

INTRODUCTION:
PERMISSION TO
LAMENT

Lizzie died when she was thirty-seven.

She was the first member of our immediate family to be snatched away from us.

My wife Edrie's eldest sister had struggled with illness from birth. She'd been born in the 1940s, when hospitals did not yet understand just how devastating maternal deprivation could be. So when she first showed signs of diseased kidneys, she was taken into hospital and isolated from her parents. They could only look through the glass in the window of her ward. Not surprisingly, she didn't recognize them when she eventually returned home.

The shadow of failing kidneys haunted her all her life. But inspired by her faith in Christ, she never surrendered to bitterness or self-pity. I well remember her courage and her wonderful sense of humour. Lizzie refused to let her illness define her—and she had to battle through long years of it.

But in the end, she lost her battle.

Edrie resembled her sister in both looks and personality. The loss of her sister hit her hard.

It was during the months that followed Lizzie's death that I discovered that Christians are not always as sensitive as they should be.

I think of Tony (not his real name), who after church one Sunday came to "comfort" Edrie:

I just want to tell you that I know how you feel. My wife died last year. She is with Jesus. I have never shed a tear for her. Why should I?

And don't let me find you weeping for your sister. Only a selfish person would want her back. So buck up, and don't let the side down.

Yes, he really did say that!

I'd like to tell you that he was the only one. But over the years, I have encountered similar sentiments. "Christians should be stoic" is the underlying narrative. This raises a whole host of questions.

Do we need permission to grieve? Is grief selfish? Should we be afraid of what others think? Are we letting the side down? Is it better to tell lies and pretend we don't feel any grief, saying we are okay when really our lives are falling apart?

So many masks

Christians wear masks. We pretend that all is well when we are actually struggling. Often, the mask we put on is a kind of

confident triumphalism which tells the world that our faith is strong and that the trials of this world somehow don't touch us. In particular, we deny the grief and sorrow which we feel in the face of loss.

There are all sorts of reasons we do this.

Perhaps we think that if we confessed our inner struggles, we would be letting the side down. What would my brothers and sisters in church think of me? Their lives are so together and sorted. (If only we knew!) Anyway, there are plenty of people worse off than me. It's better to smile and keep quiet. Isn't that what good Christians do? And what about my witness? What would my non-Christian friends or colleagues think if I told them how I *really* felt?

Then again, we may be suspicious of allowing our feelings to show. Isn't the Christian life a matter of the truth conquering the emotions? We walk by faith, not feelings, distrusting demonstrative displays of strong emotion. We get embarrassed when people open up to us and would never want to inflict our pain on others, for we are terrified of embarrassing or overwhelming them. Surely it's better to be disciplined and controlled?

Then of course there is the whole cacophony of voices around us telling us that triumphant faith conquers everything and we should pull ourselves together. There is no room for pain. Voicing our griefs and sorrows is a denial of God's goodness and a sure sign of unbelief. Remember what happened to Israel in the wilderness? The people grumbled against God and ended up

dying outside the promised land.¹ With this in mind, the author of Hebrews warns us, “See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (3:12). Shouldn’t we exercise faith instead?

In short, it’s better to fix our masks firmly in place and pretend that all is well.

Ditch the mask!

These arguments seem so persuasive—that is, until we turn to the Bible. The root problem here is that we do not know our Bibles well enough. For it is full of men and women who genuinely struggled with pain and loss. And what is so wonderful and unique about the Christian Scriptures is that they tell us the truth about the human condition:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:22–23)

As we shall see, the Bible allows us to be honest. It gives us permission to lament. Lamentation gives grief, sorrow, regret, and disappointment their due. God made us, and he does not expect us to jettison our humanity when we come to faith and are saved. Salvation restores us to what we were always meant

1 See Exod. 15:24; 16:2, 7–9, 12; 17:3; Num. 11:1–6; 20:1–3.

to be. And not only is lamenting okay, but it is a vital part of recovering a biblically balanced view of the world.

Lamentation is the prayer language God has given to us so that we can tell him about our sorrows and rekindle our trust in his fatherly care. This was a language used by prophets and apostles, as well as a myriad of unnamed Christians. And this was the language which Jesus himself used in the midst of his trials:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
 Why are you so far from saving me,
 so far from my cries of anguish? (Ps. 22:1)

And sometimes our own prayers are little more than a groan:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. (Rom. 8:26)

We know that one day there will be no more tears (Rev. 21:4). But we are not there yet. Today we live between Eden and the new creation, and this place is a vale of tears.

