

NORTHERN LIGHT

Digest

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Grief and Resurrection

On the same day I started writing this article I received news that my brother-in-law had six to eight weeks to live. He's 57 and dying from cancer-laden brain tumours. A half century ago I was racing him around in a wheelbarrow, and he was putting ice down my back when I was asleep on his parents' couch. He was the little brother I never had, a kindred spirit, full of mischief and fun.

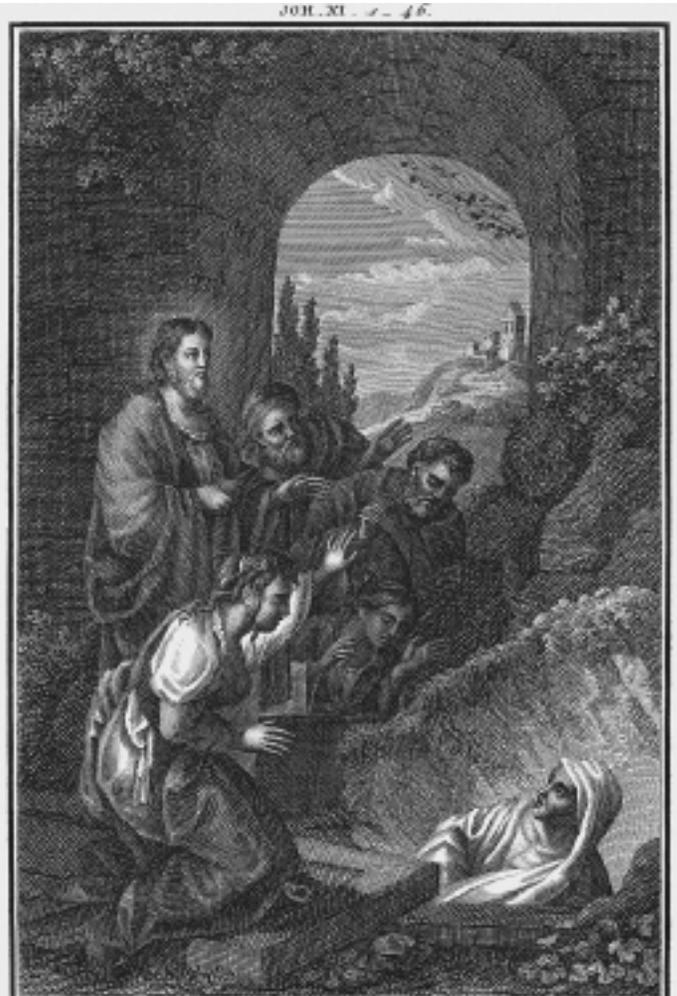
On the same day I started writing this article I received news that my brother-in-law had six to eight weeks to live. He's 57 and dying from cancer-laden brain tumours. A half century ago I was racing him around in a wheelbarrow, and he was putting ice down my back when I was asleep on his parents' couch. He was the little brother I never had, a kindred spirit, full of mischief and fun.

His wife finds it very hard accepting his imminent death, but her response has been, "Thy will be done." In the depths of her being she trusts God, but she also wonders why God made grief so much a part of his will too. And that got me thinking.

God made us in his image, so does that mean he experiences grief as well, or did he

only make tear ducts in humans to enable us to cry? We cry our eyes out when grief hits us, so does that mean he "cries his eyes out" too? We know that Jesus did. On several occasions Jesus could not hold his tears back; he cried at the death of Lazarus, he wept over the demise of Jerusalem, and he cried out with loud crying and tears in Hebrews 5:7.

Jesus was called "a man of sorrows" in Isaiah 53:3, because, same verse, he was so "acquainted with grief." But Jesus also came to reveal his Father, so is the Father like that too? Yes, he is. He was so grieved by the evil his beloved humans were capable of in Genesis 6:6-7 that, from my perspective, he must have just wanted to throw in the towel and quit his whole plan for us right there and then.



