


BRADLEY VINSON

GOOD GRIEF


**WHY BELIEVERS CAN GRIEVE
WITH HOPE**



A RESOURCE TO HELP IN HOPE AND HEALING



*Dedicated to those on their grief journey,
you are not walking alone.*



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Despite the grief and darkness felt by many Christians who experience loss, particularly the death of a child, healthy grieving is possible because they have hope that non-believers do not have. They can find in God's word a prescription for their ailing spirit and comfort in their savior to stand beside them on their journey to heal.

This book will explore Christian grieving, or rather how Christians *should* grieve despite the obvious heartache that comes with the earthly loss of a loved one. I pray that this book also ministers to me as I travel my own grief journey, providing balm to my pain, answers to my questions, relief to my worries and closure to my disbelief.

My desire with this book is to encourage those that may come to read it, and myself. Although not the focus of this book, I will speak of the loss of my four-year-old granddaughter. I believe many look for something to hold on to as they deal with the compound grief from the death of a child, including the question of entrance into Heaven for children that were too young to understand and believe the Gospel for themselves, I genuinely pray that this book provides some comfort in that area. Richard Albert Mohler, Jr., American historical theologian

states, "The death of an infant or young child is profoundly heartbreaking – perhaps the greatest grief a parent is called to bear. For Christian parents, there is the sure knowledge that our sovereign and merciful God is in control, but there is also a pressing question: Is our baby in heaven?" This book will attempt to prove that Christians are able to grieve in a healthy way because they have access to hope that others do not.



WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT GRIEF AND SUFFERING

The *patience* of Job. I recall the many times I've heard that statement, giving the impression that Job *waited* on or through something that would help him grow spiritually. The statement may be true, but what Job endured had very little if anything to do with his choices (other than choosing to follow God). *The grief of Job* may be a better statement. There is no greater example of non-divine human suffering than what is recorded in the book of Job.

It was a Wednesday morning, May 11, 2016. I received a call from my wife. Few words were intelligible, I think I heard "She's gone", "Alanna", "the baby", then another call was ringing in, it was from Louisi-

ana where our oldest daughter and three grandchildren lived, so I clicked over. It was a stranger's voice that asked me if I was Mr. Vinson, "Yes" I replied, "I'm sorry to tell you this but your granddaughter passed away in an accident this morning. You need to come." I remember telling him he must be mistaken, there's no way one of my grandchildren died, but I was who was wrong, my four-year-old grandprincess was gone. In an instant, everything else in the remaining days of my life would be defined as *before Alanna died and after Alanna died*. A dear friend and mentor, Ron Kelly defines what I was feeling that day well through his own experience with the death of his son, "The floor dropped out from under my feet on that very sorrowful morning when my beautiful son Jonathan passed away. I was devastated, as any father or mother would be, and angry with God. I was confused and shaken in my faith, not sure if being called to the church had done me any good." Yes, I too was angry. I was confused, deeply scarred, and Christian. Only 'why?' remained. What I believed about God, suffering and grief would determine how I would move forward.

Seeing the book of Job in its proper context, as a story of suffering and grief (and later redemption) allows us to explore several views of suffering. After the first wave of attacks, we find Job worshipping.

During this worship, Job proclaims "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away," (Job 1:21), when in fact his suffering was from the hands of Satan.

God allowed the suffering, but did not deliver it. This provides an interesting question concerning Christian beliefs as they relate to grief, **is God the author of suffering?** Philip Yancey provides this explanation, "Is God somehow responsible for the suffering of this world? In this indirect way, yes. But giving a child a pair of ice skates, knowing that he may fall, is a very different matter from knocking him down on the ice."