To lament is to be genuinely Christian; sadness does not constitute spiritual failure. We are not “letting the side down” or “spoiling our witness” when we lament. Rather than denying faith, lamentation is an *expression* of faith. As we shall see, we must never confuse a genuine and heartfelt lament or complaint with unbelief and grumbling. As author Mark Vroegop puts it,

“All humans cry; only Christians lament. Lament stands in the gap between pain and promise.”²

If we are to depend on God in all things, we must learn to mourn, bringing our grief to God, expressing our very real emotions in a healthy way. There are two main Hebrew words translated “lament.” One carries the idea of a dirge—a sombre song expressing grief. The other can mean to groan with pain and sorrow. In both cases, the lamenting or mourning is vocal and demonstrative.

When we cry out to God in pain, trusting however feebly in his love, then in pain and lamentation we can be sure of his smile, because “the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love” (Ps. 147:10–11). As we turn our broken hearts towards God, we discover his kindness and goodness. We feel the warm embrace of our loving heavenly Father. We find boundless comfort in the grace of our precious Saviour. We hear whispers of reassurance as we are drawn into the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Our broken hearts draw us to delight in the compassionate heart of our triune God.

And this is a precious place to be.

We often mistakenly believe that our strength is what God wants from us, when it is actually brokenness which pleases his heart:

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for

2 Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2019), 16.

my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:9–10)

So, rather than discouraging healthy expressions of emotion—whether of joy or of pain—the Bible urges us to be honest. It also wants us to recognize that sharing our pain with our Christian family is a good thing. We are in this together, weeping with those who weep (see Rom. 12:15).

We need to learn the language of lamentation.

We need to learn to lament.

Understanding and Navigating Grief

The first time I met Edna, she really opened her heart to me.

I had been invited to lead a church house party. The organizers wanted me to speak on the Bible's teaching about marriage. So I took them to God's institution of the covenant of marriage in the garden of Eden, where God defined it in specific and precise terms: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

I developed this further. Marriage is an exclusive, lifelong, covenantal relationship between one man and one woman. No other human relationship is as all-embracing and as all-consuming. And marriage reflects a deeper and even more profound relationship—that between God and Israel (Ezek. 16:8–14; Hos. 2:7), and between Christ and his church (John 3:29; Eph. 5:25–33; Rev. 19:7–9). Sin has disrupted this, but God's purpose in grace is to restore both the vertical and horizontal relationships which, as human beings, we ache for.

Describing love, I outlined where the author of Song of

Solomon says,

Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned. (8:6–7)

Love is as strong as death—and we don't negotiate with death, for it is powerful and uncompromising. It will have its way. And so will love. It blazes like a voracious fire, and everything melts in its heat. That is why the Bible is so insistent that it is only within the covenant of marriage—the lifelong commitment of one man and one woman—that the passions of love can be fully unleashed.

When I had finished, Edna asked to speak with me. She must have been in her seventies, and she spoke with a quiet dignity which made her words even more poignant:

Thank you for what you said, but may I ask you a question? What happens when the man you have loved all your adult life dies? Tom and I were together as far back as I can remember. Sometimes I forget that he is gone and shout out his name. I don't want to live without Tom. I know it's wrong, but I can't help it. If it is true that love is a fire that burns, then I am being consumed by the flames.

Powerful words. And I didn't know what to say.

Writing about the death of his wife Joy, whom he'd married later in life, the doctor and writer C. S. Lewis used a medical analogy to describe his excruciating experience:

To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he's had his leg off it is quite another. After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce, continuous pain will stop. Presently he'll get back his strength and be able to stump about on his wooden leg. He has "got over it." But he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life, and perhaps pretty bad ones; and he will always be a one-legged man.¹

Sometimes the amputee will get out of bed in the middle of the night and fall flat on his face because he's forgotten for a moment that he has lost a limb. Even with the best prosthesis in the world, he may limp for the rest of his life.

And Edna will limp until she gets to heaven.

Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and counsellor David Kessler put it like this:

The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not "get over" the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss

1 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 52.

you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to.²

In our particular experience of brokenness, we also need to learn to limp.

The experience of grief

Grief is the universal, unavoidable, and harrowing reaction to loss. Later, we will explore grief and lamentation in the broadest possible terms. That loss can be physical (e.g., disability or dementia), social (e.g., divorce or childlessness), economic (e.g., bankruptcy), occupational (e.g., redundancy) or spiritual (e.g., feeling abandoned by God). However, our initial focus will be on the grief which engulfs us when we lose a person close to us.

Those who have experienced loss are sometimes called “bereaved.” The word “bereave” comes from an Old English word meaning “to deprive of, to take away by violence, to seize or to rob.” Some deaths are comparatively peaceful, but the experience of bereavement may feel like an act of violence. Someone we embraced has been ripped from our arms. We may feel plundered, violated even.

So, how do we react to such a brutal experience? There is, of course, no standard reaction—grief can take many forms. It may well include denial, anger, guilt, anxiety, fear, and despair.

2 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief & Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 230.