On several occasions Jesus could not hold his tears back; he cried at the death of Lazarus, he wept over the demise of Jerusalem, and he cried out with loud crying and tears in Hebrews 5:7.

The Hebrew root for "grieve" in that verse means "heartfelt anguish," which God then had to experience again and again when the Israelites could never bring themselves to trust him (Psalm 78:40-41). Israel broke God's heart as well. It was grief that his children were causing themselves so much pain and suffering because of their wrong choices.



But what we also see in his life as a human is how he got through his grief: he locked onto his Father as the only one who could help him. His closest friends, his disciples, couldn't help him. In Jesus' greatest hour of need, for instance, when his grief poured from him in droplets of blood soaked sweat, his disciples were snoring away, sound asleep. Their platitudes wouldn't have helped much anyway, though, because there was only one source Jesus could turn to for the help he needed, and that was his Father.

And what about the Holy Spirit? According to Ephesians 4:29-32, the Spirit also grieves - when we aren't kind to each other, or encouraging, or tenderhearted and forgiving. Again, like the experience of Israel, when we as God's children are not living in the truth of who we are, we hurt ourselves and others. Grieving, therefore, is very much a part of God's experience and ours.

But why?

And that's the question my brother-in-law's wife would like answered, along with why God would allow her husband to die so early in life, and in such an undeserving, heartbreaking way too, after living a life of sacrifice and service to others. She firmly believes he'll be resurrected back to life one day, but a future resurrection isn't enough to comfort her now.

A future resurrection doesn't seem to comfort people much at funerals either. Grief for the moment is so overwhelming that nothing helps to relieve it, not even knowing that one day we receive new and perfectly healed bodies.

So why did God make grief so powerful?

Well, we've covered one reason already, that God feels grief powerfully too, and he made us in his image so that we can know that about him and relate to him on that level. But there's a second reason in Scripture for God making grief so powerful: it's to get us locked onto his Son as the only one who can help us.

Jesus said exactly that in Matthew 11:28 when he cried out, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." And what more wearying burden is there in this life than grief? Lose a friend or a spouse or a child, and we never fully recover from it. Memories keep popping back, and the sadness returns. But Jesus meant what he said, because, like my brother-in-law, Jesus also lived a life of service and sacrifice for others, and in the end he too died a premature, undeserving death. So, Jesus is well acquainted with the grief that comes with life as a human.

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The author of Hebrews describes it vividly in Hebrews 5:7, that "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death."

"I've often wondered what was meant by "death" in that verse. It couldn't mean crucifixion death, because Jesus knew it wasn't his Father's will to save him from that. But grief on the scale Jesus experienced was just like a death. In Mark 14:34 Jesus actually said, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." Or as the Phillips translation phrases it, "My heart is breaking with a death-like grief."

This seems to be the "death" Jesus so desperately needed saving from, because it was drowning him. He was near to being completely paralyzed by grief. It was only God who could keep Jesus' nose just above the waterline as the weight of the world and the pressure Jesus was under tried to suck him down, down, down, into the depths of death-like despair.

It was just like that for Paul too. In 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 he admitted the most "un-apostle-like" depression when he said the pressure he was under was "far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death."

But after constantly being hassled, threatened, and nearly killed several times, it must've seemed pointless to Paul carrying on. What had he got to show for his life? Most people weren't the least bit interested in what he had to say, no matter how brilliantly he phrased it.

It's interesting, then, that it wasn't resurrection in the future Paul needed to comfort him. What he desperately needed was resurrection in the here and now. And that's exactly what he got - when he locked onto God to help him. When he realized (in verse 9) that his death-like despair "had happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God," he immediately added those four amazing words, "who raises the dead."

