

The Grief/Faith Relationship and the Disabling Effect of Unresolved Grief

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Abstract: The emotional trauma of grief can be disabling. The Biblical story of Ruth and Naomi is a metaphor for better understanding the relationship between grief and faith. The grief/faith relationship will be examined from several different points of view. This article will explore the theory and hypothesis of whether or not a person involved in an active Christian life will experience a strengthening of their faith because of the grief/faith relationship. The research method used to gain information about the grief/faith relationship was Thomas Groom's *shared Christian praxis*. First Baptist Church, Augusta, Georgia (USA) has for 26 years (1998) conducted Grief Ministry Workshops. In these workshops, participants share about their grief/faith story through writing and verbally engaging in group dialogue. The information gathered from these many years of ministering to and consulting with these workshop participants has been very beneficial to examining the influence grief has on faith and faith has on grief. This article will address the Biblical and Theological interpretation of the grief/faith relationship, as well as the Psychological and Sociological dimensions of grief and faith. The concept of Reframing grief will be discussed in detail. Theodicy and Free Will are theological issues that have a major influence of grief. These concepts will be explored as they impact the grief/faith relationship. The article will conclude with a critical analysis of whether or not the shared Christian praxis approach is an effective method in gathering the needed information for a study of the grief/faith relationship.

Keywords: faith and grief relationship, "Christian praxis," the Bible and grief, reframing grief, individual lament, national lament, theodicy, free will.

Introduction

Grief is an experience that most people must face one or more times in their lives. While we often think we know how faith affects one's grief,¹ what we need to know is how grief affects one's faith. What is the grief/faith relationship? Does the experience of grief shape or reshape the topography of one's faith?

¹ Granger E. Westberg, *Good Grief* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 84. "Persons who are spiritually more mature seem to be able to wrestle more effectively (with grief) because they are aided by the conviction that God is with them. They do not feel that they have to face the present and the future alone."

Discovering more information about the grief/faith relationship has the potential to inform ministry in response to those who grieve. There is the distinct possibility that a person experiencing the emotional trauma of grief might become spiritually disabled. A person with a disability usually has some limitations or restrictions. All types of grief can alter our normal functions at home, work or in other important settings.

Grief can be defined as the emotional feeling a person experiences after any loss. We usually associate grief as the feeling we have when we experience the loss of a loved one or friend to death. But grief can be felt with any loss such as the loss of health, job, relationships, divorce, infertility, infidelity, retirement, loss of relationship with God, and even living life in a war zone, i.e. Ukraine, can bring us grief.

Theory and Hypothesis

The occasion of grief often has a major effect on one's faith. Glen Davidson writes, "Nothing reveals true faith more decisively than a reaction to the loss of a loved one."² In his book, *Good Grief*, Granger E. Westberg suggests, "Depending upon the way we respond to this event (grief) we are either stronger people than we were before or weaker – either healthier in spirit or sicker."³ For some mourners the loss is total, "Since my wife died, I have nothing to live for, why did God punish me so?" Others wrap themselves in theological cliché, "It's just God's will." Some allow grief to reveal more about God. Walter Brueggemann suggests that Old Testament believers see loss as the occasion to rediscover the historical fact that the Lord can intervene in human affairs to "create new heavens and a new earth... (where) no more will the sound of weeping be heard." (Isaiah 65:17, 19)

This article will focus on the effects that the grief/faith relationship has on one's Christian faith. The underlying hypothesis is that persons involved in an active Christian life will experience a strengthening of their faith because of the grief/faith relationship. An active Christian life is defined as persons who attend church regularly and allow their faith to influence their daily living. A definition of the grief/faith relationship is found in this literary couplet:

Allow Your *Faith* to Inform Your *Grief* and...
Allow Your *Grief* to Inform Your *Faith*.⁴

Faith can and should inform our grief. Some people assume that, if you are a Christian, your faith will inevitably provide an advantage during the grief process. They might often quote 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14: "But I would not have you be uninformed, my friends, concerning those who are already dead. You should not be weighed down in grief, like those who have *no hope or faith*. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, God will bring back to life those who believe in Jesus." Our faith in Jesus Christ as

² Glen Davidson, *Understanding Mourning* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), 41. See also: Alan D. Wolfelt, *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*, 2nd ed. (Companion Press, 2021).

³ Westberg, *Good Grief*, 83.

⁴ Rodger Murchison, *Guide for Grief* (Michigan: Read the Spirit Books, 2011), 18.

our Lord and Savior can tell our grief that there is hope and a future. Grief does not have to make us disabled. Our faith should inform our grief.

One interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 is to affirm that those who are Christians will find grief more endurable and less likely to be disabling, but this assumption has an obvious flaw. The Apostle Paul affirms that Christians “should not” grieve like others who are not Christians because Christians do have hope and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But the issue is: Will Christians recognize the hope that is available? Will Christians utilize that hope in the face of grief? Some Christians may not even relate their faith to their grief.

