

WHAT HAPPENS IF BEREAVEMENT HITS US

Definition

There are two things that are certain in life, death and taxes as someone once said. Every day when we read the obituaries in *The Straits Times*, we see many deaths of different ages, gender, ethnic groups, backgrounds. Many funerals and burials (or cremation) are conducted daily. (Once I saw my friend in the obituary and was greatly shocked). The life expectancy of a Singaporean is estimated between 80-86 depending on your gender. There are about 20,000 deaths in 2018 in Singapore. Moses in Psalm 90:10 predicted, *'The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.'*

The death and the loss of a loved one appears to be a fearful and debilitating thing to all. Many would have attended a funeral or been at a death bed of a loved one or at least read an obituary or visited a cemetery. **As Christians, we have God given resources to handle death or bereavement when it comes to us.**

Bereavement refers to the period of mourning and grief following the loss of person (or even an animal). According to the *Cassell Concise Dictionary*, the English word bereavement means "to deprive, rob or spoil of anything" or sometimes even to seize by violence. The word bereft is to "be deprived of." "Mourning" is the word that is used to describe "the expression of sorrow or grief" (*Cassell Concise Dictionary*) or the public rituals such as holding funeral services, wearing black clothing, or the lowering of a flag to half mast. Grief refers to one's personal experience of loss; it includes physical symptoms as well as emotional and spiritual reactions to the loss. While public expressions of mourning are usually time-sensitive, grief is a process that may take most people several days, weeks, months or even years to work through if anything at all. **As Christians, we need to learn to be patient and sensitive to them during these trying times in the grace and comfort of the Lord** (i.e. the families who lost their two teenage children who were hit by the oncoming train on 9 August 2009).

Consider the list of deaths in the bible (compiled by *Wiersbe*, 32).

DEBORAH (Gen. 35:8)	ASAH (2 Sam. 2:32)
RACHEL (Gen. 35:16–20)	ABNER (2 Sam. 3:27)
ISAAC (Gen. 35:27–29)	AHITHOPHEL (2 Sam. 17:23)
NADAB AND ABIHU (Lev. 10:1–2)	DAVID (1 Kings 2:1–11; 1 Chron. 29:26–28)
MIRIAM AND AARON (Num. 20:1, 22–29)	JOAB (1 Kings 2:34)
MOSES (Deut. 34)	SOLOMON (1 Kings 11:41–43)
JOSHUA (Josh. 24:29–30)	JEROBOAM AND REHOBOAM (1 Kings 14:19–20, 31)
GIDEON (Judg. 8:32)	ASA (1 Kings 15:23–24)
SAMSON (Judg. 16:23–31)	AHAB (1 Kings 22:37–40)
ELI (1 Sam. 4:14–18)	AHAZIAH (2 Kings 9:27–28)
SAMUEL (1 Sam. 25:1)	JEHU (2 Kings 10:34–36)
SAUL AND HIS SONS (1 Sam. 31:10–13; 2 Sam. 21:12–14)	JOASH (2 Kings 12:19–21)
	JOSIAH (2 Kings 23:29–30)

Grief is real for everyone including Christians who are not exempt. Grief is an appropriate response to death, even for the believer. Solomon says well that there is time for everything *'a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance'* (Ecc 3:4). **The Christian gospel gives us great hope in the face of death, but it does not mean that there is no sorrow in that loss.** God's people mourned at the time of death in a variety of biblical passages and stories.

Consider Abraham at the time of the death of Sarah, his wife. He went to mourn for Sarah and wept over her (Genesis 23:2). Consider Joseph who when his father Jacob died: Joseph threw himself upon his father and wept over him and kissed him (Genesis 50:1). The entire people of Israel also grieved at the death of Moses, their leader. The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over (Deuteronomy 34:8). Remember the shortest verse in the bible? Our Lord himself, standing at the graveside of his friend Lazarus; *Jesus wept* (John 11:35). Our Lord cares as the hymn writer says and his ear is open to our cries, sobs, fears and grief.

