

## Pastoral Care and Death

### Lesson 12

The aim of this lesson is to highlight the main issues a pastor needs to explore and consider as he reflects on his role in giving care to people in times of grief and bereavement. We will go into the grief process in more detail when we do the course on specialized counselling.

#### I. What are the different types of death?

Some of these are:

1. The death of a child
2. The death of an adult child
3. The death of a parent
4. The death of a spouse
5. The sudden death of a loved one
6. The death of a loved one through terminal illness
7. The death of a loved one through murder
8. The death of a loved one through an accident

All of these types of death imply different relations to the one who died. They were a spouse, a parent, a colleague, a son or a daughter. So it is important that the pastor ministering to those who are grieving understands that people grieve differently because of the nature of the relationship and also because of their approach to grieving. Each of these represents different types of loss to the person grieving.

#### II. What are the different ways in which people grieve and process death?

##### A. Process of grieving

There are different ways in which people die and each of these has an impact on the grieving process.

1. The death of a spouse

There are many unique aspects to the death of a spouse. They were one flesh. Often there are issues of a financial nature that the surviving spouse needs to learn to manage. Often there are financial and business aspects the spouse was not aware of. It's useful if there are skilled family members that can help in these matters. There might be issues such as debt to deal with. Remember that death is not a science so there isn't always a clear methodology. They are coming to an empty home with many reminders. However, at a certain stage it is time for them to view their new single stage positively. What did they always want to do but were not able because of marriage? For example, scuba diving or running the Comrades Marathon. Encourage them to build up new dreams, volunteer and rearrange things in the house. It's a new season.

2. The death of a loved one (from a small child's perspective)

Children up to 5 or 6 view the world literally so explain death literally to them e.g. Uncle Joe's body stopped working and the doctors could not fix it. He can't come back.

Avoid euphemisms that might make them frightened e.g. we have lost Uncle Joe.

Share the bible view to the children e.g. heaven.

Remember that children often feel that mom or dad has abandoned them if they lose a parent.

As children grow older they begin to realise the finality of death.

### 3. Death of a child

Many bereaved parents have directed their anger in positive ways, by working to change laws, build foundations, raise money, fund scholarships and other avenues as a catalyst for positive change. Typically when one loses a child there are feelings of regret, anger, and even desire to join the child. There are various coping strategies such as trying to have another child, or moving away to another town. It's important for them to not make radical changes that have not been thought through. Sometimes the other children can feel rejected. The parent has to be strong for his/her other kids whilst going through the grief process themselves. Sometimes parents express anger toward each other for negligence and other such blaming. Often these parents ask real questions of life such as "Will life ever be good again?"

### 4. The death of a loved one through terminal illness.

In the bargaining stage of grief you may ask:

- If only we had sought medical attention sooner...
- If only we got a second opinion from another doctor...
- If only we had tried to be a better person toward them...

There is the added dimension of all the medical bills; statements from the ill person expressing the desire to die and feeling like they are a burden. The exhaustion stemming from looking after them is another factor affecting the process. Sometimes loved one shave spent so much time looking after them that when the person dies they now need to rediscover themselves. Often in the case of the terminally ill you are dealing with denial about impending death and also questions about faith. Do I continue believing God for healing whilst preparing for death? As a pastor be prepared to answer questions about faith and healing and why God allows certain things.

### 5. The case of murder or suicide

- Sudden, violent, unexpected
- Police involvement
- Confusion; accusation and conflict
- Mixed emotions of anger toward the person.
- Secrecy
- Stigma, shame, isolation
- Blame and guilt "If only I was a better parent".
- Rejection and abandonment
- Autopsy often necessary
- Support groups can help
- Often no life assurance available due to nature of death.

**B. The Stages of Grieving**

Here is the grief model called "The 7 Stages of Grief" from Recoverfromgrief.com.

**1. SHOCK & DENIAL-**

You will probably react to learning of the loss with numbed disbelief. You may deny the reality of the loss at some level, in order to avoid the pain. Shock provides emotional protection from being overwhelmed all at once. This may last for weeks.

**2. PAIN & GUILT-**

As the shock wears off, it is replaced with the suffering of unbelievable pain. Although excruciating and almost unbearable, it is important that you experience the pain fully, and not hide it, avoid it or escape from it with alcohol or drugs.

You may have guilty feelings or remorse over things you did or didn't do with your loved one. Life feels chaotic and scary during this phase.

**3. ANGER & BARGAINING-**

Frustration gives way to anger, and you may lash out and lay unwarranted blame for the death on someone else. Please try to control this, as permanent damage to your relationships may result. This is a time for the release of bottled up emotion.

You may rail against fate, questioning "Why me?" You may also try to bargain in vain with the powers that be for a way out of your despair ("I will never drink again if you just bring him back")

**4. "DEPRESSION", REFLECTION, LONELINESS-**

Just when your friends may think you should be getting on with your life, a long period of sad reflection will likely overtake you. This is a normal stage of grief, so do not be "talked out of it" by well-meaning outsiders. Encouragement from others is not helpful to you during this stage of grieving.

During this time, you finally realize the true magnitude of your loss, and it depresses you. You may isolate yourself on purpose, reflect on things you did with your lost one, and focus on memories of the past. You may sense feelings of emptiness or despair.

