

Part C) Dealing with the Guilt of Grief

In the first two lessons of the series, we covered Five Sobering Thoughts About Grieving and then The Five Steps of Grieving. In this lesson we will deal with a topic that is very common in the lives of those that are grieving, the guilt of grief.

Guilt in Grief Examples

When Jesus was facing His own death, it was a difficult time for all. The tensions were high and the prospects were low. All the disciples were jockeying for position of power and there was a lot to be guilty about concerning their behavior. There were two disciples in particular that stood in contrast to each other concerning guilt in grieving circumstances, Judas and Peter. Both had much reason to carry guilt in their hearts concerning the death of Jesus, but the end results could not have been more opposite.

Guilt Gone Wrong: Judas and the Guilt of Betrayal

- Matthew 27:3-5 Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, ⁴ saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But they said, “What is that to us? See *to that* yourself!” ⁵ And he threw the pieces of silver into the temple sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself.
- Acts 1:17-18 “For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry.” ¹⁸ (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out.

Judas had been setting himself up for this moment for at least the last three years as he followed Jesus around for more than three years. The thought that he had betrayed Jesus was more than he could bear, ultimately leading to the unhealthy reaction of suicide.

Guilt Gone Right: Peter and the Guilt of Denial

- Matthew 26:69-75 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came to him and said, “You too were with Jesus the Galilean.” ⁷⁰ But he denied *it* before them all, saying, “I do not know what you are talking about.” ⁷¹ When he had gone out to the gateway, another *servant-girl* saw him and said to those who were there, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁷² And again he denied *it* with an oath, “I do not know the man.” ⁷³ A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Surely you too are *one* of them; for even the way you talk gives you away.” ⁷⁴ Then he began to curse and swear, “I do not know the man!” And immediately a rooster crowed. ⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the word which Jesus had said, “Before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” And he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter also had been with Jesus for more than three years, yet in three short hours there were three quick denials that would close his earthly relationship to Christ. He would have to take this grief into the death of his friend and Savior Jesus. The mere thought of this predicted act of denial was enough to drive Peter to weep bitterly as he fled his Lord and Savior His hour of need. Yet we know that this is not where it ended. It took just a few days and he was already in recovery from the pain, running in a foot race with John to the empty tomb of Jesus. Within forty more days he

would be back in full fellowship with Jesus and leading in the early church. He recovered well from the guilt of grief that could have easily crushed him if certain steps were not taken.

There are many types of guilt that we can experience while being in grieving mode. The following is just a few of the incidents that can occur.

Guilt of Neglect

Resources:

There once was a mother that suddenly lost her daughter in a car accident. The grief was naturally great and she was a frequenter to the cemetery for gravesite visitations. Every year she made several large purchases at the cemetery flower shop. For Christmas she bought the wreath, grave blanket and vesper light. For Memorial Day she purchased a beautiful vase of fresh-cut flowers. For the daughter's birthday she usually purchased another bouquet of flowers and some balloons. There were a few other holidays and events that the mother purchased something to display on the grave. For one birthday she even purchased a memorial bench to be placed under a tree near the burial site.

One day I asked her why she did so much concerning this. She replied, "If she was alive I would be spending this money on her. I feel obligated and incomplete if I do not do it when she is gone." That really made an impact on me for what was driving this behavior was the guilt of neglect. She felt that by not doing this that she would be neglectful in her provisional duties as a mother.

Time:

In our personal relationships with other, therewith lies the responsibility to set aside the time necessary to invest in those associations. I have met countless family members and friends that said they wish they would have taken more time with their loved ones if only they would have known of the impending death.

In our fast pace world of sports, work and recreation, we tend to lose track of this. If we are not careful, our family relationships will pass us by in a way that will lead to much regret. Those children and grandchildren are only going to be with us for a few more years and then off they go. Those parents and grandparents will only be with us a few short years and then there will not be any more time to spend with them. We must never forget that time is a moving barometer on the lives of those whom we hold dear. If we neglect it, it will not be an asset, but an adversary of regret.

Guilt of Abuse

Violence:

Perhaps the relationship had a component of physical violence with it. To the man that was physically abusive to his wife prior to her death the guilt would be great. I have known parents that were physically abusive to their children when death paid a visit to the family. The guilt was great because there seemed nothing that could be done about the overwhelming sense of added pain.

Verbal:

Words can often hurt as much as physical violence and can leave a great guilt in the heart of the person left behind. I once knew of a case where a mother was arguing with her child about an issue concerning behavior. The mother said some pretty cruel things and the son stormed out. Those would be the last words they ever shared together because that night the son died in a drunk-driving car accident. The guilt for that mother was great and it was exhibited for years through unresolved difficulties.

Guilt of Circumstances

Accidental

There are so many things that are out of our control, including the death of a loved one. There once was a father that used to do the work on the cars of his children. When one of these children died in a car accident, he felt so responsible thinking his workmanship might have contributed to the accident.

Consequential

How many times have you know people that had habits that were detrimental to their health and then it finally caught up to them. To the smoker that puffed away for decades there will likely be a linked cause of death. Also to the drinker, the over-eater, the speedster, the angry man, the violent man and the dishonest man will all likely contribute to their own death through the ensuing ramifications of their choosing. WE ALL HAVE SOMETHING LIKE THIS!