Another powerful text that can influence those who mourn is John 11:25: “Jesus said, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die.’” As faith can inform our grief, our grief can also inform our faith. Faith is not a static or unchanging feeling that once appropriated it is never altered. Faith should be active, living, changing, and always seeking God in new places and in new ways. Grief is one of those occasions in life when we begin to assess who we are and what we believe. It is very appropriate for us to question ourselves, to question God, to stretch our faith, and search for new horizons of truth. Grief can indeed inform our faith.

Research Methodology

The methodology used to research how grieving persons relate to the grief/faith relationship is Thomas Groome’s shared Christian praxis. He defines one’s praxis as the essence or the totality of a person. Groome’s *shared Christian praxis* method assumes that as an individual shares his or her life story, reflects on the story and lets the Biblical story inform their story, a new praxis may evolve from this sharing.

Praxis was a term employed by Aristotle to describe reflection upon social action as one of the ways of knowing.⁵ In his book, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, Groome further defines Christian praxis as “a group of Christians sharing in dialogue their critical reflection on present action in light of the Christian Story and its Vision toward the end of lived Christian faith.”⁶ This methodology, as with any research method, does have its limitations. The primary objective of this research was to listen and learn how faith is shaped by grief and how grief might be influenced by one’s faith.

I have been conducting Grief Ministry Workshops (GMW) since 1998, 26 years. The GMW format has usually been three to four Sunday afternoon sessions lasting 1.5–2 hours per session. In each session, the grief group will discuss various topics including: The Faith and Grief Relationship, The Bible and Grief, Reframing Grief, Individual/National Lament, Theodicy and Free Will.

⁵ Thomas H. Groome, “Praxis,” in *Harper’s Encyclopedia of Religious Education*, ed. Iris V. Cully and Kendig Brubaker Cully (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 493–4.

⁶ Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 184.

In one of the earlier GMW, participants agreed to share in writing and verbally their grief/faith story. The results of their deliberate and intentional input and the anecdotal information gathered over these 26 years, has been the basis of the research for this article.

For more detailed information about the specific data gathered during the earlier GMW I would reference "Grief and Faith: A Study of Effect."⁷ The research method employed in dealing with GMW sessions and data gathering was Participant Observation. This methodology allowed the researcher to become a part (a participant) of the group or individual being studied and yet also allowed the researcher to maintain appropriate distance as an observer.

A participant observer can be distinguished by one of three roles: overt, semi-overt, and covert. In this project the observer's role is that of an overt researcher.⁸ The individuals being interviewed and the group participants were informed about the role of the research observer. As an observer, the researcher must be careful to report what is happening and not what he or she would like to be happening. Naturally, all research involves an element of interpretation. Participant observers should be especially cautious as their own participation and presuppositions can dramatically affect the results of their research.

Participant Observation has been often criticized as a data collection technique because of its lack of standardized procedures. A researcher must ask some hard questions:

1. Can we have real confidence in the resulting data?
2. Would any two investigators come up with equivalent results?
3. Does the presence of the researcher significantly alter the quality of the data?
4. Does the presence of the researcher hinder the researcher's ability to interpret data?
5. Is the researcher limited in his/her ability to witness all relevant aspects of the phenomena in question.

In participant observation, the social position of the observer determines what he/she is likely to see. The observer in a clergy position will affect the collection and interpretation of data. A common social structure and common symbolic language between the researcher and the participants will increase the possibility of successful communication.

As mentioned earlier, the data collection method was shared Christian praxis. The procedure used to collect this praxis data was journaling. Participant Observation was the methodology used to examine and analyze the data.

⁷ Rodger Burgess Murchison, "Grief and Faith: A Study of Effect," A Ministry Research Project presented to the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1995.

⁸ William Foote Whyte, *Learning from The Field: A Guide from Experience* (Beverly Hill, CA: Sage Publication, Inc. 1984), 30-31.

Here are a few examples of some of the Journaling Topics:

- “When my loved one died, my feelings toward God were...”
- “When my loved one died, I expected God to...”
- “When my loved one died, I sought comfort...”
- “When my loved one died, I found comfort....”
- “When my loved one died, Jesus was for me...”
- “When my loved one died, I discovered prayer to be...”
- “When my loved one died, resurrection became for me...”
- “When my loved one died, God’s goodness and power became for me...”
- “When my loved one died, the Bible became for me...”

A Biblical and Theological Interpretation of the Grief/Faith Relationship

A Biblical example of the grief/faith relationship is the widow, Naomi. Her story is found in the Book of Ruth. In the opening verses, Elimelech and his wife Naomi face a famine in the land of Judah. Together with their two sons, they move to the land of Moab. Soon after, Elimelech dies and the sons marry Moabite women: one named Orpha and one named Ruth. Then years later, the sons die. Naomi’s response to her grief is bitterness and pain. She blames God for her loss. She angrily laments, “The Lord has turned against me!” She boldly points her finger at God as the source of her misfortune.

