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CONNECTING WITH THE HEART OF GOD IN GRIEF:  
EMPLOYING NARRATIVE IN CHRISTIAN  
BEREAVEMENT CARE

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A Thesis  
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the Faculty of  
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by  
Lauren Jane Kratz  
December 2017

**APPROVAL SHEET**

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Date 8 NOV 2017

To Stephan, my late husband,  
who taught me by example  
what it means to love unconditionally,  
to never shrink back,  
to embrace suffering, death, and loss,  
and to taste and see that the Lord is good!

Until the trumpet sounds,  
the dead are raised,  
and we meet again.

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## PREFACE

While I am the author of this thesis, a greater author than I is not yet finished writing the story of my life. I am grateful to my God and Savior for his amazing grace in choosing to make an unrighteous sinner righteous in Christ. God has divinely orchestrated both the events of my life and the relationships I have forged with particular people to enable this thesis to come to fruition.

I am deeply indebted to my advisor and pastor, Robert Cheong, for his time, wisdom, and encouragement over the past fifteen months. Robert has the rare ability of reaching skyward for the big ideas while keeping his feet on solid ground as he applies those ideas to the nitty gritty of people's daily lives; he is both academically astute and pastorally sensitive. I sincerely hope this same balance is reflected in my work.

My academic thinking and writing has also been enriched by the teachings of the professors I have sat under at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, most notably Dr. Jeremy Pierre. I count it a privilege to be studying at this prestigious institution. I am grateful to Greg Cook of Christ Chapel Bible Church, Fort Worth Texas, for introducing me to the power of biblical counseling in South Africa in July 2014, for pointing me in the direction of Southern Seminary, and for making my transition to studies in the USA a smooth and welcoming one.

The teachings and influence of my pastor of many years, Mike Lombard of Kommetjie Christian Church in South Africa, has in many ways shaped who I am as a follower of Christ today. The love Mike and my late husband, Stephan, shared for the Lord, for biblical theology, and for teaching God's story as narrative undergirds this thesis, and I am grateful for the continued fellowship in the gospel of Mike and his wife, Annemarie.

My father, Bill Mincher, has lovingly and generously supported my studies abroad and offered words of encouragement when I most needed them. The prayers and love of my mother-in-law and sister-in-Christ, Karin Kratz, as well as her confidence in Stephan's hopes for my future after his death, have given me much needed strength to persevere.

Last but not least, a general word of gratitude to the many family members, friends, and brothers and sisters in Christ who have journeyed with me during the years of Stephan's illness and/or been there for me in my bereavement. Reading and writing about bereavement has at times felt like having open-heart surgery without the anesthetic. Many of you have been there to pick up the pieces when I couldn't, to weep with me when I was weeping, and to point me to the God of all comfort. Thank you all so much.

Jane Kratz

Louisville, Kentucky  
December 2017

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

You and I *will* die. Before we die we will most certainly be affected by the death of a close family member. Losing a loved one to death—whether a child, spouse, parent, grandparent or sibling—will shake and test the commitments of our hearts and the foundations of what believe. James Sire calls these commitments and foundations a worldview.<sup>1</sup> When the grieving person is faced with death, this bereavement forces them to grapple with questions about what is real, what it is to be human, and what happens to a person at death.<sup>2</sup> Those caring for the bereaved also need to be conscious of their worldview because it will shape the structure of their care. Inconsistency in a person’s worldview is not uncommon because of the tendency to selectively incorporate commitments from competing worldviews. As sojourners and pilgrims who are called to live in this world but not be of the world (1 Pet 2:9-12; John 15:19, 17:14), Christians live in the constant tension between non-biblical worldviews and the biblical worldview. Christian bereavement care, therefore, needs to proceed from a solid biblical foundation in determining the approach while guarding against commitments that seek to undermine biblical foundations. Such provision raises the question of what goal, model, and method of bereavement care will encourage an overall trajectory of faith?

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<sup>1</sup>James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 122. Sire defines a worldview as “a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.”

<sup>2</sup>James W. Sire, “8 Questions Every Worldview Must Answer,” *Christianity.com*, accessed April 27, 2017, <http://www.christianity.com/theology/other-religions-beliefs/8-questions-every-worldview-must-answer.html>.

## Clear Problem Statement

When people experience deep pain and suffering, as they do in grief, they seek comfort. Comfort for the bereaved usually follows swiftly and in abundance after the news of a death in the family. Some people might maintain contact with the bereaved for a couple of weeks after the funeral, and even fewer people in the month or two that follow. The impact of grief and the need for soul-satisfying comfort, however, extend well beyond the time when most people stop offering care. Churches that expect the pastoral staff or elders to be solely responsible for the care of every member of the congregation will quickly find themselves under-resourced. In recognition of this fact, Benjamin Shikwati, Vhumani Magezi, and Rantsoa Letšosa argue for a model of care that shifts beyond the pastor to embrace “the community of believers as the mainstay of care and healing.”<sup>3</sup> Such an approach is not only more practical, but also more scripturally sound. Christ gives a range of gifts to church leaders so they might “equip the saints to do the work of ministry” (Eph 4:11-16).<sup>4</sup> Believers are exhorted to love one another (John 15:12, 1 Pet 3:8), bear one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2), speak the truth to one another (Eph 4:25), comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18, 2 Cor 1:3-4), encourage and build one another up (1 Thess 5:11), and pray for one another (Jas 5:16).

Is the average Christian, however, equipped to comfort and encourage those who are grieving the death of a loved one? Does the church preach and teach on death and about how to draw alongside those who are grieving? Does society and culture embrace, accept, and know how to deal with the reality of death? Is the church more influenced by what Scripture says about death than it is by what secular culture teaches? Authors Fred Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy Goldsmith would answer “no” to all

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<sup>3</sup>Benjamin Shikwati, Vhumani Magezi, and Rantsoa Letšosa, “Bereavement Healing Ministry amongst Abaluyia: Towards a ‘Circle for Pastoral Concern’ as a Healing Model,” *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 47, no. 1 (April 10, 2013): 8.

<sup>4</sup>All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version, unless stated otherwise.

four of these questions.

Craddock et al. studied ten cases of pastors who—while serving in ministry—faced their own terminal illnesses and impending deaths in relative isolation because of the church’s unwillingness to communicate openly about death.<sup>5</sup> Although their study is primarily focused on anticipatory grief, the unwillingness of the church to openly engage the subject of death while the pastor was still alive had implications for dealing with death after the fact. Citing one case, Craddock et al. write, “Denial and ambiguity clouded an already difficult situation. Janet’s dying in the church was a train wreck. A disaster. An imposition. An unmentionable thing. The church only many years later is recovering its stability.”<sup>6</sup> Breaking the silence on death in the church is only half the battle. Knowing what to say is the other half.

Sadly, the church, for the most part, has embraced the secular narrative with respect to death rather than drawing on the rich resources in Scripture and the great store of theological and pastoral wisdom of prior centuries.<sup>7</sup> One of the core issues Craddock et al. identify is the church’s inability to “offer help from the heart of the Christian gospel at critical end-of-life moments.”<sup>8</sup> The church needs to be able to offer meaningful, relevant, and timely gospel truths to the bereaved in a way that connects the individual’s grief process with the larger narrative of God’s story of redemption.

In our modern secular context where multiple influential voices claim to have all the answers to our woes, the voice of God is barely audible. The questions raised by grief are by no means new. The tendency, however, of people to turn to anything or anyone but God himself for answers and comfort is a modern malaise. The psalmist’s

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<sup>5</sup>Fred B. Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying: Recovering the Church’s Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>6</sup>Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying*, 1.

<sup>7</sup>Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying*, 47.

<sup>8</sup>Craddock, Goldsmith, and Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying*, 21.

cries are to his God and to no one else: “Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide in times of trouble?” (Ps 10:1) and “How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?” (Ps 13:1-2). The questions raised by grief are the very same questions that should drive us back to Scripture. The church has certainly worked hard at developing solid theological doctrines over the centuries. However, the church has not done well at helping its people apply theological and biblical truth to their personal lives, particularly with respect to grief and bereavement. Christians struggle to connect their reality with God’s reality and to experience the presence and comfort of God in the midst of suffering.

### **Thesis Statement**

The experience of suffering threatens to undermine faith in God’s goodness and sovereignty and distort a person’s perception of God’s nearness. In suffering, however, the believer not only has the opportunity to engage God, but to truly know and experience God. Only God can bring true comfort to the bereaved; he invites the bereaved to find rest and peace in him as “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” (2 Cor 1:3-4 NIV). Effective bereavement care, I will argue, encourages the bereaved to receive comfort from God and to draw confidence from their union in Christ. Bereavement care, therefore, needs to focus on communion with God because comfort and confidence flow from this communion.<sup>9</sup> I also contend that Scripture touts the implements of narrative and relationship as the most effective way of inviting the

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<sup>9</sup>John Piper defines communion with God as “God’s communication and presentation of himself to us, together with our proper response to him with joy.” Communion, therefore, is more than knowing about God. Communion *with* God is to know and experience God body and soul, through his Word and by his Spirit, as a person “feel[s] and express[es] the appropriate response of the heart.” John Piper, “Reading the Bible in Prayer and Communion with God,” in *Understanding Scripture: An Overview of the Bible’s Origin, Reliability, and Meaning*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem, C. John Collins, and Thomas R. Schreiner (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 46, 48.

bereaved into communion with God. Practical implementation involves the caregiver pointing the bereaved to God primarily through telling and listening to stories.

### **Research Outline and Methodology**

In support of this thesis, chapter 2 critically evaluates contemporary bereavement care approaches. Secular bereavement theories, which have dominated the field over the last half-century, are investigated with reference to the definition, goal, counselor's role, and resolution of bereavement care. This investigation will shed light on the extent to which such interventions have influenced the theory and practice of Christian bereavement care. In examining the underlying worldviews of the secular and Christian models and considering some reasons for overdependence of the latter on the former, I begin to make the case for a Theocentric and Christocentric approach to bereavement care. To be sure, secular bereavement theories do accurately describe the human experience of grief. But, their interpretation of that experience is not free of underlying presuppositions. Furthermore, secular theorists fail to deal with the most fundamental struggle of the bereaved – the anguished cries of pain and confusion as they try to make sense of suffering and death.

Chapter 3 focuses on the human experience of grief. Humans experience grief as a form of suffering which affects a person's relationships with others, themselves, and most importantly God. Contemporary autobiographical accounts of the experience of grief, as well as some biblical accounts, provide an initial understanding of the human experience. However, since God has chosen to reveal his perspective on the human experience of grief in his Word, consideration is also given to the roots of grief in the Genesis narrative. These theocentric insights from Scripture are then used to interpret the human experience of grief.

Chapter 4 further develops the argument for a theocentric and Christocentric approach to bereavement care. Explanation is given for why a theocentric understanding

of God's emotions and character is so important in bereavement care. I then argue that the Word of God should be both the source for developing an understanding of bereavement and the method employed in providing care to the bereaved. Jesus serves as the prime example, since the life of even our Lord was not without an abundance of grief. Various biblical narratives are used to inform a method of bereavement care—in eight relational steps centered around narrative and relationship—which is both biblically sound and pastorally sensitive.

Chapter 5 offers practical guidelines on caring for the bereaved by demonstrating how the relational steps above address the relational struggles in grief and effectively accomplish the goal of connecting the bereaved with the comfort of God.

Chapter 6 concludes by drawing together the arguments in an effort to demonstrate how employing narrative in Christian bereavement care can effectively connect the bereaved with the heart of God in grief. For, by such a connection comes comfort only God can offer.

### **Terminology**

For the sake of clarity, some of the terms and phrases used in the title of this thesis are explained below.

*Grief.* Throughout this thesis, “grief” will refer to the multidimensional response of a person to the death of another person – a family member, relative, or close friend. Hence, the frequent use of the words “bereavement” or “bereaved” likewise refers to the state of a person following the death of another person. Grief relating to other types of loss will not be addressed in this thesis. Furthermore, unless stated otherwise, any reference to grief is to be understood as grief *after* the death of a person rather than as “anticipatory grief.” The latter is the experience of grief as one anticipates the impending death of a person who has a terminal illness.

*Bereavement care.* The term “bereavement care” has been selected in

preference to alternative terms such as “grief counseling” or “grief therapy.” The latter two terms are derived from secular medically-based models of treatment. “Counseling” is usually sought when a problem exists which requires diagnosis and treatment. “Therapy” implies an abnormal state where the problem has reached pathological proportions, which in grief might be referred to as “complicated grief” or “prolonged grief disorder.”<sup>10</sup> “Bereavement care” on the other hand implies that people who are grieving do not have to do so alone because they can benefit from the love and support of other Christians. The term “bereavement care” also legitimizes grief as an appropriate response to the death of another person with whom one had an intimate relationship.

*Employing narrative.* In this thesis, the phrase “employing narrative” refers to the use of true stories (narrative) as part of the method for caring for the bereaved. Specifically, attention is given to the interaction between the individual’s actual life story and God’s redemptive story (or other smaller narratives in Scripture) as he or she deals with bereavement. While a person’s individual story is a representation and interpretation of reality and not reality itself, the telling of the story is based on and aims to recount actual historical experiences. The individual’s story is also subject to the truths of the biblical narrative and so acknowledges the validity and authority of absolute truth external to the individual. Narrative in this sense is to be distinguished from “narrative therapy,” a psychotherapeutic technique aimed at helping a person re-construct his or her story by externalizing a problem and separating it from his or her identity. A person who drinks alcohol excessively, for example, has a problematic relationship with a substance called ‘alcohol.’ He or she neither an alcoholic, nor a sinner. Identity is socially rather than biologically determined and the individual, therefore, can *create a new narrative* to resolve the problem because, contrary to the biblical approach, there are no absolute

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<sup>10</sup>M. Katherine Shear, Paul A. Boelen, and Robert A. Neimeyer, “Treating Complicated Grief: Converging Approaches,” in *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society: Bridging Research and Practice*, ed. Robert A. Neimeyer et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 139.

truths.<sup>11</sup> While this general approach of narrative therapy runs contrary to the biblical approach described in this thesis, not all approaches to narrative (or narrative therapy) do.<sup>12</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

To journey with the bereaved through the questions, doubts, and despair of grief requires the caregiver to engage in and be challenged by those same questions, doubts, and despair. Like Job's comforters, people would rather provide answers—even inadequate answers—than confess ignorance and dwell in the uncomfortable space of uncertainty and mystery. To walk through the valley of the shadow of death requires the caregiver to risk exposure of inconsistencies in his or her own worldview and theology. To walk the path of suffering with those who are grieving is for the caregiver to expose him or herself to suffering. To journey with the bereaved is to look death squarely in the face. Few are willing, and more feel ill-equipped, to embark on such a journey.

God uses the church to exhort and equip believers to journey alongside those who are grieving (Eph 4:11-14). Scripture instructs believers to mourn with those who are mourning (Rom 12:15) and to comfort those in need of comfort with the comfort which they themselves have received from God (2 Cor 1:4). Equipping implies learning and learning implies a need for reflection. Reflection is needed on (1) the state of affairs in the field of bereavement studies and care generally, (2) bereavement care in the church

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<sup>11</sup>Kathleen Gilbert, for example, says that the primary way in which people attribute meaning to the events of their lives is through narrative: "Our stories inform our lives and our lives, in turn, are shaped by our stories. We need to *create stories* to make order of disorder and to find meaning in the meaningless" [emphasis added]. Kathleen R. Gilbert, "Taking a Narrative Approach to Grief Research: Finding Meaning in Stories," *Death Studies* 26, no. 3 (April 2002): 236.

