



SCHOOL OF GRIEF
— DR. DAVID PAGE —

THE SCHOOL OF GRIEF COURSE

WEEK 6:

Growing Larger Through Loss

Dr. Dave



SHEPHERDCHURCH

WEEK 6: GROWING LARGER THROUGH LOSS

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it.” Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

“Grief isn’t something to get over.” Mary Lamia

“Hope does not extinguish grief,” but it can take our memories of those we have lost with us to better or different future places.” Mary Lamia

“The forces of fate that bear down on man and threaten to break him also have the capacity to ennoble him.” Elisabeth S. Lukas

Grief Isn't Something We Get Over

Grief is a tool God gives us to get through our losses and transitions in life. We tend to use the phrase “getting over something.” This mistaken notion that grief is something you work through, finish, and get over is hurting rather than helping those in grief. Feelings of grief and sadness are common for many years. In fact, sometimes they are common for a lifetime after the actual death occurred.

I haven't gotten over Jackie's loss; instead, her loss became a part of who I am. She is a large part of my story on earth and something I'm very proud that Jackie has become part of the landscape of my life.

Grief isn't something you get over. It's not over; it's into. It's not through; it's absorbing your loved one into your life. Sittser wrote, “I did not get over the loss of my loved ones; rather, I absorbed the loss into my life, like soil receives decaying matter, until it became a part of who I am.” Jackie has become part of the fabric of my life and who I am as a person.

You begin to wear the loss of your loved one, it becomes a part of the landscape of your life. It's absorbing, wearing it, growing into it until it becomes clothes that fit better. We should carry loss in our hearts for the rest of our lives Jesus said blessed are those who mourn, he didn't say blessed are those who've overcome mourning. It's who mourn.

Maybe our own sorrows, but also other people until we realize that we belong to a community of mourning that goes back thousands of years and wraps itself around the world today. So we spend so much of our time trying to escape these things, avoid these things, and the call of discipleship is to grow into them.

The reality is you will carry your loss for the rest of your life. There is no stage called closure in grief, although our friends and family may want us to find closure because our pain makes them uncomfortable.

Your Loss Does Not Define You

Your loss does not define your identity, rather the defining factor will be how you respond to your loss. One of the lessons I learned through my daughter's death is that I can't control everything that happens in my life. The key isn't what happens to you but how you respond to what happens to you. I believe that 10% of life is what happens to us and 90% is how we respond.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor. While a prisoner in a Nazi death camp in Auschwitz in World War II, he was stripped of everything in his possession, including his gold wedding band. As he stood there naked in front of the German guards, he realized they could take everything from him except his power to choose. He wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Frankl refused to yield ultimate power to his captors and circumstances. In the same way, I decided my life was not going to be defined by my daughter's death, even though I was commonly known as "the pastor who lost his daughter" throughout the city of Auburn. Instead, my life would be defined by my response to my daughter's death.

Honestly, after two decades, I am still bewildered by my daughter's death. I don't know why she got a brain tumor, and I don't understand why she had to die. I've just decided to just keep on living after my loss and trust God to bring good out of the mess, to create beauty out of the ashes. As God began healing my heart, I was able to come alongside others and help them with their grief. My life was not defined by her loss but strengthened by it.

God Designed Our Hearts to Grieve

God designed our hearts to grieve. It's one of its main functions and purposes. Grieving is a necessary and ongoing practice to help us live and adapt to a turbulent world filled with heartache and pain. What a tremendous gift from God to our heart, body, and soul, to allow it to fulfill its most beautiful and noble purpose. Grieving helps us process the tragedies of the human experience and experience the comfort of God in the process. Grief, when tended to well, tends to our hearts well, which allows us to care for the hearts of others.

The Heart Enlarges

The heart doesn't break; it enlarges. The heart is elastic, like a balloon and can expand, stretch, and grow. We can increase the capacity of our souls and become more compassionate, empathetic and loving as people.

