



The children had been sitting with their dying mother for several days. On our first visit Edith and I - along with the family - expected that God would call the mother home any hour. On our second visit, some three days later, we again sat with the family, expecting God to call her home any moment. After reading Psalm 23 and praying slowly and clearly so their dear mother could hear, one daughter asked, "*Pastor Walter, why is death so hard?*" I sensed deep emotions.

How would **you** answer this question?

How have **you** answered this question?

Have **you** ever asked, sitting with a dear loved one, just hours before God calls him/her home, "Why is death so hard?"

Remember, here is a grieving daughter who deeply loves her mother. This grieving daughter has watched her mother suffer a long time. The family members felt loved by their mother all their lives - and now this daughter, as all the other children in the room, found it hard to see their mother in such agony.

The question, "Pastor Walter, why is death so hard?" may not have been a question at all. Was it an expression of grief, of sympathy, of love? It may not have been this at all. Was this question really an expression of anger directed towards God? Was this daughter pointing to God and accusing God, "Why, God, is death so hard for my mother?" Only God and this daughter knew her deep emotions.

Only after we have been in such a difficult valley will we begin to sit with a grieving family and not respond with a quick answer.

I chose not to answer the question. I could not give a quick answer. Instead, I took it as an agonizing plea - such as Jesus' anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). I was silent for maybe a minute. Words often do more harm than good in times of grief. Then I referred to Jesus' own grief in the story in John 11. We know the story of how Jesus cared for the two sisters, Martha and Mary, at their brother's, Lazarus' grave. Possibly beneath Martha's question was a deeper one. Was Martha really asking, "*Jesus, why is the death of Lazarus so hard?*"

Certainly we must focus on Jesus' words of hope and assurance, "I am the resurrection and the life." These words give us hope in our grief. We can compare these words to the main strong root that gives nourishment and life to a large plant. Without a strong root a plant will not survive - and certainly not thrive. In a similar manner, Jesus is the root that gives life and hope to us who believe in Him, especially in times of despair and grief.

But, even as we must focus on Jesus' promise we cannot miss the equally strong emphasis in this story that is on Jesus' compassion. There are at least seven references to how deeply Jesus cared in John 11:33-38. The text suggests that Jesus' love was so deep that John remembered that love some sixty years later when he wrote the gospel of John.

Jesus' example is a model that we must follow. Jesus cared deeply from his heart. He did not only speak promises with his mouth.

May Jesus' compassion, expressed in seven specific ways, inspire us:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Jesus saw Mary weeping. 11:33
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Jesus saw the Jews who had come along with Mary also weeping. 11:33
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Jesus was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 11:33

- 4<sup>th</sup> Jesus asked, “Where have you laid him?” 11:34
- 5<sup>th</sup> Jesus wept. 11:35
- 6<sup>th</sup> The Jews recognized how deeply Jesus loved Lazarus. Jesus’ expressed his emotions - he did not keep his emotions in check. 11:36
- 7<sup>th</sup> As Jesus came to the tomb he was “once more deeply moved.” 11:38

In this story Jesus demonstrated that we must care when someone is in a crisis - be this grief, depression, despair or hopelessness. A crisis, such as the death of a brother in this story or a mother in the story I began with, will not be desired. But this crisis is the window of opportunity we have to minister to a person’s heart and soul.

We might not agree, but studies show what the number one contributor to spiritual growth is:

✗ not transformational teaching, or being in a small group, or even reading deep books, or even having energetic worship experiences.

✓ instead, it is seasons of loss, pain, crisis.

Yet - what do we focus on and trust will make the necessary spiritual changes we desire in our own lives and in the lives of people in our church family? Don’t we depend on our programs. Don’t we believe, that if we get our programs just right, people’s lives will change? Certainly worship services and teaching opportunities are important.

But, God is also providing many opportunities for us and our church people to become like Jesus in the daily, hard situations of life. Yet, are we missing these because we are expecting Him to bless mainly in the planned church activities.

The people in our church family are facing one crisis after crisis. Many look back in their lives - grieving over children and grandchildren who are rejecting their faith and their God. Our people regret many lost opportunities. They look in the mirror with a sense of disappointment and loss, maybe even shame. They look ahead, facing their own deteriorating health or that of their loved ones. Some are confronted with terminal health issues.

