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Presentation Transcript
Grief - Mental Health and the Bible 13
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March 30, 2018

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries.

We're currently working on the series, *Mental Health and the Bible*. The title of today's presentation is simply, *Grief*. It's the thirteenth in the series. If you want to listen to, or read, any of the rest of this series, you can go to our Website, liferesource.org. And then you can go to the series page. And there, all of our series will show up. You can select this one. Or, you can just enter *grief* in the search panel and it will pop up that way, too.

I was talking to a fifteen-year-old some time back. She seemed subdued. And as we talked, I learned that she was having a terrible time sleeping. She had dark bags under her eyes, which isn't the way most fifteen-year-olds look. The night before, during the very early morning, she felt paralyzed for ten minutes or so while she was in bed. She told me that her insides felt like concrete. She'd lost fifteen pounds in the last two months, because she had no appetite at all. Normally a motivated student, now she could not focus on tasks at hand. Her boyfriend had, without a word to anyone, committed suicide.

The most important part of this presentation I want to make immediately. And that is, that this is not normal grief. This girl has been traumatized by the horror, and the suddenness, and the unexpectedness of it. It shocked her. And she's going to need help to get over this. She's stuck. She can't think about anything else. And, if she doesn't get help, her life will likely take a turn down a dark road. She could face depression, or anxiety, or isolation, or addiction, or lack of motivation and focus. These things could all become a part of her life permanently, as opposed to normal grief, which is the natural process that people pass through unassisted or with minimal help. But we're not talking about traumatic grief today. We've done that before. It was the second one in this series on *Mental Health and the Bible*. If you haven't heard it yet, I would encourage you to read or to listen to that one, so that you can understand the difference between normal grief and pathological – or traumatic – grief.

What is grief? Well, grief is a set of feelings that occur when people have experienced a serious loss. We generally think of grief as related to the loss of a loved one, but grief can be a part of any loss – moving, loss of job, getting seriously ill, loss of loved ones, friends, or pets. These can all cause grief. So, as I mentioned earlier, we’re going to talk about grief that *not* traumatic today.

Most people understand, I think, that grief is a natural process. And there are two ways that we can think about this and to know for sure. One is a study – or studies – done by a man named George Bonano at Columbia University. He’s done the best research on this topic that I know of. After six months to three years, most people just pass through grief naturally without the need for any kind of therapy. Resilience to loss in adult life seems to be the norm. That’s what he proved by his studies. And really, that idea is driving all psychological thought – or most of it, pretty much – these days.

What he also discovered was, that for some people who are grieving, sometimes therapy makes it worse. It’s only when there’s trauma that therapy is needed or seems to help. I know, personally, I usually release clients once they’re past the traumatic part, so they can grieve on their own.

The second way that we can know this, beside scientific research, is from the Bible. Now you’ll remember that this series is called *Mental Health and the Bible*. It’s for people in the Church of God so that they can integrate their knowledge about modern psychology and what the Bible says about it. We point out the good, the bad, the ugly, and the true and the untrue. So, I’m going to use the Bible to inform our understanding of grief.

I want you to turn with me to Isaiah 53:3 and let’s read this prophecy about Jesus.

Isaiah 53:3-4 – *He was despised and rejected by men – a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief – as one from whom men hide their face he was despised, and we esteemed Him not. Surely, He has born our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

Now, the word for *grief* here has also been translated *affliction* – and grief is an affliction – *sickness*, and a *disease*. So it can refer to physical illness as well. From the context, we understand what this is talking about.

We know, too, that, in scripture, God admonishes us to afflict ourselves – to take an action, designed to help us feel appropriate for feelings for what’s going on. When a time of trial comes, or when we’re in trouble, God tells us, in one place, to rend our hearts, not just our garments. Modern people probably don’t understand what that means, but in old days – back in Bible times – people would tear their clothing as a sign of upset about what was going on.

And the word *acquainted* – “He was acquainted with grief” – can mean to understand, or be familiar with it. So we know that Jesus suffered a lot in His physical life and was finally crucified, and so, He is *acquainted* with grief. He understands it and He’s familiar with it.

So, the Bible, actually then, if you think about it, is implying that grief is a normal part of life. And sometimes God even tells us to afflict ourselves so that we can feel sadness about something that is happening. So, yes, bad things happen in life. We all suffer losses. We all eventually die. Some of us will lose loved ones. We have a way to move past that and it’s called grieving. So, underlying everything we know about grief, really, it’s about acknowledging and feeling our feelings of loss – not stuffing them, but working through them instead. And that’s a principle that is brought out in modern psychology – in almost every field of psychology. And that’s something that we are taught to do in the Bible. If you are numb about something, you’re supposed to do something that prevents you from being numb, like fasting, or tearing your clothes, or putting ashes on your head – being dirty and uncomfortable. And that’s supposed to help us get into a frame of mind that’s appropriate – to feel what’s appropriate for the situation. So I think that’s pretty interesting. And I think, sometimes, the way modern people try to feel their feelings isn’t the same way they did then, but one way to look at that is, they did what was culturally appropriate, and we do the same today.

