

Dear Class Member,

Some observers of events in the UK surrounding the death of Queen Elizabeth and the ascension of her son Charles to the throne have wondered whether the hectic schedule of duties he's had to abruptly assume have left him sufficient space to mourn the passing of his mother. For our next class, we are using that news as an occasion to consider how mourning and faith fit together.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, here is the lesson.



## **As New King of the UK, Does Charles Have Time to Mourn?**

*The Wired Word for the Week of September 25, 2022*

### **In the News**

Almost immediately after the death of Queen Elizabeth II, her son Charles became the king of the United Kingdom. Among his first duties as King Charles III was leading the national mourning for his mother, but some bereavement experts have expressed concern that the pace of his new responsibilities may have left the king with insufficient time and space for his own grieving.

His recent itinerary included engagements in London, Edinburgh, Northern Ireland and Wales, as well as attendance at the state funeral for the queen, and the pace is unlikely to let up soon.

At one stop outside of Hillsborough Castle, King Charles exited his car to spend time greeting and talking with well-wishers. According to *The Guardian*, he was smiling and laughing, but when he got to the end of the line, Ingrid Graham, 36, a nail business owner, said, "I am so sorry for your loss, Your Majesty." She later said he replied, "Thank you. I wouldn't wish this on anybody."

*The Guardian* noted that after a meeting with Northern Ireland's political leaders, the king's pen leaked while signing the visitor's book, and he snapped, "I can't bear this bloody thing ... every stinking time," as he walked away.

This was "a really normal grief reaction," said Sharon Jenkins, a grief counselor in the UK. "One of the stages of grief is anger and frustration. Things just don't make sense any more. The life you lived changed just like that. Your emotions have been thrown out of kilter into the unknown ... People seem to break down at the small things."

Jenkins said that "healthy" grieving typically involves keeping busy, but being able to stop is also important when a break to mourn is needed, and that is something the king's schedule doesn't easily accommodate.

She also noted that King Charles, who lost his father in April 2021, is now an orphan, and seeing his mother being laid to rest could also intensify any unprocessed grief from his father's passing.

More on this story can be found at these links:

'Grief Can Overwhelm You': Has King Charles Had Space to Mourn? *The Guardian*

(<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/sep/16/grief-can-overwhelm-you-has-king-charles-had-space-to-mourn-queen-death>)

King Charles III Fed Up With Leaking Pens at Northern Ireland's Hillsborough Castle Ceremony. *ABC Net* (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-14/king-charles-vents-at-leaky-pen/101437008>)

## **Applying the News Story**

Were you surprised to hear grief counselor Sharon Jenkins describe King Charles as an "orphan"? It's not a term we typically use for adults whose parents die. In a lecture a few years ago, the linguist Noam Chomsky pointed out that the English language is incomplete when defining someone by what that person has lost.

English is not totally without such words, for we do have "widow," "widower" and "divorcee," for individuals who have lost a spouse, but really, how often do we call grown-ups who lose their parents orphans? They may not be materially affected by the loss, but might they not feel pain just as deeply? Or what word do we use for a parent who has lost a child? We can hardly imagine a greater source of pain, but we have no single word to describe such a person. Courts sometimes speak of "surviving parents," but that is used mainly to refer to legal considerations. Also, what about a person who has lost a brother or sister? What are we to call such a person? A "surviving sibling"?

Whether or not we have terms that define us by what we've lost when loved ones die, it's likely that we will grieve. That's the cost of having loved someone.

Dealing with grief may be even more difficult in some Christian communities, especially those where, when a Christian dies, the emphasis is primarily on the fact that the person is in "a better place," and thus, celebrating may be deemed more appropriate than mourning. If the focus is strongly on the glory of heaven and the triumph of resurrection life, someone who is grieving may feel that they cannot express the depth of the pain they are feeling over the loss of the loved one.

Yes, Christians have the great hope of eternal life, but grief is really grief, and pain is really pain, and the Bible never tells us not to grieve. That's our topic in this lesson.

## **The Big Questions**

1. Do people ever "get over" the loss of one they have deeply loved? What is the difference between "getting over" the loss and "continuing on" despite the loss?
2. In what ways do the practices of your faith community bring you comfort when you are grieving? In what ways might the practices of your faith community fall short in bringing comfort in times of grief? Why?
3. From your own experience of grief, what advice would you give a friend who was newly mourning the death of a loved one? Why?
4. What is the one thing you would advise a newly grieved person *not* to do? Why?
5. What, if anything, does your grief say about your faith?