To the believers at Thessalonica, Paul urges them to consider the promise of the Lord's return and the resurrection which will then take place, for this reason: *'But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.'* (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Notice that Paul does not use the hope of the coming of the Lord as a reason to avoid or eliminate grief. Rather, he points out that **a believer need not grieve excessively to the extent as though there is no hope.**

In other words, Christian grief has a definite purpose and the end of it is in the glorious hope of the appearing of Christ and our resurrection one day even in the midst of death. This is the Christian basis for solace and consolation and it is sufficient for us. 2 Corinthians 1:4 says, *'Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.'*

The Many Images of Death

The Bible uses the words die, dead, and death more than 1,300 times, and it records the deaths of many people, both good and evil. Scripture also includes dozens of images and metaphors for death (list below by *Wiersbe*, 27):

- **bowl broken** - Ecclesiastes 12:6
- **breathe your last** - Genesis 25:8, 17; 35:18, 29; 49:33; Job 14:10; Psalms 39:5, 11; 62:9; 144:4 (see also Mark 15:37 and Luke 23:46)
- **darkness; light put out** - 1 Samuel 2:9; Job 3:4-6, 9; 10:21; 12:22; 17:13; 18:5-6, 21:17; 24:17; Psalm 88:12; Proverbs 13:9; 20:20; 24:20; Ecclesiastes 6:4. Note the New Testament image in 2 Timothy 1:10.
- **devoured** - Deuteronomy 32:42; 2 Samuel 1:22; 2:26; 11:25; Isaiah 1:20; 31:8; Jeremiah 2:30; 5:17; 8:16; 12:12; 46:10, 14; Nahum 2:13. Death and the grave were sometimes personified and described as having insatiable appetites (Isaiah 5:14; Habakkuk 2:5; Proverbs 27:20; 30:15-16). God's promise was that He would swallow up death and it would be no more (see Isaiah 25:7-8; 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Revelation 20:14; 21:4).
- **sleep** - Paul calls the Christian dead "those who have fallen asleep in him (Jesus)" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). However, nowhere are we told that Jesus "fell asleep" in death, because He tasted the full impact of death on the cross. Because of His sufferings, death for us has lost its terror and its sting and may be compared to falling asleep. Of course, it is the body of the believer that sleeps; the spirit goes to be with Christ (Acts 7:60). See also Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; John 11:11; Acts 13:36; 1 Corinthians I 1: 30; 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; 5:10. To "die in the Lord" means to be at rest (Revelation 14:13).
- **absent from the body** - The spirit departs from the body and goes to be with Christ (2 Corinthians 5:8; James 2:26). In 2 Corinthians 5:1-4, Paul intimates that there is an "intermediate body" of some kind as saints await the resurrection, but assures us that one day we will have permanent immortal glorified bodies.
- **changing clothes** - 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. See also 2 Corinthians 5:1-4; Philippians 3:20-21; and I John 3:1-3.
- **departure** - The Greek word gives us the English word "analysis" and it was used to describe a soldier taking down a tent and moving on, a ship setting sail, the unyoking of oxen, and the solving of a problem. Simeon

used it of his own death (Luke 2:29), and Paul used it in Philippians 1:23 and 2 Timothy 4:6. For the believer, death means the battles are over, the burdens are set aside, and we move to a better country where we will understand the mysteries that perplexed us in life. *'Taking down a tent'* is found also in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4 and 2 Peter 1: 13-14.

- **exodus** - On the Mount of Transfiguration, this is what Jesus called His own death (Luke 9:31). Just as Moses had led the people of Israel out of Egyptian bondage, so our Lord leads sinners out of bondage through His death and resurrection (Colossians 1:12-14). Peter used the word to describe his impending death (2 Peter 1:15).

Wiersbe adds,

"Note in the book of job the pictures of the swiftness and brevity of life. They include the weaver's shuttle (7:6), a breath (7:7), a passing cloud (7:9, and see James 4:14), a vapour, a swift messenger (9:25), a swift ship and flying eagle (9:26), a withering flower (14:2), a passing shadow (14:2), and a dream vanished (20:8-9)."

Bereavement is a highly individual and a complex experience as well. No two people respond the same way to the losses associated with the death of a loved one. People's reactions to a death are influenced by such factors as ethnic or religious traditions; personal beliefs about life after death; the type of relationship ended by death (relative, friend, colleague, etc.); the cause of death; the person's age at death; whether the death was sudden or expected; and many others.

