

It is helpful to think of life as a journey. Looking down the road that stretches before us we anticipate the course we will follow. There are goals to be reached, hopes to be realised and purposes to be fulfilled. We all have them. Some of us have thoughtfully mapped out the future, many have not, but nonetheless somewhere at the back of all of our minds we are set upon a certain course. We may have been following that course for some time. If that is the case the people and things associated with it will have become familiar to us, and so long as we are on it we will feel comfortable and secure.

At times, through life, the road we had intended to travel is suddenly blocked to us. Unforeseen events intervene and the journey is stopped. Goals can no longer be reached, hopes vanish, purposes cannot be accomplished, security is threatened, and the world becomes an uncertain place. When that happens a process begins: a process of change: a process of letting go of the old way and turning in new directions to new goals, new hopes, and new purposes.

Of course, if we were perfect that would be easy. We would acknowledge the hand of a sovereign God in our circumstances and gladly accept the change imposed upon us. But we are not perfect. We find it hard to let go. We find it hard to establish new outlooks and new directions, and so the process of change is painful for us. It is the process of grieving.

The circumstances which impose grief upon us are many. We most commonly associate it with the death of a loved one, but other changes in the course of life can cause similar pain: sudden loss of employment, a move to a different community, a member of the family moving away from home, a disappointment, or even the death of a family pet or the loss of a treasured possession. For some of these the pain will be more severe than for others, but any situation of loss has the potential to induce that series of reactions we call grief. Can you think of some other examples?

The Stages Of Grief

Everyone's grief is different. No matter what your experience has been you will never wholly appreciate just what another is feeling, but it is possible to observe and understand a little. There are, for example, certain stages that a grieving person will usually pass through and if you are aware of them your attempts to help will be more appropriate. I find it useful to consider three.

- The stage of denial.
- The stage of yearning.
- The stage of reorganisation.

Here are some of the things you can expect to happen:

- 1 The stage of denial.** Often the immediate reaction to news of the death of a loved one is denial. There may be spoken acknowledgement of the death and expression of emotion but somehow the full realisation of what has happened does not register. I believe this is a safety mechanism which the Lord has built into our minds so that when circumstances are just too overwhelmingly painful to face we are, to a degree, eased into them. Denial can be very strong. Some may remain convinced that the death, of which they have been told, has not occurred at all. Others will acknowledge the truth but live in a state of detached numbness or bewilderment. It can last for a short time, or continue for many days or even longer.

- 2 **The stage of yearning.** As the truth filters through the mind, denial gives way to yearning. The mind, and body, long and search for the one who has gone and for the old familiar ways that are lost. There are times of anxiety when the body tenses up, the heart may beat hard or the stomach go into knots. The mind drifts back to good times that have passed and takes comfort in familiar memories. The imagination plays tricks: a noise is heard and we react as if it has been the person we loved, we see a stranger in the street and for a split second we think it is him, perhaps we hear his voice or imagine we can see him in the dim light of the night hours.
- 3 **The stage of reorganisation.** In time, the yearning fades, though at first it will take very little to reawaken it. As it does, bit by bit a new course for life is established. Gradually, although the good memories of what has passed are still there, familiarity with new ways brings security.

Its OK

It is good to be able to reassure those who grieve that these things are normal and natural. Not only that, but God does not condemn us because we grieve. Rather He would comfort us in our sorrow and gently encourage us to move forward in faith, trusting His goodness and providence (2 Corinthians 1:3–4, Hebrews 4:15–16).

How Long?

Often I am asked, “How long will it take?” but that question is impossible to answer. It depends upon so many things, but it is not unusual for periods of yearning to return even some years after the loss, when something stirs the memory.

Sometimes, the course of grief is complicated and prolonged, perhaps by regrets or grievances which repeatedly turn the thoughts back to the past, or perhaps by concern that to move forward would be to forsake the memory of a loved one. The most common cause of problems, in my experience, is the lack of new goals and purposes. If there is nothing to move forward to, numbness and yearning persist.

How Can You Help?

Let me suggest some practical ways in which you can help those who are grieving.

In the early stages:

- Words may not mean a lot. This is not the time to introduce new ideas or try to modify thoughts.
- Demonstrate sympathy by your actions, as much as by your words.
- Listen to what is being said, even if it is repetitive. Much of what is said may be the product of a mind in turmoil trying to rationalise something which does not make sense, or a mind in denial trying to grasp reality. Allow this natural process to take place.
- Be a friend, and demonstrate your friendship by being available to give practical help, but do not take over or become intrusive. Allow the one who is grieving to be involved in what is going on, to take part in practical arrangements, and to have time to grieve alone.
- Do not try to distract or cheer up someone who is in the early stages of grief: that is to encourage and prolong denial.

Through the days of yearning:

- Continue to be a friend. Continue to be available when needed and demonstrate the genuineness of your friendship in practical ways.
- Give reassurance that the physical and emotional symptoms of grief are a natural human response, and not something to be ashamed of.

- Give wise and appropriate comfort from the Word of God, remembering that the Lord is not One to break the bruised reed.
- Encourage with thoughts of the Lord's return and the glory which lies ahead (1 Thessalonians 4:13).
- Be willing to talk openly about the loved one who has gone.
- Deal patiently and honestly with questions, worries, and fears as they arise. For example, if a person in grief expresses guilt about past events, do not dismiss it lightly. There may be a genuine problem, and as the Lord's people we have a way to face and deal with guilt.
- Gently, and progressively, introduce the idea that there is a way forward to be sought. The Lord has His purpose for each one of us (Ephesians 2:10).

In the struggle to reorganise:

- Encourage, more and more, to look forward and press on toward the hope of glory.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction and purposeful activities, with gentle encouragement to become involved, but avoid creating artificial situations or introducing purposeless time fillers.
- Help to identify gifts which could be developed and used for the Lord's glory.
- Give counsel and advice as it is asked for, but again do not take over or become too intrusive.
- Watch out lest wrong directions are taken and lovingly admonish if need be.

It is not possible here to say everything that should be said about helping those who grieve. Some of what is to come in later chapters will be relevant and can be added to what is here, but hopefully I have given you some ideas to begin with, and sufficient understanding to stimulate you to careful thought about other ways in which you can show the love of the Saviour.



Often those who are going through a time of grief are given advice which is not helpful. Think of some examples of "bad counsel" you have heard of. How would you advise in the same situation?



The Lord has a purpose for each one of us. How would you help someone who sees no purpose in life to find a way forward?



Using the table below, list some passages of Scripture you can think of that teach us about heaven. Now study each of these passages carefully and, in the second column, write down the main points to be taken from each one.

Bible Passage	Teaching About Heaven
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	