*As we visit and provide care we have an option. Will we minimize their loss) and give platitudes, quick promises and shallow prayers? Or will we sit with our people in their loss and regrets - knowing God will walk with them - as He is walking with us in our crisis?*

*A deeper reading of John 11 may suggest the main emphasis is Jesus’ care, his silence and coming along side - and not the promise we focus on, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Certainly we believe and preach this promise, but may we also follow Jesus who came beside two friends and wept with them.*

☹ - Perhaps Paul’s command, “**mourn with those who mourn,**” Romans 12:15,

is disobeyed more than any other command.

When people mourn, we should not:

- ✘ - give good advice to those who mourn. Usually they know the answers.
- ✘ - tell mourners to shape up because other people have it worse
- ✘ - make comparisons to other people
- ✘ - rebuke mourners because we are to “rejoice in the Lord always”
- ✘ - give answers or formulas
- ✘ - minimize their loss

We need to ask ourselves, does being around someone who is unhappy (mourning) get in the way of our own demand for happiness? Are we uncomfortable with those who grieve? Can we stand the silence of grief? Do we deal with grief by needing to say something, anything, that is often very unhelpful.

The most important thing in a crisis:

✓ **Presence = quietness / listening**

When we quietly sit with a person in her grief and crisis, we demonstrate a deep trust that our God is able to care for us and for the person we are with, and that **He** will walk with us in every “valley of death” and in every crisis.

There may be more truth to the one line, “**Be still and know that I am God,**” that we will only demonstrate when **we** are **still** - than in all the preaching and teaching a mourning person will ever hear.

A lesson from Job’s three friends: “they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him...they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.” Job 2:11-13

“*Sympathize*” - a Hebrew verb that means “body movement, shaking back & forth, nodding the head.” Job’s friends’ love was so strong, their grief was so great, that they sat next to Job and took on his anguish - for seven days.

Jews speak of “sitting shiva” - literally “*sitting sevens.*” A Jewish tradition is that friends will come and sit with one who mourns for a period of one week.

**Ministry in crisis takes time:**

- We cannot mourn in a hurry.
- Is our pace of life so fast that we cannot mourn with those who mourn? Do we have time to mourn with those whom God calls us to mourn with?

If we don’t, and if some day our own time for mourning comes - and it will come - who will mourn with us? Who will take time to sit with us when we experience deep loss?

**Crisis can purify our own ministry & our own lives!**

Crisis is not just something we minister **to** - it is something we minister **from**.

This means - when we come to a person who is in crisis - the issue is not primarily what we can **give to** the person. The primary issue is what is happening in **our own soul**. Can we rest and be still - trusting God will quiet us and hold us? When our faith is secure in our Almighty God, then we can begin to minister **from** a deep trust in God. Then the person in crisis will feel the care and love from God because we are feeling it as well.

One of the most misquoted verses you'll never find in the Bible is this one: *"God will never give me more than I can handle."*

We confuse this with another promise - that about temptation -

*"God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" - 1 Corinthians 10:13*

Often God does give us more than we can handle so that we'll have to trust him.

However, the "American Life" and "Canadian Life" is designed to keep us from the point of desperation. This is the very place where faith and trust in God actually begin. But, we don't want to be weak. We want to be heroic, powerful, and important. We are conditioned (even in church) to overcome obstacles, not embrace our limitations.

God's desire is to work through human vulnerability rather than overcome it. God's way is not to take us out of trials, but to comfort us with **his presence** in the midst of them. We can only be sensitized to the sufferings and grief of other people when we are in touch with our own suffering.

You will never be placed in a situation **God** can't handle.

*"Lord - help me to remember that nothing is going to happen to me today that **You** and I together can't handle."*

God isn't at work producing the circumstances I want.

God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the person **He** wants.

**Crisis can deepen love:**

*"As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is the **resetting of a Body of broken bones**."* - Thomas Merton

In normal times, isolation hurts.

**In crisis, isolation kills.**

In normal times, community blesses.

**In crisis, community saves.**

Maybe we will bless more people with our **limp** than with our **strength**.

Maybe we will care deeper with our **silence** than with our profound **words**.

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- initial thoughts from Don't Waste A Crisis, Leadership Journal, pp 36 - 40, John Ortberg,
  - also from The Way of Weakness, Leadership Journal, Winter, 2014, pp. 40 – 44, Mike Erre,
  - Ruth Haley Barton, Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership, Seeking God in the Crucible of Ministry
  - Pastor Walter Wiens, revised February, 2018