Listen to Naomi’s lamentation in Ruth 1: 20–21 as she journeys back to her homeland of Bethlehem: “The Almighty has dealt with me so bitterly. I went out full and the Lord has brought me home empty. Do not call me Naomi! Call me Mara, because the Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” Naomi has become more than just a grieving widow. She has become the personification of grief. The contrast between the old Hebrew name Naomi, (מִיָּעֵן) meaning pleasant or sweet, and the new name Mara, (מַרָּה) meaning bitter and sad, points out that Naomi has allowed grief to transform her entire life.

Naomi’s grief had so profoundly altered her life and body that the people of her hometown Bethlehem said this about her in Ruth 1:19: “And it came to pass, when they (Naomi and Ruth) came to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and they said, ‘Is this Naomi?’” Can grief become so intense that it alters a person’s appearance? Naomi’s grief was not only transforming how she looked; her grief became a disability to her spiritual faith.

There is redemption in this Biblical story. Ruth, Naomi’s daughter-in-law, embodied hope for Naomi. The name Ruth in Hebrew means friend (רֵבָה). Their friendship is exemplified in Ruth’s familiar plea in Ruth 1:16: “I beg you not to leave me. Wherever you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

Because of Ruth’s faithfulness, Naomi was restored from her debilitating disability of grief to a renewed faith in God. Ruth, the friend (רֵבָה) became a means of restoration for Naomi. In this Biblical story, Ruth’s husband Boaz, also becomes a means of redemp-

tion for Naomi (Ruth 4). Boaz became a kinsman to Naomi and Ruth. He takes on the role of kinsman-redeemer. This is an ancient responsibility explained in Leviticus 25. Through the familial and faith relationships of Ruth and Boaz, and especially through baby Obed, the grieving Naomi is restored to new life. This restoration is expressed in Ruth 4:14–17:

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is reflected in the GMW as seen in this brief dialogue about the grief/faith relationship between Don and Mary who were grief group participants:

Don, *"If Christians respond to grief in a bad way or a negative way, that means that their faith before the loved one's death was not what it should be. It was God's will that my wife died and that is the end of that."*

Mary, *"Yes, their faith was weak."* Mary continues, *"I link my weak days emotionally with my faith. If my faith was as strong as it should be, I should accept the fact that it was time for my husband to die. But there are moments when I cannot accept it and that is not good. My mother tells me to trust God. Sometimes that does not seem to be enough. I have questioned my faith through this grief process. My mother told me that God gives and God takes away."*

Don and Mary perceive a cause-and-effect relationship concerning the grief/faith relationship:

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Cause – Strong Faith | = Effect – Mature grief response |
| Cause – Weak Faith | = Effect – Immature grief response |

Their comments seemed to be based on the belief that if a person has a strong enough faith, then death and grief will not cause anxiety or call their present belief system into question. Don and Mary appear to be responding to faith in the same manner as Naomi. God is responsible for their loved one's death. Don and Mary are also not allowing the grief/faith relationship to mature that faith system. They seem to have a static faith that is not influenced by the circumstances of the death of their loved one. They are an example of individuals who are disproving the underlying hypothesis that persons involved in an active Christian life will experience a strengthening of their faith because of the grief/faith relationship. Don and Mary are seemingly proving this hypothesis is not correct.

Individual Grief and National Grief

Although the data gathering and the research for this article is primarily focused on the individual aspect of the grief/faith relationship, grief can also be seen and felt in a larger context. The war in Ukraine and the pain and grief it causes is naturally personal as people lose loved ones and friends to death or dismemberment. But this war also brings about a feeling of corporate or national grief. It is as if the entire country is crying, mourning, and grieving.

Communal, common, and public grief is somewhat different from personal grief. When a country is grieving it can bring about a disabling national crisis or it can also become a galvanizing force that bonds people who would not normally have a common connection. This collective grieving can have a positive impact on the community and also on various individuals.⁹

After or during a national tragedy, conversations about faith are often more apparent. This can be a healthy opportunity to share religious beliefs with others. This sharing can invite a healthy spirit of ecumenical conversation with the community. If grief has become debilitating to some within the community, this public sharing of religious rituals and traditions can be helpful in some situations. During a recent pastor's conference in Khust, Ukraine, one pastor/chaplain told the story of how a local law enforcement officer, who wanted nothing to do with faith and the church, became interested in Christianity as he observed Christians publicly sharing their grief/faith feelings for each other individually and for their country. After months of conversation and encouragement, this officer accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and was baptized. This officer was very influential in the local community. This anecdote is illustrative of how the grief/faith relationship can have a positive affect on individuals and the public.

Around the world, we often see that mourners have created shrines at the scene of a tragedy. An example of this is the shrine near Maidan in Kyiv commemorating Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity. In New York City there is a memorial to those who died in the Twin Towers on 9/11, 2001. At these sights, people can gather and express their faith, grief, and hope. These occasions help to validate the importance of those lives lost and possibly promote healing for those who grieve.

