*,¹ Bill Dunn and Kathy Leonard's *Through a Season of Grief*,² or Diane Dempsey Marr's *The Reluctant Traveler*.³ Decisions were also made as to which barriers to growing through grief would be presented at each meeting of the group, as well as which Psalm would be prayerfully reflected on. A list of questions were also developed to spur the group in fruitful sharing (see Appendix F).

Training Small Group Leaders to be a Support to Those in Grief through the Psalms

Training small group leaders who want to support those who are grieving gives them the resources they need to help participants stay connected in community.

¹ Martha Whitmore Hickman, *Healing After Loss* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

² Bill Dunn and Kathy Leonard, *Through a Season of Grief* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004).

³ Diane Dempsey Marr, *The Reluctant Traveler* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002).

Without such training, the average small group leader is simply not equipped to deal with someone who is journeying through their grief. This training (see Appendix G) included giving leaders an understanding of how they can help people be oriented to who God is through the Psalms and prayerfully process their disorientation in order to be reoriented to God. Boundaries were also defined in terms of the support a group can provide and when to point people to other resources because their needs exceed the resources of the group.

Ongoing Resources: Stephen Ministry Training and Professional Counseling

As previously stated the needs of the grieving for community and support will often exceed the resources of a small group. Developing a trained group of Stephen Ministers who are prepared to offer one-to-one care is a helpful level of support to establish in the life of any congregation. Developing a partnership with a professional counselor a pastor can refer people to is also important. In most communities these referral resources can be developed which are of great benefit to the grieving.

Resources

To carry out an effective grief workshop, other resources will need to be developed. These resources include the right place to meet. A church sanctuary or chapel is an ideal space because it already has a sense of the sacred. People hope or anticipate that they will meet with God in such spaces. This gives participants an immediate sense that growing through grief is a sacred journey that God wants to be with them on. The right written materials that do not overwhelm but guide participants are also important.

Facilities: Reserve Space for the Grief Workshop and the Grief Group

Church sanctuaries and chapels are busy places. It is therefore necessary to reserve such a “sacred space” far enough in advance to ensure the publicity about the event is accurate and participants know what to expect. In addition, reserving the room for the grief group to meet should be done with an eye toward what would be comfortable for participants. A space that is too cramped may cause participants to feel overwhelmed or that the group is too intense. A room that is too large with few participants may cause them to feel that they are alone in their grief or that only a few people are facing such a difficult journey. At Sierra Presbyterian we reserved the church sanctuary three months in advance and the space for the grief group was reserved so that participants knew where to go for the group and that they would be comfortable meeting there.

Written Materials: Resources for Grief Workshop, Bookmarks with Psalm Reading Plan and Spiritual Journaling Instructions.

The written materials that are incorporated into the grief workshop (See Appendix A) include a list of the barriers to growing through grief, a Psalm that can be prayed and space for spiritual journaling. A book mark that presents a reading plan for the Psalms and spiritual journaling questions are also included so people have the resources they need to continue to pray through the Psalms. In addition, a list of dates and times for the start of the grief group, other groups which are prepared to support those who are grieving, as well as Stephen Ministry and pastoral and professional counseling resources.

Sound Equipment in the Sanctuary and set-up of Chairs and Refreshments

Other practical resources utilized for the grief workshop include sound equipment in the sanctuary. The facilitator of the workshop will need to arrange chairs in the sanctuary to support learning and interaction. Refreshments can also be provided in order to create a more informal or relaxed feel to the workshop.

Additional Support Personnel at Sierra Presbyterian Church

Additional support people will need to be involved in order to effectively carry out the pilot program. At Sierra Presbyterian this included the Communications Coordinator who arranged the publicity and PowerPoint promotional slides for the workshop. In addition, the Office Administrator was involved in order to reserve the sanctuary space and meeting rooms for the grief group as well as to prepare the materials for the grief workshop and for praying through the Psalms.

Assessment Plan

The plan for assessing the effectiveness of this strategy to help people grow the grief includes the creation of a grief workshop questionnaire (See Appendix C) as well as the distribution of the questionnaire at the end of the workshop in order to receive feedback. The feedback that is received through the questionnaire is then analyzed and interpreted to see if there are any changes to be made in order to improve the workshop. Assessing the benefit of having participants pray through the Psalms in order to stay in communication with God is done through a gathering for people to share the impact of their experience. Tracking the utilization and impact of caring relationships will be done

by keeping track of how many grieving people are participating in the grief group, are sharing their grief journey in small groups, or are meeting with a Stephen Minister, pastor, or professional counselor. Encouraging people to share their grief story in writing is accomplished by distributing the Sierra Grief Story, Learning from Loss Exercise, collecting them, and producing them for the benefit of others who are grieving. In addition, among those stories that are particularly powerful, some of those people will be prepared to share in worship for benefit of others who can be encouraged to grow as well.