And Paul meant "raises the dead" in the here and now, because he goes on to say in verse 10, that "God has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us." So, he'd already experienced God saving him from drowning in grief and despair. And it was just like being resurrected from the dead, because his despair was like an unyielding quicksand sucking him down into oblivion, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. But cry out to God and God had answered, and so convincingly were Paul's cries for help answered that he knew God would answer him in the future too.

And when Jesus cried out to God to save him in Hebrews 5:7, he "was heard because of his reverent submission." When he trusted in his Father's will and wisdom, he too was raised from drowning in his death-like grief. But it was grief that taught Jesus to trust, verse 8, just like shattering grief and despair taught Paul to trust.

And how many times have I felt like David in Psalm 6:6-7 when he wrote, "I am worn out and groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears, and my eyes grow

weak with sorrow"? Maybe not drench my bed with tears yet, but I do remember the day I told my Doctor, "I cannot go on any longer," and I meant it. I was shattered.

Thirteen years later I still drown in despair at times, but learning to trust Jesus has proved to me again and again that he raises us from the dead now too.

A future resurrection to eternal life is great news for those about to die after a life of suffering and heartache (Romans 8:17), but for those of us still alive and still facing times of grief, we'll need raising from the dead a lot of times now too.

To answer my sister-in-law's question, then, as to why God makes grief - and overwhelming grief - such a necessary part of his will, it's to lock us onto Jesus to experience "the power of his resurrection," as Paul calls it in Philippians 3:10. But it's the power of Jesus' resurrection in the here and now, depending on Jesus to do for us in our lives what his Father did for him "during the days of his life on earth" as well (Hebrews 5:7).

I've learnt like Jesus and Paul, that where there is grief in the here and now there is also resurrection in the here and now. So, when Paul, back in 2 Corinthians 1:10, writes: "On God we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us," that's a guarantee we can experience again and again too.

It made me think of "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted" in Matthew 5:4. I hope Jesus doesn't mind me rephrasing that a little by saying, "An amazing experience awaits those who grieve, because when you trust me I will resurrect you from the death of your grieving. I will save you and I will comfort you, again and again. I promise."

By Jonathan Buck

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Bill Hall
**Managing Editor
Layout and Design**

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The Editor,
Northern Light Digest
203A 2121 Airport Drive
Saskatoon SK S7L 6W5
or email us at:
northernlight@gcicanada.ca

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Send all address changes to:
Northern Light Digest
203A 2121 Airport Drive
Saskatoon SK S7L 6W5
email:
northernlight@gcicanada.ca



Dear Supporter,

As Canada gets more involved in the Coronavirus crisis, I wanted to update you on a few things:

1. We have cancelled all local gatherings, (Church Services, Bible Studies, etc.) until further notice.
2. I urge you to institute an “internal support system” within your circle of friends and family. We have many friends and family who need assurance and comfort at this time. Now is the time for us all to really express that love we keep reading about in *Northern Light Digest*, and hearing about at our church services.
3. We are now offering a national live on-line Sunday Service, that happens at 9 AM Pacific Time each Sunday. Information on how to access the service is found on our website: www.gcicanada.ca

We are also making recordings of previous church services available on our website.

4. I wanted to add that because our local church services have been cancelled, we, like other churches, are facing a big decline in the donations we receive. If you are able to help us in this way, please use the enclosed envelopes to send in your offerings or donations. (We can also send you an additional supply of envelopes if you need them...just request “more envelopes”) Our office here in Saskatoon will remain open and we will continue to process the donations we receive from all donors.

You can also donate via phone using a credit card (1 (306) 653-2705), or via *Canada Helps* using the DONATE button on our website: www.gcicanada.ca

5. Finally, we will post any updates from Grace Communion International Canada on our website on a regular basis.

We are living during uncharted times. But we know we have a great God who knows our sufferings, our stresses, etc. We have a Saviour who is there to offer us his peace. May we be a people who can share that peace with our church families and all those around us.

Thank you for your prayers and for all you do.

Bill Hall
Canadian Director