The book of Psalms gives voice to the personal and communal aspects of grief. Psalms is a valuable resource in understanding ancient Israel's response to grief and how God is a part of the grief/faith process. Lament Psalms constitute a large part of the entire Psalter. Although this article deals with the grief/faith relationship of the individual, Claus Westermann implies that divine revelation also occurs when we juxtapose and conjoin the lament of the nation and the lament of the individual.¹⁰ An example of this individual/national lamentation is voiced by Sigmund Mowinckel. He prefers to regard the individual laments as national laments put into the mouth of the king or another

⁹ See Anthony O'Hear, "Mourning and Memory, Private and Public Dimensions," in *The Meaning of Mourning: Perspectives on Death, Loss, and Grief*, ed. Mikolaj Slawkowski-Rode (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023), 175.

¹⁰ Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* Vol. 28, 1974, 29.

representative of the people.¹¹ It should be mentioned that Westermann, Mowinckel and others understand lament function in the Psalms to be a rehabilitation of a member to the life-world of the group, the tribe, or the clan, i.e. individual/national lament form. This is in contrast to, Walter Brueggemann who personalizes the lament form, as he says, “The individual lament functions to restore one to full life and affirmative faith.”¹²

I raise the issue of the relationship between individual and national grief not only because that is a reality for the people living in war-torn Ukraine, but it is also the reality for many other people all around the world. This article is focused on how the grief/faith relationship affects individuals, but we all know that individuals constitute a society and a community and therefore the individual/national lament is an important aspect of the entire grief/faith process.

Theodicy and Grief

Both Individual and National Grief often raise theological issues. As mentioned earlier, the Psalms of lament speak about how God is a part of the grief/faith process as seen in the individual/national laments. In the Book of Ruth, the story of Naomi reminds us that many people in grief often want to blame God for their misfortune. Their painful lament is: “Did God take my loved one?” In her grief, Naomi accuses God for her affliction: “The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” (Ruth 1:21) Blaming God for human death is common. It can be natural to question the goodness and power of God in the face of grief and sorrow. This idea is so prevalent that an entire branch of theology, called Theodicy, is focused on defending God’s goodness and power in the face of suffering and death.

Here is the theological dilemma for those of faith who are grieving:

If God is all *Good*, why does He allow evil, pain, grief, and death?
 If God is all *Powerful*, why does He not stop evil, pain, grief, and death?
 Either God is not all *Good* and does not care about the suffering of humanity.
 Or God is not all *Powerful* and cannot stop the suffering of humanity.

This theological dilemma is very problematic for those of faith who are grieving. This is an ancient quandary dating back as far as Epicurus in 4th century BC. Martin Marty speaks about God’s goodness and power in his book, *A Cry of Absence*.¹³ The question of God’s goodness and power can be directly related to one’s understanding of grief. If a person of faith begins to question God’s ultimate ability and willingness to help in their time of loss, it can increase the intensity of their grief. It could push a person into disabling grief. As mentioned earlier, this was exactly what happened to Naomi. She said in Ruth 1:21-22, “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” Naomi’s lamentation is, that she went away from Bethlehem full with a husband

¹¹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 225ff.

¹² Walter Brueggemann, “The Formfulness of Grief,” *Interpretation* Vol. 31, July 1977, 264.

¹³ Martin E. Marty, *A Cry of Absence* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 24–28.

and two sons. Now she is returning to Bethlehem empty as a widow and motherless. Her grief has crippled and disabled her faith.

Another way to understand and interpret God's goodness and power in the face of evil, suffering, grief, and pain, is the concept of Free Will. If humans are totally free to make their own choices, then humanity will live in a world that has both good and evil.

A pastor who understood the disability of grief in a war zone was Rev. Doctor Leslie Weatherhead. He was the pastor of The City Temple Church of London, England from 1936 till 1960. He was ministering to his congregation during the trauma of WWII. In 1941, the church building was totally destroyed by an incendiary bomb that was dropped during the blitz of London. Pastor Weatherhead continued to minister to his congregation all throughout the war. His congregants asked their pastor where is God in all of this evil, suffering, grief, and pain? Weatherhead published his classic book, *The Will of God*,¹⁴ in 1944. The war was still raging on and would not end until May of 1945. What could a pastor say to his people who were grieving not only the death of their loved ones but also grieving the destruction of their church and grieving the challenge facing their faltering faith as they questioned where is their Good God in the midst of all of this evil?

Those who mourn might ask Weatherhead, in the harsh reality of war, how do we interpret Romans 8:28: "We know that in all things God works for good for those who love Him, for those who are called according to His purpose." *All things work for good*, even the brutal, painful, death and destruction of war? All things? Where is God in the middle of war? What is His Will when innocent people are grieving, suffering, and dying? Weatherhead penned his words during exactly this kind of catastrophic moment in history. His book proposes a threefold understanding of God's Will:

1. The Intentional Will of God: God's ideal plan for humanity. Intentional Will.
2. The Circumstantial Will of God: God's plan within certain circumstances. Circumstantial Will.
3. The Ultimate Will of God: God's final realization of His purposes. Ultimate Will.