<sup>12</sup>A variety of approaches has arisen to practicing narrative therapy, making it difficult to define clearly, but the general approach is rooted in the work of Michael White and David Epston. Jennifer Wallis, Jan Burns, and Rose Capdevila, "What Is Narrative Therapy and What Is It Not? The Usefulness of Q Methodology to Explore Accounts of White and Epston's (1990) Approach to Narrative Therapy," *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 18, no. 6 (December 2011): 486–97.

and pastoral ministry, and (3) the underlying worldview assumptions of bereavement care approaches and, therefore, bereavement care as it relates to the Word of God.

## CHAPTER 2

### CRITICAL EVALUATION OF CONTEMPORARY GRIEF CARE APPROACHES

People have been writing about the human experience of bereavement since time immemorial. The development and proliferation of theories or models to explain that experience, however, is a modern phenomenon. The secularization of society, with the rise of the scientific paradigm, has significantly influenced our modern understanding of death and bereavement. Christian bereavement care has not been immune to the influence of secular models. In fact, pastoral workers and Christian counselors have generally adopted these models—primarily derived from psychoanalytic theory—wholesale and with little to no critical evaluation of the underlying assumptions. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to critically evaluate contemporary bereavement care approaches. First, secular bereavement theories will be examined with reference to (1) how grief is defined, (2) what goal is set for grief care or counseling, (3) the way the role of the counselor is understood, and (4) how the goal of counseling is accomplished. Second, Christian bereavement care theories and programs will be examined to determine how much they are influenced by these secular theories. Third, the theories (both secular and Christian) will be discussed in terms of the underlying worldview assumptions.

#### **Secular Bereavement Theories**

Theories and approaches to bereavement care have proliferated in the fields of psychiatry and psychology for the past hundred years. Significantly, over the past twenty to thirty years more rigorous scientific studies have challenged previously held assumptions about how best to care for grieving people. Some of these revisions have come as a result of interdisciplinary collaboration between the different fields of

academic study: the humanities, social sciences, cultural studies, and forensic or death studies. All modern bereavement theorists possess a definition, goal, counselor's role, and resolution of bereavement.

### **How Is Grief Defined?**

When defining grief, no theorist can escape presuppositions. While definitions vary according to the underlying presupposition, the majority define grief broadly as a “normal” response to the loss of a valued person.<sup>1</sup> Most limit the definition to a response that primarily affects the person's emotions, while some include the cognitive aspects,<sup>2</sup> and a few also include the social or relational aspects of grief.<sup>3</sup> The distress or sadness of grief is often linked to separation anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Although attachment to and separation from others adds a social or relational dimension to these definitions, the focus remains intrapsychic rather than interpersonal. Consequently, psychiatrists and psychologists created a category for pathological or atypical grief.<sup>5</sup>

Controversy has arisen in recent years over the definition of normal grief. Two issues have led to this controversy: (1) the move to include a disorder for bereavement in the fifth Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), and (2) the

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<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 21; Erich Lindemann, “Grief and Grief Management: Some Reflections,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 30, no. 3 (September 1976): 202–4; John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 17–18; J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (New York: Springer, 1991), 34–37; Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xiii; Colin Murray Parkes and Robert Stuart Weiss, *Recovery from Bereavement* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), 1–6; Wolfgang Stroebe and Margaret S. Stroebe, *Bereavement and Health: The Psychological and Physical Consequences of Partner Loss* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 19.

<sup>3</sup>Lindemann, “Grief and Grief Management,” 204; Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, *Continuing Bonds*, 19.

<sup>4</sup>Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 18; Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 7; Parkes, *Bereavement*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup>Parkes, *Bereavement*, 107–116; Parkes and Weiss, *Recovery from Bereavement*, xi, 9–22.

failure to retain the “bereavement exclusion” as part of the criteria for the diagnosis of a major depressive disorder (MDD).<sup>6</sup> The DSM-5 defines “normal grief” as that which cannot be labeled “persistent complex bereavement disorder.”<sup>7</sup> By implication, therefore, for grief to be considered “normal,” severe grief reactions should diminish within the first 12 months following a death, during which time the bereaved person should be able to return to normal daily functioning.<sup>8</sup> Distinguishing between grief and depression in the first few months of bereavement can be difficult. Yet, by removing the “bereavement exclusion” a person grieving the recent death of a loved one could be diagnosed with MDD and prescribed medication if their depressive symptoms exceed a mere two weeks (if even within the first two months of the death). While the DSM-5 attempts to distinguish between anxiety disorders, depression disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, and bereavement, making those distinctions in specific cases can be challenging. The definition of grief, and the boundary lines drawn by theorists between normal and pathological grief, influences the goal they set for grief counseling.

### **What Is the Goal of Grief Counseling?**

When most people think about grief counseling, the name Elizabeth Kübler-Ross comes to mind. Kübler-Ross, however, was no expert on bereavement, even though her five-stage theory of dying has influenced the goal and method of bereavement counseling for the past forty-eight years. It must be recognized that Kübler-Ross studied death and dying—the anticipatory grief of patients facing their own death—not

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<sup>6</sup>Kristy Lamb, Ronald Pies, and Sidney Zisook, “The Bereavement Exclusion for the Diagnosis of Major Depression,” *Psychiatry (Edgmont)* 7, no. 7 (July 2010): 19–25; M. Katherine Shear et al., “Complicated Grief and Related Bereavement Issues for DSM-5,” *Depression and anxiety* 28, no. 2 (February 2011): 103–17.

<sup>7</sup>American Psychiatric Association and DSM-5 Task Force, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 792. Although this “disorder” has not made an official listing in the DSM-5, it is included under the section “Conditions for Further Study.”

<sup>8</sup>American Psychiatric Association and DSM-5 Task Force, *DSM-5*, 789–92.

bereavement, but her stages-theory was inappropriately applied to bereavement after her work was popularized by *Life* magazine.<sup>9</sup> Kübler-Ross not only failed to correct this misapplication by others but was herself guilty of the same. The book she co-authored with David Kessler *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*<sup>10</sup>—published a year after her death and thirty-five years after her first best-selling book<sup>11</sup>—demonstrates that she never revised her original model, despite heavy criticism and research findings validating alternative theories. For Kübler-Ross, the goal of both anticipatory grief and post-death bereavement is *acceptance*.<sup>12</sup>

While acceptance is the last stage for Kübler-Ross, for others it is the first stage of bereavement. The goal of bereavement care for theorists who make the link between grief and separation anxiety is letting go of attachment to the deceased. Acceptance of the reality of the death—overcoming of shock, numbness, disbelief, and, denial—is a necessary first phase or task for Colin Murray Parkes and Robert Weiss, and William Worden in achieving this goal.<sup>13</sup> Successful completion of all the phases (or tasks) is another implicit goal of these three theorists. Being stuck in any specific phase results in delayed, complicated, or pathological grief.<sup>14</sup> These theories and ideas, however, became increasingly challenged.

Rather than viewing bereavement as a cessation of relationship, other theorists

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<sup>9</sup>Ruth Davis Konigsberg, “New Ways to Think about Grief,” *Time*, January 29, 2011, accessed February 15, 2017, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2042372-1,00.html>; Loudon Wainwright, “A Profound Lesson for the Living,” *LIFE*, November 21, 1969.

<sup>10</sup>Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*.

<sup>11</sup>Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

<sup>12</sup>Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 99; Kübler-Ross and Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving*, 24–25.

<sup>13</sup>Parkes and Weiss, *Recovery from Bereavement*, 155–59; Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 10–14.

<sup>14</sup>Parkes and Weiss, *Recovery from Bereavement*, 164; Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 70–71.

began to understand bereavement as maintaining bonds with the deceased. Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman argue that “the resolution of grief involves continuing bonds that survivors maintain with the deceased and that these continuing bonds can be a healthy part of the survivor’s ongoing life.”<sup>15</sup> The goal of bereavement counseling, therefore, would be the construction and reconstruction of new connections to the deceased.<sup>16</sup> Sociologist Tony Walter adopts a similar approach: “The purpose of grief is therefore the construction of a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives.”<sup>17</sup> A model which proposes maintenance of bonds with the deceased as the goal of bereavement contradicts a model advocating for a separation of emotional ties to the deceased. Or does it?

The “Dual Process Model of Bereavement” integrates these seemingly opposing models, suggesting that both perspectives see only part of the picture of bereavement.<sup>18</sup> Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut argue that the bereaved oscillate between loss-orientation and restoration-orientation as they seek to deal with the stress and anxiety associated with the death of a loved one—a dynamic adaptive coping process.<sup>19</sup> The goal of bereavement counseling for those adopting this model would be to ensure that the bereaved do not fixate on any one aspect (i.e. positive appraisal, negative appraisal, confrontation, or loss) but that room is created for oscillation between both positive and negative appraisal, both confrontation and avoidance, and both loss and restoration.

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<sup>15</sup>Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, *Continuing Bonds*, 22.

<sup>16</sup>Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, *Continuing Bonds*, 18.

<sup>17</sup>Tony Walter, “A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography,” *Mortality* 1, no. 1 (March 1996): 7.

<sup>18</sup>Margaret S. Stroebe and Henk Schut, “The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description,” *Death Studies* 23, no. 3 (May 4, 1999): 197–224.

<sup>19</sup>Margaret S. Stroebe and Henk Schut, “Models of Coping with Bereavement: A Review,” in *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping, and Care*, ed. Margaret S. Stroebe et al. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 375–403.

The question “What is the goal of grief counseling?” assumes the need for *counseling* when someone is grieving. George Bonanno, however, argues that grief counseling is seldom needed because people are more resilient to loss than most grief theories assume.<sup>20</sup> Research has shown that unsolicited counseling for bereavement yields little or no benefit and could even be harmful.<sup>21</sup> Psychologists and psychiatrists working within a clinical setting would necessarily encounter those who are struggling more than usual with bereavement, or for whom bereavement is a trigger or stressor for other underlying psychological conditions. The goal set for bereavement counseling shapes or determines the role of the counselor.

### **What Is the Role of the Counselor?**

The role of the counselor is to help the bereaved achieve the desired outcome or goal of bereavement care. For both Kübler-Ross and Worden, the role of the counselor is to help the bereaved resolve unresolved issues—accepting death or severing bonds, respectively.<sup>22</sup> Proponents of stage-phase-task theories also view the counselor’s role as facilitating the completion of each stage, phase or task so that complicated or pathological grief does not ensue. For Klass et. al., on the other hand, the focus is on facilitating a change in connections with the deceased and negotiating the meaning of

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<sup>20</sup>George A. Bonanno, “Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive after Extremely Aversive Events?” *The American Psychologist* 59, no. 1 (2004): 20–28.

<sup>21</sup>Although Neimeyer does not specify the ways in which grief therapy can be harmful when offered to those who are following a normal or un-traumatic grief process, he does offer some explanation of why this might be so. Methodologically, researchers and practitioners are focused on “psychiatric and physical problems, rather than features distinctive to grief per se.” The main distinctive Neimeyer identifies is the importance of “meaning reconstruction in response to a loss.” Robert A. Neimeyer, “Searching for the Meaning of Meaning: Grief Therapy and the Process of Reconstruction,” *Death Studies* 24, no. 6 (September 2000): 547–48.

<sup>22</sup>Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *Death Is of Vital Importance: On Life, Death and Life after Death*, ed. Göran Grip (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1995), 139; Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 37.

loss over time.<sup>23</sup> The role of the counselor is to facilitate the successful resolution of grief.

### **How Does Resolution Come About?**

In each of the theories discussed so far, resolution is primarily an intrapsychic process of emotional expression. Resolution in Kübler-Ross's approach is achieved as the bereaved work through *unfinished business* by expressing feelings, especially the "unnatural emotions" of fear, shame, and guilt.<sup>24</sup> Parkes, however, warns that expression of emotions can be harmful and so there needs to be a "balance between eliciting and alleviating distressing emotions."<sup>25</sup> Walter argues that expressing feelings to a counselor will not bring adequate resolution for the bereaved who "need to make sense of self and others in a continuing narrative."<sup>26</sup> Sharing stories with others who knew the bereaved is the way in which resolution comes about, according to Walter. Adaption or resolution for Stroebe et. al. comes from confronting the loss in small doses by oscillating dynamically between a loss-orientation (avoiding restoration changes) and restoration-orientation (avoiding grief).<sup>27</sup>

Addressing the definition, goal, counselor's role in, and resolution of bereavement individually is in some ways artificial due to their reciprocal nature. A Christian approach demonstrably treats these in a more integrated manner and is, therefore, more favorable.

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<sup>23</sup>Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, *Continuing Bonds*, 19–20.

<sup>24</sup>Kübler-Ross, *Death Is of Vital Importance*, 139; Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Mal Warshaw, *To Live Until We Say Good-Bye* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 12.

<sup>25</sup>Parkes and Weiss, *Recovery from Bereavement*, 229.

<sup>26</sup>As a sociologist, Walter views bereavement as "part of the process of (auto)biography, and the biographical imperative—the need to make sense of self and others in a continuing narrative." Therefore, he says, "talking about or expressing feelings to a counsellor or in a self-help group may be helpful but it may be a poor second best" to talking to those who knew the deceased person. Walter, "A New Model of Grief," 19–20.

<sup>27</sup>Stroebe and Schut, "The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement," 220.

## Christian Bereavement Theories and Programs

Secular bereavement theories have influenced the theory and practice of Christian bereavement care. An examination of the work of several Christian bereavement specialists reveals the extent of that influence.

Sharon May, Norman Wright, and Tim VanDuiwendyk<sup>28</sup> each considers grief counseling to be a process that begins with acceptance and moves the bereaved through a series of tasks toward a goal of reorganization, healing, or reinvestment in life without the deceased.<sup>29</sup> In recognizing the importance of family relationships in the experience of bereavement, May combines systems theory with attachment theory to develop “a more comprehensive model” of bereavement care.<sup>30</sup> She relies on John Bowlby, Kübler-Ross, and other secular theorists for her understanding of the bereavement process, accepting their theories and assumptions with little consideration for how those assumptions might conflict with Christian presuppositions. She does, however, insist that Kübler-Ross’s five stages are not to be viewed as linear, “but rather as layers of an onion unfolding, or as a spiral, or as a roller-coaster.”<sup>31</sup> Her recommendations on how to counsel the bereaved are heavily influenced by these secular bereavement theories.<sup>32</sup>

While May acknowledges that grief impacts the soul and gives rise to an encounter with God, she provides no biblical theological categories (sin, suffering, judgment, sovereignty, salvation) to guide counselors in helping counselees “make sense

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<sup>28</sup>May and Wright are licensed Christian marriage and family counselors, and VanDuiwendyk is a Christian hospital chaplain and licensed marriage and family counselor.

<sup>29</sup>Sharon Hart May, “Loss and Grief Work,” in *Caring for People God’s Way: Personal and Emotional Issues, Addictions, Grief, and Trauma*, ed. Timothy E. Clinton, Archibald D. Hart, and George W. Ohlschlager (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2005), 384; H. Norman Wright, *Experiencing Grief* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 75; Tim P. VanDuiwendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief: A Ministry Approach* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2006), 55, 115–18.

<sup>30</sup>May, “Loss and Grief Work,” 361–64.

<sup>31</sup>May, “Loss and Grief Work,” 366.

<sup>32</sup>May, “Loss and Grief Work,” 371–84.

of why God allowed the death [of their loved one], and why He did not intervene.”<sup>33</sup> In her section on “interventions,” May identifies the importance of a relationship with God and reliance on his Word for bringing comfort, but other than mentioning this fact and referring briefly to Isaiah 53 and Psalm 23, she does not develop or integrate relationship with God and dependence on his Word into her approach.

