Grieve Like A Man

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I Don't Have Time for This

Grief is never convenient.

Life was great! Heather and I were living out fantastic days together. Our marriage was stronger than ever, and we stood ready for a new adventure. I had worked through my grief and was finally able to put my life as a cop behind me. Next up—the ministry!

We were going to put everything on the line for our new life. So with that wonderful mixture of excitement and terror that comes with risking everything for the unknown, we packed our bags and moved to Dallas for graduate school.

We were a little worried about what it would be like to live in such a large city so far away from family and friends. We also had all the usual concerns related to going back to school—I

had not been the most dedicated student in the past, and the idea of wasting tuition dollars made my stomach hurt. My wife depended on me, and we were about to have another mouth to feed. Heather was expecting our first child during this transition.

To say my faith was being stretched would be an understatement. I was stressed, but I also had an incredible peace. In fact, it was one of the happiest times in my life. I knew God had set me on this journey. It was an exciting feeling to rely on Him in such a real way from day to day. I had no other choice. Questions hung heavy, of course, and I certainly didn't have the answers. I remember praying, *God, I have no idea how this is going to work out, so I just trust it to You.* I must have said that a thousand times. God gave a thousand answers.

We settled in a small apartment just outside of Dallas. We managed to have enough money for my program so Heather—who had always dreamed of being a stay-at-home mom—was able to work at home.

I spent my days in class listening to debates, and then over dinner, Heather and I discussed what I had learned. One evening I was sitting at our dinner table while Heather finished cooking, and I breathed a silent prayer. *God, You are so good to me. Life is so perfect right now, and I thank You for bringing me here.*

The anxieties associated with our move had begun to fade. We had a nice apartment, and I quickly learned the new driving skills I needed to commute to downtown Dallas. God even threw in a huge park close to home so I could enjoy short escapes from all the sirens and car alarms in our neighborhood.

The only unknown for me had to do with being a dad. Like most new fathers, I wondered if I had what it takes. Would I

really be able to live up to that dangerous comment I had made numerous times—"My kids will never act like that!"

It's a Boy

Soon our small nursery was ready for its new occupant, and so was I. As I walked past the nursery doorway, my mind drifted to thoughts of my soon-to-arrive son. A boy. Heather wouldn't let me register for baby gifts at Bass Pro Shops or Cabela's, but the day was coming when he would be all Dad's. It is amazing how your mind can drift instantly to the dreams you have for your son—even one you haven't met. Hunting is a big deal for the men in my family, so it was no surprise that my thoughts drifted to the first year he would join the rest of the men at deer camp.

A few years after that I would allow him to select a special hunting knife. I could almost see myself teaching him how to field dress and skin a deer with that very knife. As my thoughts continued to race outside that nursery door, I imagined him finally getting to carry a rifle and take a deer for himself. These daydreams were based on my own childhood because those were exactly the same steps I took with my dad. They would be his unforgettable rites of passage, and I would be there to guide him every step of the way. With every dream I grew more excited for my son's arrival.

About halfway through my first semester, we experienced a big challenge. On November 1, Heather entered the hospital for bed rest because of complications with the pregnancy. Our son wasn't due to arrive for almost three months, so this was a serious matter. Even so, I remained calm. I was focused on

God, and I felt that part of the reason He brought us to Dallas was so we could benefit from Baylor University Medical Center and all its resources and expertise.

Heather stayed as busy as possible while confined to a hospital bed. She was blessed with several visits from our mothers. They kept watch while I tried to stay on pace in school. I wrote papers and read theology at her bedside and in the hospital lounge. It was a time of uncertainty, but it also included some good memories. Heather and I both really enjoyed watching football, and her room had all the sports channels. I decided to provide the snacks for some of these sporting events to give Heather a break from hospital food and also to justify my junk-food craving. Heather used discretion and fared well after these bedside picnics, but I learned there are just some things you do not mix with fake crab meat.

