



GRIEF EDUCATOR CERTIFICATION COURSE

WEEK 10:

Faith and Grief



Notes from the Grief Educator Certification Course taught by Dr. David Page through The School of Grief.

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Dr. David Page". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

WEEK 10: FAITH AND GRIEF

“Grief is like going through a tunnel and sometimes we wonder if we’ll ever come out the other end. But God has not abandoned you, and he wants to comfort you and assure you that he is with you.” ~ Billy Graham

The Benefits of Faith

Faith helps people cope with grief by providing a sense of comfort, meaning and purpose. It also facilitates the healing process and assists people in finding hope. Faith allows people to turn to prayer, Scripture, spiritual practices, and community support during difficult times, providing a sense of not being alone in their grief. In fact, The National Institutes of Health (NIH) found that strength of spiritual belief is an important predictor of bereavement outcome. People with low strength of belief resolved their grief more slowly during the first year after their loss than those with a high strength of belief.

As Christians, we should grieve with hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13), leaning on God. We may not feel like it, but if we have faith in Jesus, we are resilient. Romans 8:37 says, “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” To conquer is to be victorious over an adversary. God is our Father, and he has a good plan for our future. The Bible says, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Misunderstanding Faith and Grief

Faith and religion are complex but important topics in the wake of a loss. Religion can be an incredible comfort in times of loss. But losses can also cause us to question our faith, as we struggle to make sense of the death. Some even believe erroneously if you have enough faith then you need not grieve.

Much like when people say, “He’s in a better place” or “It’s all part of God’s plan.” These platitudes are shared with the hope that they will bring comfort to the griever. What complicates grief is when one internalizes these quotes and starts to feel that the depth of their grief is somehow reflective of their faith. This can leave believers questioning why they are still feeling the pain of grief when someone they love is now with God.

Grief is our natural reaction to loss. We feel a deep and aching pain when someone we love is no longer with us. When someone we love is gone, we feel myriad of emotions that come with grief. Though faith that someone is in a better place or that you will see them again can be a comfort, this does NOT remove the pain that the person is gone. It does NOT change the trauma that can come from watching someone suffer from a prolonged or painful illness. And this does NOT eliminate the anger, blame, guilt, regret, or countless other feelings that can come up following a death.

It's not that your grief and your faith should be separate. It's that you must remember that the depth of your grief does not imply a loss of faith.

The problem with the thinking that those who believe need not grieve, is that one is made to feel that the reverse must be true: Those who do grieve do not believe.

Grief is Not a Lack of Faith

Please hear me on this, experiencing grief DOES NOT indicate a lack of faith. When a person of deep faith loses someone, it's important to remember that grief is about their own experience of loss. It's perfectly reasonable for someone to believe that their loved one is in a better place, and still feel overwhelmed with the pain of being separated from them.

Furthermore, a person can believe in a greater plan, all while still experiencing the pain of absence. It's not selfish to grieve, and it's not a lack of faith. It's a normal reaction to a devastating loss that can coexist with the comfort of one's faith.

Faith communities should be a place of comfort and support in times of loss. Thankfully, many of them are and this certainly was my experience after losing our daughter. However, some faith communities bring judgment and criticism for the emotions of grief, fixating on the idea that grief and faith cannot coexist. This leaves grievers feeling as though their grief has been minimized or misunderstood.

God's Ways are Beyond Our Understanding

I don't always understand God.

God says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

When I lost my daughter to brain cancer, not only did the loss challenge me to the core but it also confused me because I prayed for six weeks and believed in my heart that God was going to heal her.

I honestly thought I would see God miraculously heal my daughter, yet she ended up digressing and passed away in my arms. I believed, yet God didn't do what I asked Him to do. I've talked with many people who also struggle with the same issue of God not doing what they asked of Him. Some people might suggest that God didn't heal your loved one because you didn't have enough faith. That isn't the case. I think it takes more faith to trust God after a significant loss than it does if your loved one is healed.

After Jackie died, I felt sad, abandoned, angry, frustrated, and disappointed because I expected something different. I asked, "Why me? Why her? Why did this happen?" I expected a different life than the one I was living after my loss. Some people abandon their faith and walk away from God when tragedy strikes. They think if God really loved them, He wouldn't allow misfortune in their lives.