Would the war in Ukraine be God's Intentional Will? No. God does not intend for His creation to be at war. As Weatherhead explains it, God is Creator and Sustainer of our world, and that means God set in motion a wondrously complex world where an almost infinite number of cause-and-effect processes unfold around us all the time. Yes, death is a part of this life for every one of us, but God is not a murderer, Weatherhead argued passionately. Remember that he was writing his book in an era when millions of people were dying around the world, so his affirmation did not come lightly. All of his readers understood that wars can break out and kill millions, but Weatherhead argued that it is not God's Will for people to die this way.

Yet, God can work for good in all circumstances, His Circumstantial Will. There is the possibility within every tragedy that God can forge a future of renewed hope. The people of Ukraine do not have to be defined by this war. We cannot deny the suffer-

¹⁴ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1954).

ing and pain the war causes. Grief and sorrow are the natural emotions felt by those who are living through this catastrophe.

Can we say there is some ultimate good even in war? This would be God's Ultimate Will. Is there any hope for those who are dealing with chronic disabling grief? Here is where Weatherhead leads us in his analysis. Weatherhead does not believe that God causes tragedy, like this war, so some ultimate good can be realized. What kind of Good God would do that? He believes that, when God's intentional will is altered by factors in this world (war), God actively works with us in spite of the circumstances. God can take the bereavement we are now experiencing and allow this grief and pain to carry us to renewed faith.

I have had many hours of conversation and shared ministry with a Ukrainian pastor who exemplifies how the grief/faith relationship can be a catalyst for understanding how tragic circumstances do not have to thwart God's Ultimate Will. This pastor ministered in Berdyansk. After the Russian invasion in 2022 and the occupation of his city, this pastor and many other Christians felt threatened in many ways. They made the decision to relocate as refugees to the city of Vinnytsya. They left behind in Berdyansk many family members, their homes, their jobs their church, their memories of what was and is no more. They were experiencing devastating grief but they were determined their grief would not destroy them or their faith. In their newly adopted home of Vinnytsya, they established a new church with six members in April of 2022. Today the worship attendance is seventy-five and growing. The church has multiple ministries in Vinnytsya, throughout Ukraine and even with Ukrainian soldiers and civilians at the frontlines of the war. This faithful pastor and his courageous congregation are demonstrating how even in the face of grief and loss renewed faith is a possibility.

A Psychological and Sociological Interpretation of The Grief/ Faith Relationship

To better understand how The Will of God, and other issues, can impact the grief/faith relationship it would be helpful to focus on an approach introduced by Donald Capps. In the story of Ruth and Naomi, a technique for allowing grief and faith to mutually influence each other was introduced. The technique is called "Reframing."¹⁵ The word reframing does not appear in the text but the concept is there. Reframing encourages the bereaved to look at the circumstances of their grief from a new perspective. Naomi thought her life was over because of the death of her husband and her two sons. Ruth reframed Naomi's grief by not only being her friend but also by embracing Naomi within a new family through Boaz and Obed. Boaz became Ruth's husband and Obed became their son. Naomi became like a grandmother to Obed. And it would be through the lineage of Obed that David would become the greatest king of Israel. Naomi discovered that life is not over because of grief. In some ways through reframing, new life is just beginning.

¹⁵ Donald Capps, *Reframing, A New Method in Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 10–12.

Through reframing, people are invited to focus on their loss from a fresh and new perspective. This change in perspective does not bring our loved ones back to life. What changes are the ways we look at our loss, understand the loss and respond to the loss. Just as a painting takes on new dimensions when given a new frame, people who reframe their grief can discover new sources of strength. It happened in the life of Naomi.

This example of reframing is both a wise psychological practice, as introduced by Donald Capps, and a truth deeply rooted in scripture. The author of Hebrews tells us about the journey of Abraham and his experience with reframing: "If they (Abraham and his family) had been thinking of the land from which they had gone out, they would have had the opportunity to return and go back. But as it is, they desired a better country." (Hebrews 11:15–16) Instead of bemoaning the loss of comforts in their previous land (as the Moses-led Israelites did many years later), the writer of Hebrews is telling us that Abraham's people trusted that God was leading and blessing them. For Abraham, the "promised land" was more than a new place in which to dwell. It was also a reality of mind and heart – reframing life in the belief that God had called him to a significant new life. Traumatic moments not only change people's lives, but they change people's view of God, of themselves and of their understanding of life itself. Rather than battling to resist those changes, reframing frees a person to grow through them. Abraham and Ruth understood the timeless truth of reframing – although they obviously did not name the term we use today to describe it.