Witnessing what happened to Job, one would think, why suffer at all? Yancey concludes his statement in a similar fashion, "Could God have done it another way? Could he have maintained some of the benefits of the pain network without the disadvantages?". Death by accident comes to mind for me (the 'preventable' things seem to trouble me the most). The above observation complicates the questions and creates a dilemma; why tragic accidents, violent acts, or devastating illnesses? Yancey argues the following, "Much of the suffering on our planet has come about because of two principles that God built into creation: a physical world that runs according to consistent natural laws, and human freedom. By committing himself to those two principles, both good principles in themselves, God allowed for

the possibility of their abuse." With that in mind I ask, **does free will create suffering** or our choices generate pain? This is a tough realization for me as a believer. I accept the consequences of my sins, but choices (even amoral choices) can create suffering? Thinking back on the death of my granddaughter, I have struggled with choices made that I feel could have saved her life, choices on the day of the accident and choices weeks or months before. "I could have made *better* choices" I tell myself. Witherington, who suffered the death of a daughter, provides the following, "One primary reason I am not a Calvinist is that I do not believe in God's detailed control of all events. Why? First, because I find it impossible to believe that I am more merciful or compassionate than God. Second, because the biblical portrait shows that God is pure light and holy love. In him there is no darkness, nothing other than light and love."

Revisiting the book of Job, after the second attack from Satan afflicting Job with painful sores, his wife implores him, "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). Then his friends come. What I find interesting is that they first mourned with Job then soon after accused him for his suffering, "Remember now, who ever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed?"

According to what I have seen, those who plow iniquity and those who sow trouble harvest it." (Job 4:7-8). Though well intentioned (I pray), my family endured similar, as tears were still pouring, the questions started; "Why", "Why didn't" and "What did *someone* do (or not do)", all giving the perception that this tragedy happened because someone did something *wrong*. Yancey gives the following insight from his interviews of Christians with life-threatening illnesses, "every one without exception has told me how damaging it can be to have a visitor plant the thought, 'You must have done something to deserve this punishment.'" At the moment of most need, our Christian friends gave us a large dose of self-doubt and guilt. Yancey continues, "I'm glad the author of Job took such care to record the rambling conversations of Job's friends: that book serves as a permanent reminder to me that I have no right to stand beside a suffering person and pronounce, "This is the will of God," no matter how I cloak that sentiment in pious phrases. The error of attributing all suffering to God's punishment has far-reaching consequences." If God is not punishing me (I did nothing wrong), why did this happen?

Yancey states it plainly, "The first error comes when we attribute all suffering to God, seeing it as his punishment for human mistakes; the second error does

just the opposite, assuming that life with God will never include suffering." The book of Job tackles this very issue, when Job's friend Bildad proclaims, "If you are pure and upright, surely now He would rouse Himself for you and restore your righteous estate. Though your beginning was insignificant, yet your end will increase greatly." (Job 8:6-7). In other words, do right and God will take care of you. This is a dangerous stance that Job himself takes as he laments before God, "That You should seek for my guilt and search after my sin? According to Your knowledge I am indeed not guilty, yet there is no deliverance from Your hand." (Job 10:6-7). Job, thought himself a righteous man, in fact, those words were spoken from God's own lips, then how could such suffering befall him? Job questions God, did you make me Lord just to kill me? I've done no wrong, why do me like this? These statements further define Job's lack of enlightenment of God's will for his life.

We can find ourselves in this position if we are not careful to recognize God for who He is in the midst of our suffering. Yancey speaks to this persuasive thought on Christianity, "And Christian faith does not magically equip us with a germ-free, hermetically sealed space suit to protect against the dangers of earth. That would insulate us from complete identification with the world— a luxury God did not allow his

own Son. To hold out the inducement that becoming a Christian will guarantee you health and prosperity— why, that is the very argument advanced by Satan in the book of Job, and decisively refuted.” He continues by addressing the ‘miracles to the good’ point of view, **“obviously miracles do not offer a permanent solution for the problem of suffering because the eventual mortality rate is exactly the same for Christians and non-Christians alike– 100 percent.”** The apostle Paul addresses the issue also and seems to forewarn that the expectation of Christian life should be enduring a measure of suffering. He told Timothy, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

While the book of Job focuses on his trials, pain, turmoil, and what we can learn from it, there’s very little recorded on how we are to view grief. Boersma gives the following observation, “Because Christianity holds that death is the soul’s entry into a better state, it would seem to imply that grief is ultimately a mistake in judgement, the result of the emotions improperly taking control of human reason. Death, on the Christian view, would seem to be not a loss but a transition or even a promotion. If only we recognized our loved ones newly acquired heavenly bliss as we should, we would not grieve.” I don’t hold

this view, but it does give revelation to the conflicted Christian experience with grief. Paul in response to the Thessalonians' worry about deceased family and friends missing the return of Christ, says, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). Some have interpreted this verse as Paul speaking against the idea of grieving at all, while others have interpreted this scripture as warning against grieving excessively, as if you have no hope, which would be a characteristic of grieving by unbelievers. Boersma reinforces his belief in Christians' right to grieve, stating, "the Apostle would condemn only the kind of grief that fails to recognize the hope of resurrection." But also concedes, "Others have interpreted the passage as a categorical rejection of mourning, arguing that the hope of the resurrection invalidates the grief of bereavement."