Report on Results

The initial Growing through Grief Workshop held at Sierra Presbyterian in May of 2013 was attended by sixty-five people. The feedback that was received from the workshop was resoundingly positive. However, as the experience was reviewed it became apparent that reordering the Psalm reading and reflection time and the review of the various barriers to growing through would be helpful. The workshop was offered a second time in May 2014 with seventy-five people attending. Again, the feedback was positive, with more people sharing their experiencing and engaging in the grief group.

The Grief Group that began following the initial workshop was attended by eight people. Each meeting we began with a time of orientation, where a devotional reading was shared. Participants were then invited to share or check-in in light of the framework given. The group then prayed through a Psalm with time for writing or prayerfully reflecting upon it. Participants were then invited to share what parts of the Psalm they particularly connected with so that they could work through the disorientation that they

were feeling related to their grief and hopefully be reoriented in relationship with God. They were then encouraged to read and reflect upon the Psalms until the group met again and to meet with a Stephen Minister, pastor or professional counselor if they felt the need for more intensive support. As pastor, I had a number of follow-up appointments after the grief workshop to help people process their grief. The licensed M.F.T. reported that she had a series of follow-up counseling appointments, and three people began meeting regularly with a Stephen Minister. Small group leaders who were prepared to support the suffering through the training time that was offered shared that their groups have become more authentic and honest places, where people have felt safe to share their grief.

As part of a congregational—wide reading of the Psalms the grieving were given bookmarks that guided them into which Psalms to read on which days. Questions for prayerful consideration of the Psalms were also distributed. At the end of the summer a gathering to celebrate and share their experiences was offered. This celebration time was attended by forty people who shared how praying through the Psalms had benefited them. Many of the grieving gave the input that there were times when they were not sure how to pray or what to say to God and the Psalms gave them language and voice for their own prayers. Finally, a collection of grief stories were compiled from among those which were written. These were produced for the benefit of those in the congregation so that they could read the stories and find encouragement in their own journey through grief.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION: KEEP ON GROWING

This doctoral project on Growing through Grief has sought to give a comprehensive view of how a church can minister to those who are grieving. Rather than give an isolated understanding of only one type of loss, the project has sought to establish understanding and to provide resources to help those who are hurting as a result of a variety of losses. Claypool writes, “It is true that many of us think of grief only in relation to bereavement and death, and this is the most intense form of the experience, of course. But as a matter of fact, any time we lost something that is of value to us, the feelings we experience are feelings of grief.”¹ Understanding that the loss of a close family or friend is one type of grief, but that the loss of a job, the death of a dream, or other difficult life transition can all leave people at a loss, is critical for providing a comprehensive ministry to those who are grieving in the church and community.

The good news that is presented here is that people do not have to be bound by an experience of grief or loss but can grow through it. That does not happen by accident however, but through the hard work of entering into the darkness so that they can work through it. As Claypool rightly identifies,

I honestly believe that this can happen to any person as a result of the grief process. But there is nothing automatic about it. The experience of loss can embitter a person forever. One can become curdled and resentful against God and the universe and spend the rest of their days in defiant rage. Or grief can harden and isolate a person. I have known people who have experienced the pain of loss who say: ‘Never again. I will not make myself vulnerable to this kind of agony.’ Then, closing themselves off from everyone and everything, they become shriveled and lifeless. But if we are willing, the experience of grief can deepen

¹ Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 87.

and widen our ability to participation in life. We can become more gratefully for the gifts we have been given, more open-handed in our handling of the events of life, more sensitive to the whole mysterious process of life, and more trusting in our adventure with God.²

For people to experience such growth though, they need not only to be encouraged and guided into communion with God through such resources as have been presented in this project, but they need others to come alongside them to support them on the journey. As has been detailed, the suffering need guides alongside who can help them traverse the terrain of grief with all its switchbacks and false summits. To stay with them, helping to share the load as best they can is critical for a caregiver who wants to contribute to someone's healing journey. Spiritual friends can come alongside those who are wrestling with such questions with unconditional love and support. They can confirm and support what they are learning and the ways they are growing, building upon basic affirmations, but can also help them keep the big picture in mind.