After the death of his wife, Joy, C. S. Lewis wrote poignantly in his book, *A Grief Observed*, "I thought I could make a map of sorrow and grief. Sorrow, however, (...) needs not a map but a history."¹⁶ What Lewis learned is that grief painfully opens up our lives to fresh insights about our past and fresh hopes for the future. We mourn our loss, but grief also leads us to new vistas.

In my own life, I have experienced this truth. When my father died, I often was plagued by negative thoughts like these:

God, look at what I have lost! I can't call Dad on the phone any more. I can't ask him for advice and counsel. He won't see my children graduate from high school or college or see them get married.

My grief was debilitating. I had difficulty performing my responsibilities as a Christian church minister. I often became overly emotional in worship. I was especially dysfunctional when I tried to officiate at a funeral. My grief was causing a disability that needed my full attention. I don't know what finally helped me to 'reframe' my grief. I give God the credit. Instead of focusing on what I had lost, I began to say:

God, look at what I gained in life thanks to my Dad! He was a good father, a good husband to my mother, involved in our community and in church activities. What a blessing that I knew him at all!

In reframing my grief, or looking at my grief from a new perspective, it did not change the fact that my father was dead. What changed was the way in which I understood my father's death.

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 50.

I realize for some who grieve, their relationship to the deceased might not be as positive as mine was to my father. And yet, for people of faith, reframing will involve allowing our faith to inform our grief and our grief to inform our faith. The idea is as old as Abraham and as new as the latest research into grief and grief's power to make a person disabled. When a person experiences disabling grief, the journey to health and wholeness, is much like the same journey for a person who has experienced the trauma of a physical disability. The rehabilitation process can be long and difficult.¹⁷ It requires patience, perseverance, and determination.

The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, encourages the bereaved to “weep softly, but grieve long.”¹⁸ Kierkegaard declared that we should grieve for our beloved until we too shall die. Rather than putting the loss behind us and moving on, he would have us embrace it and permit our grief to strengthen our relationship with God. Kierkegaard's approach has much merit but for some who grieve, this dramatic identification with the loss can become pathological. In contrast to Kierkegaard, David Switzer suggests that pathological grief is the fixation on a particular symptom or a particular segment of a stage of the normal grief process. He states that the usual grief process is marked by an experimental testing of various behaviors over a period of time, discarding those that are not functional in the maintenance and restructuring of the self, and then utilizing in a constructive and adaptive way several of those behaviors that facilitate self-maintenance and growth.¹⁹ This is not to say that Kierkegaard's approach is pathological. On the contrary, his method has sound theology and appropriate psychology for most people. The caution concerning his technique would be for those who may have difficulty properly separating from the loss as they are also carrying the burden of the loss into the future.

It is important to encourage those who grieve to understand the difference between appropriately embracing the memory of the deceased and inappropriately becoming obsessed on the memory of the deceased. One hospice nurse reminded me, in somewhat of a contrast to Kierkegaard, “If we don't let our loved one die, they won't let us live.” Some people become so obsessed with life in the past that they deprive themselves of the potential of life in the present and in the future. Those who are dealing with chronic disabling grief are particularly susceptible and vulnerable to becoming so fixated on their grief that they begin to view life only through the lens of grief. These people become like Naomi. They are not just a grieving person. They become the personification of grief. They have changed their name to Mara (bitter and sad).

¹⁷ See also: D. Keith Cobb, M.D., *The Grief Survival Handbook: A Guide from Heartache to Healing* (Victoria: Trafford Publishing, 2009). The story book by Katelijne Depoortere, *I Do Not Want to Die*, Eng. ed. (Bruges: Van Driel Publishing, 2022) can be a great recourse for those who work with grieving children.

¹⁸ Longworth William, “Kierkegaard and Pastoral Care,” *The Perkins School of Theology*, Vol. XXXVII, Fall 1983, 6. Kierkegaard quotation from *Works of Love*, 319.

¹⁹ David K. Switzer, “Awareness of Unresolved Grief: An Opportunity for Ministry,” *The Christian Ministry*, Vol. 11, July 1980, 20.

One of the reasons that grief invokes such profound emotions is because grief is a reminder of the loss. Attachment and loss are both a part of the experience of life. Throughout life we form attachments to persons, places, things, and events. Throughout life we also are challenged to let go, leave behind, and move on. From leaving the safety of a mother's womb to breathing one's last breath, life is confronted with loss.²⁰ Attachments and losses occur with each new developmental stage of life. Some of these changes are welcomed and experienced as celebrative growth; others are unwelcomed and experienced as painful loss. Most of the attachment/loss phenomenon have an element of both. When one may attempt to reattach to a loss, grief can either facilitate the appropriate transition from loss to new attachments or grief can obviate the transition and create additional anxiety. John James and Frank Cherry observed, "...we live in a society that doesn't educate us to deal with loss but rather teaches us how to acquire and hold on to things."²¹

The attachment/loss concept is basic to understanding grief. In studying the effect that grief has on faith and faith has on grief, it would be beneficial to examine the origin of grief. John Bowlby's, Attachment Theory provides a conceptual framework to discern the origin of grief.²² Grief is the response to the fact of loss.