In addition, the death of a loved one inevitably confronts adults (and older adolescents and children) with the fact that they too will die. So Moses said in Psalm 90:12, *'So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom'* and Paul in Ephesians 5:16-17 said, *'Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.'*

Death can occur in unexpected moments. There are examples of people who died suddenly in an accident (MH370 passengers and their family members) or those from long term diseases like heart failure or cancer or stroke, whether terminal or debilitating illness that slowly weaken us. Pastors, care givers and counselors recognize that bereavement has possible two aspects to it, the actual loss and the symbolic losses.

The Grieving Process

The immediate cause of bereavement is usually the death of a loved friend or relative. There are situations, however, which can affect or prolong the grief process. They are:

- The relationship with the dead person was a source of sorrow or anger rather than love and support.
- The young man's 2 back passengers who died in a car accident recently and another in a marathon were unexpected. Bereavement in these cases is often made more difficult by intrusive news reporters as well as concern over the loved one's possible physical or mental suffering prior to death.
- The person was killed mysteriously. Survivors of homicide victims often find the legal system, police investigation and the media intrusion disturbing.
- The person is missing in action and presumed dead (MH370) but their death has not been verified. As a result, friends and relatives may alternate between grief and hope that the person is still alive (Silkair disaster in Palembang, Indonesia in 2002).
- The person committed suicide. Survivors may feel guilt over their inability to foresee or prevent the suicide, shame that the death was self-inflicted, or anger at the person who committed suicide (incident of Robert Yeo of *Helping Hand*).
- The relationship with the dead person cannot be openly acknowledged. The person could be a homosexual or there is extramarital sexual relationship that has been kept secret for the sake of spouses or other family members and loved one or one who died of an infectious disease (i.e. SARs victims in 2003).

- The dead could be a pet animal like dog, cat, hamster or goldfish rather than a human being. In some cultures or societies there even have an elaborate burial or cremation for the animal and invite other pets to attend the funeral (note that a pet has no soul unlike a human being and there should not be excessive mourning process).

Possible Signs and Symptoms

Bereavement can affect a person's physical and psychological well-being as well as emotionally. Some experience changes in appetite and weight, insomnia and other sleep disturbances, loss of interest in work or studies, low energy levels, chest or throat pain, and other possible psychosomatic ailments. People who have lost a loved one in traumatic circumstances may have such symptoms of an exaggerated response in crying, visual or auditory hallucinations, or even muscular tension.

Doctors, pastors and other counsellors have identified four possible stages or phases in bereavement:

1. **Shock, and non-acceptance.** This initial phase lasts about 2-3 weeks, during which the bereaved person finally accepts the reality of the loved one's death.
2. **Agony of grief.** This phase typically lasts for several weeks or months. Some people undergo a mild temporary downcast spirit for about 3-6 months after the loved one's death.
3. **Depression.** In this phase of bereavement, survivors may find themselves taking on the loved one's roles and responsibilities as well as redefining their own identities.
4. **Final Acceptance.** Forming new relationships, and having positive expectations of the future. Most people reach this stage within one to two years after the loved one's death. (i.e. even remarriage for some in due time if they lose their spouse)

(see also *Wiersbe*, 68-70 which elaborates further and puts the process as shock, strong emotion, depression, fear, guilt and even anger and later acceptance.)

In some cases some cannot function normally and keep thinking of the dead person, long to be with him or her, and may feel that part of them died along with the loved one. They sometimes behave like the deceased person, imitating the dead or speak about "joining" the loved one in death, refusing to accept the reality of the death.

Spiritual Help or Treatment

Most people do not require formal treatment for bereavement. In the early 2000s, however, many people choose to participate in support groups for recently bereaved people or hospice follow-up programmes for relatives of patients who died in that hospice. Bereavement support groups like the church and family are particularly helpful in guiding members through such common but painful problems as disposing of the dead person's possessions, celebrating holidays without the loved one, coping with death anniversaries, etc.