Wright, who describes grief as a journey of letting go, adopts an eclectic approach to counseling the bereaved, drawing upon a wide range of models. He advocates a blending and weaving together of information gathered from the various models.<sup>34</sup> Wright links grief emotions to a person’s thoughts about life without the deceased person and thoughts about grief itself, but he makes no reference to theological categories.<sup>35</sup> Recovery is “a matter of choice,” according to Wright, which requires a firm resolve and effort on the part of the bereaved to “say goodbye” and then reinvest their emotional energy into new and fulfilling things.<sup>36</sup>

Wright mostly uses the categories of secular theories to describe the process of grief. However, he connects grief to God and biblical theological categories in his chapter on *Growing Through Loss*. Wright describes the need for a shift in the bereaved from a position of asking why the loss has happened to how they can learn from their experience.<sup>37</sup> “Having faith in Jesus Christ and developing a biblical perspective on life is the foundation for survival and recovery,” says Wright.<sup>38</sup> He *briefly* deals with a Christian perspective on death as transition into another world, some false assumptions

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<sup>33</sup>May, “Loss and Grief Work,” 374.

<sup>34</sup>H. Norman Wright, *Helping Those in Grief* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2011), 63–64.

<sup>35</sup>Wright, *Experiencing Grief*, 26.

<sup>36</sup>H. Norman Wright, *Recovering from the Losses of Life* (Nashville: Lifeway Press, 1995), 68, 75.

<sup>37</sup>Wright, *Recovering from the Losses of Life*, 37, 86–98.

<sup>38</sup>Wright, *Recovering from the Losses of Life*, 89.

Christian's have about suffering, and the importance of worshiping God despite suffering. These Christian categories of suffering, however, do not inform the overall framework of his care for the bereaved.<sup>39</sup>

VanDuivendyk invites counselors to “sojourn” with the bereaved by being willing “to support, listen, and compassionately walk another through their wilderness of grief.”<sup>40</sup> He views grief as an “unwanted gift” from God that can bring about profound emotional and spiritual growth when the bereaved are willing to work through the emotional pain of grief.<sup>41</sup> The goal of bereavement care for VanDuivendyk is healing. Healing involves both acceptance and adjustment (tasks that form the basis of most secular bereavement approaches), yet goes above and beyond these two tasks. Healing, according to VanDuivendyk, comes when the bereaved can see beyond the pain and “remember that [their] tears are [their] gratitude” or an expression of their love, “rather than just [their] grasping.”<sup>42</sup> While VanDuivendyk draws the connection between this transformative healing and God, he keeps his references to God generic.<sup>43</sup> The biblical-theological terms he uses—for example, sojourner and wilderness of grief—are likewise used metaphorically and generically. This could be explained, in part, by his role as a hospital chaplain where he is expected to respectfully engage people of all faiths.<sup>44</sup> His approach, therefore, is not Christocentric – at least not overtly.

William Hoy<sup>45</sup> considers Kübler-Ross's five-stage model “virtually useless for

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<sup>39</sup>Wright, *Recovering from the Losses of Life*, 86–98.

<sup>40</sup>VanDuivendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief*, 5.

<sup>41</sup>VanDuivendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief*, 6.

<sup>42</sup>VanDuivendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief*, 126.

<sup>43</sup>VanDuivendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief*, 126–27.

<sup>44</sup>VanDuivendyk, *The Unwanted Gift of Grief*, 5.

<sup>45</sup>Hoy works as a Clinical Professor at Baylor University and previously served as a pastor and hospital chaplain.

caregivers” because the stages do not account for the complexities of the grief process or the active role a person can take in responding to grief.<sup>46</sup> While Hoy acknowledges the valuable contribution of the mental health disciplines, he highlights the unique contribution of pastoral caregiving to the bereaved by way of the Scriptures and careful theological application.<sup>47</sup> According to Hoy, the healing of “troubled hearts” comes *from God* through the caring presence and listening ears of supportive caregiving volunteers and through accurate teaching in the context of nurturing communities.

Drawing from, but adapting, the model developed by Worden,<sup>48</sup> Hoy employs the image of a compass. The “four points” of the compass guide the grief process for the bereaved as they navigate their way through the uncharted territory of grief: remember, reaffirm, realize, and release.<sup>49</sup> For Hoy, memories and story-telling constitute the “remember” phase. This allows the bereaved to explore the spiritual questions evoked by their grief. Pastors or caregivers in their midst can then “reaffirm” them of God’s presence. Hoy does a marvelous job of bringing these two points to bear on a Christian approach to bereavement. Sadly, however, he gives the caregiver little guidance on the use of Scripture as well as further unpacking “reaffirm.” Hoy does acknowledge the importance of helping grieving people with the theological questions that arise. However, he believes these should be dealt with during the ongoing ministry of the church and not

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<sup>46</sup>William G. Hoy, *Guiding People through Grief: How to Start and Lead Bereavement Support Groups* (Dallas: Compass Press, 2007), 16–17.

<sup>47</sup>Hoy says, “As pastoral caregivers, if we try to assume the role of psychotherapists, we fail to offer the very important theological depth and reflection that we are best equipped to provide. Our most elemental responsibility remains to sensitively offer the solace God provides and to lead our people as they grapple with the great theological themes of where God is in the midst of suffering, crisis, death, and loss.” William G. Hoy, *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved* (Crawford, TX: Compass Press, 2008), 51.

<sup>48</sup>Hoy credits Worden as having had a significant influence on him as his mentor, friend, and counseling supervisor. Yet, Hoy’s approach seems to be more firmly rooted in his Christian worldview than the clinical psychological assumptions of Worden’s approach to bereavement care. Hoy, *Road to Emmaus*, 50.

<sup>49</sup>Hoy, *Road to Emmaus*, 59–63.

when a person is in the midst of a crisis.<sup>50</sup> Functionally for Hoy therefore, the goal of bereavement care remains essentially the same as Warden’s – “to emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life.”<sup>51</sup>

Church Initiative’s popular and wide reaching GriefShare bereavement program is designed to move people “from mourning to joy” with the recognition that true healing from the pain of loss “can only come from God’s presence” experienced “through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”<sup>52</sup> The participant walks through a thirteen-week curriculum. Healing is achieved upon completion of the following steps:

1. Explaining the grief process through video presentations by experts and fellow grievers.
2. Pointing people to God’s Word and relationship with Christ for comfort and encouragement through personal daily Bible study.
3. Encouraging prayer as directed by the workbook, within the sessions, and intercessory prayers by others.
4. Exhorting participants to actively work through their grief. This can take place either in a group setting (church community), or during daily personal reflection.

The program can only be offered by churches and materials cannot be purchased apart from participating in a GriefShare course at a local church.

GriefShare draws on the insights of people with both ministerial and personal experience in grief recovery. Additionally, they do not ascribe to any secular model. However, elements of the secular models can be seen in the six goals outlined in the participant workbook and discussed in the video: (1) accept the reality of your loved one’s death, (2) turn to God who is the one person who is able to help you through this process and bring you comfort, (3) express your grief-related emotions, (4) establish a

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<sup>50</sup>Hoy, *Road to Emmaus*, 34–36.

<sup>51</sup>Hoy, *Guiding People through Grief*, 16.

<sup>52</sup>Church Initiative, *GriefShare Leader’s Guide*, 3rd ed. (Wake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2015), 14.

new identity, (5) move forward, and (6) store memories.<sup>53</sup> The common trajectory of the secular approaches that start with acceptance and culminate in moving forward or reinvesting in life is apparent in these six goals. Goal two (turning to God for comfort), however, is distinctively Christian and is part of how goal five (moving on) is achieved.

Yet even with this distinctive included, *the process and experience of grief* take up a disproportionate amount of time compared to deriving comfort from God and his Word.<sup>54</sup> While the latter element is not completely absent in the videos, engaging God through his Word is mostly done in private (homework). A very short period of time is allocated in the group for discussion of the homework each week. When Scripture is used, usually only one or two verses related to different aspects of the bereavement process are applied to the experience of grief. GriefShare does not engage the larger framework of God's story and bigger portions of Scripture.

### **Critique of Both Secular and Christian Models**

Secular theories of bereavement seek to understand and explain the human experience of grief, ultimately, in order to help grieving people. Christian models of bereavement have a similar objective – to bring comfort and healing to those who are hurting. The source of comfort, however, differs. Given that the review of Christian models clearly demonstrates a dependence upon secular models for both the framework and the content, is it possible that Christian bereavement care has capitulated to secular presuppositions? To answer this question, two other questions need to be addressed: (1) What worldview assumptions underlie these theories? and (2) Why has pastoral theology relied so heavily on secular bereavement care models?

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<sup>53</sup>Church Initiative, *GriefShare: Your Journey from Mourning to Joy (Participant Workbook)*, 3rd ed. (Wake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2016), 22.

<sup>54</sup>Two notable exceptions are sessions 6 and 12, which deal with “Why God?” and “Heaven,” respectively. These topics are necessarily theological and so the material and videos engage Scripture more directly as they seek to deal with the issues.

## Worldview Assumptions

Christian approaches that adopt secular methods will suffer from the God-limiting presuppositions of secular approaches. Not only are bereavement models often inappropriately applied in pastoral care,<sup>55</sup> but the anthropocentric, naturalistic, and secular humanistic assumptions upon which they are based often contradict the theological assumptions of the Christian worldview.

Lucy Bregman's critique of Kübler-Ross's model shows how incompatible her approach is with the Christian worldview. Bregman identifies "ethical naturalism"<sup>56</sup> as the underlying paradigm of Kübler-Ross' model and of most others working in the field of bereavement from a modern psychological perspective.

Kübler-Ross' theory presupposes a fulfillment and self-actualization model of human existence, which combines with ethical naturalism in the metaphor of "growth." This model organizes the clinical data into *stages* and not merely a typology of responses, thus revealing strong value judgments and her own underlying view of "maturity."<sup>57</sup>

The five stages—defined by Kübler-Ross as emotional categories—are virtually devoid of cognitive or moral content according to Bregman.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, a moral concept like guilt is dismissed as an inappropriate or unnatural emotion.<sup>59</sup> Death itself is viewed as "natural" and is certainly not to be understood as an "injustice" or "punishment" or to

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<sup>55</sup>David McNeish says, "Models of grief are . . . perhaps most useful when considered as framework upon which grieving can be negotiated rather than as a mould into which grieving must fit." David G. McNeish, "Grief Is a Circular Staircase: The Uses and Limits of Models of Grief in the Pastoral Care of the Bereaved," *Practical Theology* 6, no. 2 (August 2013): 200.

<sup>56</sup>Ethical naturalism is the view that "moral terms, concepts, or properties are ultimately definable in terms of facts about the natural world." For instance, death would be explained in terms of the rhythms of nature rather than being a judgment from God upon sin. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Ethical Naturalism," accessed October 6, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethical-naturalism>; By the term "ethical naturalism," Bregman means a perspective that combines human fulfillment with harmony in nature so that "meaning is discerned in the rhythms of the organic world" and "to live and die in accordance with nature is peaceful." Lucy Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life: Perspectives on Death from Christianity and Depth Psychology*, Christian Explorations in Psychology (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 31, 37.

<sup>57</sup>Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 38.

<sup>58</sup>Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 44.

<sup>59</sup>Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 44; Kübler-Ross, *Death Is of Vital Importance*, 139; Kübler-Ross and Warshaw, *To Live Until We Say Good-Bye*, 12.

have any link to traditional Christian theological categories.<sup>60</sup> Naturalism, like secular humanism, permits no room for God and certainly not the God of the Christian Scriptures. Yet, for a considerable period of time, Christian therapists and chaplains endorsed Kübler-Ross' theory and made no attempt "to discover [the] underlying incompatibilities between historical Christian theological assertions and Kübler-Ross' ethical naturalism."<sup>61</sup> Bregman is not the only one to identify the inconsistencies and limitations of secular approaches to bereavement care.

In his excellent evaluation, David McNeish suggests that following any single model of grief "can inevitably reduce a complex and often bewildering phenomenon to a *constraining ideology* that may even result in the imposition of harm rather than relief" [emphasis added].<sup>62</sup> The underlying ideology of many bereavement models prizes individuation and personal autonomy rather than interdependence and relationship.<sup>63</sup> McNeish considers the Dual Process Model, despite its attempt to synthesize two opposing models, to also be limited in its explanation of grief. It fails to take account of outside factors such as social support, religious belief, and meaning-making. A trained and compassionate pastor, he suggests, is better equipped for such care.<sup>64</sup>

If Bregman and McNeish are correct, as I believe they are, then why has pastoral theology relied so heavily on these models?

### **Overdependence on Secular Models**

The church during the past six or seven decades, to a large extent, has bought into the specialization and professionalization of the field of psychology. Outsourcing

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<sup>60</sup>Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 42–45.

<sup>61</sup>Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 45.

<sup>62</sup>McNeish, "Grief Is a Circular Staircase," 190.

<sup>63</sup>McNeish, "Grief Is a Circular Staircase," 192.

<sup>64</sup>McNeish, "Grief Is a Circular Staircase," 200.

care and counsel of their congregants to psychologists and psychiatrists became standard practice. In addition, the hospitalization of critically ill and dying people alienated society and the church from both the process and advent of death.<sup>65</sup> Kübler-Ross' popularity came about primarily because, as a psychiatrist, she gave a credible voice to the fears, anxieties, and experiences of those dying in hostile clinical environments. The media disseminated her ideas into popular culture within months of the publication of her first book. Consequently, Kübler-Ross gained world-wide popularity almost immediately.<sup>66</sup>

Secular bereavement theories engage grief on the emotional level as an experience of loss and assume that the bereaved find comfort in understanding the nature and process of grief. Some measure of comfort is found here and these theories make sense. Both the comfort and the theories, however, fall short. Secular theories accurately describe part of the human experience of grief – but only a part of it. One of the theological issues Bregman raises in her book *Beyond Silence & Denial* is that from a Christian perspective death (and hence bereavement) *is not merely loss*.<sup>67</sup> By uncritically accepting secular models, the church failed to see that significant portions of the Christian view of death were absent from secular definitions. Furthermore, God and his character had been omitted by these approaches, affecting interpretation of the human experience and practical care of the bereaved.

In more recent years, the church has started to recognize the consequences of outsourcing care and is trying to take more responsibility in caring for its members. Yet, because it still lacks biblically and theologically sound alternatives<sup>68</sup> the church has

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<sup>65</sup>Fred B. Craddock, Dale Goldsmith, and Joy V. Goldsmith, *Speaking of Dying: Recovering the Church's Voice in the Face of Death* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 2–4.

<sup>66</sup>Derek Gill, *Quest: The Life of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980), 303–8. The title of Kübler-Ross' first published book is “On Death and Dying.”

<sup>67</sup>Lucy Bregman, *Beyond Silence and Denial: Death and Dying Reconsidered* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 99.

<sup>68</sup>Bregman comments, “Although a reaction has now set in against uncritical use of secular psychotherapies among Christian counselors, in this area there are not the kind of clear alternatives to

continued to opt for methodologies that focus on the nature and process of bereavement. While it has brought God and his character into the bereavement conversation, the church has done so as an add-on and not as the foundation for care. The church fails the grieving Christian when it fails to make *the comfort of God* the goal of care and the *Word of God* the primary method of care.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Human theories and models of bereavement will always be limited in their explanatory power. “To be a creature is to be limited in thought and knowledge,” says John Frame.<sup>69</sup> A difference exists between “Creator and creature in the world of thought . . . divine thinking and human thinking . . . the thoughts of the ultimate Lord and the thoughts of His servants.”<sup>70</sup> Theories that fail to include the all-knowing Creator of the universe and his revelation in the definition, goal, and method of bereavement care, therefore, will be more limited than those that do include God.

Including God, however, needs to be done in a way that his Word shapes the framework of any bereavement care approach so that the comfort that is brought is the comfort of God. The Christian belief in the sufficiency of Scripture and in the power of the Word and the Spirit of God to bring comfort and healing, means Christian bereavement care must be first and foremost theocentric and Christocentric. Only secondarily should it focus on the more limited understandings of the personal human experience of grief (whether secular or Christian). Nevertheless, bereavement care should

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Kübler-Ross that one might imagine. Moreover, until certain fundamental theological and ethical issues are addressed, nature, growth, and acceptance will probably be our vocabulary for dying, our imagery, and our myth of death.” Bregman, *Death in the Midst of Life*, 45.