I've had my ups and downs in my relationship with God, but I never doubted His love for me. Although I couldn't see a positive outcome, I trusted God for a good outcome in the end. Why? Because God is good, and His plans are good.

God never promises that what we experience in this life will be good. We live in a sin-stained world. We shouldn't expect heaven on earth because this earth is filled with brokenness. But even in the middle of all the brokenness, God has a good plan for your life.

Romans 8:28

Paul said, "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" (Romans 8:28). This verse is a promise. God is working with us to bring about good in our lives. I think if we were honest, we'd say, "Sometimes this verse has been a great comfort to me and other times it's stretched my faith to the point where I want to tear it out of my Bible." Have you ever felt like that?" Yeah, right, God! You're going to take this loss in my life and eventually turn it into some- thing good? Really?"

A.W. Tozer, author of *The Knowledge of the Holy* said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." When you go through a hard time, your theology about God and what you think about Him matters.

Do you think of God as sovereign, loving, and good? King David said, "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). God is good and has the power to turn our hardships into something good. I can look back two decades now and say that God's plans for me were good, even considering the loss of my daughter.

Three Categories of People

All of us live in one of three primary locations in relationship to pain. I've observed there are three categories of people in relation to Romans 8:28. Some of you are what I refer to as BPs. You are Before Pain people. Some can live the first 15, 20, or 30 years without tragedy coming their way. And if you're BP, Romans 8:28 to you is a *Theory*.

Some of you, are currently right in the middle of pain. You're IPs. You're In Pain people. Whenever you read this verse it's a *Lifeline*. You think, "If this verse wasn't in my Bible, I would think the world's out of control. But with this verse I'm hanging on because I know something good is going to come out of my pain. So, I'm leaning into God and trusting him to do something redemptive in my life."

And the rest of us are APs, After Pain people. We're in the process of healing and recovering from our pain. For those of us who have been through deep pain and are on the backside now, Romans 8:28 is a *Treasure*. God's promise in this verse is an absolute gift to me and to many of you.

When my wife bakes a cake, I've noticed the individual ingredients, flour, raw eggs, and vanilla don't taste good by themselves. But when she mixes them all together and exposes them to heat it tastes great. When you let God work all the ingredients together, He can turn your life into a masterpiece.

God is Close to the Brokenhearted

When Jackie died, I felt confused, abandoned by God, angry at the Almighty, and utterly disoriented. I was confused about my relationship with Him, my identity, and my future. I felt so alone. Why did God seem so distant when I needed Him most?

I found relief and comfort when I turned to the book of Psalms, specifically Psalm 34:18: “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” David says God understands our feelings and helps us bear our burden of sorrow. In contrast to other gods, or the unfeeling universe of atheism, the God of the Bible deeply cares for our pain.

David begins by saying, “The LORD,” which is in all caps referring to Yahweh, the Creator of Everything and the great I AM. He says the LORD is close to the brokenhearted. Where is God when it really hurts? Maybe He’s closer than we think. God is very close to you after your loss. In fact, David is implying that God is standing right beside you. He meets you in your deepest pain.

I like Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of this verse: “If your heart is broken, you’ll find God right there; if you’re kicked in the gut, he’ll help you catch your breath” (Psalm 34:18 MSG). Peterson says, “You’ll find God right there.” The NASB version says, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted. And saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

David says God is not only present with us, but nearby. Near to the pain we feel, to the loss we can’t fill, and to the feelings we can’t express in words. For the brokenhearted, God gives nearness.

God is not distant or removed from knowing about our pain and unique experience of loss. He is always available and close to those who suffer. Not only is He near, but He stays with us and helps us get through our pain.

He Saves Those Who Are Crushed in Spirit

David says God saves (rescues or delivers) those who are crushed in spirit. The Psalmist isn’t referring to the New Testament concept of salvation, which includes forgiveness from sin and a right standing with God. Rather, he’s referring to the Old Testament concept of salvation that includes delivering us or rescuing us from our troubles and pain. It’s freedom from distress and the ability to live again.

God will give you the courage, strength, and ability to live again. As I reflect on that season in my life, I now realize that I never felt closer to God than during my daughter’s illness and death and the days that followed. My faith in God sustained me in grief. I didn’t know what my future held but I knew I wouldn’t face it alone.

