Judging by the comments I have heard from counselees, and the eavesdropped remarks of those who have tried to offer comfort, many seem to misconceive that our position of hope in Christ gives little or no place for grief. Scriptural passages like 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 have been interpreted unwisely to produce guilt when grief seems too entrenched even for hope to lift the spirit out of its seeming quagmire. “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”

For some, sorrow must somehow be punctuated by a contrived statement of hope or purpose. We know the troubles with Job’s friends, but seem drawn to repeat them. We minimize grief through rationalization, or else we rush into hope—overemphasizing joy to displace sorrow—and devaluing the significance of grief and hope and sorrow and joy in the end. Somehow, we fear that a severe grieving over pain and suffering, even death, is indicative of a lack of belief in the certainty of hope, salvation in God, and His promised future.

Indirectly, we fear that a failure on our part to lift the sufferer into joy bespeaks the emptiness of that promise should suffering become our visitor. We fail to realize that if hope was indeed real, we need not forcefully wedge it into grief. When grieving is given its cycle of life and death, true hope will remain—secured and deeply appreciated.

How Should the People of Hope Grieve?

Reading more carefully, Paul’s instruction to the Thessalonians was not a call to stop grieving, but, in fact, to grieve as people with hope, not as people without hope. The question becomes: how should the people of hope grieve?

Again, Scripture provides perspective: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). Importantly, this statement sits in the middle of a discourse on love. The context is predicated by a reminder that “love must be sincere” (v. 9). In fact, the message of Paul in Romans 12:9-21 takes on profound meaning when exercised within a context of grieving. If we truly love someone, we will participate fully with them in grief.

Grieving does not betray hope; it neither speaks for, nor against, it. Grieving is for the moment; grieving can be for life. Grieving may not stop until that moment when our Lord personally wipes our tears away (Revelations 21:4). For believers, grieving in not eternal! Joy is! Until then, joy and sorrow co-exist: in the midst of sorrow there can be laughter and in the midst of joy there can be sadness. We must allow both to have their time.

How Should Companions in Life Minister?

The problem with mourning is not in a lack of understanding the promise of hope, but in a lack of companionship while grieving. Ecclesiastes 4:10 explains, “If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” The flood of support and fellowship
in suffering typically comes in a moment (e.g., funeral), but supporters do not suffer with the griever nearly as long as they should ("charity suffereth long," 1 Corinthians 13:4, KJV).

For instillers of hope (spiritual friends, pastors, and counselors), the best account in Scripture that we must keep in mind is Jesus’ rising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:12). The account is familiar: Jesus’ dear friend, Lazarus, was dying (actually he was allowed to die). But Jesus delayed His going to him so that the power and glory of God could be manifested in Jesus. When He finally arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days. For four days, Mary, Martha, and everyone else there had been grieving. While the most powerful moment came when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the most touching came moments before it: “When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” (John 11:33-36).

Jesus came to teach, to preach the good news, to heal, and ultimately to save. Yet, given His power and purpose, it was not beyond our Lord to grieve and weep. His grieving was so deep and sincere that even the Jews recognized and exclaimed His love for Lazarus. There are many passages where the authors have attested to the love of Jesus for others; this is the only account where His love was so visibly evident that the author recorded the observation and proclamation of love by non-followers of Jesus—the Jews. Remarkably, it happened while Jesus was sharing in the grief of His friends.

Jesus said, “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master” (Matthew 10:24-25). When grief enters into our lives, or when our relationships and professions compel us to enter into other people’s grief, we should join the hurting in their grief, suffer long in love, not rush into hope, but give grieving its time. Hope will come and it will stay.

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