We developed some wonderful friendships with Heather's nurses. Two in particular, Kelly and Teresa, still hold special places in our hearts. They spoiled Heather and gave us both a lot of leeway as we yelled at the television during the games.

The doctor was hoping to let our son grow as long as possible before being born, but on December 1, the baby showed signs of distress. I got a call at the apartment early that morning to return to the hospital. I called family and friends to share the wonderful news that our son would arrive later that day. Two carloads of family began the seven-hour drive to Dallas. Later that morning, the doctors decided it was best not to wait any longer, so our son, Caleb Scott, was born at 11:12 a.m. and taken to the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). This was all according to plan and something we expected. I made all the calls to announce our little blessing had arrived.

I assumed all would be well now that Caleb was here. But later that day, Heather and I met with a doctor who explained Caleb was much sicker than we had anticipated. I still had peace though, and I made another round of calls asking for prayer. I just knew God was going to heal my son for His glory. How could God not answer this prayer? After all, He had come through in so many other areas.

Only a few hours later, the nurses took us to the NICU with little explanation, and we knew something wasn't right. Several nurses and a doctor surrounded Caleb's tiny bed. They were talking and moving quickly. Then suddenly, the room went quiet. No one was talking, and the machines grew silent. Through tears we watched helplessly as our Caleb died. His entire life had been just a little more than six hours. The nurses cleaned his tiny body and put him in a yellow outfit. The nurse who handed Caleb to Heather was crying as hard as we were. We held our son close, ran our fingers over his tiny features, kissed him, and said goodbye. Then we returned to Heather's room, held each other, and cried.

Devastation

The pendulum that had been our wonderful life now began to swing the other way as we descended toward devastation. In the days ahead I would quickly learn two things: Grief never comes at a convenient time, and this leaves us men with a choice. When a life-shattering loss occurs, we can do what is good, or we can do what is great.

Though I was still in shock and pain, a hundred things seemed to demand my attention at once. I didn't have the luxury of waiting for a more convenient time.

First, with God's help, I chose to focus on the great thing that needed to be done. I poured my attention and energy into taking care of and protecting my wife. This is one of the keys to recognizing the great over the good—the great has to do with people, whereas the good consists mainly of tasks. Naturally, at such times, tasks can seem urgent, and they do offer opportunities to stay busy and fix things. Most of us men have a built-in desire to fix problems, but hurting people are not quickly or easily fixed.

One reason that people represent the greater choice is that they draw out your personal greatness. You enter into situations that force you to draw on One greater than yourself.

Whatever your loss may be, there are likely others who need your help during the crisis. Often, that just means being there to the fullest. Leave your cell phone in the car and choose to give your best to the hurting person. Decisions that need to be made at your job can be made by someone else. Projects that must be completed can be finished by someone else. Most of us believe we are irreplaceable at work. We're not. But we *are* irreplaceable when it comes to offering other people what they need in those early days of grief.

The Temptation of the Good

The good has a further temptation—it's usually much easier than the great. For instance, when some men face a personal tragedy, they look to their work as a seemingly valid excuse to avoid grief, especially in those first few days. By working hard and avoiding your pain, you may even get some praise from your boss, who will express his admiration for your devotion

to your job during a difficult time. But actually, this choice will only complicate your grief in the long run.

I can recall a man who chose to miss a family member's funeral because of work. He sent the rest of his family to the out-of-town service and has regretted it ever since. He was left not only with the grief surrounding the loss of someone he cared about deeply but also with the grief that accompanies a poor decision.

Our losses are tough enough without adding regrets. If you've made such a choice, admit it and move on. You may need to make an apology, or you may simply need to forgive yourself. We all make mistakes, and you can choose to walk past this one on your journey.

In those first days after Caleb's death, I could have easily transitioned my wife's care to other family members as they arrived. I had all the excuses in the world to stay busy elsewhere; after all, thousands of dollars in tuition and tens of thousands of dollars in hospital bills were on the line.