Isaiah said, “When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you” (Isaiah 43:2 NLT).

There is nothing to fear when God is near. On your own, you might drown in your grief, but God said He will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5).

It didn't doubt God's love for me, but I did doubt His sovereignty. Was He really in control by allowing my daughter to die? But I figured if I walked away from God, where would I go?

Jesus asked Peter if he was going to leave him, to which Peter replied, "Lord, where would I go? For you alone have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). God is the source of life and truth: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). I decided to lean into the God who is close to the brokenhearted and delivers those who are crushed in spirit. It's important to grieve freely and trust God to lead you through the darkness and heal your pain. My faith in God became an anchor to my soul during my sorrow.

Family Support

I've been blessed to have a loving and supportive family that starts with my wife, our kids, my parents, and my parents-in-law. This also includes my extended family, who have been there for me when I needed them.

Jackie's death was a profound turning point not only for my immediate family but also for our extended family. Losing Jackie changed our family dynamic forever. Overnight, Jessica went from being the middle child in the birth order to now being the youngest.

I'm so fortunate I didn't have to go through the grieving process alone. My wife was my grief companion. Although we couldn't offer a lot of comfort to each other because we were both running on emotional fumes, we knew we were in this together. We felt our relationship with God and our strong families would help us persevere through our loss.

My father, Dr. David E. Page, MD, died of a heart attack a year before Jackie's passing. He loved Jackie dearly and would have been distraught about her death. I'm thankful he never knew that pain but I'm sad he wasn't alive because he was my biggest cheerleader and would have offered me and our family tremendous support.

My mother, Joanne Page, has had the greatest influence on my life. She was an anchor for my soul. She cried with me and was a calming influence during the storm. I really thought my mom would be able to fix the problem, to somehow figure out a way to get rid of Jackie's brain tumor. She always fixed problems when I was a kid, so why not this one? But I realized that was an unfair and unrealistic expectation. I witnessed her pain—a grandmother watching her granddaughter physically decline and die.

Joshua, my nine-year-old son, was so tender and loving toward me. He assured me that everything was going to be alright. Jessica, my seven-year-old daughter, comforted me with her kindness and hugs. My father-in-law, Frank, became like a second dad to me after I lost my own. He adored Jackie and losing her was exceptionally painful for Grandpa Finch. My mother-in-law, Janice, was a great help to our family during Jackie's illness and after her death.

After Jackie's diagnosis, our family gathered at our home to throw Jackie a surprise birthday party in February, even though her birthday is December 20th. The family knew Jackie would never have a birthday party again.

We all huddled in our home on a cold winter night as Carrie brought Jackie into our dark home. The lights came on and 30 family members yelled, "Surprise." Jackie looked delighted and a bit scared at the same time. She reached out her arms for me to pick her up and buried her head into my chest. "It's okay, Jackie. This is your surprise birthday party," I said. She smiled and then saw all the gifts the family members had brought her and a beautiful birthday cake with her name on it. What a memory. What a family.

Sharon, Carrie's oldest sister, was a health care administrator in Southern California and flew up to be with us during Jackie's last days. She was knowledgeable about the end-of-life process and the medications Jackie was receiving. Sharon let us know when Jackie was close to death.

Friends from Church

Most of my closest friends are from church. The Apostle Paul said, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). Friends are called to come alongside others and share their burden. Paul also said, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). A burden in this verse is a heavy weight.

The idea of bearing one another's burdens is a picture of a man staggering beneath a heavy load of grain. Somehow, he must get the grain home to his family, but he is about to crumble underneath its weight. A friend sees his distress and rushes to his aid, lifting a part of the burden and thereby easing the weight. Although the supportive friend does not assume the whole load, his help allows the struggling brother to carry it to his destination. Friends help carry their friends' burdens.

Friends are essential in our grief because death makes us feel alone and exposed. We feel vulnerable when we lose a significant loved one. You find out who your true friends are after loss. Good friends will stick with you through thick and thin and will be there to support you in your grief. Friends are there for you when you need a shoulder to cry on, or a good distraction. It's important to spend time with your friends as a way of cheering yourself up. Friends don't let friends grieve alone.