<sup>69</sup>John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, A Theology of Lordship Series (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987), 21.

<sup>70</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 25.

address human experience since it includes the struggles a person faces in trying to make sense of death, loss, and grief.

CHAPTER 3  
THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF  
AND ITS ORIGINS

Most contemporary models of bereavement care focus exclusively on the *human experience* in understanding the nature and process of grief, making little or no reference to God. Consequently, the interpretations offered for that experience and the models which are developed fail to deliver what the bereaved need most – comfort from God. The models that do refer to the God of the Bible are often so heavily influenced by anthropocentric thinking that the means for offering comfort in grief is knowledge of the experience and process of bereavement rather than the Word of God and the Spirit of God working through the people of God. When God is referred to, secular influence renders the outcome indistinguishable. I am not suggesting that the human experience is unimportant. On the contrary, as embodied creatures, we are more readily affected by our visible experience than by the spiritual realities of God. Experience serves as a primary reference point for us as human beings and affects our view of God. However, understanding the human experience is a necessary *starting point* but not a suitable *ending point* for bereavement care.

The goal of bereavement care, I am arguing, is to encourage the bereaved to receive comfort from God and draw confidence from their union in Christ by focusing on communion with God. This is evidenced in the fact that an encounter with death and the experience of grief which follows, naturally leads people who have been made in the image of God to engage him. The first task of this chapter, therefore, will be to understand the human experience of grief from an anthropocentric perspective. This task will be undertaken by way of autobiographical narratives, both extra-biblical and biblical.

Next, the early chapters of Genesis will be mined for insights into the origins of grief from a theocentric perspective. Finally, the insights gained from Scripture will be used to interpret the human experience of grief, to understand the fight for faith amid the common struggles, and to elucidate ways in which Satan seeks to undermine the love of God and communion with him.

### **Understanding the Human Experience of Grief**

Moving autobiographical accounts of the human experience of grief—many of which are classical works—are not in short supply. Justice cannot be done to these authors or to describing the human experience of grief by extracting small portions of what the authors write. Therefore, the purpose of this section is not to provide an exhaustive account of grief in all its complexity. Nor is the purpose to catalog the full range of emotions and thoughts that a grieving person might experience. Rather, attention will be given to broader categories and common struggles of grief, particularly as they pertain to this thesis.

### **Grief Is Personal and Relational**

Grief is intimately specific and intensely personal. Seeing the dead bodies of children suffocated by the release of a deadly gas in Syria on a CNN news report may trigger a response of horror and righteous indignation towards the perpetrators. With slightly watery eyes, the thought that a good God would surely never allow such evil and suffering to occur might flash through one's mind. No sooner than the news report is over, so too are any thoughts or feelings the viewer had for the nameless victims. When an immediate family member dies, however, the distance and the defenses are breached. Both the emotional response and the question of God's goodness become intimately specific and intensely personal. The bereft mother of one of those Syrian children might ask, "Why Lord? Why my precious child? How could a good God allow my daughter, who I loved so dearly, to die at this young age, and in such a gruesome way?" These are

questions no human being can answer, but are part of the experience of grief that necessitates some sort of engagement with God—crying out to the only one who might be able to provide an answer.

Grief has elements which are common to all people and yet is also uniquely experienced by each person. One bereaved person can identify with another to the extent that they too are able to experience the complete gamut of emotions following the death of a beloved person. Although all people are made in the image of God, every person is unique. The relationship between any two people, therefore, is likewise unique. A child responding to the death of his or her father is fundamentally different to the child's mother responding to the death of her husband. They have differing relational roles. Even the grief of two widows are distinct from one another because both they and the husbands they are mourning are (or were) unique personalities. Therefore, while one can, on the one hand say, "I know *something* of your experience of grief," humble acknowledgment on the other hand that "I do not know *exactly* what you are going through" is also necessary.

Grief is relational. From the cradle to the grave, people engage in relationship with parents, siblings, extended family, school friends, work colleagues, and enemies. No one can escape relationship, even by rejecting or turning away from another person or from God. A relational triune God created people in his image as relational beings (Gen 1:26, 2:18). When a person dies, the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased is fundamentally altered, even severed. Most people tend to withdraw from relationships and become more self-absorbed during times of intense grief. The experience of deep sorrow, therefore, can result in feelings of isolation and relational distance—not only from the deceased but also from self, others, and God. A person's identity is connected to and typically shaped through relationships. The relational nature of grief means, by definition, a person's identity is impacted by the loss. A wife becomes a widow, an expectant mother who loses a child in-utero is no longer a "mother," and a young child

who loses both parents becomes an orphan. Since God made human beings, their creaturely identity is linked to the creator God. Therefore, grief also impacts a person's concept of who God is and their relationship with him, for better or for worse. In death, a real living relationship ceases to be and the bereaved are left only with memories of past interactions. The more intimate the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased, the more deeply the grief is felt.

### **Grief Is Passionate and Pervasive**

Grief is both passionate and pervasive. That is to say, grief is intensely emotional and affects every aspect of who we are as complex multi-dimensional creatures. Jerry Sittser describes his emotional response to the loss of his wife, mother, and daughter in a car accident as being “like a dam that broke . . . a torrent of pain I did not expect . . . an unspeakable agony” and a “torrent of emotion [that] swept away the life I had cherished for so many years.”<sup>1</sup> Definitions and descriptions of grief tend to emphasize the emotional component of grief and this is understandable given the depth of sorrow which is felt and expressed. Grief is defined by Scott Sullender as a “human emotional response to loss.”<sup>2</sup> While the outward expression of grief is most often emotional in nature—especially in the early weeks and months of bereavement—human beings are complex multi-dimensional creatures.

Grief is also pervasive, affecting heart, mind, body, and soul. The sorrow Sittser experiences is integrally connected with the mental confusion and uncertainty that accompanies, even feeds, his emotional response. This confusion manifests as a series of questions in his mind about (1) his emotions and beliefs, (2) the specifics of the three

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<sup>1</sup>Jerry L. Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 24–29.

<sup>2</sup>R. Scott Sullender, *Grief and Growth: Pastoral Resources for Emotional and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 25.

deaths, (3) the length and nature of his suffering, (4) his own identity, and (5) God's part in the tragedy.<sup>3</sup> The exercising of one's will is also affected by grief. Functioning normally becomes difficult and grief takes its toll on the body as well the mind and emotions. C. S. Lewis eloquently expresses this sentiment in his journal about the death of his wife. "No one ever told me about the laziness of grief," says Lewis. "I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much effort. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth?"<sup>4</sup> The things Lewis was committed to when his wife was alive seem meaningless after she is gone. People have "dynamic hearts" that function affectively, cognitively, and volitionally in an integrated manner.<sup>5</sup> Tears of sadness are linked to the longings of the heart to be reconnected with the deceased and the cognitive awareness that such connection, at least in this life, is no longer possible. Such thoughts and feelings can lead to despair and doubt, resulting in a response of apathy, and in some cases, are accompanied by a weakened will to go on living. Grief, therefore, impacts the whole person.

Definitions of grief that take a holistic and integrated anthropological view more accurately reflect the far-reaching effects of grief. Shep Jeffreys helpfully defines grief as "a system of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that are triggered when a person is faced with loss or the threat of loss. Emphasis is on both internal (thoughts and feelings) and external (behavior) reactions."<sup>6</sup> Jeffreys has not succumbed to the tendency to view

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<sup>3</sup>Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 72, 76, 122, 147, 154, 164. The following is a list of some specific questions raised by Sittser in his process of mourning: "Will this emptiness continue forever? Will I feel this way for the rest of my life? Am I doomed to sail forever on a vast sea of nothingness?" (72); "What do I believe? Is there life after death? Is there a God? What kind of person am I? Do I really care about other people? How have I used my resources—my time, money, and talent? Where am I headed with life?" (76); "Why me? . . . Why did the loss happen to us?" (122); "If God really was God, where was he when the tragedy occurred? Why did he do nothing? How could God allow such a terrible thing to happen?" (147); "What if the God—the God I have trusted for so long—does not exist?" (154); "Does death really have the final word?" (164)."

<sup>4</sup>C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 8–9.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life: Connecting Christ to Human Experience*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 16–17.

<sup>6</sup>J. Shep Jeffreys, *Helping Grieving People: When Tears Are Not Enough: A Handbook for*

the head and heart as disconnected, as has been the case at different times in history and in different cultures. This dichotomy finds its roots in Cartesian and Darwinian thinking.<sup>7</sup> Modern debate regarding the nature of emotions also betrays the chasm. Non-cognitive theories of emotion hold that emotion is a physiological response to changes in the body and has little or nothing to do with cognition. Matthew Elliott argues convincingly, in his book *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament*, that a cognitive theory of emotion better fits research evidence.<sup>8</sup> In a cognitive theory of emotion, emotion and cognition are understood to be inseparably linked to one another since emotion is “an indicator of what we believe and value.”<sup>9</sup> Physiology certainly plays a role in emotion but is not seen to be the sole cause of emotion. A right understanding of the human experience of grief, therefore, necessitates an understanding that the emotions expressed in bereavement form part of a dynamic interplay between thoughts, emotions, physical feelings, and actions.

### **Grief as Suffering**

Grief inextricably relates to suffering. How it does so remains complex and multi-dimensional. Two significant aspects deserve attention. One complication exists as an ethical dilemma. The voice of sorrow says, “All is not well with the world. Death is not natural or right.” An ethical judgment about death is what characterizes grief as a form of suffering. On witnessing the incineration of countless Jews in a concentration camp, Elie Wiesel laments, “Never shall I forget the faces of the children, whose bodies I

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*Care Providers* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 29.

<sup>7</sup>Matthew Elliott, *Faithful Feelings: Rethinking Emotion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 22.

<sup>8</sup>Elliott, *Faithful Feelings*, 27–31.

<sup>9</sup>Elliott, *Faithful Feelings*, 53.

saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.”<sup>10</sup> Simeon tells Mary shortly after the birth of Jesus that a sword would pierce her soul (Luke 2:34-35), and indeed it does as she stands weeping the foot of the cross on which Jesus is crucified (John 19:25). Nicholas Wolterstorff says, “It’s so wrong, so profoundly wrong, for a child to die before its parents. . . . How can I bury my son, my future, one of the next in line? He was meant to bury me!”<sup>11</sup> While the intensity of grief seems to increase with the perception of a premature death, it cannot be all that is at play in Wolterstorff’s grief; Sittser laments the death of his elderly mother just as intensely as he does the deaths of his daughter and wife. Sittser asks the following questions: “Why at such a young age [his daughter’s death]? . . . Why in the prime of life [his wife’s death]? Why just before retirement [his mother’s death]?”<sup>12</sup> Whether the circumstances of death involve the witnessing of blatant acts of evil or not, or whether a young or an elderly person dies, the “anguished cries for help” and “the gut-wrenching pain of the affliction of the soul”<sup>13</sup> can only be described as suffering.

The second significant stumbling block involves the multi-dimensional response to death which culminates in an almost mechanical reaction of theodicy. Phillip Zylla identifies four broad components of suffering: physical pain, psychological anguish, social degradation, and spiritual despondency.<sup>14</sup> Witnessing the physical deterioration of a person dying of cancer, imagining the painful last moments of a man killed in a car accident, feeling the loneliness of the physical absence of the deceased, fearing an unknown future, feeling the pressure of other people’s expectations regarding

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<sup>10</sup>Elie Wiesel, *The Night Trilogy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), 43.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 16.

<sup>12</sup>Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 122.

<sup>13</sup>Phillip Charles Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>14</sup>Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 54–55.

appropriate grieving, and seeking to understand God’s involvement in suffering, all exemplify this complex nature of suffering. The least recognized yet most profound dimension of suffering—what Zylla refers to as “spiritual despondency”<sup>15</sup>—has a direct bearing on the central thesis of this paper. Since only God can bring true comfort to the bereaved, effective care encourages the bereaved to receive comfort from God by focusing on communion with God. Suffering, however, shifts the focus of attention to the problem of evil, leading to doubts about the goodness and sovereignty of God, even for the Christian. “The spiritual questions and turmoil that often go along with the other elements of suffering mentioned,” says Zylla, “create anguish and uncertainty that is difficult to bear.”<sup>16</sup> When the bereaved do not have the cognitive, emotional, theological categories, and the relational support needed to deal with such doubts, they can spiral downward into despair. The more the person spirals into despair, the more the person is likely to distance him or herself from God and other people, and therefore less likely to experience the comfort of God in the midst of grief.<sup>17</sup>

### **Grief and Narrative**

Oversimplification and reductionism plague those seeking to explain grief. For this reason, Christian philosopher Eleonore Stump argues for employing narrative—especially biblical narrative—as the most suitable method for redeeming suffering and dealing with the problem of evil.<sup>18</sup> Narrative provides a type of knowing that propositional truth does not.<sup>19</sup> The devastating effects of bereavement and the importance

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<sup>15</sup>Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 63–67.

<sup>16</sup>Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 54.

<sup>17</sup>I am indebted to Robert K. Cheong for the understanding of how people spiral down from doubt, to despair, and then to distance from God.

<sup>18</sup>Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xviii.

<sup>19</sup>Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 53.

of narrative context are best illustrated in the biblical narratives of Jacob mourning the death of his son Joseph and Job wrestling with innocent suffering following the death of his ten children, servants, and livestock.

In Genesis 37:29-36 Jacob tears his clothes and weeps over the presumed death of his son Joseph. The depth of Jacob's sorrow can, however, only be fully appreciated when one understands the intimacy of Jacob's love for his favorite son. The long-term impact of Jacob's bereavement on his heart, mind, and actions becomes more apparent when the story reaches a climax. Joseph, who unbeknownst to his father and brothers is alive and well in Egypt, holds Simeon hostage to coerce his brothers to return with Benjamin. The pain of Jacob's loss so many years after Joseph's apparent death remains deep:

And Jacob their father said to them, "You have bereaved me: Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. All these things are against me." Then Reuben spoke to his father, saying, "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you." But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave. (Gen 42:36-38)

The story of Jacob's grief is not, however, only about Jacob. *Jacob's grief is set within the larger narrative of God seeking to redeem Israel.* After his father's death Joseph says to his brothers, "Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Gen 50:19-21). These verses provide an interpretive framework for the evil, grief, and suffering Jacob experiences.

The story of Job provides one of the most comprehensive accounts in Scripture of the human experience of loss and grief. Job laments the death of most of his household. The forty-two-chapter narrative of Job provides insight into the relational struggles he encounters with his wife, comforters, and God, as well as the internal struggles of grief as a form of suffering—in his case, innocent suffering. The narrative of Job's suffering is also framed by a larger narrative. Satan receives permission from God

to test Job's fundamental allegiance, a conversation of which Job is completely unaware.

Although the larger narrative of God's redemptive purposes does not change the fact of the suffering of Jacob and Job, nor provides them with specific answers at the time of their suffering, seeing the broader narrative framework within a theocentric perspective nevertheless has important implications for understanding grief rightly. These implications are explored in more detail in the next two chapters, but require the necessary condition of locating grief's biblical origins.

### **Understanding the Origins of Grief Biblically**

Death and sorrow were not part of God's original intention for the creation.<sup>20</sup> Sorrow first enters the human experience following the guilt and shame of Adam and Eve when they fall into sin. Rather than being filled with sorrow for their sins through repentance, Eve blames the Serpent and Adam blames both Eve and God who gave him the woman (Gen 3:12-13). Consequently, God banishes them from the Garden of Eden, life becomes hard, and death subsequently enters the human experience. Suffering is a result of the judgment of God: pain in childbirth, strife between the man and woman, and the earth yielding thorns and thistles (Gen 3:14-19). Although Adam and Eve do not express sorrow, where expected, when first confronted by God, it can be inferred from later Scriptures (Gen 23:2, 42:38) that sorrow enters the human experience with Adam's sin.