Unlike unbelievers, we have hope in a living God, as Lischer resolves, "For atheists and agnostics the main issue boils down to the question. Is there a God? which they treat as the final rather than the first question." For believers, hope is integral in our beliefs about grief, as Yancey explains, "Hope means

simply the belief that something good lies ahead. It is not the same as optimism or wishful thinking, for these imply a denial of reality.” **The truth is, death comes and what those left behind believe about grief influences how they grieve.** What we believe should not be used as a hindrance to grief and grieving. Believers throughout the Bible lamented before God, putting their grief on full display before the one they believed could give them the healing and deliverance they desired. God did not take away their grief in all cases, instead He stood with them through their grief.



HOW BELIEVERS GRIEVE

This book explored what Christians feel about pain, grief and suffering, but let’s see how we *should* grieve or suffer. Believers and non-believers alike can find themselves in *hopeless grief*.

As Solomon and Gupta describe in their study of bereaved parents, symptoms that can lead to hopelessness may set in, “confusion about one’s role in life, difficulty accepting the loss, avoidance of reminders of the loss, inability to trust others, bitterness or anger related to the loss, difficulty moving on with life, numbness, feeling that life is meaningless and

feeling stunned or shocked by the loss.” Despite all this, we can still choose hope.

As Paul tells us, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.” (1 Thessalonians 4:13) Do not grieve as those without hope. Our hope in a risen savior, a genuine hope, which sets us apart from the unbeliever who without this hope may not find lasting comfort, as Boersma informs, “It may be true that, in the “natural” course of events, people’s grief subsides and they somehow accept the horrible experience of loss. But this recognition in itself does not offer comfort, because it is unable to provide genuine hope.”

This hope (which I define as ‘God Hope’ or ‘Hope in God’, because all hope is not the same) allows us to grieve and endure suffering because we have a Comforter who endures with us. We have the capability to look at our present situation of grief, heartache and suffering and know no matter how dark it looks there is a light somewhere in the future. Jesus, who Himself outwardly showed grief during His time on earth, took time to comfort His disciples who were struggling with His impending departure. He told them, “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house

are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going." (John 14:1-4). Jesus was saying, *have hope. When this is all said, and done, you will be with Me.*

Yancey provides an example, "Bruno Bettelheim, survivor of Hitler's camps, acknowledges that such belief translates into actual help: 'It is a well-known fact of the concentration camps that those who had strong religious and moral convictions managed life there much better than the rest. Their beliefs, including belief in an afterlife, gave them a strength to endure which was far above that of most others.'" Hope does not mean the absence of pain, grief or suffering, instead I believe that hope strengthens us to endure those dark times in our lives and can provide resolve in knowing this is not the end and to help us seek how the dark times can be used for our good and not to destroy us. Yancey adds, "But it now seemed clear that the periods of sharpest suffering had been the very occasions of spiritual growth. Trials had purged sin and developed character; poverty had taught him dependence on God and cleansed him of greed; failure and public disgrace had helped cure worldly ambition. A clear

pattern emerged: pain could be transformed, even redeemed.” This helps us see Job in a new, clearer light. Despite his suffering, Job realized in the end that God’s intention was for his good, not to harm him. The goal is to understand what ‘good’ is being described here.

Days after the death of my granddaughter, I was now back home dealing with the rigors of seminary (I was still unsure if I was going to drop out, but decided to stick with it as best I could in the meantime), caring for my grandson who just lost his little sister and trying to hold it all together for my wife for whom disbelief had still not released its grip, I receive a text from a friend. I thought he was reaching out to make sure we had settled in well after our trip, (we visited with them on our way home from Louisiana after making our granddaughter’s funeral arrangements). Instead the text was informing me that his wife was experiencing pain from a then unknown illness and was soliciting prayers for her to be healed– the text was only sent to our Pastor and me. **That moment I realized how unlike God I was.** My first thought was, “doesn’t he know Alanna’s dead?!” (Of course, he knew. I stood in his living room and cried with him just days before). I was overwhelmed! I hadn’t prayed for days for myself or my family, and here was a friend that needed me to pray for his wife.