Our souls can grow larger through suffering. Loss can enlarge its capacity for anger, depression, despair, and anguish, all natural and legitimate emotions whenever we experience loss. Once enlarged, the soul is also capable of experiencing greater joy, strength, peace, and love. What we consider opposites—east and west, night and light,

sorrow and joy, weakness and strength, anger and love, despair and hope, death and life—are no more mutually exclusive than winter and sunlight. The soul has the capacity to experience these opposites, even at the same time.

Grieving is love, and love is grieving. Grief and love are two sides of the same heart. You grieve because you love. Without love, there is no grief. I believe because of my loss and because of your loss, we have a greater capacity for love and joy. And I believe we can accomplish things in the future that we never dreamed possible.

Growing Larger Through Loss

The death of a loved one can serve as a wake-up call to live life to the fullest. Death reminds us of how precious life is and what we could do if we had the courage to seize the day. Experiencing loss is an opportunity for us to grow by taking responsibility of our lives and making sure we don't waste it.

Thus, it's not true that we become less through loss unless we allow it to crush us and become bitter. On the contrary, loss can make us more. One of the grief myths is that our grief gets smaller over time and that becomes the goal. The goal isn't to make our grief smaller. It's for us to become bigger and to grow around our grief. Grief won't get smaller, but you will get bigger.

As a result, you become resilient. This growth process does much more than restore you to who you once were prior to your loss. Rather, you emerge from the experience transformed into a truer expression of who you were really meant to be. I keep asking, "How can I grow through this? How can I grow in my faith? How can I be better at walking alongside others in their grief?"

Author and radio host, Joni Eareckson Tada, became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident when she was seventeen years old and has been paralyzed from the shoulders down since. One of her mantras is, "*Lean into the pain, grow from the pain.*" Our natural reaction to pain is to say, "*No, I want to get rid of the pain.*" We spend much of our time trying to avoid pain and loss and the call of discipleship is to grow into them. Growing larger through loss is a process. To grow you must lean into the pain, but don't rush the process.

Post Traumatic Growth

German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, said, "*That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.*" I believe this is generally true. We hear a lot about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) occurs more often. Studies show that some trauma survivors report positive changes and enhanced personal development after experiencing their trauma. PTG refers to any beneficial change resulting from a major life crisis or traumatic event.

That being said, PTG does not lessen grief. So, don't look at it as an end point to your pain. Rather, PTG co-exists with our distress and is something that only exists because of our distress and our attempt to cope. Like much of grief, PTG is unexpected, but can be a beautiful byproduct of pain.

Many people who experience PTG adopt a new worldview with new possibilities for themselves, resulting in a rich and meaningful life.

5 Domains of Post-Traumatic Growth

The five domains of Post-Traumatic Growth are:

- Personal strength: A deeper sense of personal strength
- Appreciation for life: A greater appreciation for life in general
- Spiritual change: A shift in relating to God and the spiritual world
- Relating to others: Strengthening of close relationships
- New possibilities: Identification of new possibilities

Resilience

Most of us at some point will be struck by one or more major traumas: the sudden death of a loved one, violent crime, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, a serious automobile accident, a debilitating disease, a natural disaster or war. If you are very fortunate, then you have never encountered any of these misfortunes; but most likely you will someday. It is estimated that up to 90% of us will experience at least one serious traumatic event during our lives.

Traumatic events throw our lives into turmoil in unpredictable ways; no two people will respond to them in exactly the same manner. For some, the stress of the event can become chronic, lasting for years. They may undergo a dramatic change in outlook, becoming sullen, demoralized, withdrawn, cynical, and angry. Some will become depressed or develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Horrific, intrusive memories and nightmares will haunt them for days, months or even years, and they will feel unsafe in the world – hypervigilant – as if another serious danger lurks just around the corner. Some will take up drinking or drugs to numb their pain and dull their memories.