The biblical narrative of Adam and Eve's fall into sin reveals an important sequence of heart and mind struggles that precedes the experience of sorrow. As the serpent casts doubt in the mind of Eve, she *fantasizes* what it would be like to have the wisdom that God is apparently holding back on giving her and Adam (Gen 3:5-6). Upon eating of the forbidden fruit, doubt and temptation become full-blown sin, and Adam and

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<sup>20</sup>Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 96.

Eve experience *shame*, *guilt* and *fear*. They subsequently cover their nakedness and hide from the presence of God (Gen 3:7-8). God graciously confronts them with three questions that provide the couple with an opportunity to repent (Gen 3:9, 11). Instead, they choose to continue to hide by blaming someone other than themselves—an expression of *anger* (Gen 3:12-13). Consequently, *sorrow*, suffering, and death enter human experience (Gen 3:14-19). The sorrow that flows out of this narrative of the fall of man is complex and multifaceted because sorrow is usually mixed in with some of these other “common struggles.”<sup>21</sup>

Four strands of sorrow can be inferred from the Genesis narrative. The first is sorrow for the loss of the gifts God had given Adam and Eve. The beautiful Garden of Eden with abundant life, provision, and blessing was exchanged for a wasteland outside. The second type of sorrow is the loss of fellowship with the giver of the gifts. God had walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen 3:8-9), but after they sinned Adam and Eve were judged by God and banished from his presence (Gen 3:23-24). The third is the sorrow Adam and Eve experienced as they felt the weight of their shame and guilt for sinning against God. They became aware of their nakedness, covered themselves with fig leaves, and hid from the presence of God – they effectively lost their right standing before God (Gen 3:6-8). These three strands of the sorrow help us understand the origins of the human experience of grief biblically. And yet, such an understanding would be incomplete without any reference being made to God’s response to human sin and their experience of sorrow.

The fourth strand of sorrow—which is both surprising and supremely magnificent—is the sorrow of God.<sup>22</sup> Although no explicit mention is made of the sorrow

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<sup>21</sup>I am indebted to Robert K. Cheong for his pastoral teachings regarding the common struggles (fantasy, shame and guilt, fear, anger, and sorrow) and how they relate to doubt, despair, distance, faith, hope, and love.

<sup>22</sup>An important distinction must be made between the language of sorrow attributed to God as divine creator in the biblical text and creaturely human sorrow. Rob Lister correctly argues that God’s grief or compassion should be understood as “covenantal expressions of God’s eternally loving nature” and his

of God in Genesis 3, three chapters later we see God express sorrow when the wickedness of man has increased to the extent that he is grieved in his heart and sorry he ever made man (Gen 6:5-7). Yet, God does not give up on man and destroy him but rather, moved by both sorrow and love, he graciously chooses to save a righteous man, Noah, and his family (Gen 6:8-9). Time and again, God's loving kindness causes him to act in merciful ways in response to the sin of man. The sorrow God feels in relation to sin is an expression of his amazing redemptive love for his creation. The supremely magnificent aspect of God's love is expressed in his choice to enter into the human experience of sorrow. God the Son leaves his heavenly throne to enter a fallen world, not as royalty but as the suffering servant (Phil 2:5-8). Jesus became a man of sorrows who acquainted himself with grief (Isa 53:3). Jesus knows and experiences sorrow.

### **How the Fall Narrative Interprets the Experience of Grief**

Death and how it affects us constantly reminds us that we live in a fallen world. Like Adam and Eve, people want to hide from the reality of sin. They shrink back from their own sin and fear its effects on all their relationships, including God. Consequently, not only are people surprised by death when it strikes, but they react by questioning or blaming God. The question, "Why Lord?" is seldom merely a question. More often than not, this question is a statement that God should not have allowed the death to happen or should have done something to prevent it. Modern psychologists and thanatologists<sup>23</sup> would refer to this tendency to hide from death as the *denial of death*. Denial seeks to suppress shame and guilt, and avoid the feared consequences of sin—

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divine affection. Lister comments, "God's experience of emotion is an incorporeal experience, which is to say that it precludes the kinds of bodily accompaniments that are part and parcel of our emotional experience." Therefore, his sorrow is that of the divine holy creator and not a creature. Rob Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 257, 252.

<sup>23</sup>A thanatologist is a person involved in the scientific study of death and dying, usually with a focus on the psychological and sociological aspects.

judgment, suffering, and death. While fear of God is in a sense warranted, fear that suppresses personal guilt misrepresents the character of God. This servile fear is based on the false belief that God is capricious, unjust, and unloving. The consequence of such a response is aptly described by Zylla: “One experiences the root of sorrow as the absence of comfort, the absence of courage, and ultimately, the absence of God.”<sup>24</sup> Grief is usually accompanied by a propensity to draw away from God and to experience God as distant.

The four strands of sorrow referred to in the previous section provide a useful framework for understanding sorrow in bereavement. They also offer a corrective to the false view of God as necessarily distant and unloving in the face of adversity. First, the death of a loved one brings with it sorrow over the loss of certain provisions. When a husband dies, for example, the sole source of household income might come to an end necessitating, in certain circumstances, the sale of the family home and a return to paid employment for the wife. Fears regarding financial security, the loss of a home in which precious memories were built, the loss of the freedom to be a full-time mother, the loss of a strong man to lift a heavy box or cut the grass, and the burden of raising a family alone, all add to the struggles a grieving widow faces. These losses are all real, deeply felt, and need to be mourned. Yet, when a widow’s gaze remains fixed on the loss of provision, she is blinded to both God’s ongoing provision and his presence. Her husband was the means of God’s provision for a time, but God has always been and will always be her provider.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the bereaved suffer the physical loss of the person. God created man body and soul with sensory ability. Death unalterably severs all tangible interaction with a person. People communicate their love for another as embodied relational beings. The desire to hear his voice one more time, to be embraced

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<sup>24</sup>Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 66.

by her again, to hear him chuckle at a joke, to whisper “I love you” into her ear, is a desire that cannot be met because he or she is no longer physically present. Sorrow over the loss of the presence of another is often too deep for words and seemingly inconsolable. Tears or sobs of grief are an appropriate form of expression for the loss of a life created in the image of God. In as much as the deceased reflected the image of the invisible God, the bereaved grieves not only the loss of the person who has died, but also the loss of a tangible aspect of God’s character and God’s blessing (although this aspect of loss is seldom part of one’s conscious awareness). The danger for the bereaved is to be so focused on his or her loss that he or she becomes blind to the presence and needs of family members who are still living, and to the presence of the living God.

Third, grief has a way of stripping away the fig leaves with which people cover their guilt and shame before God. They are left feeling exposed, vulnerable, and aware of their own mortality. Both remorse and fear, therefore, often accompany grief. A woman might have spoken harsh words in anger to her husband frequently during their marriage but the words spoken in the week preceding his death lead to remorse. The opportunity to make amends no longer exists. Consequently, she may be weighed down by regret because she let the sun go down on her anger and failed to ask for and grant forgiveness (Eph 4:26-27; Matt 18:21-23). This heightened awareness of sin against man and God, amplifies a person’s fear of the judgment of God. Therefore, it is not uncommon to lapse into a tangible fear of judgment that manifests as fear of death. If fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7, 9:10; Ps 111:10), then the remorse and fear that arises when a person is grieving should not be too quickly dismissed or suppressed. It may set a person on the path to repentance and restoring their right standing before God and/or deepening their communion with God. The death of any person reminds one of the need to be sorrowful over sin in the world and over how it affects God.

Fourth, the sorrow God feels in relation to sin, which is rooted in his loving nature, means he does not remain distant or apathetic. James Beck and Bruce Demarest

helpfully identify three forms of death in the biblical text that speak to the redemptive nature of God's dealings with sinful man. "The moment Adam sinned, he experienced *spiritual* death and came under the sentence of *physical* and *eternal* death," say Beck and Demarest [emphasis added].<sup>25</sup> God could have destroyed mankind by bringing about spiritual, physical, and eternal death all at once, yet he does not. God mercifully intervenes through his Son so that the judgement associated with physical death is transferred to Jesus. Physical death becomes the gateway to eternal life for those who believe but the portal to eternal death for those who continue in unrepentant sin. The sorrow the bereaved feel when a relationship is severed by physical death, however deeply felt, pales in comparison to the sorrow that will be associated with being excluded from the kingdom of God (Luke 13:28). Understood in this way, God's invitation to the bereaved is to so love him and the eternal life he freely offers that they will shed more tears over the living dead (spiritually dead) than the dead who are alive in Christ. Viewed in this way, the bereaved can connect with the heart of a God who rejoices when a sinner repents (Luke 15:7) and who weeps over the unrepentant sin (Luke 19:41). A grieving person, however, in the midst of sorrow may become so inwardly focused they forget the bigger picture of God's redemptive narrative. Even if the person sees the bigger picture, he or she might struggle to apply God's story to his or her specific circumstances of grief. This bigger picture includes the reality of spiritual warfare.

Spiritual warfare is a biblical reality that should never be dismissed or ignored (Gen 3:1-4, Eph 6:10-13). While believers need to be aware of the spiritual battle that is constantly raging for their allegiance, vigilance during a period of bereavement is even more important. Sustained periods of intense suffering make a grieving person particularly vulnerable to attack. Satan actively seeks to undermine a person's love for

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<sup>25</sup>James R. Beck and Bruce A. Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 55–56.

God and his or her confidence in God (1 Pet 5:8-9). The story of Job is a case in point. “Curse God and die!” is what Job’s wife tells him to do in response to the loss of their children, servants, livestock, and finally his health (Job 2:9). Satan intends to elicit this exact response from Job and, in so doing, turn a righteous man against God (Job 2:4-5). Grief intensifies the battle for faith as Satan seeks to draw the bereaved away from communion with God.

### **Concluding Remarks**

At the heart of grief lays an encounter with sin, suffering, and death. Sorrow is an appropriate response to a relationship severed by death. In the midst of sorrow, people seek to make sense of the pain and confusion. Consequently, grief raises in the bereaved a host of questions. The bereaved, whether Christian or not, naturally cry out to God for answers because, as image-bearers of the Creator, at some basic level they know only he is able to bring order out of chaos, relief to their pain, and hopefully answers to their questions. Nevertheless, this cry for help and comfort is subject to the spiritual battle that rages for every human heart as Satan seeks to undermine faith, hope, and love by watering the seeds of doubt he has sown. Experiencing periods of doubt, despair, and distance during bereavement, even as a Christian, is part of the normal human experience. The question, however, is what will set a person on an overall trajectory of faith amid trying times so that they can know and experience the comfort of God as they grieve? Satan’s point of attack with Eve was first the Word of God and then the character of God. Surely then, the Word and character of God are key to maintaining or restoring communion with God.

CHAPTER 4  
THE NEED FOR A THEOCENTRIC AND  
CHRISTOCENTRIC APPROACH  
TO BEREAVEMENT CARE

Words connect us to God, and God to us, in a unique and relational way. Words are powerful. God's words are particularly powerful (Heb 4:12). In Genesis 1 we see God created everything out of nothing *simply by speaking words*. Words are what set human beings apart from all other earthly creatures. God speaks words within the Godhead (Gen 1:26) and he speaks words directly to man (Gen 1:28-30, Ex 3:4-5). God also speaks to people through both the written Word (Matt 22:29-32) and the Word made flesh (John 1:1-5, 1 John 1:1-3).

People use words to describe and understand the world in which they live, including their understanding of bereavement. John Frame says, however, that “the facts of creation are not raw data or brute facts that are subject to mutually contrary interpretations. They are preinterpreted by God.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, when the bereaved insist that their suffering conflicts with God's character, it merely reflects their interpretation of the facts and not the facts themselves. As Frame says, human interpretation “is always also a reinterpretation of God's interpretation.”<sup>2</sup> Human knowledge, therefore, is dependent upon God's revelation for a right understanding of him, the world in which people live, and people themselves. Scripture, as the inspired and inerrant Word of God (2 Tim 3:15-17), needs to inform both the interpretation of the

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<sup>1</sup>John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, A Theology of Lordship Series (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987), 28.

<sup>2</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 28.

human experience of grief and the development of a Christian bereavement care approach.

Effective bereavement care, I propose, encourages the bereaved to receive comfort from God and to draw confidence from their union in Christ. Since comfort and confidence flow from communion with God, communion should be a central aspect of a Christian approach. Such a proposition finds biblical and theological warrant in the narratives of Scripture. The Word of God contains both the *source* and the *method* for bereavement care. Vital to the task of developing a Christian bereavement care framework is a theocentric understanding of God's emotions and character. An appreciation for how Jesus both enters into and responds to the human experience of grief, therefore, is foundational to a right understanding of the character of God in the midst of bereavement. The narratives of Jesus responding to bereavement together with the overall biblical narrative, consequently, informs a theocentric and Christocentric approach to bereavement care.

### **The Need for a Theocentric Understanding of God's Emotions and Character**

The degree to which a person's understanding of God's character and emotions lines up with a biblical perspective of who God is will influence the degree to which he or she can experience communion with God. Scripture describes God as "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles" (2 Cor 1:3-4 NIV) and the Son of God as "a man of sorrows . . . acquainted with grief" (Isa 53:3). Since God has chosen to reveal himself in both the written words of Scripture and in the living Word of his Son, the Scriptures are the source for a theocentric understanding. For a grieving person to receive God's comfort and understand how Jesus' sacrificial death impacts the death they are dealing with, they need a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric understanding of God's emotions and character. Such an understanding is important for at least three reasons: The bereaved (1) are less likely to misrepresent

God, (2) are able trust in the goodness of God despite their feelings and perception of how things appear, and (3) are able to see how God personally enters into the human experience of grief to deal with the problem of death.

First, in their finitude and self-centeredness, especially during periods of struggle, people often misrepresent God. People are made in the image of God and not the other way around, yet at times they relate and respond to him as if he is made in their image. Fantasizing about what they would have done if they were in control, people accuse God of being uncaring when someone they love dies. If he really did love them he would have done something to prevent the death. But God is not in the least bit like his creatures and this is, in fact, good news for the bereaved.

According to the doctrine of divine simplicity, “God is radically unlike creatures in that he is devoid of any complexity or composition, whether physical or metaphysical. . . . There is also no real distinction between God as subject of his attributes and his attributes.”<sup>3</sup> This means God not only possesses the quality of love, but that “God *is* love.” By implication, therefore, God cannot not love because love is who he is and to do so would be to deny himself (1 John 4:8, 2 Tim 2:13).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, any actions or expressions of “emotion” from God, or lack of action, cannot contradict his loving nature. Consequently, even his expression of wrath against sinful creatures (his righteous anger) does not contradict his loving nature and is not to be understood in the same way as human expressions of anger are generally understood. Rather, says Rob Lister, “the manifestation of God’s eternally holy love in the expression of wrath against sinful creatures is ultimately a testimony to the strength and utter stability of divine emotion”<sup>5</sup> and “God is both invulnerable to involuntarily precipitated emotional

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<sup>3</sup>William F. Vallicella, “Divine Simplicity,” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2015), accessed May 3, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/divine-simplicity>.

<sup>4</sup>Robert K. Cheong, “Restore: Knowing and Experiencing God through Story” (Paper presented at the Sojourn Community Church Midtown, Louisville, KY, Summer 2017), 20.