**5. THE UPWARD TURN-**

As you start to adjust to life without your dear one, your life becomes a little calmer and more organized. Your physical symptoms lessen, and your "depression" begins to lift slightly.

**6. RECONSTRUCTION & WORKING THROUGH-**

As you become more functional, your mind starts working again, and you will find yourself seeking realistic solutions to problems posed by life without your loved one. You will start to work on practical and financial problems and reconstructing yourself and your life without him or her.

**7. ACCEPTANCE & HOPE-**

During this, the last of the seven stages in this grief model, you learn to accept and deal with the reality of your situation. Acceptance does not necessarily mean instant happiness. Given the pain and turmoil you have experienced, you can never return to the carefree, untroubled YOU that

existed before this tragedy. But you will find a way forward.

You will start to look forward and actually plan things for the future. Eventually, you will be able to think about your lost loved one without pain; sadness, yes, but the wrenching pain will be gone. You will once again anticipate some good times to come, and yes, even find joy again in the experience of living.

### **III. What is the purpose of a funeral?**

#### **A. Funerals help people to grieve.**

People grieve in different ways. In some cultures professional mourners were hired and they would weep loudly. People living in Bible times often tore their clothes, wore sackcloth, or covered themselves in ashes (II Sam. 3:31). In the West today funerals are more subdued and numbers are limited. It's important for pastors to be aware of these dynamics. Not everyone wants the whole world to visit their home after the loss of a loved one.

#### **B. Funerals give people the opportunity to express sympathy.**

When you are aware of this you will set aside time at a funeral for this to occur through the talks, sermon and also social time. Part of this is shown practically by the fact that people have travelled from afar to be with the bereaved. Often it is comforting for one to know that one is not alone.

#### **C. Funerals help to bring closure.**

There is power in a burial as the person's body is being lowered into the ground. Often there is a form of closure that takes place particularly for children. When people give their speeches and remember good things about the deceased person, it's often a form of closure. This is not to say that the grieving process has ended but it's a step in the right direction. Closure also comes about as the bereaved accept the loss. A funeral helps them to accept that the person they loved has indeed died.

#### **D. Funerals are a time of thanksgiving.**

One of the positive aspects of a funeral is that it is a time to remember the positives about the person's life and the legacy they left. It's an opportunity for people to appreciate and also emulate the individual's good deeds.

#### **E. Funerals are a time of reflection.**

Funerals give the people present an opportunity to reflect on their own lives. Often it's a time to ask ourselves how well we have lived our lives thus far. They get us to face the reality of eternity.

### **IV. What is the function of a pastor at a funeral?**

Firstly it's important for you to be clear about what you can and cannot do at a funeral. Clarity about expectations is important lest people are disappointed because they expected you to play a role that you were not aware of. This becomes quite challenging when you are asked to be involved in a funeral for someone from a different church or a family member who isn't in your pastorate. Because every funeral is different there is often a strong need for clarity when it comes to expectations. I have outlined below a number of guidelines to help pastors fulfil their role at a funeral:

1. Be prepared for meaningful ministry as first impressions count.
2. Remember that it is a crisis.
  - Few people are ready for it even in the case of the terminally ill.
  - Hence there is often confusion.
  - Identify a key level headed person who is in their right mind and has information that you need.
  - Identify the decision-makers.
  - Don't pretend you have all the answers.
  - Take them a step further in their process.
3. Put on both hats; practical and emotional. Your purpose is to comfort and guide.
4. Be sensitive to the different approaches to grief and the various family needs.
  - Some may feel they want to share openly whilst a sibling might not want to say anything. Don't force people to do things they would rather not do.
5. Minister in humility and compassion. It's not an ordinary Sunday service with your congregation.
6. Use terminology that people will understand.
  - Remember that not everyone there will be from your church.
7. Get assistance from the funeral home when you need it.
  - Remember that they do this regularly.
8. Be careful of charlatans who are in it only for the money.
  - As time goes by develop relationships with good funeral services companies that you trust.
  - Remember that death is a good business to be in. You will ever run out of customers.
9. Remain calm
  - It's useful to have a notebook and not to forget any details.
  - Remember that because many people are emotional they need someone there who is sensitive but calm.
10. Keep things personal by using the deceased person's name.  
Pronounce it properly
11. Ask the right questions  
When you are conducting a service it's important that you have the right information.  
Some possible questions to ask are:
  - What was your son's view of life and faith?
  - What was the nature of his death?
  - Who was he close to?
  - What were his aspirations?
  - Describe some of your last moments with him?
12. Review the service format
  - Find out what they mean by the word funeral. People have different expectations. Is it a cremation or a burial?
  - Do they want to have a service at the burial site in addition to the memorial service?
  - What is their preference for the tone of the service?

- You can also educate them with regards to the options available to them and the possible expenses they will incur.
- Your role is to advise them with regards to the cost and benefit of the various approaches.
- In all of this remember that there are certain cultural practices that are not in line with the bible and it's important to avoid these and also inform the bereaved in case they are ignorant of these matters.

*In essence you are saying "I am here for you. It's tough but stick with me and I will get you through this first step."*