I thought of God, knowing that He gave His only son for me when I hated Him, and still stands beside me while I'm grieving, never asking "Do you know how I feel? I gave up my son for you!" I brought the request to my wife and asked her to come to our prayer room with me to pray for our friends, she did, and we both cried out to God and prayed for our friend's healing. That experience taught me a valuable lesson and helped me understand more clearly the good God intended for Job (and for us as believers). To be more like Him, for our spirit and walk to be more like His. That is the good I'm committed to be aware of as I grieve. Our hope allows us to see Romans 8:28 as Paul intended. "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." We have to view our tragedies as an opportunity to pursue the 'good things' God may be attempting to show us in our growth and relationship with Him. As Yancey explains, "We never know in advance exactly how suffering can be transformed into a cause for celebration. But that is what we are asked to believe. Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse."

In choosing God, we are also choosing pain.

We must look beyond what we are feeling and experiencing here on earth and instead to the greater

rewards of Heaven, as Yancey explains, "That, I believe, is the central message of Job. Satan had taunted God with the accusation that humans are not truly free. Was Job being faithful simply because God had allowed him a prosperous life? Job's fiery trials proved the answer beyond doubt. Job clung to God's justice when he was the best example in history of God's apparent injustice. He did not seek the Giver because of his gifts; when all gifts were removed he still sought the Giver."

Having hope is still not a balm for grieving, and as stated before, many Christians believe that grieving is as an unbeliever, instead of the belief I hold which is we should not grieve *like* an unbeliever. As we go deeper into how we should grieve, I believe it is important to look at how unbelievers grieve and realize there is much we as believers can learn from them. Lischer proclaims, "Why is it that nonbelievers like Christopher Hitchens or Julian Barnes have the courage to look the beast in the eye in a way that Christian writers seldom do? How is it that they capture the tragic aspect of death better than so many religious "celebrations of life" that only deflect the work of mourning?". Indeed, though we have hope we must not neglect healing *through* grief by facing death and the pain of (earthly) loss. Because of our hope in an eternal life we can grieve loss with

an expectation of healing, but we must face death and mourning and accept it as a reality much like an unbeliever. Hope while grieving does not negate the reasons we grieve, due to loss and the earthly separation. Witherington warns, "I have met Christians who thought they had to be Stoics, to pretend they didn't hurt. Strong people (especially men), they believe, should not allow themselves to grieve deeply and should certainly not let their grief show. Wrong. That's Stoic *apatheia*: the aim of avoiding deeper emotion or pathos. That is not Christian theology at all. **Christians are the very ones to grieve deeply because they have loved and been loved deeply.**" He continues, "Something is wrong, terribly and profoundly wrong, if we have no capacity to mourn the passing of someone we have loved with all our heart. In other words, it takes a strong person to weep and not be afraid to show your mortality and vulnerability."

I vividly remember God speaking to me just days after Alanna died, we were on our way home (back to Texas from Louisiana) and His words were clear, stern, poignant and caring all at once. God said, "If I asked you, when would have been the best time for Me to have Alanna what would you say? In fifty years? When she reached 100? How about after you

died?" I thought, "Yes, that would be best." He then said, "That's selfish, then she'd be grieving you. If I asked you when the best time for Me to have Alanna was you'd say, 'no time is the best time'. **That's why I didn't ask you.**"

We must understand that as Christians, our grieving is about us. Witherington explains, "For the Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. There is nothing grave in that. No, we are grieving for our own sense of loss, our own sorrow over the sudden departure, our own feelings of being alone." That's a sobering idea, but when placed in proper understanding it is true, we are grieving *our* change of status, not our loved ones.

