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DROPPING THE WEIGHT OF GRIEF Michael B. Beough
John 11:28-37; I Thessalonians 4:13 January 17, 2010
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Some say Uranium is the heaviest natural element on earth. I say it is grief. Grief will likely be the heaviest emotion any of us will ever experience.

As a pastor, I have seen grief rip out the hearts of others and have done everything in my power to keep it from getting to me like that. As a son, I saw how it nearly destroyed my dad after my mother died and had not the slightest idea how to save him. As a husband, I walked in the quicksand of grief as my wife was treated for cancer twice and never quite knew what to say to make it all better.

I don't know if the writer of Hebrews 12 had grief in mind when he wrote, "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." I do know that it is impossible to run, or to know which direction to run, when weighed down by grief.

Now I have a confession to make. When I adopted the title for this sermon series, I should have given more thought to grief. Grief is not a weight that you can simply decide to drop. It's not as if we can say, "I am going to grieve less today or next time something happens, I will not grieve as much." Grief happens. The question is not, "How can we keep from grieving?" The question is, "What becomes of our grief?"

For this sermon series, "Drop That WEIGHT!", I promised to find us biblical help for dealing with those things that weigh us down. Here is the first biblical truth regarding grief.

Grief is not a sign of a lack of faith. It is the way God made us to respond to loss and disappointment in our lives. We are made to grieve. In fact, it is a divine attribute. In John 11, Jesus wept. The Son of God stood before the tomb of his dead friend Lazarus and cried. We would say he had a heavy heart. He was weighed down with grief.

Now why is it so important to know that Jesus wept? Well, it is the tell. Classical Christian theology said God could not be affected by creation. In other words, God is perfect and self-fulfilled and is not swayed by His imperfect creatures. God is all the superlatives and does not need us to complete himself – All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Present. And, yet, Jesus wept. In that, he lets us see into the heart of God.

Let me ask you this. How do you feel when someone suffers a great loss but shows no grief? You wonder if that person cares. You wonder if that person has a heart. Years ago, a member of the church I was leaving confronted me with this. After the going away party where some were shedding tears, she said she thought it odd that I was not showing any emotion. She wished I had shed some tears.

What was she saying? She wondered if I really cared about them. Grief is the strongest expression of love and caring. It reveals the truth of what poet and preacher John Donne said that no man is an island entire unto itself. Grief reveals

the pain we experience when the bonds are broken, when a piece of the mainland breaks off. To grieve is to be like God. Not to grieve is to be the Enemy of God.

Here is another biblical truth. Grieving is not a solo act. We do not grieve alone if we trust in God.

I mean this in two ways.

First, Psalm 34 makes it clear that "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit."

The Bible does not tell us not to grieve. It tells us that when we grieve, God hears and helps. He rescues and he saves. In other words, God will not let our grief master our lives if we trust in Him. Again, in John 11, Jesus shows us this characteristic of God. When Jesus shows up at the home of his dead friend Lazarus, Jesus sees Mary and Martha and the other mourners weeping. It is Jesus' compassion for those who are grieving that causes Jesus to weep. Jesus, the Son of God, is with them. He has come to rescue and to save because that is what God does.

How long is grieving supposed to last? It is different for every person. But we know that God promises to lift the weight for those who trust him. There will be joy in the morning, though morning might be a year later, or 5 years, or more. Regardless how long we feel the grief, the promise is that God will not let the grief master us if we trust in Him.

Second, God gives us a community of support if we trust in Him. There is nothing more powerful than being part of a community that holds you up in prayer in time of loss and grief. There is nothing more powerful than having others surround you with their love and with their prayers and with their casseroles, the sacramental offering for those who grieve. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. When one of us hurts, we all pray. When one of us hurts, we eat.

Listen to this. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul writes, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God."

My own father discovered this truth after my mother died. For three years, he grieved and nearly wasted away. Shortly after her death, he had to have bypass surgery for the second time in his life. After surgery, he started walking 7 miles a day, barely eating. He was skin and bones. He didn't go anywhere. Every time I visited him, he had to tell me again about my mother's last days and last hours and last minutes, how my mother died, what it was like. Then someone got him to attend a widows and widowers group at his church. Reluctantly, he went. Some friends had to drag him there. It turned out to be mostly old women, he said, but he went back a second time and a third. To make a long story short, he ended up marrying one of those "old" women, for which we, the family, were immensely grateful. No doubt it was a gift of God's grace for all of us. We do not grieve alone.

And a final biblical truth. Paul says it in I Thessalonians 4:13. Those who trust in God do not grieve as those who have no hope. What this means is

that our grief does not end in despair. Grief aims us toward the future. It is a powerful reminder that there is more to life than the sorrow we share. It is a painful reminder that the life we live is only a faint reflection of the life God has in store for us.

We live in the light of Revelation 21:4. It says, "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

I found the following words on a blog. I don't know the person who wrote them, but they caught my eye.

Grieving like a Christian does not mean we do not grieve. It means we grieve without despair. We crawl into our Father's lap and lay our tear-stained cheeks on His shoulder, and trust that what He ordains is always right, will always work out well in the end, and that all our losses will one day be restored to us. It is running to Him and asking, "Tell me again the story of what You have done and what You will do to destroy this enemy." It is going to Him and asking for the strength and comfort we need to face the new reality of our temporary, mortal lives--a reality without someone we have grown to love, without someone we are used to having as a part of our lives and perhaps mistakenly assumed would always be there. It is knowing that although there is loss, all is not lost.

God has set a race before us. Grief will slow us down, may even cause us to take our eyes off the finish line. But then God promises to lift us up on eagles' wings. For those who trust in him, light finally dawns again. The grief becomes, not a terrible weight, but a yearning for the bright future. When we realize that Jesus has borne all our sorrows, when we come to know him as the one who grieved unto death for us, then the blanket of darkness begins to roll away. Our grief even points us to that place where we might do ministry. It becomes our muse. It writes a script on our hearts for the rest of our lives. "I have suffered thusly; therefore I will go to those who also suffer and tell them of my hope in Jesus Christ our Lord."