

Voices: The power of silence in the face of grief

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I never will forget Oct. 15, 2013. The phone rang late that night, which never can be a good thing for a pastor. You expect to hear tragic news about someone in your congregation.



Zac Harrel This phone call wasn't about a church member, though. It was about my mom. She suffered a major heart attack and passed away almost instantly. You never fully recover from the shock of receiving news like that. The pain always is there. At least three years in, I have not found much truth in the saying, "Time heals all wounds."

In the days immediately after the shocking phone call, my heart continually turned to the book of Job. I thought about verse 21 in chapter 1. It's the famous verse that says, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away."

The Lord was gracious to me in so many ways through my mom. She was such a gift of his grace. But in that moment, I realized all he had taken away, too.

“Blessed be ...”



She never got to meet her granddaughter, who was born two months later. She didn't get to spoil that child or see her grow and change and in many ways be an exact image of her. Those wounds still hurt, but my heart still proclaims with Job, "Blessed be the name of the Lord" because Jesus is my hope. His resurrection is the hope of my resurrection and my mom's resurrection to come. God will redeem what has been taken away. Jesus is enough in this moment, in this grief.

The book of Job also convicted me about my own ministry to people in grief before I had experienced grief myself.

I am convinced Job's friends are examples of what not to do. When we are walking with others through grief, we don't have to have the right words. In fact, we don't have to have words at all.

Job's friends decided they must have an answer. They believed they must speak into the situation and tell Job the truth. These friends ended up doing more harm than good, and God rebuked them for their insensitive ministry.

No magic words

In my own ministry as a young pastor, I thought I needed to say something to fill in the silence that inevitably comes in grief. I was wrong. When I lost my mom, I didn't need words. In fact, I probably couldn't tell you anything anyone shared with me those first few weeks. What I do remember is who came by, who just sat with me, who called to tell me they were praying. I remember who was there.

There are no magic words to speak to those walking through grief. They don't need an answer from you in that moment. They need you. They need you to be the hands and feet of Jesus, to be a physical representation of the love and presence of our Savior. Our presence is our greatest ministry to those walking through grief. Silence is not something we have to fill. Silence is an opportunity for us to sit and cry with those who are hurting. Powerful ministry happens in silence.

No timetable

There is no timetable with grief. It comes on without warning days, weeks, months—even years—after we lose our loved ones. The loss we feel is healthy. It is a longing for the redemption and reunion to come in Christ.

It has been three years since I lost my mom, and the grief still is there. It still is there when I see her picture or when I find a note with her handwriting on it or a gift she gave me 10 years ago.

In those moments, I don't need someone to give me a bumper-sticker platitude. I need someone to sit with me. I don't need the perfect words. I need someone to represent for me our perfect Savior, who is with us. Always.

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