The issue of attachment and humanity's need for relationships can be expressed theologically as atonement. In life, there is a fundamental search for unity and community.²³ Gilkey suggests that humanity is in search of personal reintegration and for the healing of our broken communities. He feels that detachment during grief can exacerbate the need for reconciliation.²⁴ He suggests that atonement could be faith's response to grief's need for reintegration.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to discover the effects of the grief/faith relationship. As mentioned earlier, the data for this article was gathered from Grief Ministry Workshop participants who agreed to share in writing and verbally their grief/faith story and also participate in a group setting discussion. The results of their deliberate and intentional input and the anecdotal information gathered from many years of conducting GMW has been the basis for collecting the research material.

There are several dynamics within the research that warrant evaluation. The GMW participants familiarity with each other was a major concern. Many of the participants are often friends and/or acquaintances and fellow church members. The advantage of

²⁰ John Bowlby, "Attachment," Vol. 1 of *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1969). See also: Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Living with Grief," in *In This World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life in Learning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 203.

²¹ John W. James, Frank Cherry, *The Grief Handbook: A Step-by-Step Program from Moving beyond Loss* (NY: Harper & Row, 1988), 11. The newer edition: John W. James, *The Grief Recovery Handbook, 20th Anniversary Expanded Edition: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses* (NY: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2017).

²² John Bowlby, "Attachment and Loss," Vol. 111, *Loss*, 126.

²³ Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969), 402.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 402-3.

this friendship, relative to the group dynamics, created almost instant group comradery and acceptance. The acceptance appeared to be effective in a social context but considering many of the participant's responses to various issues, the acceptance many have been limited in the area of gathering information about faith issues. Because the group members usually know each other so well outside the group, there seemed to be pressure within the group to comply and conform to expected Christian church member standards.

The group also often must deal with one or more very dominant individuals who are verbally controlling and confrontive in areas of theology and psychology. These types of assertive personalities can often speak for other group members who seem to be hesitant in responding to certain issues. It appeared that some group members were uncomfortable with silence and also uncomfortable watching their colleagues struggle with their emotions. Information about the grief/faith relationship was thwarted because some individual members were not permitted the physical time and emotional room to express their true feelings.

Other factors to consider relative to gathering research information from the GWM participants are the following (this article will not explore fully each of these factors):

1. The place where the GMW group members meet. All of the meetings were held at the church. For most of the participants, the church represented a particular standard of thought and belief. Could then the church be a deterrent to the group speaking openly about their grief/faith feelings?
2. The size of the group. There are definite advantages to small and large groups. A small group often enables members to participate several times during each session. Where a larger group might prevent group members from joining in as freely. But on the contrary, a small group can restrict participation as group members feel intimidated and uncomfortable with feeling the need to speak.
3. The age of the group members. The traditional GMW participants are widows ranging in age from 75–85. Of course, the age and gender will vary with each workshop session. Although this matter of age was not investigated, the age of the participants could influence the response to grief/faith issues.
4. The circumstances surrounding the death of the participant's loved one. Most of the workshop members experienced a long-term illness of their loved one and death was anticipated. But often group members experienced sudden and tragic death, i.e. suicide, homicide, death in war, sudden infant death syndrome, and the list goes on.
5. The group members relationship to the deceased. Most of the GMW participants are widows or widowers. The relationship of a group member to the deceased could be a factor in the individual's response to the grief/faith issue.

A final issue to evaluate is the method use to gather the research information. Shared Christian praxis was the basis for the group members to express their feelings about the grief/faith relationship. Shared praxis was an effective method to allow

participants to communicate their faith feelings. This approach gave the group members an appropriate environment in which they could express their faith feelings. As with any method, the converse, which was discussed earlier, is also true.

The underlying theory and hypothesis of the research and this article has been that persons involved in an active Christian life will experience a strengthening of their faith because of the grief process. An active Christian life is defined as persons who attend church regularly and allow their faith to influence their daily living. The results of this research did not seem to sustain this hypothesis. Whether or not a person's faith will be strengthened because of the grief process was not apparent from the general responses from the GMW group members. A few participants said their faith had been strengthened as they had moved through their grief, but the majority of the participants did not affirm that conviction. In observing the participants, it would seem that a person's faith is not at all automatically strengthened by the grief process. For grief to have a strengthening effect on faith, persons must allow their faith to be affected by grief. Many of the workshop group members seem to only cling to a static faith and therefore the grief process appeared to not have any major influence on their faith at all.