I could have focused on these issues and ignored Heather, justifying my actions with the excuse that this too was a way of taking care of my family. To be honest, that choice would have been easier. I knew what calls to make and what offices to visit, but I had no idea how to help my wife or how to deal with what was going on inside of me. I felt overwhelmed. Still, somehow I knew that I belonged at Heather's side.

After we cried together for some time, I started to make the last round of phone calls to family and friends. There were still two carloads of family on the way, and they needed some time to process the news before they arrived at the hospital. I'm glad I did this instead of allowing someone else to make the calls, but it was hard.

I was shaken when I spoke to my dad on the phone. My mom was in one of the carloads on the way to the hospital, so he was alone at home. He wept uncontrollably. I don't ever remember my father crying before this. Choosing to make this call instead of focusing on another distraction ripped me to the core, but the relational connection with my dad was worth the pain. It was the first time since I was a young child that I could remember my dad and I saying "I love you" to each other. It was a good memory from a tragic day.

The Distraction of the Good

Years have passed since those difficult days. I graduated from seminary and accepted a position as a hospice chaplain, where I had the honor of walking with many men through their initial days of grief. These men knew their loved ones—often their wives—were approaching death. I have observed recurring patterns in these men after their wives died. Most spent a while at the bedside. I am sometimes invited to join them in these precious moments. I will pray and offer to read Scripture. The men will usually talk to their wives, touch them, and say goodbye.

As we leave the room together, their minds will almost always turn to the distraction of the good. They ask questions about moving the loved one's belongings out of the long-term care facility, how to get a death certificate, and who will call the funeral home. These are all good questions, and I answer each one carefully while assuring the widowers that everything is in place to address those details. For some, this gives them permission to focus on the greater matters at hand. They can call family, friends, and pastors to join them in their grief. Others, however, find

comfort in the distractions. After their questions are answered, they simply find something else to hold their focus. In the needless busyness, they seek some level of control in a world that has just spiraled out of control.

My ministry includes following up on these men after the deaths of their loved ones. I consistently see a difference between the men who accepted their grief and the men who focused on the distractions at hand. Those who waited for a more convenient time to grieve usually realized later that they missed some great blessings by not facing their grief head-on at the outset. By the time they realize this, their families may have all returned home. The words, hugs, and support were all initially there, but the distracted widower did not fully feel their impact. I gently offer these men the same advice I offer you: *Now* is the time to begin the grief journey.

The Foot of the Cross

One man's grief journey took him to a most unlikely place as he faced the choice of completing good tasks or rising to the greater challenge of focusing on relationships. John, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, made his decision at the foot of Jesus' cross. To fully grasp the storm of grief that had enveloped John, we need to know a little more about him. John was one of the twelve disciples, but his relationship with Jesus went deeper than that. He was one of three disciples who often received special training and revelation from Jesus. John highlights his affection for Jesus when he tells us that he was known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

John was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and was

on the verge of ushering in His kingdom. John had been with Jesus for about three years and by then was no doubt anticipating a leadership role of his own in the new kingdom.

John was with Jesus the night He was betrayed and arrested. As the night continued into the next day, Jesus was mocked, tortured, and interrogated in a series of illegal trials. John's grief must have multiplied as questions filled his mind. *Why is this happening? Why won't Jesus stop it? Jesus is the Messiah we were waiting for, isn't He? Surely they won't kill Him, will they? Will they come after us next?*

Many of us men can imagine John's anguish because we too have spent sleepless nights with our minds flooded by a torrent of questions. The answers never come easy amid the hazy thinking of early grief.

As the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion advanced, John's losses must have seemed to be multiplying. First he lost a friend named Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus. They had been together for three years, and John's heart must have broken as he watched Judas lead the armed crowd straight to Jesus.