To look at grief honestly, as something not to be avoided or ignored, but something to actively participate in (what many in the counseling world calls 'leaning in'), is where God can use us and strengthen us. We must remember we have something the world does not, we have God, a God we see as the solution to our grief, not the cause of it. What we can rely on is God's compassion for us, as Witherington adds, "The phrase, "It's all God's will," is cold comfort. I believe in a God whose "Yes!" to life is louder than death's "No!" Death is not God's will. On the

contrary, God is in the trenches with us, fighting the very same evils we fight in this world—disease, suffering, sorrow, sin, and death itself. **He cries with us.**”

It is a right for Christians to grieve, it is both natural and normal. Consuming grief, inconsolable grief, and grieving without hope is what Paul was speaking against. To Witherington’s point, “What does it mean, then, to grieve as one who has hope? It means we grieve with one eye forever fixed on the eschatological horizon— that is, looking to the end of history. It means we grieve knowing that resurrection will reverse death.”



COMPOUND GRIEF: LOSING A CHILD

There is a sentimental value placed on children that few other people groups benefit from, and rightly so, they are the ‘innocent’ among us (as far as turning against God in rebellion). Mohler speaks to this sentimentality, “Of course infants go to heaven, they argue, for how could God refuse a precious little one?”, he adds “Mere sentimentalism ignores the Bible’s teaching which bears on the issue. We have no right to establish doctrine based on what we hope may be true. We must draw our answers from what the Bible reveals to be true.” There are those who

cannot believe, some are with us for many, many years and are unable to comprehend or accept the Gospel, others are not here long enough to hear it at all.

I believe that young children and those that are mentally unable to comprehend the Gospel are 'covered' and protected from being accountable. Robert P. Lightner offers an interesting point, "Perhaps God did not give us an "age of accountability" because there is no one age for all. Though it is easy to believe as a grieving grandparent that children are received into Heaven though they have not accepted Christ as their savior. There are inferences in the Bible in defense of this belief. One of the most notable, though not the 'happiest' stories in scripture tells of the occurrence of a child dying below the age of accountability that eludes to their eventual entrance into Heaven. The consequences of King David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, from which she bore a child brought God's judgement on David (God told David his son would die). David's reaction (and response) was very telling. He said, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to

me" (2 Samuel 12:22-23). David was identified as a man after God's own heart, he knew God, he knew he would be with God, and he knew he would be with his son. This is encouraging to anyone who has lost a child.



CONCLUSION

I have cried many tears while writing this book, thinking of my own grief as well as my changed future without my loved ones. God is constantly reminding me that my tears are okay and that they are a reminder of the love I had here on earth that I long to have again. He reminds me that I'm not actually mourning *for* them, I'm mourning for myself because they are no longer here with me. Deep grief, I believe, is a sign of deep love and should be cherished and acknowledged, not avoided. **I have tears in my eyes, but hope in my heart.**

I believe God saves children and others that cannot believe on Him; not because they are innocent, but out of His mercy. Our God is gracious, His word (the Bible) has a consistent thread throughout it that proves that. Though we all are sinful, some will either not have the opportunity to believe on Christ or have the capacity to understand the Gospel message.

Lightner adds, "Yes, your child is in heaven. You believe that, I am sure, and hundreds of thousands of other moms and dads have believed it about their children when they stood in the same lonely place." In all of this, I believe our faith won't let us believe that our loved ones who could not believe for themselves are not in heaven. Our hearts will not let us believe a God with characteristics including wisdom, love, mercy, grace, and goodness would not save our loved ones.

Witherington sums up my feelings precisely, "I hold to this not simply because Jesus rose from the grave but also because I remember that Jesus raised Jairus's daughter from the dead."

I dream of the day when I will hear Jesus say, Alanna, Talitha cumi—"Little girl, arise!"

BRADLEY VINSON

Keynote Speaker | Author | Trainer



Bradley holds a Masters degree in Biblical and Theological Studies from Dallas Theological Seminary, is an award-winning author and has written numerous articles on Biblical and spiritual issues.

He strives to deliver hope through speaking and ministering to audiences across the country on the 'tough' topics that hinder them from living fulfilled, whole and healed lives. His expertise is derived from a unique perspective of one who has experienced compound loss and research in topics relating to spiritual issues and grief.

Contact Bradley at bvinson@vinsoncs.com or 940-584-0517 for information about speaking engagements or interviews.

Find additional resources for help and healing on your grief journey at www.goodgriefbook.com

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