When someone stays in communication with God and finds the caring support they need in community, they can experience the kind of transformation that leads them to a place where they can eventually serve as a support for others. They may then experience the same reality of the Psalmist who could say, "those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him." (Ps 126).

The invitation of Jesus is that the suffering can bring their grief to God because he cares and can ultimately lift the burden of grief and give new gifts and new hope. As

² Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, 97.

Isaiah prophetically wrote about Jesus, “he bears our griefs and carries our sorrow; by his wounds we are healed.” (Is 53:4, 5). Jesus himself extends a wonderful invitation to the hurting when he said, “come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30). That does not mean that things will not be difficult. Followers of Jesus are not promised a life of ease or an absence of hardship. Rather, Jesus himself was honest with his first disciples about the difficulties they would face, which followers of Christ still face today. In the Upper Room discourse that is recorded in the Gospel of John, Jesus was honest about such hardships when he said, “I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (Jn 16:20-22). Therefore, according to Jesus, suffering is temporary but is part of the process God uses to grow people in this life, and lead to greater joy in the next. Paul could also affirm the transforming power of God when he wrote, “and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

What does that mean for the here and now, when we face hardship? It means that we have one, in Jesus, who has faced suffering and stands with the suffering today. The suffering can turn to him and find hope in him. Just as Jesus came to dwell with us

on earth, those who place their faith in Christ will one day dwell with him for all eternity, where there will be no more crying or mourning or pain. As John writes in the book of Revelation, “now at last God has his dwelling among men! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away” (Rv 21:3-4). Card writes of this anticipated day,

Behold, I make all things new” (Rv 21:5). In that moment, we realize to our great joy that, all along, this journey of lament has been a journey toward the New Jerusalem. This hope is meant to shape and give meaning to us in the twists and turns of the journey. But the future hope does not cancel out our need to lament now; in fact it accentuates our deep need to lament what remains. The promised hope makes the pain of the present journey more bearable.³

This transforming hope, which can undergird those who are facing an experience of suffering at the present, can be the foundation upon which they are able to stand and stand with others. Part of the purpose of God allowing suffering then, is that as the God of all comfort and the giver of all compassion he can prepare his children to be a conduit of that comfort and compassion in the lives of others. As Demarest asserts,

The compassionate One permits his children to experience suffering in order to be empowered to serve others . . . We who have been healed and repatterned serve with fresh purpose so that others might enter the circle of blessing. Having been deeply graced in the core of our beings, we tell the good news of new life in Jesus. Our Lord himself is our model for this others-centered phase of life’s journey: ‘For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45). Many biblical people pursued outward journeys of service following seasons of distress and darkness. After passing through a painful season of disobedience, Jonah finally obeyed God by preaching to the people of Ninevah. Simon Peter, after his denial of Jesus and subsequent restoration, was redirected outward, assuming leadership in the early Jewish-Christian church . . . A redemptive journey of personal and community formation

³ Card, *A Sacred Sorrow*, 142.

and a mission journey on behalf of others must advance in tandem . . . The restorative inward journey leads—as it always does by God’s grace—to an outward journey of service to others.⁴

Suffering shapes us. The good news of the gospel that is reflected in the lives of those who faced great grief is that people can grow through it. They do not have to become less, in fact their souls can grow. Reformer Calvin echoed such sentiments,

God uses suffering to purge sin from our lives, strengthen our commitment to him, force us to depend on grace, bind us together with other believers, produce discernment, foster sensitivity, discipline our minds, spend our time wisely, stretch our hope, cause us to know God better, make us long for truth, lead us to repentance of sin, teach us to give thanks in time of sorrow, increase our faith, and strengthen our character.⁵

The good news of the gospel, is that in Christ’s triumph over sin and death, a new heaven and a new earth will ultimately result. Kreeft writes, “On this day, the mystery of suffering and the deeper and more original mysteries of sin and death will be solved, not just in theory but in practice; not just explained but removed. God will tie up the loose ends of the torn tapestry of history, and the story which now seems to be a tortured tangle will appear as a masterpiece of wisdom and beauty.”⁶ Growing through grief then comes when one views their present life, including suffering, hardship, and pain, from this heavenly perspective. They are then able to stay engaged in life in the present and serve as a sign of hope for others. As this project has outlined, this hope is sustained when the grieving stay in communication with God, find a community of support that surrounds them in love, and they become a comfort to others in their grief.

⁴ Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, 140-141.

⁵ Calvin, *Suffering—understanding the love of God*, 17.

⁶ Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, 123.