## **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **2 Samuel 12:19-23**

*But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, he perceived that the child was dead, ... Then David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He went into the house of the*

*LORD and worshiped; he then went to his own house, and when he asked, they set food before him, and he ate. Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive, but when the child died, you rose and ate food." He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me, and the child may live.' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."* (For context, read 2 Samuel 12:15b-24 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Samuel+12%3A15b-24&version=NRSVUE>).)

David, king of Israel and his wife Bathsheba had a newborn son. Shortly after the child's birth, the baby became ill. David fasted and prayed for him day and night for a week. So great was his worry and pain that when, on the seventh day, the child died, David's servants were afraid to tell the king, for fear he might do some harm to himself.

If a modern-day grief counselor had been present, David might have been advised to "feel it and heal it." Perhaps he'd have been urged to talk about his loss, let his feelings out, and "work through his grief." Certainly, he would not be left alone with his sorrow.

Advice like that may well be right for some who are in mourning. But we should resist the temptation to think everybody deals with grief in the same way. Frankly, while many people are helped by talking about it, not everyone is. David, for example, found more help by going it alone and reconnecting with ritual. "He went into the house of the LORD and worshiped," the text says. Embracing time-honored traditions and deeply rooted disciplines that people have practiced for generations can give us a sense of connection and stability as one's world is rocked by loss. The practices of fasting, praying and worship were not invented by David on the spot, out of his personal grief -- rather, they were part of a ritual of bereavement that gave him the time, space and the structure he needed for making sense of sudden loss.

At a time of devastation, our focus is likely on the significance of the loss of a loved one. It may help to remember that nothing in all creation -- nothing in life, and nothing in death -- can separate us from the love of God.

We can learn more from David. The scripture tells us that after the child died, David went and consoled his wife. She too, had suffered the loss. In the midst of his own pain, he directed at least some of his energy toward someone else. He refused to view what had happened as a tragedy for himself only. He worshiped God; he comforted his wife. And while the grief and the pain remained, David's healing began in the resources of his faith and the reaching out to a fellow sufferer.

**Questions:** For some people in grief, immersion in the rhythms and resources of the faith tradition can be a source of comfort, but what about when the loss threatens to overwhelm us? What, if anything, brought you some comfort when you were in grief?

### **1 Thessalonians 4:13**

*But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.* (For context, read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Thessalonians+4%3A13-18&version=NRSVUE>).)

This verse contains a great truth -- Christians grieve, but they have the hope of the final resurrection and eternal life. But the verse has also been misused to imply that because of our great hope, we *shouldn't* grieve.

In a recent interview (<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-213-amanda-held-opelt-the-honesty-of-grief/id1215420422?i=1000574596668>), Amanda Held Opelt, who after the death of her sister at age 37, wrote a book about grief titled *A Hole in the World* (<https://www.amazon.com/Hole-World-Finding-Rituals-Healing/dp/1546001891>), commented on the verse above. "I don't really cover that [verse] in my book, because I feel a little ... contempt towards the way that passage has been used. Because I think in many ways, we kind of stop at the word "grieve." We do not grieve, because ... you are not supposed to be overcome by sadness. You're ... supposed to be able to manage your anger or manage your sadness because you have the hope of Christ, or you have the hope of the resurrection, the hope of the afterlife.

"And the church has had a long history of this kind of teaching. ... It's this idea that excessive emotion, excessive pain is somehow a sign of a lack of holiness or a lack of spiritual maturity.

"... what I find actually in the Bible, now that I've gone back and read it through the lens of grief, is it's not telling us not to grieve. It's saying, yes, you have hope. But grief is still grief and pain is still pain. And I find a God that's actually very indulgent of strong, intense emotions. A God that ... is really, I guess, amiable towards his people expressing outrage, and hopelessness, and questions. And I see that all over Scripture now."

**Questions:** How, if at all, is this verse a comfort to you when you think about a loved one who has died? In what ways have friends and family given you space to grieve when you needed it? In what ways has the church helped you when you were grieving?

### **Psalm 34:18**

*The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.* (For context, read Psalm 34:15-18 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+34%3A15-18&version=NRSVUE>).)