Let’s now look at some of the symptoms that we can experience when we’re grieving. Some people have difficulty sleeping. Others sleep too much. Some aren’t bothered by that. So not everybody feels all of these that I’m going to mention. Some people cry a lot when they’re grieving. Crying is a good way to feel our feelings, and get them out, and process them. So that’s actually healthy. I’ve had some people tell me, “I’ve been crying too much,” and I think what they mean is, “I’ve been crying more than normal.”

Another thing that happens to people is either a loss or an increase of appetite – you know, the fifteen-year-old I was mentioning had lost fifteen pounds in two months. She was slender by nature and didn’t have it to give away, so her body was stressed because she completely lost her appetite.

People also have trouble getting things done. And that can be caused by several things. If you’re not sleeping well, you’re tired. Loss is associated with depression, so when we’re depressed, everything gets harder to do. Or, we have trouble focusing because of the anxiety that we have or the shock that we’re in. This fifteen-year-old was like that. She couldn’t focus on her schoolwork. Her mind wouldn’t stay on it.

Another thing that people do – a physical symptom – is that they try to mute the feelings with alcohol or drugs. And that’s just the opposite of what they really need to be doing. Today, most addiction clinics attempt to treat the underlying issue for the addiction, rather than just the addiction itself. So they know that underneath most addiction is loss, and people are trying to

mute that. So quite often, unresolved emotions are about loss and people often try to get away from that – take a shortcut to temporarily mute it.

Let's look at some emotions that come along with grieving. Of course, sadness would probably be the one we think of first. Loneliness is another one. Anger – “the person left me,” or people are fighting about the inheritance or whatever. Sometimes we feel what's called survivor guilt – you know, “If I'd only done this or that,” or, “If I hadn't done this, they'd still be alive today.” Sometimes, there are no emotions – emotional numbing – sort of a muting of the feelings or a denial of them.

Yet another feeling that people tell me about a lot is a feeling of isolation. And this is greater than just loneliness – missing the person that's died.

I was talking to a woman whose daughter had committed suicide. And her initial reaction was past normal grieving and into trauma, which is completely understandable. Five years after the death, her favorite sister – the one she was closest to – in the most sincere effort to help her, lovingly asked her, “Can't you just move on?” And, of course, since she had not dealt with trauma yet, it was impossible to even begin grieving. So no, she can't move on. But those of us who watch somebody suffer like this, we're so desperate to try to find something to help, we just wish with all our heart that they could just move on. So we make the terrible mistake of asking that question. And so, instead of helping her sister, she felt more isolated than ever. She didn't feel understood by anyone she knew, she told me.

And it doesn't have to be a traumatic loss to feel misunderstood. People who lose their mates, they say, “Nobody knows what it's like to live without my spouse.” Well, that's probably true. But that makes them feel isolated.

Also, another thing that comes up with people, in an emotional way, is difficulty doing routine things that used to be accomplished easily. And that's because of the depression. Difficulty doing routine things that used to be accomplished easily – so sometimes we feel guilty, or we beat ourselves up, or we get discouraged, because we're not able to accomplish the things that we used to do.

Another aspect of this is that quite a few people believe that grieving occurs in stages. In her landmark book, *The Stages of Grief*, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross tells some stages that she thought occurred in a specific order. I seem to notice that some people don't pass through all of them, and that some experience them in a different order, and some experience other things that she didn't have on her list. Now, years later, it seems that there are as many ideas about stages of grief as there are counselors. And I just explained to you my experience with it – not hers. But she said that the first thing that happens is that people go into a state of denial. It doesn't feel real, or like “This isn't happening,” or “I'm not going to accept it.”

I was watching the movie, *We Were Soldiers*, and there was a scene in the movie where all the women of the men who were over in Viet Nam fighting were living on base in housing, and the federal government was sending out notices of soldiers deaths by the cab company. They delivered the telegrams that way. There were so many of them, there wasn't the personnel. So the lady who was the wife of the officer in charge of the 7th Army told the cab driver to bring them all to her and she would get them where they needed to go. They knocked on this one lady's door, and when the woman saw them, and she immediately started shaking her head, "No!" She say, "This isn't happening!" So she was denying it.

The next phase that Kubler-Ross says occurs is anger. And that can be directed in a variety of ways. It can be toward the deceased – for abandoning them. It can be at God – for taking them away – or at self, or at other people. Somehow, most everybody I talk to gets angry at some point.