APPENDIX A

Sierra Presbyterian Church Grief Workshop May 2014

Welcome & Opening Prayer

Barriers to Growing Through Grief:

- A linear view of grief (That you go through the stages in a linear way)
- The detour of denial (Denying the reality or significance of your loss)
- A faulty understanding of forgiveness (That forgiveness means forgetting or denying the hurt)
- Filling the void in unhealthy ways (Through relationships, drugs, alcohol, entertainment, etc.)
- Unhealthy expectations (of how far we are along in our grief process at any one time)
- Not letting go of the need to know (Getting stuck in your “why?” questions when there are no easy answers)
- Comparing losses
- Isolating the impact of grief into only one area of our life (Spiritual, emotional, physical)
- Other: _____

Understanding grief as a journey with different destinations: Grief is a process with various cycles or seasons that impacts each person differently. Unfortunately, western culture has adopted a model that is more linear and lacks a recognition that not everyone grows through their experience of grief. Many of those who lived through an experience of grief and loss reflect that the process is less linear and more cyclical, that is not so much about stages one gets over but seasons that one moves through. The Bible also presents a different model, and is full of examples of people who have grown in their relationship with God through various types of grief.

Three Primary Characteristics of those who Grow through Grief:

- Remaining in Communication with God
- Remaining in Community with others
- Remaining with others in their grief

Communication with God:

- The Psalms of Orientation, Disorientation, and Reorientation
- Staying in Communication with God by Praying the Psalms of Lament
- Spiritual Journaling

Sierra Presbyterian Church
Growing Through Grief Workshop
The Psalms of Orientation, Disorientation & Reorientation

Introduction: The sequence of orientation-disorientation-reorientation is a helpful way to understand the use and function of the Psalms.

1. Psalms of Orientation-Here there is an absence of tension, for instance in the Psalms of Ascent (Psalm 120-134). Thus songs of creation, wisdom, retribution and blessing all function in the same context of good order and well-being. (ex: Psalm 30)
2. Psalms of Disorientation-Psalms of Lament that follow a petition-plea-praise pattern, where there is readiness for a new orientation. The speaker is located at various places in the movement of living into and emerging out of disorientation. The purpose is acute response, helping the person to call upon God to intervene in a time of trouble (ex: Psalm 51, Psalm 77).

“Times of disorientation are times when persons are driven to the extremity of emotion. Human persons are not meant for such situations of disorientation. They will, as able, struggle against such situations with all their energies. In so far as people are hopeful and healthy, they may grow and work through to a new orientation.” ~Walter Brueggeman, *Psalms & The Life of Faith*.

3. Psalms of Reorientation-Surprise, wonder, miracle, and amazement when a new orientation has been granted to the disoriented. It is precisely the dispossession of false and deceptive positions that can lead to the recovery of faith. Two of the works that must be carried out to come to reorientation are the criticism of idols and heeding the true God who will make all things new. The purpose is to renew or reestablish relationship, to reorient relationship toward thanksgiving, even when reasons for giving thanks when they are hard to find. The song of celebration is a new song sung at the appearance of a new reality, new creation, new reliability (ex: Psalm 18 or Psalm 73).

The key insight here, is that until there is an embrace of honest helplessness, there is no true gospel which can be heard. Until the idols have been exposed, there is no place for the truth of the true God. Sometimes we must be “in the depths” if there is to be new life. Here the utter abandonment of pretense is a prerequisite to new joy.

Conclusion: The movement of our life, if we are attentive is the movement of orientation, disorientation, and reorientation. And in our daily pilgrimage, we use much of our energy for this work. The good news, is that grace intrudes and God makes all things new!

Psalms of Lament

“Lament has the potential to change a heart. It compels a search, strips the heart of pretense and forces us to wrestle with God. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” ~Dan Allendar, The Hidden Hope of Lament.

“One loss that results from the absence of lament is the loss of genuine covenant interaction because the second party in the covenant (the petitioner) has become voiceless or has a voice that is permitted to speak only praise and doxology.”

“The second loss caused by the absence of lament is the stifling of the questions of theodicy-the capacity to raise legitimate questions of justice.”

“A community of faith which negates lament concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because it seems to be only a place of praise.”

“Rather the lament makes an assertion about God: that this dangerous, available God matters in every dimension of life. Where God’s dangerous availability is lost because we fail to carry out our part of the difficult conversation, where God’s vulnerability and passion are removed from our speech, we are consigned to anxiety and despair and the world as we now have it becomes absolutized.”