In one of the most gut-wrenching scenes I've ever witnessed, a pastor removed an elder—one of his best friends—from church leadership. Through tears, the pastor wept as he read a written statement concerning the elder's failure. He had to physically hold the podium to keep from collapsing about halfway through because the pain was so intense. Surely Judas' failure broke John's heart too.

Next, John lost his dreams, his career, and his hopes for the future. Jesus is being crucified, and that means John won't have a position in a new kingdom—a position he has spent the past three years training for and dreaming about. In his grief, John

must have wondered, *What will I do now?* His identity was wrapped up in following Jesus, and the loss of an identity is terribly painful, especially for men.

Finally, in his clearest and most painful loss, John lost his friend and king, Jesus. Perhaps you have said goodbye to your closest friend and know all too well how John must have felt. Combine that pain with John's other losses, and his reaction is astounding. He doesn't run away, he doesn't isolate himself—he goes to the foot of the cross.

To fully appreciate the magnitude of John's decision, remember that this scene did not resemble our modern-day stained-glass windows or paintings of the event. This scene was more like a horror movie with the sights, sounds, and smells to match. John would have seen three crosses with Jesus hanging on the center one. His friend's body was stripped, mangled, and covered in blood. Roman soldiers keeping a close watch nearby must have glared at John with disdain. John would have heard the sound of the three crucified men gasping for air and groaning in pain. The unmistakable smell of death would have penetrated everything around it. It would have hung heavy in the air from previous executions. In the middle of this nightmare, racked with grief, John made two great choices.

"Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother, His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene" (John 19:25). In John's first opportunity to choose the great—to focus on his relationships with others—he took several women who were all followers of Jesus to the foot of the cross to say goodbye. One of those women was Mary, Jesus' own mother. What an amazing act of compassion. What might it have looked like, though, if John had chosen the good, focusing on tasks

and trying to control the situation? He would have probably explained to these women that they couldn't go to the cross because the soldiers there might harm or even kill Jesus' followers. Jesus had loved them very much, so surely He wouldn't want them to take such a risk. John might have further explained to Mary that Jesus had been badly beaten and that she would not want that image as her last mental picture of Him. These suggestions would have been reasonable and based on genuine love, but John chose instead to be with those women and fulfill their needs.

"When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple He loved standing there, He said to His mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then He said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home" (verses 26-27). I must confess that I had read this passage numerous times, and my only thought was what an honor it must have been for John to take care of Jesus' mother, Mary. I failed to recognize the swamp of grief and related emotions John was dealing with when Jesus gave him this responsibility. John made another great choice amid his losses and chose to take care of Mary as if she were his own mother. He didn't even skip a beat, but took her into his home immediately.

What might have happened if John had kept his mind on the tasks at hand? He would have probably told Jesus that he was happy to help Mary. John would personally escort her to the house of one of Jesus' brothers; after all, they were the logical and legal choices to provide for Mary. John might have even explained that this choice made more sense because he was now unemployed with no current prospects for the future. You may laugh at the idea of John saying these things to Jesus,

but isn't this exactly the way we sometimes initially react to grief—grasping for the things we can control and trying to fix at least something?

The beginning of grief will almost always prove inconvenient.

But at that critical time, *choose* to place your focus on people and the great things that being with them will do for your grief. Ask God to help you see the difference between good things and great things as you wrestle with the initial shock and numbness.

Perhaps your grief will reveal mistakes you have made. If so, I encourage you not to allow them to become insurmountable obstacles on your journey. Move past them by using what you have learned to help others and yourself. You will be reminded throughout this book that you can veer off the trail anytime, but the only way you remain lost is by refusing to return to the correct course.

Reflection Questions

1. What has distracted you from connecting with people in your early days of grief?
2. Are you still staying busy doing good things when greater things need your attention?
3. Do you need to forgive yourself for making poor decisions in those early days of grief?
4. Are you still waiting for a more convenient time to grieve?