Bargaining is another one that she identified – "If only..." and "What if...." Some people, in desperation, try to bargain with God to get their loved one back or to make things better.

Her fourth one is depression. Sadness sets in as we begin to face the realization of what we've lost. Depression is recognized sometimes by crying, sometimes by sleep issues, decreased appetite, feeling overwhelmed, or regretful, or lonely. Those are all – well, not all – but some of the manifestations that people feel in depression.

And then she says that, finally, there is acceptance. There is no way to get over the loss of a loved one because of the love, but there *is* a way to go on. I often tell the story of a boy who was in a grief group that I facilitated. He wrote in his survey at the end that he learned that life could go on. Now, he didn't learn that from me but from the other boys he got to know in the group who had also suffered similar losses. And as they had fun together, and worked together, he realized, "We can go on." And he was a part of that *we*. So, being with other people who've suffered similar losses can, quite often, be very powerful in a positive way.

Now, hopefully, we know a little bit about what grief looks like right now and understand some of the dynamics of it. Let's talk about *how* to grieve. Since everyone experiences loss in their own unique way, there can't be any rigid rules about how to do this or how long it takes. Everybody's different.

I had a good friend who lost his son at sixteen years of age in an accident at school. And he told me that it helped him to memorialize his son. Every year he observed his birthday. And when he was telling me this, my mind went to the movie, *The Karate Kid*, and Mr. Miyagi, who every year – I think it was on his birthday – would bring out all the photos of his wife, and the newspaper articles about their early life and things that were going on in the world at that time. He would look at all those things and the photos, and put on his army uniform – because he was in the Army when she died – and that evening – once a year – he would reminisce about their life

together. Then, the next day, he would get up and go to work. So there was time to think about her, and remember her, and make her special in his mind. Getting past grief *doesn't* mean forgetting. We don't forget. It's about going on and being productive after that.

There's a story in 2 Samuel 11 about some events in the life of David. He saw a woman one day from his palace, and he desired her, and he learned that she was married to a soldier in the Israeli army named Uriah. David put Uriah on the front lines of the battle, and not unexpectedly, he died there. David then took Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, to be his wife – now that she was a widow – and she got pregnant and had a son. Now, we're told that God was displeased with what David had done. And we can, certainly, all be displeased with him, because that was a very low thing to do – a terrible thing. It kind of reminds me of Benghazi and some other things that have happened in our country. But God afflicted the baby and he died. (Now, I know what some of you may think. Why would God, who is supposed to be fair, kill a baby to teach his father a lesson? Well, that *is* hard to think about, but the fact is, that when we think that way, we're thinking like a human being and not like God thinks. God's going to resurrect that baby to life and he *will* become an eternal member of God's family, just like David, his father, will be. God has a way to help us get past all of these things. So, being an eternal member in God's family is very important to Him, but that doesn't matter so much to us. We think about the here and now. We take the short-sighted view of it. But God...well, that's what He's after. He's after all of us. And He's going to do whatever it takes to get us where He wants us to be.) So, back to the story. While the baby was sick, David fasted and lay on the ground for seven days. He didn't get up. He didn't bathe. He just laid on the ground in the palace – on the floor. When David learned, after seven days, that the baby had died, he got up, and washed, and dressed and ate. And his servants were confused. They said to him, "Well, this is the reverse of what people usually do. They usually afflict themselves *after* the death." But David said, "I fasted and afflicted myself, hoping that God would heal the child while he was alive, but when He didn't, I knew it was final." He told his servants, "I will eventually go to my son, but he will not come to me." So he accepted the reality of it. And it sounds to me like a lot of things got sorted out while he was lying there on the ground – guilty, sad, uncomfortable, and starving.

So what can we learn from this about grieving and death? Well, you could say, "Affliction." But I think affliction leads us to faith. So faith is a spiritual perspective. And I want to go now to Lamentations 3:31. You know, Lamentations was written after Israel went into captivity, I believe – or they were in the process of going there – and it says:

Lamentations 3:31-32 – *For the LORD will not cast off forever, but though He cause grief, He will have compassion according to the abundance of His steadfast love.*

So, even though God will allow bad things to happen, and sometimes, even causes it, He will have compassion according to the abundance of His steadfast love. Now some people refuse to see that part of it – that latter part – and they only focus on the fact that He causes grief. Well,

that is a denial of the way things work in the world and a denial of the nature of God. And it says in verse 33:

V-33 – *For He does not afflict from His heart or grieve the children of men.*

So it's not who He is. It's what He's doing to help us get where we need to be. So God is in a massive effort to bring all of us under the umbrella of His gracious love forever! And sometimes, He makes us feel uncomfortable. He allows some of us to die. You know, it's a *big* plan. And He has lots of power to make that happen. So He sometimes takes extreme measures. And, from my observations – and biblical observations as well – those extreme measures He takes are usually due to our stubborn, ignorant or rebellious attitudes. Sometimes the innocent have to suffer for us to learn. But God promises, in the end, that it will all work out.