<sup>5</sup>Rob Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion*

vicissitude and supremely passionate about his creatures' practice of obedience and rebellion, as well as their experience of joy and affliction."<sup>6</sup> In other words, human rebellion against God does not change his loving nature in any way or force him into a response which would cause him to react in unpredictable or unexpected ways. The bereaved, whose emotions are tumultuous in the early stages of loss, can have complete confidence in the stability and faithfulness of a loving and relational God.<sup>7</sup>

Second, understanding God's emotions and character rightly means a person can trust in the goodness of God and his purposes despite their human perspective on death. People seldom know the reasons why God allows specific instances of suffering. Like Job, a father grieving the tragic death of his 10-year-old son caught in the crossfire of gang violence is not privy to the conversations between God and Satan or the reasons why God would permit "innocent" suffering. In fact, Eleanor Stump says God has a reason for not giving his reasons. "God [does] not explain in detail and in advance to every sufferer why God allows that particular suffering for that particular person" because "in different ways, for different reasons, God's explaining in advance to particular sufferers his reasons for allowing their particular suffering abrogates those very reasons."<sup>8</sup> In Job's case, had he known about the conversation between Satan and God, his righteousness and unwavering faith in God could not have been tested. Job's knowledge of the character and sovereignty of God restrains him from charging God with

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(Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 179.

<sup>6</sup>Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned*, 175. This is what Lister refers to as the impassibility and impassionedness of God.

<sup>7</sup>Quoting Michael Horton, Lister says, "God is bound by his nature, but only by his nature. But just so, God is bound to us (better, has bound himself to us) by a free decision to enter into covenant with us and with the whole creation. God is not free to act contrary to such covenantal guarantees because doing so would entail the violation not only of his decision but of his nature, particularly his faithfulness . . . so the only reason we may have relationship with God is that he has freely chosen to bind himself in faithfulness for our good." Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned*, 181.

<sup>8</sup>Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 410.

wrong in the face of great suffering and keeps him from turning away from God (Job 1:22, 2:10). Like Job, only as the bereaved keep engaging God in their bereavement, bringing all their doubts and questions to him, can they know and experience him in ways they could not during times of abundance and joy (Job 42:5). A correct understanding of the character of God enables the bereaved to be less shaken by tragedy. It also enables them to draw near to God when they are grieving because they trust him even when things make no sense.

Third, grieving people need the person of Jesus at a time when it seems as if God has failed to prevent the death of their loved one. Paul Randolph argues that people who are grieving do not need an understanding of the *process* of grieving, nor an *elaborate theological explanation* of how Jesus took upon himself the grief of others. Rather, he says, “They need the person that Jesus is.”<sup>9</sup> They need Jesus because he is God in the flesh (Matt 1:23, Phil 2:7-8). Access to God the Father and, therefore, to the indwelling presence and comfort of God is through Jesus alone (John 14:7-11, 1 John 4:14-15). Furthermore, Jesus is the manifest expression of God’s love (John 3:16-17). Jesus alone removes the sting of death (1 Cor 15:54-57) for both the bereaved and their deceased loved one when they place their faith in him. The cross and subsequent resurrection of Jesus accomplish God’s redemptive purposes and is a sign of God’s victory over sin, suffering, and death. A Christocentric approach to bereavement care, therefore, is essential.

### **A Christocentric Response and Approach to Grief**

In the gospels, we not only see how Jesus experiences grief but also how he responds to the bereaved. Jesus weeps. He weeps when he enters Jerusalem and foresees the destruction that will follow because of the unbelief of Israel (Luke 19:41-44). He

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<sup>9</sup>Paul Randolph, “Grief: It’s Not About a Process; It’s About The Person,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 16.

weeps and groans when he sees Mary and the other Jews weeping at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (John 11:28-36). Jesus is sorrowful and deeply distressed as he contemplates his own impending death in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-38). As he draws his last few breaths, Jesus cries out to his God in lament using the words of Psalm 22 (Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34). And in Luke 24 we see how the resurrected Jesus engages two disciples on the road to Emmaus who are grieving his death. A method of Christian bereavement care should arise from the Word of God, and more specifically from the Word of God made flesh who perfectly images God and who provides a clear example of how to bring God's comfort to the bereaved.

### **The Narrative of Lazarus's Death**

If some measure of comfort comes to those who mourn when they see another person weeping with them, how much more when the Son of God weeps with the bereaved. Jesus groans in the spirit, is deeply troubled, and then weeps when he sees Mary weeping over the death of Lazarus (John 11:33-35). And yet, while shared tears bring comfort, this narrative offers so much more than the fact that Jesus identifies with human suffering. God's love and his desire for his creatures to experience everlasting life rather than condemnation and death (John 3:1-21) causes him to act. But he acts in ways that often confound and surprise people.

Jesus does not respond to the news of Lazarus's illness as might be expected. This narrative poignantly illustrates the great divide between man's perspective and God's perspective on suffering and death (John 11:1-44). From the human perspective, Lazarus died either because Jesus was physically absent or because he failed to exercise the power he did have to heal despite his absence. Like Martha and Mary, the bereaved are prone to cry out to God "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21, 32). Like the other bystanders, the bereaved often cry out, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?" (John

11:37). The people in the narrative, however, (including the disciples) do not see and know what Jesus sees and knows – that God has a far bigger plan in place (John 11:4, 14, 25, 40-42). Jesus purposely delays his visit to Lazarus, knowing full well Lazarus would die (John 11:14) but also with the awareness that his friend's ultimate state would not be death but life (John 11:4). Jesus wants Mary, Martha, the disciples, and the other mourners to believe he is the resurrection and the life and that by believing in him they will never die (John 11:25-26). God's desire and purpose, even in this tragic event, is the salvation of his people (John 11:45) and the glorification of both the Father and the Son (John 11:4, 11:40). In the midst of grief, the bereaved can become so consumed by their own suffering they forget to look up to see how God, time and again, redeems suffering and overcomes death in unexpected ways. He redeems suffering, first and foremost, through his own death and resurrection.

### **The Narrative of Jesus' Agony and Death**

Jesus' call to suffer sheds particular light on a proper understanding of God's compassion. As Jesus considers his impending death on behalf of humanity, he is deeply troubled (Mark 14:33-34). The contrast between Jesus' view of death and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's is stark. Kübler-Ross believed "death does not exist," it was merely a "transition" from one state of existence to another.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, people need to accept rather than fear death. The inconsistencies between her beliefs about death and reality, however, are exposed by her initial response to the death of her mother. She was so angry with God she believed he was dead.<sup>11</sup> If death really is nothing but a transition, why then would she be so angry? Jesus, on the other hand, stares the horror of sin and death in the face to the point where the sweat of his agony becomes "like great drops of blood falling

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<sup>10</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Life after Death* (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1991), 37.

<sup>11</sup> Kübler-Ross, *Death Is of Vital Importance*, 148.

down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). Rather than a response of anger toward God, Jesus prays, pleading for the cup of suffering and death to pass from him yet entrusting himself to the will of his Father. He knows that while all things are possible for God it might not be possible for God to take this cup from him without thwarting his larger redemptive purposes. When a grieving mother is struggling to understand why God did not prevent the death of her teenage daughter in her fight against cancer, the knowledge that God did not prevent the death of his own Son can be comforting. His death means that her daughter, assuming she has trusted in Christ, will ultimately experience eternal life (John 11:25). The anguish Jesus feels in the garden of Gethsemane is not merely his anticipation of the physical pain he will endure at the hands of his enemies. Rather, Jesus knows he will face separation from the Father when the wrath of God is poured out on him for the sins of humanity.<sup>12</sup> He bemoans this bleak prospect from the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34). Psalm 22, to which Jesus appeals, is a psalm of lament.

The Psalms are one of the most helpful ways for grieving people to give expression to their grief because they include expressions of faith regarding the character and faithfulness of God while at the same time giving voice to the struggles in dealing with death. The Old Testament Scriptures make extensive use of lament in dealing with grief. The Psalms not only encourage and legitimize the need to weep and cry in community, but they also teach the context of appropriate lament. Gene Fowler adopts the six-part structure that Bernard W. Anderson outlines from the psalms of lament, for the structure of his book.<sup>13</sup> The psalms of lament are generally organized in the following way: (1) lament is addressed directly to God, (2) complaint is made regarding the

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<sup>12</sup>Lister, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned*, 264–65.

<sup>13</sup>Gene Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament: Caring for the Bereaved* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 40.

circumstance of the psalmist, (3) a confession of trust follows the complaint, (4) a petition or appeal is made to God with an expectation that God hears and will intervene, (5) words of assurance are confessed, and (6) finally a vow of praise or thanksgiving is offered to God.<sup>14</sup> Structured in this way, the lament is far more than an outpouring of emotion and helps guard against grieving that excludes God and tends towards self-pity. Psalms 13, 22, 23, and 42 provide just a few examples of Scriptures that speak directly to the situation of those who are grieving. These Psalms invite the bereaved to draw near to God amid suffering because God remains good, sovereign, and merciful. The goodness of God is clearly seen in what happens after the death and burial of Jesus when two disciples, who are walking back to Emmaus, are found lamenting his death.

### **The Narrative of Jesus Offering Comfort**

Jesus administers and models the comfort of God to those who are bereaved in the Luke 24 narrative.<sup>15</sup> On the day Jesus' dead body goes missing from the tomb in which he was laid, two confused, disillusioned, and sorrowful disciples leave Jerusalem to return to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-21). They are grieving the death of the one in whom they placed their hopes for the redemption of Israel (Luke 24:19-21). While these two disciples process the event, the resurrected Jesus draws near and joins them on their journey (Luke 24:15). Their eyes are restrained so they do not recognize Jesus or know that he *is* with them in their time of confusion and bereavement. Despite his knowledge of the events which have transpired, Jesus feigns ignorance. He asks them two questions because he wants to hear their story and the struggles of their hearts. Jesus first takes time to listen to Cleopas and his companion and then he rebukes them, not for grieving, but for their response of unbelief (Luke 24:25). Jesus then affirms the sovereignty of God in

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<sup>14</sup>Fowler, *The Ministry of Lament*, 40–42.

<sup>15</sup>I am indebted to Rob Schettler, chaplain at Baptist Health Floyd in New Albany Indiana, for making this connection between the Emmaus story and bereavement care.

carrying out his redemptive purposes through the sufferings of the Christ (Luke 24:26) and “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). As Jesus walks along the road with the two disciples he tells them God’s redemptive story and their hearts burn within them (Luke 24:32). When he sits down to eat and breaks bread with them, their eyes are opened (Luke 24:30-31). They are comforted and their mourning is turned into joy as they fully encounter the risen Christ (Luke 24:32-35, John 16:20). The disciples have communed with God.

People who are grieving commonly feel like God is far from them. The Luke 24 narrative challenges this perception, however, by affirming the truth that God is relational and personally near to his people when they suffer. Through union in Christ and with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the comfort of God can be experienced directly. Jesus, who is called Immanuel or “God with us,” is the comfort of God made manifest in the life of the believer (Isa 7:14, Matt 1:23). This comfort is also mediated through other believers as they share the comfort they have received from the Father, during times of suffering (2 Cor 1:3-4). Therefore, the whole Christian community is to make itself available to be used by God to bring comfort to others who are grieving.

Soul-satisfying comfort for the bereaved comes from God through communion with him. It also informs some key elements of a method for bereavement care, not least of which is the importance of narrative or story-telling. Jesus tells the two disciples God’s story from the Scriptures, showing how the promises of God are fulfilled in him (2 Cor 1:20).

### **The Narrative within the Narrative**

What story might Jesus have told the disciples as he expounded the Scriptures in the two hours they walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus? We cannot know for sure, but

perhaps his narrative might have closely resembled the words of Hebrews 11:1-12:2. This passage provides one of the best biblical-theological narratives of all the heroes of faith in Scripture who, by faith, looked forward to the promised seed (Jesus) and a better homeland. Hebrews 11 threads together brief epitaphs of multiple people who died in faith. This survey shows how God had been working in history towards the goal of redeeming a people and preparing a heavenly city for them. The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 are all said to have seen and embraced the promises of God even though the promises were not fulfilled in their lifetime (Heb 11:13). God's judgment, therefore, is only punitive for those who persist in ongoing or sustained rebellion. "Faith," says Hebrews 11: 1, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Faith is believing the Word of God (both his promises and warnings) and then acting on that belief in obedience to his Word (Heb 11:7-8). The way in which God redeems his people is through the birth, death, and resurrection of the promised Messiah, Jesus. During times of bereavement believers should be encouraged to keep their eyes focused on Jesus, who is both the source and the perfecter of their faith (Heb 12:1-2).

Seeing the patterns of how people and God relate to one another helps the bereaved to put their own life story, and the life story of the deceased loved one, into context and view God rightly. As the narrative in Hebrews 11 spans the ages of the Old Testament, two patterns begin to emerge. The first is the pattern of the people (initiated by Adam and Eve) who follow God for a while but then turn from following him and consequently suffer judgment and ultimately death. The second is the pattern of God's relentless love in pursuing a rebellious people by providing a leader to rescue them. These patterns are seen in the Judges, the Exodus, the kings of Israel, and the Exile. From Noah to the nation of Israel, a faithful remnant is always preserved by God as a reflection of his faithfulness in bringing his promises to fulfillment. God is not capricious or malevolent, even in allowing suffering and death.

Suffering is designed to help people who are wandering off the path to course

correct. It may be more accurately described as a loving invitation to get back on the right path and to draw near to God (Jas 4:8). For those who are on the right path, suffering is God's way of refining and purifying (Mal 3:3). However, for those who persist in their rebellion, suffering will persist and they will receive their just deserts (Jer 17:10, Ezek 16:59). Seeing these patterns reminds the bereaved that even though no human being deserves life, God gives life in his Son and he continually pursues both mercy and justice. Every person is dependent upon the love and mercy of a God who cannot not love because he is love.

### **Narratives of Future Glory**

In the love and mercy of God, he has an amazing future planned for those who put their faith and trust in Christ. Revelation 21:1-7, 22:1-17, and John 14:1-6 paint a picture of a glorious future where there shall be no more death or sorrow and the people of God dwell in the presence of God forever. Communion with God will be fully and permanently restored and comfort for sorrow will no longer be required. No secular bereavement care model offers this kind of hope to the bereaved.

The bereaved, however, live in the space between the ascension of the resurrected Christ and the consummation of God's kingdom when Christ returns. The narrative of the apostle Paul's life and missionary work provides a helpful example of what it might look like for present reality to be shaped by that glorious future hope. Reading 1 Corinthians 15:40-44, 2 Corinthians 4:8-18 and 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, alongside the Revelation 21 and 22 helps to ground future hope in present reality in the midst of pain, suffering, persecution, and threats of death.<sup>16</sup> The Apostle Paul models what a Christ-like response and attitude to suffering looks like. More than taking comfort

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<sup>16</sup>Robert K. Cheong, "Restore: Redemption & Consummation, Knowing and Experiencing God through Story" (Paper presented at the Sojourn Community Church Midtown, Louisville, KY, Spring 2017), 13–16.

in the fact that Christ identifies with his suffering, Paul so identifies with Christ's suffering and death that he carries about the Lord's death in his body so that his body can be used to manifest the life of Jesus (2 Cor 4:10-12). Paul connects with the heart of God in the midst of suffering. With his eyes focused on Jesus and God's glory, Paul is able to not merely endure suffering, but to welcome it because he understands how God uses suffering and turns it for good (Rom 8:28-29).

Present suffering, in other words, is not suffering for the sake of suffering but rather suffering for the sake of future glory. When a woman whose husband was shot and killed continues to worship God and tells the murderer she forgives him, she is giving witness to the gospel and the power of Christ at work in her and the world. Her eyes are fixed on future glory.

### **A Proposed Christian Bereavement Care Framework**

A Christian approach to bereavement care must be built on theocentric and Christocentric foundations. This enables Christians to receive their comfort from God and respond to the death of their loved one with an overall trajectory of faith. The proposed bereavement care framework (goal, model, and method), therefore, is derived from Jesus' interaction with the bereaved and God the Father.