~Walter Brueggeman, The Costly Loss of Lament.

“Growth in the Christian life is shown in working through to a new orientation, reflecting a hopeful and healthy person who can work through (by God’s grace) disorientation and reorient themselves in relation to God. Entering more fully into a truthful/real relationship with God means first embracing honest helplessness.”

~John Goldingay, The Dynamic Cycle of Praise and Prayer in the Psalms.

Suggested Reading:

Dan Allender, The Hidden Hope of Lament.

Walter Brueggeman, Psalms & The Life of Faith.

Walter Brueggeman, The Costly Loss of Lament.

Michael Card, A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out In The Lost Language of Lament.

John Goldingay, The Dynamic Cycle of Praise & Prayer in the Psalms.

C.S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms.

Eugene Peterson, Answering God.

Praying our Grief: Psalm 42

¹ As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.

² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

When can I go and meet with God?

³ My tears have been my food day and night,
while people say to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

⁴ These things I remember as I pour out my soul:

how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One
with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

⁵ Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

⁶ My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you
from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.

⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls;
all your waves and breakers have swept over me.

⁸ By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.

⁹ I say to God my Rock, “Why have you forgotten me?

Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?”

¹⁰ My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long, “Where is your God?”

¹¹ Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

Reflect on the psalm by sitting in silence or spiritual journaling:

Reflection Questions:

What feelings and emotions are expressed by the Psalmist that you relate to?

What does the Psalmist ask God to do for him? Why? What do you most need from God right now?

What does it look like for you to trust in God’s unfailing love right now? How have you experienced God’s salvation and goodness even in the midst of your grief?

Community with Others:

- The Church being the church-Grieving together in an environment of growth
- Gathering in worship where people are given an opportunity to lament
- Supporting people in their grief through small groups
- Stephen Ministry-Having a guide alongside
- Professional or Pastoral Counseling-Shepherding care for the suffering

Comforting Others:

- Comforting others with the comfort of God
- Opening ourselves to the wounds of the world
- Suffering and serving others
- Personal Testimonies-Sharing your grief story with others

Sharing your Grief Story:

What have been the primary challenges you have faced in processing your grief?

What have you learned from your experience that might be helpful for others to know as they go through their own grief journey?

What experiences of communication with God, community with others or comforting others have helped you heal & grow through your grief?

APPENDIX B

Sierra Story-“Growing Through Grief Together.”

Background: As a community that is seeking to grow together, we recognize that God can bring healing and spiritual growth through experiences of grief and loss. In order to understand what may contribute to healing and growth through a time of grief, you are invited to reflect upon and share your grief story so that others might learn from your experience and grow as well.

EXERCISE: Learning From Loss.

Who I am as a person and how I respond as a helper depends largely on my ability to experience and cope with, integrate and grow through, loss. An unwillingness to accept past losses, a refusal to risk future losses, halts all growth and evokes such remembrance of personal pain that it blocks, distorts, or confuses any encounter with another's pain. I must come to terms with my own pain before I can meet you in yours.

Our losses are many:

The loss of innocence--my illusions about myself and the world. The illusions of perfect oneness with another, of an omnipotent protector, of safety and security, etc..

The loss of significant persons--through disillusionment, flight, relocation, alienation, death.

The necessary losses of growth--putting away childish things, putting up with new realities throughout the lifecycle, becoming adult, growing older.

The loss of physical well-being--accepting limitations of illness handicaps, aging.

The loss of contexts--a new school, new home, new church, or new vocation.

Name: _____

For Journal Reflection: Write reflections as they come in stream of consciousness reporting of your life review: (You may use this paper or type it out if you would like more space. Once complete, please return to Pastor Mike's box in the hallway of Ryosa Hall.

1. List your losses. Rate their severity. Draw a loss line from birth to now. Mark the losses- the necessary losses of growth above the line, the traumatic losses below. Rate severity on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being mild, 5 being catastrophic.
2. What barriers or obstacles have you encountered in your grief journey? How have any of the following slowed you or kept you from healing and growing through your grief?
 - ___ The detour of denial (Denying the reality or significance of your loss)
 - ___ A faulty understanding of forgiveness (That forgiveness means forgetting or denying the hurt)
 - ___ Filling the void in unhealthy ways (Through relationships, drugs, alcohol, entertainment, etc.)
 - ___ Unhealthy expectations (Of how far we are along in our grief process at any certain time)
 - ___ Not letting go of the need to know (Getting stuck in your "why?" questions when there are no easy answers)
 - ___ Comparing losses (Getting caught up in comparing your loss with the losses of others)
 - ___ Isolating the impact of grief to only one area of our lives (Spiritual, Emotional, Physical, etc.)
 - ___ Other:
3. List your learnings. How have these losses shaped or reshaped you?
4. List your leaps forward. Have there been some marked gains associated with the losses? How were the loss and gain connected?
5. List your fears of loss to come. What losses do you anticipate? Which do you fear the most? How are you preparing? What have you learned about coping?
6. List your sustaining values. What meaning of values do you possess from your learning-through-loss? Are there any values that now important to you?