However, many people will find ways to meet the challenge and continue with purposeful lives. For a period after their ordeal, they may become distressed, but in time they will bounce forward and carry on. For some, it will be almost as if the trauma had never occurred. For others, the distress will persist, but they will find healthy ways to cope. Some survivors will even grow stronger and wiser because of their trauma. These survivors may report that their tragedy has helped them to appreciate life more, to become closer to family and friends, to find greater meaning, and sometimes to embark on a new mission in life. In the words of Elisabeth S. Lukas, a protégé of the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, *“The forces of fate that bear down on man and threaten to break him also have the capacity to ennoble him.”*

Bouncing Forward

There is a common misconception that resilience is synonymous with “recovery” and the notion of bouncing back into shape. I believe this line of thinking is toxic and potentially damaging. Here’s why: Humans are fundamentally and forever changed by the challenge, change, and complexity we encounter. Neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to grow and change in response to our experiences. We do not recover, but instead, rebuild. We do not bounce back, but instead, we bounce forward.

Resilience is not about staying the same or bouncing back. It's also not just maintaining a mentality of "this too shall pass." But instead, about evolving and allowing ourselves to be changed for the better. Instead of seeing resilience as going back, as bouncing back, we get to understand that resilience is about harnessing the wisdom, growth, and perspective we earned amidst adversity and going forward, incorporating what we learned.

Resilience is about being able to engage in a challenge and to allow yourself to be fundamentally changed by that experience, to allow the challenge to enhance us, rather than diminish us. You become a different person, and you have the opportunity to grow and change. In exchange we receive the gifts of enhanced confidence, strength, wisdom, and courage.

Dr. Taryn Marie Stejskal, author of *The 5 Practices of Highly Resilient People*, began working with brain injury patients and found that most popular beliefs about human resilience are incorrect. Since then, for the last 20 years, she has conducted qualitative research on the power of resilience, studying the science behind why some people succeed while others fail.

Dr. Taryn Marie outlines the five critical behaviors that define successful resilience: Vulnerability, Productive Perseverance, Connection, Graciousity (Gratitude and Generosity), and Possibility. Resilient People bounce forward, take an active approach to facing challenges, and most importantly, they are made, not born.

A Reverse Bucket List (Dr. Taryn Marie Stejskal)

We know that a bucket list is a listing of pleasurable things that we want to do and experience during our time on this planet. As I've had the good fortune to be able to do some of the things on my bucket list, I've realized that I learned more from the hard times I went through than the pleasurable times.

Yet, how often do we feel ashamed about our losses, challenges or the things we're facing? Unlike our bucket list items, we're not often broadcasting our tough moments on social media.

However, those moments are often the most expansive and instructive. So, I created the reverse bucket list, which invites us to look at the challenges that have come up in our lives and reflect on what these times taught us.

To better understand our reverse bucket list moments, we can ask ourselves: How has this challenge formed me for the better? How has it shaped me into the person that I am today? This allows us to cast a new light on the challenge and to begin to look at it as an experience that's part of our formation. Then we can celebrate what we learned from the reverse bucket list moments. We're not celebrating the hard things that happened, but we're celebrating what we learned.

How Long Will I Grieve?

How long will your loved one be dead? Because if they're going to be dead for a long time then you're going to grieve for a long time. But that doesn't mean you'll always grieve with pain. People are afraid that healing means forgetting their loved ones or what happened to them. It's not forgetting them but rather it's remembering them with love, talking about them, and keeping the connection with them alive. David Kessler said, "Healing is remembering your loved one with more love than pain."

Will I Ever Recover?

Regarding recovery from loss, there is a difference between a broken leg and an amputation. We can't go back to something else before. I believe there are experiences in life where there is no recovery—if by recovery we mean we're going to be able to go back to something we had before. When it came to my loss, I had to change my definition of recovery. If we mean complete recover and healing in this life, then I have not recovered and don't think I ever will until I get on the other side of heaven.

Jerry Sittser writes, "Recovery is a misleading and empty expectation. We recover from broken limbs, not amputations. Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery. It will transform or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same."