We need time to recover and repair and God is our refuge and fortress in times like this (Psa 46:1). The purpose of a funeral is 3-fold, to glorify God (worshipping and evangelism), to fortify the living (bereaved) and to dignify the dead (i.e. proper burial). Helping practically in the funeral arrangements is needed for the bereaved family especially the financial and emotional concerns (i.e. a funeral can cost between S\$5,000 - S\$20,000 here). Burial and not cremation or sea burial is recommended for the proper disposal of the redeemed dead (Deut 34:3-4).

Traumatic grief may require temporary use of medications to control sleep disturbances and anxiety symptoms along with other practical therapy like rest and exercise and prayers. Support groups of people may be needed to deal with sudden and violent loss. Complicated grief can be managed with a combination of group and individual counseling and corporate and individual prayer and comfort in the Word of the Lord.

Warren Wiersbe gave these helping tips below (*Ministering to the Mourning*, 77):

Ten Commandments for Caregivers

1. When death occurs in a family, immediately go to see them.
2. Do a great deal of listening. Allow people to express their thoughts and feelings without instantly correcting their bad theology or rebuking their bad attitudes.
3. Emphasize the promises of God and the unchanging love of God.
4. Leave the mysteries of life and death unexplained. Be willing to say, "I don't know." *'weep with them that weep'* (Rom 12:15), but avoid saying, "I know just how you feel." They do not think you do.
5. Never underestimate the powerful ministry of presence (and prayer). Simply being there often means more than what we say or do.
6. Allow mourners to grieve or share in their own way, at their own pace (for a closure).
7. Remind yourself that grieving is a complex process that requires time.
8. Stay in touch with those who mourn. Let them know you are available even after the funeral.
9. Keep confidential what you see and hear in private.
10. Help to do things for them i.e. buy food, send the children to school do the house chores...etc.

Supporting a child through grief and bereavement

Melinda Smith, M.A., and Jeanne Segal, PhD has some good advice here below

Even very young children feel the pain of bereavement, but they learn how to express his or her grief by watching the adults around them. After a loss - particularly of a sibling or parent - children need support, stability, and honesty. They may also need extra reassurance that they will be cared for and kept safe. As an adult, you can support children through the grieving process by demonstrating that it's alright to be sad and helping them make sense of the loss.

Answer any questions the child may have as truthfully as you can. Use very simple, honest, and concrete terms when explaining death to a child. Children - especially young children - may blame themselves for what happened and the truth helps them see they are not at fault.

Open communication will smooth the way for a child to express distressing feelings. Because children often express themselves through stories, games, and artwork, encourage this self-expression, and look for clues in those activities about how they are coping.

How to help a grieving child:

- Allow your child, however young, to attend the funeral if he or she wants to.
- Convey your spiritual values about life and death, or pray with your child.
- Meet regularly as a family to find out how everyone is coping.
- Help children find ways to symbolize and memorialize the deceased person.
- Keep your child's daily routine as normal as possible.
- Pay attention to the way a child plays; this can be one of a child's primary ways of communicating.

Look out for any of the following warning signs after the initial grieving period—especially if it's is prolonged over two months or more since the death that may require specialist attention.

- Difficulty functioning in daily life
- Extreme focus on the death
- Excessive bitterness, anger, or guilt
- Neglecting personal hygiene
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Inability to enjoy life
- Hallucinations
- Withdrawing from others
- Constant feelings of hopelessness
- Talking about dying or suicide

Conclusion

As Christians, we need to help others not to fear death for Christ is Victor over the grave and has given that victory to us as well. 1 Corinthians 15:57-58 says, *'But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.'* Bereavement is real and considered a normal response to death and loss. It should ordinarily be allowed to run its course; death is the last enemy that all must face one day and grief is necessary for recovery for the living when they faced the loss of a loved one for their own mental well-being and for a proper closure in their lives. We are people of hope and not doom.

The Christian hope of the resurrection based on Christ's resurrection provides a sure comfort and solace (2 Corinthians 1:4) for those who grieve, as it focuses the believer on the one who has the keys of death and the grave. **Remember at the centre of the funeral is not a dead body but a living God who cares and is coming again to resurrect us all (Revelation 1:18).** Let us work and glorify God while there is yet breath in our nostrils. Those who are in Christ will have a blessed ending and those who serve the Lord faithfully will have even a greater surprise at the end of their lives John in Revelation 14:13 says, *'And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them.'*

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