### **John 11:35**

*Jesus began to weep.* (For context, read John 11:17-44 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+11%3A17-44&version=NRSVUE>).)

Psalm 34 is a collection of statements about God's goodness, and among them is the statement above that the Lord is especially near to the brokenhearted. When we are in deep mourning, we may not always be able to sense how near God is, and the nearness of God is no guarantee we will be spared pain. In fact, the very next verse, 19, says, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, ..." which is not to say that they suffer more than the unrighteous, but that they are not spared the reality of what it means to be human.

The verse from John is, in the King James Version, the shortest in the Bible: "Jesus wept," but it actually says quite a lot. With his tears, Jesus emotionally joined those who were mourning the death of his friend Lazarus. The late Eugene C. Kennedy, a psychologist and laicized Catholic priest, wrote about crying in his book, *The Pain of Being Human* ([https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/the-pain-of-being-human\\_eugene-c-kennedy/611197/item/6149911/#edition=3824285&idq=1430386](https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/the-pain-of-being-human_eugene-c-kennedy/611197/item/6149911/#edition=3824285&idq=1430386)). He said, "Tears in the mature person's life come at very deep moments of sadness and joy, on occasions of separation and reunion, whenever love shows through life. Tears are above all a sign that we are alive, that the heart still beats because we care about

someone or something enough to cry. ... People who live with hope and trust can cry aloud; they are alive and have known the meaning of love. ... Our tears redeem us when they reveal us clearly to another, unshielded from the consequences or risks that are involved in being human."

**Questions:** If you had been there and seen Jesus crying, how would you have felt? Why?

### **Revelation 21:3-4**

*And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*"See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them;*

*they will be his peoples,*

*and God himself will be with them and be their God;*

*he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;*

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,*

*for the first things have passed away."*

(For context, read Revelation 21:1-7 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+21%3A1-7&version=NRSVUE>).)

TWW team member Stan Purdum says, "The place I most often read from Revelation 21 is at cemeteries, standing with others beside an open grave where we are about to commit someone to the ground in the hope of everlasting life. We are often huddled together against a cold wind, seeking not only physical warmth but the warmth of human connection as we grieve. We look forward to a day when death will be no more, where mourning and crying and pain will have no place in our lives.

"But in the meantime, we walk the path of pain at the loss of those who are dear to us, and we grieve. May God help us."

**Questions:** How do you think it will be to live without mourning, crying or pain? Will such a world be recognizable to us?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Respond to this, from Dutch Catholic priest and professor, Henry Nouwen: "Very shortly after my mother's funeral ... I returned from Holland to the United States. A few days later I was busy again, as always, teaching, counseling students, attending faculty meetings, answering mail, and doing the many things that fill the daily life of a university teacher. There had been little or no opportunity to let mother's suffering and death enter deeply into my innermost self.

"During the days that my mother was dying and during the days immediately after her death, I tried to pay as much attention as I could to my family and to anyone who offered friendship and love. And then, back in the United States, far away from home, the busy school life certainly did not encourage me to listen to my own inner cries. But one day, when I paused for a while in my office between appointments, I suddenly realized that I had not shed a single tear before or after mother's death. At that moment I saw that the world had such a grasp on me that it did not allow me to fully experience even the most personal, the most intimate,

and the most mysterious event of my life. It seemed as if the voices around me were saying, 'You have to keep going. Life goes on; people die, but you must continue to live, to work, to struggle. The past cannot be recreated. Look at what is ahead.' I was obedient to these voices: I gave my lectures with the same enthusiasm as ever; I listened to students and their problems as if nothing had happened; and I worked with the same compulsiveness that had characterized my life since I started to teach. But I knew then that this would not last if I really took my mother and myself seriously. By a happy coincidence -- no, by a gracious gift of God -- I had planned a six months' retreat with the Trappist monks at the Abbey of the Genesee, which during the past years had become a second home to me.