Church Support

There is no perfect church. Pastor and author Charles Spurgeon said, "The day we find the perfect church, it becomes imperfect the moment we join it." Every church is flawed and made up of imperfect people, but the beauty of the local church is truly amazing. The church is the greatest hope in the world, now more than ever. When my daughter died, Sunrise Church was the church in all the right ways, in the best sense of the word. Our church family mourned with us, took us under their wings, and helped carry us in our grief and pain.

When I flew home after getting the news of Jackie's diagnosis, two friends from my men's small group, Mike and David, picked me up from the airport and drove me home. I'll always remember their presence with me when I was in shock from the news of my daughter's terminal diagnosis.

Weeks before Jackie's death, the church held an all-day prayer vigil for Jackie. People joined us in praying for her healing. After Jackie's passing, the church took a love offering for our family and raised \$10,000 to help us pay for the funeral expenses.

Norm, a friend and leader in our church, brought his brand-new Dodge Durango over to our house the night before Jackie's funeral and suggested we use it to transport our family the next day. Norm and his wife, Phyliss, lost their 21-year-old daughter, Laurie, in a car accident over a decade before we met them. They became grief mentors to me and Carrie. Norm started a GriefShare group at his home a couple of weeks after Jackie died that we joined.

Christy, our Children's Director at church, came over during Jackie's illness and played catch with a baseball with Jessica. Christy knew that the focus was on Jackie and that Jessica needed love, as well. I'll never forget that act of compassion. Pastor Tim, my top associate pastor, was there for me during my pain and would ask, "How can I serve you?" Unbelievable.

The Nazarene Church in Auburn allowed us to use their worship center for the funeral because our worship center wasn't large enough to accommodate the crowd in one service. Our staff and volunteers did an amazing job helping plan the funeral. It was personal, meaningful, and memorable. Friends from other churches attended the funeral, including members from our first church plant, Harvest Church, and friends from Saddleback Church, along with pastors from other local churches in Auburn.

An Unexpected Gift

I received a letter in the mail the week after Jackie's death with a whole bunch of one-hundred-dollar bills inside with a note that said, "Take your wife to Hawaii." Who sends cash in the mail? Carrie and I went to Hawaii to get away, relax, and refuel after the worst season of our life.

I went to church the next morning at New Hope Oahu. Carrie stayed at our hotel. The pastor, Wayne Cordeiro, came out on stage to start the service and said, "We're thrilled today to have two tremendous singers from the mainland with us, Bryan Duncan and Matthew Ward. Bryan Duncan, a contemporary Christian artist and friend, sang a song called, Strollin' on the Water at my daughter's funeral a week earlier. He came out and sang the exact same song at the church.

I started to cry in my theater seat in the worship center. The lady next to me asked if I was okay. In my deep pain, I felt like God had reached down and gave me a hug from heaven, reassuring me that He saw me, was with me, and loved me.

After the service, I approached Bryan as he was greeting people. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"A friend suggested we come to get away," I replied.

"Come with me. I want to introduce you to Pastor Wayne," he said.

Bryan shared with Wayne about my loss. “What are you doing tomorrow morning?” Wayne asked.

“I’m free, why?” I replied.

He told me he’d like to treat me to breakfast at Royal Hawaiian Resort. We met for breakfast, and he shared about his sister’s death when he was just 14 years old. Wayne, a total stranger until that morning, encouraged me and radiated hope.

Hagar, a woman in the Old Testament who had been abused, was thrown out of her house and left in the desert by herself. An angel of the Lord came and spoke to her and promised to bless her in her despair. She recognized that it was God speaking directly to her. From then on, she calls him, “The God who sees me.” She says, “For I have seen the God who sees me” (Genesis 16:13).

Sometimes, the blessing is what happens on the inside of us in our relationship and faith in God who sees what we cannot. When we realize that God sees us in our sorrow, then we become more willing to trust Him with our pain.

Over the next few weeks, various families provided meals for our family. We received hundreds of cards, letters, and emails. The outpouring of love was overwhelming. I wasn’t used to receiving help from others. I was a pastor and a caregiver who gave to others as much as possible, but I had nothing left to give. I was brokenhearted and embraced the help from our church family. I am forever grateful to our church family in Auburn for the extraordinary love and support they showed our family during our time of need.

THE END



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