There once was a widower that lost his wife to skin cancer. She used to tan all the time and yet he knew it was not good for her. He only mentioned it a few times because he did not want to get into an argument about it. He actually suffered guilt because he felt he should have taken a greater stand against it. This is a type of guilt that people actually suffer from while in the grieving process.

How to Deal with the Guilt in Grief

2 Samuel 12:16-23 David therefore inquired of God for the child; and David fasted and went and lay all night on the ground. ¹⁷ The elders of his household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them. ¹⁸ Then it happened on the seventh day that the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead, for they said, "Behold, while the child was *still* alive, we spoke to him and he did not listen to our voice. How then can we tell him that the child is dead, since he might do *himself* harm!" ¹⁹ But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, David perceived that the child was dead; so David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." ²⁰ So David arose from the ground, washed, anointed *himself*, and changed his clothes; and he came into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he came to his own house, and when he requested, they set food before him and he ate. ²¹ Then his servants said to him, "What is this thing that you have done? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but when the child died, you arose and ate food." ²² He said, "While the

child was *still* alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, ‘Who knows, the LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live.’²³ “But now he has died; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me.”²⁴ Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her; and she gave birth to a son, and he named him Solomon.

1) Remember to admit the Guilt.

David had a lot of sin leading up to this tragic event. He had an adulterous relationship with Bathsheba; he had Uriah the Hittite killed in battle against the Ammonites. In fact the child that had died was the result of the sin in David’s life. I am sure that went through David’s mind once or twice while he prostrated on the ground before God in tears and prayer.

We also must remember that our own lives are not perfect. There might have been some friction between you and the person that passed away. There might even be some regrets in the shortcomings that were obvious to all. Perhaps we blew the opportunity to say “I love you” to our dearly departed before they met their fate. It does not matter who the person is, there are always imperfections in the relationships with others. We must admit the Guilt of Grief if we are ever going to begin the healing process that is so earnestly desired.

2) Remember your intentions were good.

While the child was alive, David fasted and petitioned to God on his behalf. This went on for a week, which is quite a long time to struggle with it. When the elders tried to comfort him, he refused.

You were not perfect, but the odds are that your intentions were good. I have met very few parents, children, relatives or friends that did not have good intentions when it came to their relationship with another.

Look at the overall relationship and ask yourself the question, “Did I really have good intentions?” I have spoken with many parents who have lost children and there is often unnecessary guilt left behind. They forgot about all the meals, the clothing, the gifts, the time and the love showed the child before they passed. They were not perfect as mentioned and their intentions were good. They needed to give themselves credit where the credit was do.

The Guilt-Ridden Father

There was a father named Claude. He was a hard worker to provide for his wife and children, often being gone for twelve to fourteen hours of the day. He reasoned to work hard now and in the future he would be able to have more time off to spend with his daughters. He was what we call today a “Workaholic”. Often he would arrive home after the children were already tucked into bed. Initially his heart was heavy because he really wanted to be there for them, but over time it had become a habit. “Maybe when the schedule lightens up” he reasoned, but the time just got away.

Then one day his daughter Deb, the four year old, was feeling rather sick. Over the past few weeks she had a low-grade temperature and a number of bruises that simply did not go away. His wife took Deb to the doctor and he immediately sent them to the hospital.

Claude received a phone call from his wife that day; his daughter Deb had Leukemia. Claude's heart was crushed.

He cleared his schedule and immediately moved it up on his priority list. With great tears and prayers unto God, he cried out for help. Over the next couple months the doctors and nurses tried everything to no avail. Four months to the day, little Deb's casket was lowered down into a cold December grave.

For many months, Claude had great regret over the time he could have spent with his daughter instead of working. Whenever he would see his other two daughters, the memories of Deb wanting her daddy to tuck her in would haunt him. "If only I had taken time to show her my love" he exclaimed. The guilt was terrible. He could not get past that in his life. If you were to go to his daughter's gravesite today, there her father is buried next to her, having died in his forties of broken heart.

3) Remember that God's decision is final.

When David found out that his son was dead, he washed, anointed and clothed himself and went into the house of the LORD to worship. Following that he sat at the table and ate food. When the elders asked him about this, he basically claimed that the final decision rested with God and that the decision was made. Without the understanding of finality in death there can be no removal of guilt. Only at the point of understanding there is nothing we can do to reverse it can we call upon the mercy of the Lord for a solution.

4) Remember to comfort others.

Notice that David immediately went to comfort Bathsheba. Even though we do not have the scripture detailing the sufferings of Bathsheba, we know that she also lost her son. We also know that she was in need of comfort and that the birth of another son, Solomon, brought her that comfort. Common sense would tell us that she was hurting inside and in need of consolation. David saw that need and went to meet it.

Even when you have already gone through the prior three steps of dealing with the Guilt of Grief, there is yet another step, remembering to comfort others.

Remember the four important steps in dealing with guilt in grief.

1. Remember to Admit Your Guilt
2. Remember Your Intentions
3. Remember that God's Decision is Final
4. Remember to Comfort Others