

## When Grief Visits Our Ministry

This side of heaven, grief is a frequent visitor. Ministry leaders certainly need to process grief in a healthy way themselves, but it is also essential that we prepare our ministries for seasons of grief, and then lead wisely through those times of loss. While some aspects of processing grief are defined by the culture around us, other elements of grief are common to us all as humans made in the image of God. How can we see gospel-growth take place in seasons of loss?

**Jay Mosser** has served in pastoral roles for over 40 years – about 20 years in assistant pastor capacities and the rest as senior pastor. Through those years he has served in three churches ranging from smaller (less than 50) to larger (about 1,000). Along the way he has worked with children, teens, worship ministry, pastoral care, preaching and leadership. Jay has an M.Div. from Western (Conservative Baptist) Seminary and a D.Min. from Corban University in Oregon, where his doctoral thesis was titled “How a Pastor’s Theology of Shepherding Affects the Health & Growth of a Church.” He is married to Kathy and has three daughters and five grandchildren. In his spare time, he loves to read, hike, travel, watch sports, and spend time with his family.

### I. Introduction

A. Let’s talk about experiences of grief...

B. Scripture texts to guide us

- Psalm 34:15-22
- Psalm 56
- John 11
- Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:14-16

### II. Ministry Leaders Need to Process Grief Themselves.

A. We tend to think about grief the most when it involves the death of someone close to us. That is not wrong, but we also experience grief during seasons of intense conflict or ministry change or international conflict. In such seasons, we are losing something important to us that we may never fully regain. And we grieve deeply.

B. Grieving is a process, not an event. It does not take place overnight. In fact, it does not take place according to any particular timeframe. In many respects, grief is a life-long companion. This side of heaven, we are never truly done grieving.

C. As ministry leaders, we not only grieve our own losses, but we also “absorb” the grief and sorrow of those we serve. When we care well for others, we enter their world of sadness and help them carry the load. Grieving is hard work that takes both an emotional toll and a physical toll.

Time to discuss briefly: How have YOU experienced grief and loss? How are you experiencing grief and loss today?

- III. Ministry Leaders Can Prepare the People They Serve for Seasons of Grief and Loss.
- A. Yes, preach and teach that “the joy of the Lord is our strength” and that we should “serve the Lord with gladness” – but as well, teach people that grieving is NOT lack of faith. We do not “grieve as those with no hope,” but we DO grieve.
  - B. Because grief and sorrow are God-given emotions, expressing these emotions is part of being human, living out the *imago dei*. The Psalms are a superb textbook for teaching us how to handle the full range of human emotions.
  - C. Educate yourself and the people you serve about how to help others grieve, including learning what things are helpful to say and what things are less helpful to say. This can include very practical instruction on dealing with death and dying, local customs and needed paperwork, and helping people know what to expect.
- IV. Ministry Leaders Can Use Seasons of Grief and Loss for Gospel Good.
- A. Be a present and empathetic representative of Jesus with grieving people. Your active, caring presence will speak volumes, not only about you as a leader, but about Jesus who you represent. This may involve acts of service, or even being quiet.
  - B. When the time is right, remind grieving people of the nearness of God and His deep compassion for their need.
  - C. When the time is right, remind grieving people to turn TOWARD Jesus, not away from Him. Teach them how to cry out to God and how to lament in faith.
- V. Practical Suggestions
- A. READ and STUDY grief and loss. Find good books on this subject and educate yourself. Learn what to say and what not to say. Learn how to be present when there is strong emotion expressed. Learn that your role is NOT to “fix things” or to correct a suffering person.
  - B. READ and STUDY the Psalms, noticing the vast range of human emotions that are present.
  - C. Do NOT be afraid to show emotion yourself. Like Jesus, we must weep with those who weep.
  - D. When you see SEASONS of grief and loss coming, address it clearly and teach people how to grow in their faith during ALL the seasons of life.

VI. To Discuss or Think About:

- How does my “home culture” experience and express grief? What cultural expressions of grief mesh with biblical truth, and what cultural expressions of grief do NOT mesh with biblical truth?
- Have you ever made a mistake in caring for a grieving person, maybe saying something unhelpful or not being available?

Book Suggestions:

- “Remember Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope” by Matthew McCulloug
- “The Journey Home: Finishing with Joy” by Bill Bright
- “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go: Facing Death with Courageous Confidence in God” edited by Nancy Guthrie
- “The Surprising Grace of Disappointment: Finding Hope When God Seems to Fail Us” by John Koessler
- “Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament” by Mark Vroegop
- “The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come” by Rob Moll