

In a little while... Confusion, Grief & Joy

John 16:16-33

I've mentioned before that growing up in my family, we had spirited discussions around the dinner table, particularly around the meaning of words and their correct usage. Consequently my brothers and sisters and I grew up being quite pedantic about language. I say pedantic. My wife says we were nerds, but that's a discussion for another day.

Anyway we still share nerdy emails about word usage. One recent email was all about *fumblerules*. A *fumblerule* is where you demonstrate a grammatical rule by using a violation of that rule.

For example:

- Avoid clichés like the plague.
- Don't listen to any advice.
- No sentence fragments.
- Parentheses are (almost always) unnecessary.
- The passive voice should never be employed.
- And my favourite: Never use a big word when a diminutive one will suffice...

Fumblerules. Lots of fun. And fun because they deliberately show up one of the difficulties of language, which is that language is not always as clear as it could be. Sometimes it's the speaker of the message who is deliberately dancing around a topic without being direct. Sometimes it's the hearer who hears the words but doesn't appreciate the message being communicated, or the subtle nuances, or the cultural content that makes sense of the words being spoken.

My family and I come across that occasionally here in the US – like the other **arvo** when I needed **petrol** so I drove to the **servo** in Napa. I was really hungry so I stopped at **Maccas** on the way. I asked for a **chicken burger** and **chips** and they said they don't serve chips, so would I just like the sandwich. I didn't know they made sandwiches at Macdonalds... So confusing! We also just bought a new **barbie**, so I tried to buy **gas** but they only had **propane**. So in the end we just had cheese and **biscuits** for dinner instead of **sausage sandwiches**. But I guess that's what it's like to be an Aussie in the US!

Now if that was a confusing intro, then you perhaps have some empathy for the disciples at the start of our passage today. You see, the disciples had been listening to Jesus give this speech, but somehow they still didn't understand exactly what Jesus would go through the next day, even in the next hours, as he would be arrested and tried and crucified. They heard the words, but they still didn't understand.

Maybe that's you today as we open God's word – you wish God would speak clearly to you, help you to understand. That's certainly my prayer for myself every time I open the Bible. So why don't we pray that God would help us as we open the Scriptures this morning.

Our Father, we need your help to understand the big truths about this world, the big truths about your plans, the big truths about how we fit into it all. We ask this morning that you would open your word to us, give us ears to hear and hearts to understand. Grant us all joy and peace in believing, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Confusion

So Jesus has clearly told the disciples that he is going away, throughout the course of this speech in John 13-17, all from the night before Jesus died. The disciples have understood enough to be quite upset – we saw that last week in John 16:6, where Jesus acknowledged their grief because of what he had told them.

And perhaps some of their grief was because of what he had NOT told them also.

Look with me at 16:16, where Jesus says:

"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."

What exactly does Jesus mean?

The disciples are asking the same question (v17):

some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?"¹⁸ They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying."

Think for a moment. If the disciples understood that going away meant Jesus was going to die, then we understand their confusion at the idea that he would come back. Even though they'd seen Jesus raise Lazarus, and the little girl, was that enough to trust that Jesus would *also* be raised to life? And I wonder for us, in that moment when we face our own mortality, will **we** have deep and abiding trust that Jesus will resurrect **us**? Or will we have doubts? Worries? Uncertainty?

For the disciples, the concern seemed to be over what Jesus meant when he said he would come back, and especially "*after a little while.*" What exactly does that phrase mean? They knew he was going to the Father. So what could coming back in a little while mean? Was Jesus talking just about the time from his arrest to his crucifixion? Or the time from his death until his resurrection? Or the time until he would send his Holy Spirit? Or is Jesus talking about the second coming? What does he mean?

I don't think we should be surprised by the disciples' confusion. If you read back through chapters 14-16, Jesus doesn't give a blow-by-blow itinerary of the events that would follow. Jesus is preparing his disciples for what's to come, but not by sharing every gory detail. He already said that back in 16:12 –

I have much more to say to you, [but it's much] more than you can now bear.

The disciples don't know every detail, and even though they want to know the details, Jesus doesn't give them out. Don Carson says of these verses: “referring to [the] historical events [... these chapters] are amazingly sketchy.”¹

So the disciples are rightly confused. And that can happen to any of us at any time in the Christian walk, whether we've been a Christian for 6 months or 60 years. Sometimes we come across difficult truths or painful experiences that we struggle to understand for a sustained period. Times when we read God's word and it doesn't make sense to us. It doesn't answer the question we are asking.