*Adapted from David Augsburger, Soul-Making and Soul-Mending (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary).

APPENDIX C

**Sierra Presbyterian Church
Growing Through Grief Workshop
Feedback Form
May 2014**

Name: _____

What have been the primary challenges or difficulties you have faced in your grief journey?

What have you found to be the most helpful or encouraging things in your grief journey that have helped you heal, remain hopeful, or move forward in your grieving process?

What experiences of communication with God, community with others, or caring for others out of your own experience have helped you to heal or grow through grief?

What have you learned from your experience that might be helpful for others to know as they go through their own grief journey?

What have been the most helpful parts of this grief workshop? What has not been helpful? What, if anything, would you change, correct, or modify to make it more helpful?

APPENDIX D

Sierra Presbyterian Church Psalms in the Summertime

○ June 9	Psalms 1-2	() July 17	Psalms 77-78
○ June 10	Psalms 3-4	() July 18	Psalms 79-80
○ June 11	Psalms 5-6	() July 19	Psalms 81-82
○ June 12	Psalms 7-8	() July 20	Psalms 83-84
○ June 13	Psalms 9-10	() July 21	Psalms 85-86
○ June 14	Psalms 11-12	() July 22	Psalms 87-88
○ June 15	Psalms 13-14	() July 23	Psalms 89-90
○ June 16	Psalms 15-16	() July 24	Psalms 91-92
○ June 17	Psalms 17-18	() July 25	Psalms 93-94
○ June 18	Psalms 19-20	() July 26	Psalms 95-96
○ June 19	Psalms 21-22	() July 27	Psalms 97-98
○ June 20	Psalms 23-24	() July 28	Psalms 99-100
○ June 21	Psalms 25-26	() July 29	Psalms 101-102
○ June 22	Psalms 27-28	() July 30	Psalms 103-104
○ June 23	Psalms 29-30	() July 31	Psalms 105-106
○ June 24	Psalms 31-32	() August 1	Psalms 107-108
○ June 25	Psalms 33-34	() August 2	Psalms 109-110
○ June 26	Psalms 35-36	() August 3	Psalms 111-112
○ June 27	Psalms 37-38	() August 4	Psalms 113-114
○ June 28	Psalms 39-40	() August 5	Psalms 115-116
○ June 29	Psalms 41-42	() August 6	Psalms 117-118
○ June 30	Psalms 43-44	() August 7	Psalms 119
○ July 1	Psalms 45-46	() August 8	Psalms 120-121
○ July 2	Psalms 47-48	() August 9	Psalms 122-123
○ July 3	Psalms 49-50	() August 10	Psalms 124-125
○ July 4	Psalms 51-52	() August 11	Psalms 126-127
○ July 5	Psalms 53-54	() August 12	Psalms 128-129
○ July 6	Psalms 55-56	() August 13	Psalms 130-131
○ July 7	Psalms 57-58	() August 14	Psalms 132-133
○ July 8	Psalms 59-60	() August 15	Psalms 134-135
○ July 9	Psalms 61-62	() August 16	Psalms 136-137
○ July 10	Psalms 63-64	() August 17	Psalms 138-139
○ July 11	Psalms 65-66	() August 18	Psalms 140-141
○ July 12	Psalms 67-68	() August 19	Psalms 142-143
○ July 13	Psalms 69-70	() August 20	Psalms 144-145
○ July 14	Psalms 71-72	() August 21	Psalms 146-147
○ July 15	Psalms 73-74	() August 22	Psalms 148-149
○ July 16	Psalms 75-76	() August 23	Psalms 150

APPENDIX E

Sierra Presbyterian Church Psalms & The Life of Faith Celebration Gathering

- What has been one of the highlights for you as you have read and prayed through the Psalms this summer?
- What attributes or characteristics of God have stood out to you in the Psalms?
- How have you related to the various situations and emotions that the Psalmists have prayed out of?
- How have the Psalms of Lament in particular helped you to grow in a more honest and authentic prayer life?
- What kinds of things have come to mind for you as you have prayed the Psalms of Praise? What have you given God gratitude and thanksgiving for?