#### **The Goal**

Christian bereavement aims at redirecting the source of comfort. Comfort comes from God, confidence from union with Christ. Only this scenario enables the bereaved to gain victory over despair and see that God has already overcome sin, suffering, and death. Comfort then becomes inevitable.

#### **The Model**

Bereavement care, therefore, needs to focus on communion with God because comfort and confidence flow from communion with God.

## **The Method**

The most biblically sound and pastorally sensitive means of inviting the bereaved to into communion with God is by way of narrative and relationship. The method of care, therefore, is designed around the following eight relational steps:

1. Draw near to and walk alongside the bereaved as they journey through their grief.
2. Encourage the bereaved to lament the loss of their loved one by reading and praying through the psalms of lament.
3. Invite the bereaved to tell their story by asking questions that reveal their hopes, expectations, and the struggles of their hearts.
4. Encourage the bereaved to take their questions and struggles to God in prayer and to find comfort in him rather than anything else.
5. Point them to Christ by sharing God's redemptive story from creation to new creation.
6. Invite the bereaved into communion with God by relating his story to their story of sorrow and into fellowship with God's people.
7. Pray for the bereaved, reminding them that Jesus and the Spirit are also interceding on their behalf.
8. At the appropriate time (i.e., once they are further along their journey) encourage the bereaved to share the comfort which they have received with others who are grieving and in need of God's comfort.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Just as Jesus expounds the biblical narrative, so too should those involved in caring for the bereaved. God's entire redemptive story as narrative, rather than short verses taken out of context, has the power to point people to Christ. Such an approach offers present comfort and future hope in a way that provides a framework for answering some soul-wrenching questions. Yet, it is not theologically complicated for those who are in deep distress. The next chapter fleshes out what this framework looks like in practice.

CHAPTER 5  
OFFERING RENEWAL AND COMFORT  
BY CONNECTING THE RELATIONAL  
STRUGGLES IN GRIEF TO  
A PERSONAL GOD

The storms of life toss and turn to test the foundations of what we believe and the firmness of our faith. Personal narratives which are impacted by the death of a loved one cannot weather the storm of bereavement without the biblical narrative and a personal encounter with the biblical author. Knowing and understanding the biblical narrative enables a person to better understand their own personal narrative and helps answer some of the questions that arise about how suffering is to be understood. God is both the author and main character of the biblical narrative. Engaging Scripture will thus yield acquisition of the narrative as well as meeting with the Father.

A narrative approach, I argue, effectively connects the grieving Christian to the God of all comfort. The eight relational steps of the method outlined in chapter 4 will be fleshed out to show how the relational struggles in grief can be connected to the personal God of the biblical narrative. The first step is to draw near to and walk alongside the bereaved as they journey through their grief.

**Draw Near to and Walk Alongside the Bereaved**

Separation caused by death can leave a person feeling abandoned and alone in his or her sorrow. These feelings are often accompanied by a desire to withdraw and isolate from life, people, and God. However, the person's deepest real need at such a time is the embodied presence of friends and family. Physical presence combats the sense of loneliness since the embodied presence of the beloved is what is missing when someone dies. While the intensity of grief gradually reduces over time, feelings of loneliness and

isolation can intensify. Those caring for the bereaved need to be willing to walk the distance over a period of many months, perhaps even a couple of years. The presence of fellow Christian's mediates the presence of God and, therefore, is one of the ways in which God's comfort is ministered to the bereaved.

Many people feel uncomfortable with silence. People shy away from spending time the bereaved because, believing they must say something, they do not know what to say or fear saying the wrong thing. The only comfort Job's three friends offered him in the initial days of his bereavement was their tears and their physical presence. We, however, live in a culture where silence is no longer valued and weeping is something done in private. Social media has largely replaced embodied presence. Job's friends, on the other hand, left the comfort of their own homes to go and sit with him *for* seven days and nights. In that time, they did not speak a word because they saw his suffering was overwhelming (Job 2:13, Eccl 3:7). They went as a group of friends to mourn or lament his loss with him, and to bring him comfort (Job 2:11-12). Lamenting in community is a foreign concept in our culture where individualism and privacy are highly prized. Believers, however, are exhorted to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:15) and to comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18, 2 Cor 1:3-4).

### **Encourage the Bereaved to Lament Their Loss**

A sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness are often the unwelcome companions of deep sorrow. The emotions can be overwhelming and the sadness too deep for words. And yet at some point in the process, giving words to the experience of grief is what helps a person move forward and make sense of the chaos and confusion.

The Bible can be instrumental in ministering the comfort of God to the bereaved. Ecclesiastes poetically explores the mysteries of life and unashamedly confronts the apparent absurdities of life. The preacher's search for wisdom and understanding leads him to conclude that what matters is to "remember your Creator,"

and “fear God and keep his commandments” (Eccl 12:1, 6, 13). The bereaved are invited to journey with the preacher as he asks the difficult questions about the meaning of life and death. Despite the apparent “vanity of vanities,” the preacher’s journey ends with him expressing confidence in the God.

Many of the Psalms, likewise, invite the bereaved to give expression to the cries of their heart, yet in a way that confesses trust in God. Encouraging the bereaved to not only read the Psalms but also to pray the Psalms points them to their need to engage God directly and personally with their heart struggles.

The book of Lamentations presents a big-picture view of grief as it narrates the woes of Jerusalem’s destruction after Judah is taken into exile. While Lamentations may seem less relevant to a person grieving the death of an individual than Ecclesiastes or the Psalms, this book enables the bereaved to see the effects of unrepentant sin on a nation and the horrors of the suffering that follow. Furthermore, Lamentations helps the bereaved better understand the relationships between man and God. God remains merciful and compassionate in the midst of suffering and death (Lam 3:21-26).

Inviting the bereaved to share their story in their own words, when they are ready and able to do so, enables them to process their feelings and thoughts in community (i.e., not alone but with someone else or several people).

### **Invite the Bereaved to Tell Their Story**

People often fear asking the bereaved meaningful questions about their grief or talking about the deceased person because they do not want to be responsible for stirring up painful emotions. Ironically, not asking questions and taking the time to listen to the heart struggles of the bereaved adds to their grief. In the early months after losing a loved one, the bereaved are preoccupied with thoughts and feelings relating to their loss while everyone else is going about their normal lives as if nothing ever happened. To the bereaved, therefore, it can feel like nobody cares about them or remembers their beloved.

Sensitively asking questions to draw out the heart, allowing the person to share their story, and taking the time to listen carefully, are all part of showing compassion and gaining sufficient understanding to appropriately apply the Word of God to the specific struggles of the bereaved later in the process.

### **Asking Questions, Drawing Out the Heart**

In the Emmaus narrative, Jesus places as great a priority on how the disciples respond to his death as he does on the events themselves because in their response to his death their faith, or lack thereof, is exposed. When a person is physically exhausted or emotionally fragile, they are more vulnerable to temptation. Paul Tripp lists four temptations that the bereaved find particularly challenging. They are tempted to (1) doubt God's goodness, (2) to let anger at death degenerate into anger with God, (3) envy those who have not lost what they have lost (i.e., a spouse or a child), and (4) indulge in self-pity by shifting their gaze away from God and becoming self-absorbed.<sup>1</sup> Awareness of these potential temptations enables the caregiver to ask heuristic questions.

### **Telling Their Story**

Eulogies perform an important function at funeral services. They connect loved ones to memories of the deceased. Eulogies do not primarily focus on the death of the person but rather on their life. Likewise, as fellow Christians walk alongside the bereaved, they should encourage them not only to tell the story of the death of their loved one, but also to share the story of their life and its effect on them. In cases where the death was a particularly traumatic experience, there will be the need for the person to express and deal with the thoughts, feelings, and struggles relating to the trauma. Nevertheless, keeping the death event in perspective, within the broader narrative of the

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<sup>1</sup>Paul David Tripp, "When Grief Enters Your Door," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 11.

person's life story (and ultimately God's story), helps reduce the tendency to brood over traumatic aspects of the experience.

### **Listening to the Story of the Bereaved**

As a grieving person tells their story, the person who is walking alongside them needs to be filtering what they are hearing through God's redemptive story.<sup>2</sup> By doing so, the caregiver is able to listen for at least three things: evidence of faith and obedience in response to the death; common emotional and cognitive struggles that can lead to doubt, despair, and relational distance; and questions about life, death, life after death, and God.

When the grieving person is a Christian, they have the Spirit of God working in them and there should be evidence of the fruit of the Spirit. Acknowledging demonstrable fruit can be a tremendous encouragement. Despite signs of faithful obedience, in some aspects of their grief journey the bereaved will battle against the common struggles of fantasy, shame and guilt, fear, anger, and sorrow.

In bereavement, *fantasy* may take one of many forms. Most involve some way of connecting with the deceased or escaping present pain and reality. *Shame and guilt* often present themselves in the form of regret. Regret usually involves things that were said or not said to the deceased. The last words spoken may have been confrontational. Or there might not have been an opportunity to say goodbye. *Fears* about the future and particularly about the person's own health and potential death are heightened during bereavement.<sup>3</sup> *Anger* is a common response to loss. Both the reasons for and targets of a person's anger can be multiple and complex. Whether the death was by "natural" or

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<sup>2</sup>The four main movements of God's redemptive story are creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

<sup>3</sup>Other fears might include fear of not finding joy again, never being loved again (with the death of a spouse), going through another bereavement (with miscarriage), financial insecurity (where the person who died was the breadwinner), and even fears of loving again because the pain of loss seems too great to handle.

unnatural causes, the bereaved may express their anger by shifting blame. *Sorrow* in bereavement extends beyond deep feelings of sadness over the loss of the loved one. There can be sorrow over the loss of various other things associated with the deceased.<sup>4</sup> There might be grief over the “wrongness of death” and the fact that we live in a broken world, but there also might be grief which is more self-focused – a sense of feeling sorry for oneself. While grieving the loss of a loved one is necessary and right, when sorrow turns into ongoing and long-term self-pity it can quickly spiral down into despair and even depression.

Caregivers have the responsibility to listen well to the bereaved. They need to listen for how person is understanding and interpreting suffering, the quality and nature of their relationships, and the questions raised by bereavement. Questions can be a pathway to deepening one’s faith and communion with God; the importance of listening for questions the bereaved might have as they journey through their grief, therefore, cannot be overstated. In his book *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death*, author John De Gruchy attempts to give an account for the Christian hope he has in the midst of tragedy and “a world that gives us so much cause for despair and little for optimism.”<sup>5</sup> De Gruchy’s faith in the Christian hope of resurrection from the dead came under attack as he dealt with his grief and questioned his faith following the tragic and untimely death of his son. The bereaved, therefore, need to be encouraged to take their questions to God and find comfort in him rather than anything else.

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<sup>4</sup>Such losses might include the loss of a friend or someone to take the trash out, loss of financial security and with that perhaps the loss of a family home, and loss of future hopes and dreams if a child died.

<sup>5</sup>John W. De Gruchy, *Led into Mystery: Faith Seeking Answers in Life and Death* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 3.

### **Encourage the Bereaved to Take Questions to God**

The bereaved need guidance engaging God in his Word as they seek answer to their questions rather than short Scripture quotes taken out of context or trite platitudes. Some of the bereaved person's questions may be answered when put into biblical perspective, but many will not. God does not offer Job answers to his questions because God's presence is "the" answer to Job's suffering. "Mystery is encoded or hidden like a secret," says De Gruchy, "but unlike a secret, mystery never ceases to invite enquiry and exploration, for there is always more to be discovered."<sup>6</sup> Questions, asked in faith, are good.

The specific questions people ask, like their responses to grief, are unique to them and their circumstances. However, the types of questions they ask are also commonly asked by all people facing the death of a loved one. A dynamic tension needs to be maintained between commonality and uniqueness in bereavement care. Although everyone is made unique, people have many common characteristics or traits and share the same Creator. Acknowledging the uniqueness of grief, on the one hand, legitimizes the varying responses of different people to death. Acknowledging the common struggles of grief, on the other hand, helps normalize certain experiences and reduces the sense of isolation and self-incrimination that can occur. God's redemptive story connects people to each other and to the one true God who desires his children to be walking in the Spirit, in union with Christ, and in communion with the Father.

### **Point Them to Christ by Sharing God's Story**

The Word of God is one of the primary means by which people commune with God because God speaks to people through his Word. The Spirit of God works in and through the Word to bring life, hope, and comfort in times of suffering (Psalm 119:49-50). Therefore, pointing the bereaved to Christ by sharing God's redemptive story from

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<sup>6</sup>De Gruchy, *Led into Mystery*, 37.

creation to new creation and by relating his story to the bereaved person's story of sorrow should take priority in Christian bereavement care. Jesus shares the Word of God with the grieving disciples on the road to Emmaus as one cohesive narrative that points to him as the fulfilment of the promises of God. His interpretation of the Scriptures is somewhat like a eulogy but with two fundamental differences. First, Jesus is able to give his own eulogy because he does not remain dead in the grave. And second, his eulogy stretches back into eternity past (because he existed before all things) and includes more people than just himself. The bereaved cannot reconcile God's promises with their suffering without a redemptive-historical understanding. Even when grieving Christians do know God's story, they often need help connecting the biblical narrative to their own story.

Several narratives can be strung together to tell the biblical narrative in a way that is directly relevant to the struggles of a grieving person, many of which have already been discussed in chapter 4. Scholars recognize four major movements of the God's redemptive story.<sup>7</sup>

### **Creation**

Psalm 139 powerfully speaks to the intimate knowledge that God as Creator has of his creatures and the inability of his creatures to escape his presence no matter where they run. God's foreknowledge of a person's days can prove comforting to the bereaved because when a life is taken it can seem random and senseless (Ps 139:16). Knowing that every day was planned before the beginning of time, means death does not come a day too soon or too late and this knowledge can anchor the bereaved in God's reality. Furthermore, God will lead the bereaved through the dark times of grief, because what is darkness to man is not darkness to God (Ps 139:12). This Psalm about the Creator

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<sup>7</sup>G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 5–6.

God affirms that God is all knowing, all present, all powerful, and just. The bereaved need to be reminded to look up and see that God is good and he is in control.

## **Fall**

Genesis 3 provides a helpful framework for the bereaved to understand the origin and nature of sin and death and the common struggles that follow.<sup>8</sup> The emotions God created people to feel when they sin, are sinned against, or experience as they encounter a world marred by sin are God-given. God designed these emotions to help people realize their need for God and draw them back to him. God, therefore, appointed sorrow over the death. Indeed, God himself weeps over the death of his creation. The bereaved, then, may appropriately express sorrow over the same death. Comfort comes to the bereaved when they have a right understanding of suffering. Suffering acts as a means of wooing the lost back to right relationship with God and refining the faith of those who are following God's will and ways.

Job 1-42, which can be presented in a summarized form, provides a picture of a person's faithfulness to God and trust in God's righteous character in the face of great suffering and loss. Job suffers because he is righteousness. His continued righteousness is rewarded, not only with the restoration of all he lost, but more importantly with a personal encounter with God – communion with God. The bereaved can take comfort in the knowledge that when they take their suffering and their questions to God they receive something far greater than answers to their questions. They can experience the presence and comfort of the God of all comfort. Furthermore, by being reminded of the discussion between God and Satan regarding Job, this narrative also helps the bereaved to understand that a meta-narrative lies behind the life and death of their beloved, the details of which they are unknown to them. They can, however, trust that God has good reasons

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<sup>8</sup>See the section "Listening to the Story of the Bereaved" on p. 61 for details of the common struggles.

for what he allows to happen and not happen in this world. Though from the human perspective suffering abounds in the world, God works his good purposes in and through suffering (Rom 8:20-30). He remains sovereign, even over Satan by setting limits to what Satan can and cannot do.