Other concluding thoughts might focus on some of the details related to the Grief Ministry Workshops. It was through these workshops that information was gathered to conduct the analysis of the grief/faith relationship. One might need to critically consider the Biblical passages selected for use in the workshops. The selection of the text(s) is important because certain passages may tend to elicit particular responses due to their familiarity or to their relationship to the subject being examined. For example, most participants were very familiar with Psalm 23 and the workshop leader had to make a decision whether this familiarity was an advantage or disadvantage to the results of the research gathered. When a workshop participant was familiar with the scripture passage being discussed, it was obvious this participant had a preconceived understanding of these Bible verses. These workshop sessions were usually not the appropriate setting to exegete Bible texts. These sessions were not Bible study classes. The workshop leader often had to deal with the dilemma of how to balance the Biblical interpretation of a passage and the issue of the grief/faith relationship. But when a participant would offer their understanding of a Bible verse(s) and their thoughts seemed to not be sound exegesis, it often created a challenge for the leader to know how best to respond.

A further conclusion is that at times to advance and/or hinder the discovery of helpful information, the introduction of statements by religious leaders aroused strong comments from many group members. A factor one must consider is the type of statement used could bring about a predictable response. If the group is conservative and traditional and the statement used sounds liberal and unorthodox, this would be a factor that would affect the outcome of the research. An example was in the session when the subject of theodicy was discussed. This theological concept needed to be discussed but my conclusion is because this issue became so controversial was there a better way to address this concept. As a leader is trying to comfort and support a group of people in grief, it seemed counterproductive to elicit controversy.

I discovered that Donald Capp's technique of Reframing proved to be extremely helpful to the participants in the GMW. Many participants spoke about how this approach to grief gave them new insights and brought them comfort. They also affirmed John Bowlby's concept of Attachment and Loss. As grief group participants considered these sociological aspects of grief, they were unexpectedly made aware of how the grief/faith relationship had an impact on facets of their interpersonal life.

Søren Kierkegaard's approach to grief was not considered generally helpful by most GMW members. Kierkegaard declared that we should grieve for our beloved until we too shall die. He suggested that we should embrace our grief and permit our grief to strengthen our relationship with God. Most grief group participants did not fully understand Kierkegaard's thought of embracing grief. They usually saw grief as the enemy and were hoping to find ways to avoid, ignore and eliminate grief from their lives.

The relationship between Individual and National Grief was not fully explored in the GMW. Both of these concepts were discussed but most of the attention in the grief session was focused on individual grief issues. The participants were encouraged to read and comment on several lament Psalms that spoke to individual/national grief. Although these Bible passages were discussed, most grief group members would usually give most of their attention to their personal grief issues and much less attention to the issue of national grief.

Hopefully this article and the research behind this article will have positive benefits in relationship to ministry. This article could not only be helpful to individuals who are experiencing grief and bereavement but it could also serve as a foundation for formulating future ministry in the church and in the larger Christian community.

Ministry to those who grieve is a significant ministry for the church. An article like this and the underpinning research can serve to inform the church's grief ministry and enable the church to better care for those who are bereaved.

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Взаємодія горювання і віри та руйнівний вплив неподоланого горя

Роджер МЕРЧІСОН

Перша баптистська церква, Огаста, Джорджія

Анотація: Емоційна травма, породжена горем може призвести до порушень функціонування людини в сім'ї, на роботі, в суспільстві. Біблійна історія Рут і Ноомі слугує ілюстрацією для кращого розуміння взаємодії між горюванням і вірою. Саме ця взаємодія проаналізована у цьому дослідженні з різних точок зору. У цій статті ми оцінюємо теорію і гіпотезу про те, що людина, яка живе активним християнським життям, може відчувати зміцнення своєї віри через досвід скорботи. «Християнський праксис» Томаса Грума був обраний методом дослідження взаємодії між горюванням і вірою, який застосовувався на практиці у роботі з людьми, які зазнали горя у своєму житті. Перша баптистська церква в Августі, штат Джорджія (США) вже 26 років (з 1998 року) проводить семінари служіння в скорботі (Grief Ministry Workshops, GMW). На цих семінарах, що проводяться у групах, учасники діляться один з одним своєю історією горя/віри в письмовій та в усній формах. Інформація, що використовується у цьому дослідженні, є результатом багаторічного служіння та консультацій з учасниками семінарів і є важливою для вивчення впливу горя на віру і віри на горе. Крім того у цій статті розглянуто біблійне та богословське тлумачення взаємодії горя і віри, а також психологічні та соціологічні виміри горя і віри. Детально описано психологічну концепцію рефреймінгу горя, яка часто застосовується у сучасних практиках. Теодицея і свобода волі – богословські питання, які мають великий вплив на горе, тому ці концепції також подані у дослідженні. Стаття завершується критичним аналізом ефективності підходу «християнського праксису» для дослідження взаємодії між горем і вірою.

Ключові слова: взаємодія віри і горя, «християнський праксис», Біблія і скорбота, рефреймінг горя, індивідуальна скорбота, національна скорбота, теодицея, свобода волі.

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