Sierra Presbyterian Church
Psalms & the Life of Faith
Celebration Gathering

The Priority of God's Word in Prayer- Psalm 1 begins with the call to delight in God's word and be rooted in it (1:2-3). Psalm 19, 119 and others speak to the value & importance of God's word in the life of faith and prayer.

The Importance of Morning & Evening Prayer- Psalm 1:2- "on his law he meditates day and night." Psalm 5 speaks of morning prayer, "In the morning, O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation" (5:3). Psalm 22 says, "O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent." "Weeping may remain for a night but rejoicing comes in the morning." (Psalm 30) "I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted" (77:1-2)

The Character & Attributes of God- Ruler of the nations, King & God, Refuge, Strength, Rock, Shelter, Deliverer, Shepherd, Savior, Rescue, The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

The Priority of Praise (Orientation)- "I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders" (Psalm 9:1). "I love you, O Lord, my strength" (Psalm 18:1) "Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him" (33:1) "Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy" (47:1) "Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise" (48:1) "Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion" (65:1) "Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name make his praise glorious" (66:1-2) "Come, let us sing for your to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song" (95:1-2) "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth, sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day." (96:1-2) "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things" (98) "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs" (100)

The Psalms of Lament (Disorientation)- "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts" (13:1) "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (22:1) "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (34:18) "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is not foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help..." (69:1-2) "Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble" (69:17) "I call on the Lord in my distress and he answers me" (120) "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice" (130)

The Psalms of Restoration (Reorientation)- “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent” (30:11-12) “I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the mud and the mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God: (40:1-3)

Praying Related to our Anger & Enemies- “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have led a blameless life... I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked” (26:1, 5) “Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me” (35:1) “Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong” (37:1) “Deliver me from my enemies, O God; protect me from those who rise up against me” (59:1) “May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him” (68:1) “Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me. May those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion” (70:1-2) “O Lord, the God who avenges, O God who avenges...” (94:1)

Praying our Longing- “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (42:1-2) “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is not water” (63:1) “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God” (84:1-2)

Centering Prayers- “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him” ~ Psalm 37:4. “Be still, and know that I am God” ~ Psalm 46:10. “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him” ~ Psalm 62:1.

Praying our Confession- “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (Psalm 51) “Search me, O God & know my heart; test me & know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me (57: 23-24)

Praying to Remember- “Come and see what God has done” (66:5) “Come and listen all you who fear God” (66:16) “We give thanks to you, O God, we give thanks, for your Name is near; men tell of your wonderful deeds” (75:1) “I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused and my spirit grew faint. You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak. I thought about the former days, the years of long ago; I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired” (77:3-5) “Praise the Lord, o my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, o my soul, and forget not all his benefits” (103:1-2) “Remember the wonders he has done... He remembers his covenant forever” (105) “I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done” (143:5)

APPENDIX G

Sierra Presbyterian Church--Small Group Leaders Meeting—August 2013 Reflecting on The Psalms To See What They Say About Small Group Life: The Dynamic Cycle of Faith in The Psalms can be seen in times of Orientation – Disorientation – Reorientation

Orientation (Psalm 142:1-2): The purpose is to get to know one another and to encourage them in their relationship with God and the Church. The hope is that out of this time of orientation people will have the confidence to call upon God and the support of one another in times of disorientation.

Loving: Getting to know God and one another and to be made known.

Learning: The basics of Bible study-content of the Bible and how to apply it.

Serving: To make others aware of needs and build a culture of care where needs are being respond to within the group. Also, ideas developed for group service.

Reaching: Outreach mentality. Helping new people get acclimated to the group.

Disorientation (Psalm 142:3-7): The purpose of this time is acute response, helping people call upon God for intervention in a time of trouble. The role of the leader/facilitator is to help answer people's questions and empower them to call upon God for his healing, care, and intervention. We help the person direct themselves to God who can meet them at the point of their need.

Goal: To know God's presence and find support in difficult times.

Loving: To find care and support in times of confusion and crisis. Work through residual feelings from the world; unloved, devalued, interpersonal conflict.

Learning: Questions answered. Confusion clarified. New understanding sought

Serving: Not sure where to go for help or how to meet needs-Unclear of how to contribute or use gifts in the context of the group.

Reaching: Having difficult acclimating to a group or trouble growing the group.