Hebrews 11:1-12:3 shows the bereaved how the lives and deaths of various individuals weave together as part of the larger fabric of God's overall redemptive purposes. From the perspective of any one individual, their faith may seem futile especially when the reward is not realized in that person's lifetime. Just as the faithful heroes named in the narrative had to wait for the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ, so too the bereaved await the fulfillment of God's promises in the return of Christ. A Christian mother grieving the death of her son who was in a hospital cancer ward for three months may never know, this side of heaven, the impact of her Christian witness (or her son's) on the lives of other hospital patients, nurses, and doctors. Comfort comes from seeing the bigger picture of God's redemptive purposes. This intentional paradigm yields obedience.

### **Redemption**

John 11:1-44 (Lazarus) and Luke 24 (Emmaus), Mark 14:32-42 (Gethsemane), and Mark 15:1-47 and Psalm 22 (the cross and cry of lament), provide a picture of how Jesus responds to the bereaved, images God by perfectly obeying God's will, and defeats death through his sacrificial death on the cross, respectively. The grieving Christian cannot look upon the cross of Christ and proclaim in the same breath that God is unjust and unmerciful. In Christ's death on the cross we see the great exchange. Christ died in our place. We are offered, by faith, an opportunity to escape eternal death. Union with Christ unites the believer not only to the Father, but also to the Holy Spirit who is the great comforter, advocate, and sanctifier and therefore challenges the lie that the person is

actually alone in dealing with death.<sup>9</sup> In the case where the person who has died was also a believer, the grieving Christian has full assurance that his or her loved one, though having died, is still in Christ. Even though the physical body has succumbed to corruption and the soul has been severed from the body in death, Romans 8:38-39 tells us that union with Christ is not severed.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if the grieving person is in Christ and if the person who has died is in Christ, then both are in Christ. Nevertheless, union in Christ invites and calls the believer to communion with God himself. John Murray says, “There is no communion among men that is comparable to fellowship with Christ—he communes with his people and his people commune with him in conscious reciprocal love.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, by engaging these narratives, the bereaved person is invited to shift his or her focus from communion with man to communion with God.

Isaiah 53 is a passage about the suffering servant and points forward to the suffering and death of Christ. Quite likely, Jesus would have shared this Scripture with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus is “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” who has “borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa 53:3-4). The bereaved can experience the comfort of God in knowing that he knows their pain in sorrow intimately. God is not far from them when they grieve and he does care. He cares so deeply that he was prepared to suffer and die on behalf of every human being. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to be truly comforted in their grief, people need an encounter with Jesus. The bereaved need the person of Jesus because he is the fulfillment of all the promises of God. These promises begin with the Seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15) and culminate in death losing its sting through God’s resurrection power displayed when he raised Jesus from the dead (1 Cor 15:55-56). When they

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<sup>9</sup>John Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 172–73.

<sup>10</sup>Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied*, 163.

<sup>11</sup>Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied*, 169.

understand God's story rightly, the bereaved cannot say God did nothing to stop the death of their loved one. God has given the life of his only Son so that, by believing in him, they and their deceased loved one (if they are Christians) might have life in Christ, to be raised from the dead when Christ returns (John 20:31).

### **Consummation**

Revelation 21:1-7, 22:1-17, and John 14:1-6, as mentioned in chapter 4, paint a picture of a glorious future hope that God has prepared for his people. 1 Corinthians 15:40-44, 2 Corinthians 4:8-18 and 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, when read alongside the Revelation 21 and 22 passages help to ground future hope in present reality in the midst suffering. Sin, suffering, and death continue in the world and consequently, so do grief and bereavement. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul encourages the bereaved believers to comfort one another with the reminder that Christ has promised to return and to be united with his people. Future hope brings present comfort. Grief is not magically wiped away in the present but is transformed by this future hope. When Christians brothers and sisters tell a person who is grieving, "at least your wife is in heaven," as if this knowledge should remove their grief, they are misunderstanding what Paul is saying in the text. The Thessalonian believers are not instructed *not* to grieve. Rather they are exhorted not to grieve *as those who have no hope* (1 Thess 4:13). Their grief is to be tempered by future hope and to reflect their trust in the promises of God (1 Thess 5:8-10). Furthermore, they are to "comfort each other and edify one another" (1 Thess 5:11) as they await the return of Christ and the coming of the new heavens and new earth (Rev 21:4). One day, union in Christ will lead to everlasting and *unbroken communion with God*. Knowing that God is working towards restoring unbroken communion provides enormous comfort to someone grieving the death of a loved one. Through union in Christ, the bereaved will never know the sadness they now feel in relation to God because nothing can separate those who are in Christ from the love of God (Rom 8:38-39). The bereaved can sing the words of Fanny

Crosby's hymn "Blessed Assurance" because even while grieving the death of a loved one, they can have "a foretaste of glory divine."<sup>12</sup> Comfort is found in assurance rather than in mere acceptance. Comfort from God and confidence in God flows from communion with God and fellowship with his people.

### **Invite the Bereaved into Communion and Fellowship**

In *looking* to God, *listening* to his Word and invitation, and *living* out his Word in faith and obedience, believers commune with God.<sup>13</sup> When a bereaved person is able to see the connections between their own story of grief and God's redemptive story, they see how God's presence, promises, and power are shaping and reframing their own story. Grieving people, therefore, should resist the temptation to isolate themselves and rather engage God. God has provided several ways to know and experience him: reading his Word, responding to his Word in prayer and faithful obedience, meeting with God's people for corporate worship, breaking bread with other believers (holy communion), being in fellowship with other Christians, and spending time in private contemplation and prayer with their Lord and Savior. People were created to experience the invisible God and to have communion with him in these tangible ways, and not merely know about him (Rom 1:20, Col 1:15, John 20:27).

As the bereaved *look* to God's reality, they need to be encouraged to *listen* to God speaking to them and to his invitation. As Jesus engages the bereaved, whether he is addressing Martha and Mary after the death of Lazarus, the eleven disciples in the upper room after his resurrection, or a modern-day Christian, his invitation is for them to believe. The Apostle John writes his gospel with the same purpose in mind, faith in

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<sup>12</sup>C. Michael Horn, "History of Hymns: 'Blessed Assurance,'" *UmcDiscipleship.org*, accessed September 27, 2017, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-blessed-assurance>.

<sup>13</sup>The framework and many of the concepts and terminology (especially the following terms: know, experience, image, look, listen, and live) in this section have come from the model of care developed by Robert K. Cheong, Pastor of Care at Sojourn Community Church Midtown.

Christ so that those who believe might have life (John 20:30-31). What greater invitation can there be for someone who is mourning the death of a loved one than to be invited to have life! This is a much-needed invitation because, after the death of a close family member, grieving people are often unable to motivate themselves to go on living. Life without the deceased person seems pointless and the burden of grief too great to bear. Jesus, however, invites all those who are weary and heavy laden to come to him: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

The bereaved can learn from Jesus who perfectly reflects the Father by relating and responding to him in faith (Col 1:15) – even as he faces his own death (Luke 22:42).<sup>14</sup> Jesus also invites his followers to look to him for how to live, suffer, and die well (1 Pet 2:19-25). Christians are to *live* by faith in obedience to the will and Word of God and to do so with the help of the Holy Spirit. For one grieving person, this may mean reading a portion of Scripture every day, even when he or she does not feel like it. For another, it might mean forgiving the friend who said something insensitive like “Shouldn’t you be over this by now?” For a widower, obedience might look like going to church every Sunday—even though the seat next to him is empty and seeing all the couples sitting together intensifies his sorrow and feelings of jealousy. He knows, however, what he needs most is to hear the Word of God and be among God’s people. And for another it may mean getting out of bed for the first time in weeks, drawing back the curtains to let the sunlight in, praising God for the life she has in him, and asking a friend from church to pray for God to give her the strength to go on living.

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<sup>14</sup>Cheong, “Restore: Knowing and Experiencing God through Story,” 26.

## **Pray for the Bereaved**

Great comfort comes to a grieving person from knowing others are praying them (Jas 5:16). Specifically, the bereaved need God's grace to seek comfort in the right places. Second, caregivers should pray that the bereaved would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to resist temptations to which, in their grief, they are more likely to fall prey. Third, praying with the bereaved through Psalms can help give expression to both their struggles and their trust in a God's faithfulness. Finally, caregivers can remind the bereaved that when they do not have the words to pray for themselves, the Spirit intercedes for them with groanings too deep for words (Rom 8:26). Also, Jesus, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, is also interceding for them (Rom 8:34). As a man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief (Isa 53:3) and who is their high priest, Jesus is able to sympathize with their weakness (Heb 4:15). In time, when the bereaved have received the comfort of God and they can see their mourning slowly being transformed into more and more joy, they too are called to sympathize with others who are grieving the death of a loved one.

## **Encourage Them to Share God's Comfort with Others**

Sharing the comfort they have received from God with other grieving people not only indicates that the bereaved have been comforted by God, but displays how God often brings further comfort to the bereaved. Jenny,<sup>15</sup> a woman who experienced three miscarriages in the space of a few years, was able to bring comfort to a friend who had also lost a baby in utero. The day Jenny spoke to her friend was really difficult for her because all the vivid memories and emotions had been stirred up. However, a couple of days after the conversation she said she was surprised by how good she felt. "I almost feel like it was good for me to revisit those memories," said Jenny, "because in remembering the experience, and the pain I have been so afraid of, I realized again how

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<sup>15</sup>A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity of the person concerned.

much healing God has brought me. I remembered feeling like her but realized that by God's grace I am no longer like her. The Lord was able to use me to minister to her and to bring her the hope she needed to hear. Looking back gave us both hope: for me because I look back at my past through her, and for her because she can see where God has brought me and so have hope for the future. It is so like God to redeem a painful experience to bring hope.”

### **Concluding Remarks**

The goal of bereavement care, I have argued, is to encourage the bereaved to receive comfort from God and to draw confidence from their union in Christ. This chapter has shown how the comfort of God can be ministered to the bereaved by the people of God. As grieving people come to know God's story and character, they are better able to understand and interpret their own personal story. Understanding gives way to receiving the comfort of a God who meets all their needs. God does not promise to necessarily change a person's circumstances, although sometimes he does. But, he has promised his presence amid trials (2 Cor 12:9), the power and comfort of his Holy Spirit (2 Tim 1:7), and future hope of restoration (Rom 8:11). Isaiah 40:31 says, “Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Christian bereavement care, I have been arguing, needs to proceed from a solid biblical foundation in determining the goal, model, and method of care and guard against commitments that seek to undermine biblical foundations. The need to protect Christian bereavement care from competing worldview assumptions arises from the pervasive influence of secular bereavement care models and theories on the former. While secular bereavement theories accurately describe the human experience of grief, the way they interpret that experience is not value-free. Their own worldview presuppositions directed their theories. The anthropocentric, naturalistic, and secular humanist assumptions upon which these theorists base their models generally results in an intrapsychic rather than interpersonal understanding of bereavement and no reference is made to God. Consequently, secular bereavement theorists focus almost exclusively on the process of bereavement and fail to deal with the most fundamental struggle of the bereaved: the anguished cry, “Why God?” as the bereaved try to make sense of suffering and death. Any subsequent prescription for comfort will crumble upon this sandy foundation. Christian bereavement approaches, by and large, have failed to recognize that secular approaches left out significant portions of the Christian understanding of bereavement and death by interpreting bereavement merely as loss. Christian approaches that lean too heavily on secular assumptions, therefore, also fail to bring soul-satisfying comfort to the bereaved.

Grief affects a person’s relationships with others, themselves, and most importantly God. Since God has chosen to reveal his perspective on the human experience of grief in his Word, his explanation of the roots of grief in the Genesis

narrative provides the interpretive framework for a more accurate understanding of bereavement. At the heart of the human experience of grief is an encounter with sin which then results in the experience of suffering and ultimately death. Sin breaks communion with God. Sorrow, therefore, is an appropriate response to a relationship severed by death because death is a consequence of sin and reflects broken communion with God. Consequently, experiencing periods of doubt, despair, and distance during bereavement, even as a Christian, is part of the normal human experience. Satan's point of attack with Eve was first the Word of God and then the character of God. The Word and character of God, therefore, are key to maintaining or restoring communion with God.

A theocentric understanding of God's emotions and character, I have argued, is important for bereavement care for at least three reasons. First, in their finitude and self-centeredness, people who are struggling with grief often misrepresent God. Second, without the metanarrative explaining God's reasons for allowing a particular instance of suffering or death, God's character can be brought into question. Finally, it provides an understanding of why God would humble himself to become a man and enter into a fallen world. A right understanding of God's emotions and character brings comfort to the bereaved because it engenders a sense of confidence in the stability and faithfulness of a loving and relational God.

Bereavement care specialists, whether secular or Christian, want to bring comfort and healing to those who are hurting. The source of that comfort, however, can only come from "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" whose compassion is most supremely displayed in the sacrificial death of his Son, "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (2 Cor 1:3, Isa 53:3). Therefore, the goal of Christian bereavement care is to encourage the bereaved to receive comfort from God and to draw confidence from their union in Christ. Because comfort and confidence flow from communion with God, Christian bereavement care needs to focus on communion with

God. I have also argued the importance of communion with God via narrative. This method represents the most biblically sound and pastorally sensitive means unto such communion. Jesus' response to death provided an exemplary case study. Various biblical narratives were used to inform a method of bereavement care in eight relational steps:

1. Draw near to and walk alongside the bereaved as they journey through their grief.
2. Encourage the bereaved to lament the loss of their loved one by reading and praying through the psalms of lament.
3. Invite the bereaved to tell their story by asking questions that reveal their hopes, expectations, and the struggles of their hearts.
4. Encourage the bereaved to take their questions and struggles to God in prayer and to find comfort in him rather than anything else.
5. Point them to Christ by sharing God's redemptive story from creation to new creation.
6. Invite the bereaved into communion with God by relating his story to their story of sorrow and into fellowship with God's people.
7. Pray for the bereaved, reminding them that Jesus and the Spirit are also interceding on their behalf.
8. At the appropriate time (i.e., once they are further along their journey) encourage the bereaved to share the comfort which they have received with others who are grieving and in need of God's comfort.

The role of those engaged in ministry to the bereaved, therefore, is to keep pointing them to the source of true comfort, God himself. Both personal and biblical narrative proved the most effective means to this end.

Although the human experience of bereavement serves as a starting point, it is not the end-point. We need a theocentric and Christocentric approach to bereavement care. Comfort in the context of bereavement can only come from one who has experienced suffering and death *and who has overcome death*. Success in Christian bereavement care looks like a deeper and more intimate communion with God despite the struggles and the pain a person experiences, and quite possibly because of them. Some get there quicker than others, but so long as they are walking the path with their Savior and in community, hope and healing are in the offering.

Comfort comes from God alone, because God alone can deliver us from sin, suffering, and death. “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him! . . . The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, and saves such as have a contrite spirit” (Ps 34:8, 17-18).

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## ABSTRACT

### CONNECTING WITH THE HEART OF GOD IN GRIEF: EMPLOYING NARRATIVE IN CHRISTIAN BEREAVEMENT CARE

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This thesis argues that Christian bereavement care needs to proceed from a solid biblical foundation in determining the goal (receiving comfort from God), model (by focusing on communion with God), and method of care (through narrative and relationship) to guard against secular influences and to bring soul-satisfying comfort to the bereaved.

Chapter 1 introduces the thesis. Chapter 2 critically evaluates contemporary bereavement care approaches. Chapter 3 explores the human experience of grief by examining autobiographical narratives and God's account of the origin of grief in the Genesis narrative. Chapter 4 develops the argument for a theocentric and Christocentric approach. A proposed bereavement care framework is derived from the way Jesus relates to the bereaved and God. Chapter 5 offers practical guidelines on caring for the bereaved using eight relational steps. Chapter 6 concludes by drawing together the arguments to demonstrate how employing narrative in Christian bereavement care effectively connects the bereaved with the heart of God.

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