The Grief Recovery Method

Authors John James and Russell Friedman in their book, *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, define recovery as "Feeling better... claiming your circumstances instead of your circumstances claiming you and your happiness... finding new meaning for living, without fear of being hurt again... being able to enjoy fond memories without having them precipitate painful feelings of regret or remorse... acknowledging that it is perfectly all right to feel sad from time to time and to talk about those feelings no matter how those around you react ...being able to forgive others when they say or do things that you know are based on their lack of knowledge about grief... one day realizing that your ability to talk about the loss you've experienced is indeed normal and healthy."

Based on the above definition, I believe I'm moving forward in my recovery. It's taken a long time and a lot of work to get to where I am now. And yet, I still miss Jackie greatly, talk about her all the time and hold onto the hope that I will see her again in heaven. But I don't feel guilty anymore for feeling good! Feeling good is not disrespectful to her memory.

Railroad Tracks

Does God want us to be continually sad? No. I used to think life was a series of peaks and valleys; sometimes we're up, then we're down. But I've come to realize that life is much more like a set of parallel train tracks, with joy and sorrow running inseparably throughout our days.

Every day of your life, good things happen. Beauty, accomplishment, and pleasure. That's the track of joy. But every day of your life also holds disappointment, struggles, and losses. That's the track of sorrow. Joy and sorrow will always be present together.

Kay Warren, in her book *Choose Joy*, writes, “One of our toughest challenges in life is to learn how to live on both of those tracks at the same time. But there’s hope! Consider what it’s like to stand between two sets of train tracks and look off into the horizon. Those parallel tracks come together as we look ahead. They are no longer distinguishable as two separate tracks.

“That’s the way it will be for us too. During our lifetime, we stand on the tracks looking for signs of Jesus Christ’s return. We watch for the sights and sounds that will alert us that his appearance is very close. One day, in the brightness of his coming, we will meet him face to face. And when we do, the tracks of joy and sorrow will merge. The sorrow will disappear forever, and only the joy will remain.”

Love Never Dies

Love always survives death. Let’s not give death any more power than it already has. Death can end a physical life but not our relationship with our loved one, and certainly not our love because love always survives death. It never ends.

A Hope-Filled Scripture Verse

“But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

We can apply this passage to grief by encouraging ourselves to not dwell on the past pain of loss, but to instead focus on moving forward and finding hope in the future, even though the grieving process may still be ongoing. It’s a wake up call to not let past sorrow hold us back from embracing new beginnings.

What is the difference between people who thrive and people who decline over a long period of time? It's not that they don't get knocked down; it's that they get back up and bounce forward. That's true of both people I know personally and those I read about in the Bible:

- Jonah started out running from God but ended up influencing a whole city/metropolis.
- Thomas started out wracked by doubt but ended up taking the gospel all the way to India.
- Peter was disappointed with his inability to withstand pressure. He was disappointed with himself for denying Christ but ended up as a great Christian leader.
- John Mark was rejected by a high-ranking Christian leader. He was seen as a quitter but ended up being tapped by the Holy Spirit of God to write one of the Gospels.
- David bounced forward from several devastating failures: moral, leadership, and career but became the King of Israel and a man after God’s own heart.

In nearly every case, whether somebody bounces forward or not has to do with one question: “Does that person have hope?”

Howard Hendricks, the late great professor from Dallas Theological Seminary, once said, “*Discouragement is the anesthetic the devil uses on a person just before he reaches in and carves out his heart.*”

I think he's right.

When people lose hope, they lose their ability to dream for the future. Despair replaces joy. Fear replaces faith. Anxiety replaces prayer. Insecurity replaces confidence.

In *The Hope Quotient*, Pastor Ray Johnston writes, "Hope believes in future possibility rather than resigning to current reality."

People bounce forward when they have hope.

Develop the AUDACITY to thrive.

Believe that deep JOY is possible in the future.

Realize that joy in the Lord and fruitful living is available for every believer.

Expect to thrive again someday.

We grieve but not without hope. Because for a Christian, death is not the end., but rather the beginning of eternal life. This belief is based on John 11: 25-26, where Jesus says, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die.*"