Reorientation (Psalm 142:7b): The purpose is to renew and reestablish relationship with God. To reorient that relationship toward thanksgiving. In other words, helping people to find reasons for giving thanks in their given circumstances, or helping them to see how God has been involved or at work in their life even when they haven't seen it.

Loving: Feeling heard, cared for, and prayed for. Nurtured. Accepted.

Learning: New understanding. Relevant application. "Teaching, Rebuking, Correcting, and Training in Righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

Serving: Using your gifts. Finding joy in service. Okay to admit needs or ask for help.

Reaching: Relationships formed. Lives transformed. People finding Christ and community. Group is not ingrown but kingdom focused or outwardly oriented.

APPENDIX F

Grief Group Discussion Questions

- What have been the primary challenges or difficulties you have faced in your grief journey since we last met?
- What have been the most helpful or encouraging things in your grief journey that have helped you heal, remain hopeful or move forward in your grief process over the past few weeks?
- What experiences of communication with God have you had in the past few weeks. How have these experiences impacted you?
- How have you remained in community with others during this time? Are there other forms or expressions of support that you think you would benefit from?
- Have you had any opportunities to express care for others out of your own experience in the past few weeks?
- What you have you learned from your experience that might be helpful for others to know as they go through their own grief journey?
- How can the grief group be praying for you in the weeks ahead?

APPENDIX G

Stephen Ministry

What Is Stephen Ministry?

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2, NRSV).

Stephen Ministry is a one-to-one lay caring ministry that takes place in congregations that use the Stephen Series system. Stephen Ministry congregations equip and empower lay caregivers—called Stephen Ministers—to provide high-quality, confidential, Christ-centered care to people who are hurting.

How Stephen Ministry Works

The best way to understand how Stephen Ministry works is to learn about three groups of people involved in this ministry: Stephen Leaders, Stephen Ministers, and care receivers. Stephen Leaders establish and direct Stephen Ministry in a congregation. They—

- Build awareness of Stephen Ministry within the congregation and community
- Recruit and train Stephen Ministers
- Meet with potential care receivers to assess their needs
- Match care receivers with Stephen Ministers
- Provide Stephen Ministers with ongoing supervision and continuing education

People learn to serve as Stephen Leaders by attending a Leader's Training Course—a one-week conference that introduces the resources used to lead Stephen Ministry, develops key skills, and gets people excited about this caring ministry. Most congregations begin with two to four Stephen Leaders, typically including a pastor, possibly another church staff person, and one or more lay leaders.

Stephen Ministers are congregation members trained by Stephen Leaders to offer high-quality, one-to-one Christian care to people going through tough times. A Stephen Minister usually provides care to one person at a time, meeting with that person once a week for about an hour. Twice a month, Stephen Ministers gather with their Stephen Leaders for supervision and continuing education.

Care receivers are people—congregation members and others in the community—who receive care from a Stephen Minister. These are people struggling through a difficult time in life—experiencing grief, divorce, job loss, chronic or terminal illness, or some other life crisis. Some important guidelines for this caring relationship protect both the care receiver and the Stephen Minister:

- The relationship between a care receiver and a Stephen Minister is confidential.
- Men are matched with men; women with women.
- When a care receiver's needs exceed what a Stephen Minister can provide, the Stephen Ministry team makes a referral to an appropriate mental health professional or other community resource.

The Blessings of Stephen Ministry

Stephen Ministry multiplies blessings throughout the church and community.

- Congregations receive a practical and powerful way to respond to Christ's commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12 RSV).
- Pastors have a *team* of gifted, trained, and committed lay caregivers ready to minister to hurting people ([information for pastors](#)).
- Laypeople nurture and use their gifts in meaningful ministry, growing spiritually as they serve others.
- People who are hurting have a compassionate companion—a caring Christian friend who provides emotional and spiritual support.

A Vibrant, Lasting Ministry

You'll find Stephen Ministry in congregations from more than 160 Christian denominations, across the U.S. and Canada and in 24 other countries. Stephen Ministry is built to last—going strong for over 20 or even 30 years in hundreds of congregations.

Since [Stephen Ministries](#) was founded in 1975:

- More than 12,000 congregations have enrolled in the Stephen Series.
- More than 65,000 pastors and lay leaders from those congregations have been equipped at Leader's Training Courses.
- More than 600,000 laypeople have received Stephen Minister training.
- More than one-and-a-half-million people have had a Stephen Minister to walk with them, providing one-to-one Christian care during tough times.

*Adapted from the Stephen Ministries Website: <http://www.stephenministries.org>

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