Now, I know the godless people become indignant about this. And they think that we Christians who believe this way are the most foolish of all people. But their indignation and condemnation isn't going to stop what God is doing. And I don't look down on them. It would be foolish for me to do so, since I was once one of them. I had to grow in faith before I could say the things I'm saying now and believe them.

Look at this scripture – it's in Ecclesiastes 7.

Ecclesiastes 7:1 – *A good name is better than precious ointment* – well, I don't think any of us would argue with that – *and the day of death than the day of birth.* I think all of us would probably argue with that – or most of us.

God says that the day that we die is better than the day we're born. And He adds:

V-2 – *It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind* – everybody dies – the house of mourning is where people are buried. So that's how He looks at it – not the way we do. ...*and the living will lay it to heart.* So we better pay attention to that.

When a person dies, it's better than when they're born. And why is that? You know, if you think about this scripture, it really is something special. It's a view right into the mind of God, and it helps us see how God is thinking and what He's doing with us. It's great when a child is born, but even better when that person – that child grown up – dies. Why? It's certainly not the way we tend to think about it, is it? But it's great when we die, according to God, because we have moved to the next level of God's plan. For some who are dead, they are at rest in the grave waiting for a resurrection to eternal life. For others, they're also resting, but waiting to wake up as a human being again, and finally understand all that they need to know to become an eternal part of God's family. Either way, it's great! So God has a plan for everyone – even David's baby son – and even David, given what he'd done.

So David knew this and he was comforted in his loss. Of course, he still had to deal with God for what he'd done, but that's another story altogether.

Okay, once we get past the memorializing, afflicting and faith, everything else is about self-care while we pass through this hard time. When we grieve, everything is going to be harder for a while. So we should not beat ourselves up if we're not at the top of our game.

That girl that I was telling you about at the beginning, she felt bad because she couldn't focus on her schoolwork like she did. I told her to give herself permission to go easy for a while. It's only temporary.

So we need to understand that grieving is a process rather than an event and not judge ourselves. We ought to talk to other people and not isolate ourselves. And most of these things are to do just the opposite of what we feel like doing. But, if you want to get over it faster, don't be a loner. Don't hide yourself. Mix it up with the family. Talk to your friends.

Another thing to do is rest. If you can't sleep, spend enough time in bed so that you can rest. I've learned something recently. If I wake up at three in the morning, I may lay there till four and feel like I haven't slept at all, and yet I *did* sleep. So it might have been light sleep, but that still gives me rested. So I think it's also true for people whose sleep is disturbed by grieving. If you can't sleep, just spend enough time in bed so that you can rest.

Another thing is to not forego exercise. We don't feel like doing anything – maybe not to do as much as we did before, but not to give up on it altogether – to just take oneself in hand and move around – keep moving.

Another thing that people can do – and again, this is counterintuitive to the way we feel – but to keep active with our interests. Keep doing the things that we like to do in our lives.

Then the last thing that I wanted to mention is to join a support group. Being with others who are also grieving is a powerful tool to help feel more connected and encouraged.

There are many more things we could talk about – and I'm going to leave you some links on the Website to access more of those – but you get the general idea. Just try to go on living your life as best you can, but don't expect it to be as intense as it was before, and just kind of go easy at it. But don't give up and don't quit. Just keep working with things. If you like to collect stamps, try to do a little of that. If you like to work on your car, try to do a little of that. If you like to go to dance class, go to dance class. And just keep it going.

So we've ended with self-care. And I can't say it's the most important part of grieving, but it must be the most neglected. When I talk to grieving people, they've usually let down on all these things. So my job is to help them get back to it.

If you haven't heard it yet, don't forget to look up our presentation on *Traumatic Grief* in this series. It's really important to know the difference between normal natural grieving and the kind of grieving that causes people to get stuck. Actually, they're *not* grieving. What they're doing is having a trauma reaction. So just go to our Website www.liferesource.org and search for *traumatic grief* and it will pop up for you.

Also, we would very much like to hear feedback from you. That helps us. People have suggested topics they wanted to know more about. And, if we knew anything about it and could be of help, we've made an effort to do that. Or, they've asked us questions about our topics. And all this is very helpful to us. You can get to us on Twitter, Facebook, the Web, or our podcasts at iTunes store. Don't worry. While we hope you will support us, we don't charge for any of this. So look us up – LifeResource Ministries or that plus my name, Bill Jacobs. And, if you do that, I want you to know ahead of time, I am *not* the Bill Jacobs who owns a BMW dealership in Indiana.

Until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.