"When I arrived at the monastery in January I knew that this was going to be my time of grief. On several occasions, while sitting in my little room surrounded by the deep silence of the monastery, I noticed tears coming from my eyes. I did not really understand this. I was not thinking about mother, I was not remembering her illness, her death, or her funeral, but from a place in me deeper than I could reach, grief welled up and manifested itself in soft weeping." (From his book, *A Letter of Consolation* ([https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/a-letter-of-consolation-reissue\\_henri-jm-nouwen/660678/item/8637751/](https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/a-letter-of-consolation-reissue_henri-jm-nouwen/660678/item/8637751/)))

2. Discuss these comments from Amanda Held Opelt, from her interview mentioned in the discussion of 1 Thessalonians 4:13 above:

- We live in a world that can sometimes see emotional breakdown[s], ... as a liability. And I think it's really amazing that God sees them as a holy asset.
- It is right and good to name what is awful and wrong and should not be. It is good to name that in an emotional way. And there's a lot of power in that.
- We really like to talk about the victorious resurrected Lord. And I think we sometimes don't spend enough time with the God who was defeated or the God that was put to death -- the God who was the man of sorrows.
- There are grievors everywhere -- people that are suffering under the silent tyranny of grief. We need to make space with them in our rhythms and our habits and our Sunday practices, so that they can have those encounters with their grief and be affirmed for what they're feeling.

3. React to this description by the great Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, of his grief that he wrote following the death of his wife, Joy Davidman (he refers to her in the text as "H," short for her actual first name, Helen):

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.

At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.

There are moments, most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don't really mind so much, not so very much, after all. Love is not the whole of a man's life. I was happy before I ever met H. I've plenty of what are called "resources." People get over these things. Come, I shan't do so badly. One is ashamed to listen to this voice but it seems for a little to be making out a good case. Then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory and all this "commonsense" vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace.

On the rebound one passes into tears and pathos. Maudlin tears. I almost prefer the moments of agony. These are at least clean and honest. But the bath of self-pity, the wallow, the loathsome sticky-sweet pleasure of indulging it -- that disgusts me. And even while I'm doing it I know it leads me to misrepresent H. herself. Give that mood its head and in a few minutes I shall have substituted for the real woman a mere doll to be blubbered over. Thank God the memory of her is still too strong (will it always be too strong?) to let me get away with it.

For H. wasn't like that at all. Her mind was lithe and quick and muscular as a leopard. Passion, tenderness and pain were all equally unable to disarm it. It scented the first whiff of cant or slush; then sprang, and knocked you over before you knew what was happening. How many bubbles of mine she pricked! I soon learned not to talk rot to her unless I did it for the sheer pleasure -- and there's another red-hot jab -- of being exposed and laughed at. I was never less silly than as H's lover.

And no one ever told me about the laziness of grief. Except at my job -- where the machine seems to run on much as usual -- I loathe the slightest effort. Not only writing but even reading a letter is too much. Even shaving. What does it matter now whether my cheek is rough or smooth? They say an unhappy man wants distractions -- something to take him out of himself. Only as a dog-tired man wants an extra blanket on a cold night; he'd rather lie there shivering than get up and find one. (From his book, *A Grief Observed* (<https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/a-grief-observed-by-cs-lewis/248019/item/201966/>))

4. Respond to this, from a TWW team member: "My 17-year-old son recently attended the 'celebration of life' service of his piano teacher and friend who had died of cancer in her mid-70s. It did not escape his notice that this memorial service ... was markedly different from the Lutheran funerals he has attended ... the particulars aren't really my point -- more that some theologies make more room for an open experience and expression of grief than do others. ... one can feel very lonely and alone in one's grief when it seems one has to put on a joyous, celebratory face right away because the loved one is 'in a better place.'"

5. TWW team member Malia Miller commented, "When I think of King Charles' grief, I can't help but add that he is also experiencing a loss of his life as he knew it now that he has been thrust into the role of king. Grief comes in many 'flavors,' only one of which is the loss of a loved one." What other "flavors" of grief are you acquainted with?

## **Responding to the News**

Meditate on this: There is an old legend in the Talmud, which is a collection of ancient rabbinic writings that is a basis of religious authority in the Jewish faith. It goes like this:

Rabbi YOSHUA ben LEVI came upon ELIJAH the prophet ... He asked ELIJAH, "When will the Messiah come?"

ELIJAH replied, "Go ask him yourself."

"Where is he?"

"Sitting at the gates of the city."

"How shall I know him?"

"He is sitting among the poor, covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so, I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.'"

## **Prayer**

O God, thank you for the capacity to love and to grieve. Please comfort us when we mourn, and heal us through it all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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