Buy maybe, like the disciples, Jesus *has* given you enough to navigate this season. Maybe you wouldn't be able to bear the details if you knew them. Just because *we don't understand why* something is happening, it doesn't mean God has stepped out of the picture. It doesn't mean Jesus has abandoned us.²

That's the first big idea – sometimes we won't understand every detail, or every reason for what is going on in our lives.

And that leads us into our second big idea, which is about the grief of not knowing.

Grief

Last week we briefly touched on the idea of grief back in v6 of this chapter.

[Jesus said]: you are filled with grief because I have said these things.

Now as Jesus responds to their question about his going away, he returns to the topic of grief in v20:

²⁰ *Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve...*

Jesus is clearly talking now about what would happen to him just in just a few hours' time. Where the disciples would hear crowds chanting “Crucify, crucify!” Where they would see Jesus

¹ DA Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Evangelical Exposition*

² *Ibid.* following Carson's line of application

beaten and bloodied and nailed to a cross. Where they would see passers-by mock Jesus and hurl insults at him. And where they would watch him breathe his last...

Yes, the disciples would weep and mourn while the world rejoiced over the death of Jesus, and all too soon that grief would be with them.

Just like grief finds each of us in this lifetime.

Whether it's death. Or another loss, like illness, the decline of health, the loss of an activity that you once enjoyed and now can't do any more. The loss of status as you move into a different stage of life. The loss of what might have been if life had turned out the way you hoped. Perhaps it was the dream of marriage, or children, or grandchildren; or the grief of a broken family. None of us are spared grief in this lifetime. We will all grieve...

It's part of living in a world that is broken, a world where the effects of sin ripple out and cause decay even in the brightest of moments. Don't get me wrong, this world is capable of giving us moments of stunning beauty and love and awe, but they don't last forever. Grief is part of this world until Jesus returns.

And grief is not a topic we need to avoid as Christians, as if believing in Jesus will make every moment of life perfect. We've all been around long enough to know that can't be true. And I understand, it's not nice dwelling on the negative parts of our life, on the sad parts. But they are inevitable and so I just want us to think for a moment about a loving, Christian response to grief. Because we're told in the Bible to "*Rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn*" (Romans 12:15).

So what is grief like for the one suffering? We all experience grief differently, but JI Packer puts it this way in his book, *A Grief Sanctified*.

Grief is regularly more draining and harrowing than we thought it could be. [...] We did not know we could feel so strongly, and words fail us to express our feelings adequately. (p143-144)

So it's not just the feelings, but their intensity that makes grief so hard to handle. Some people speak of it like a weight on their chest and they are unable to breathe. Others say that they want to cry and shout at the same time, others can't speak at all. Grief causes all kinds of physical reactions in the body, apart from the mental and emotional toll. And then there's the social isolation of grief – because nobody can really understand what you are going through.

Packer goes on to say that grief is like "a true reflection of hell, where the ache of losing God and all good, including the good of community, will be endless... We grieve alone and the agony is unbelievable."³

³ JI Packer, *A Grief Sanctified*, 143-144.

PAUSE

So how do we walk alongside people in their grief? How do we love them like Jesus?

The first thing I want to notice from our Bible passage is the way that Jesus acknowledges their grief. He names it, he doesn't shy away from it. But he also gives the disciples time to sit with it, before he goes on to speak into their grief.

And that reminds me of the OT book of Job. Job, a wealthy man who loses everything in just a matter of days – first his livestock, then his children, then his own health. And he finds himself sitting in the dust with his body covered in sores, grieving the loss of everything that mattered in his life.

His friends come to see him – they wanted to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. And it was hard for them. When they saw him from a distance, they could barely recognize him. It says they began to weep out loud, and none of them said a word to him for seven days and seven nights. They just sat with him in the dust, silent, because they could see how great Job's suffering was.

That's a pretty good pastoral care manual right there. Be present, express sympathy, allow time, and listen more than you speak.

Sitting with someone in their grief is not like a doctor's consultation. We're not there to ask probing questions, or to find out the hows and whys.

It's not like a therapy session – unless you're a trained grief counsellor, it's not the place for your well-meaning advice.

Sitting with someone in their grief is not necessarily a time for a Bible study – it might be, but that's not the first thing I'd do. Some well-meaning Christians have said things: like it's all in God's plan; or God will make everything better; or don't worry, you're young. You'll be able to have another child.

Or worse: perhaps there is unconfessed sin in your life and God is punishing you... That's what Job's friends told him. You can read the last chapter of Job to see how God rebukes them for that untruth.

What I'm trying to say is that there are lots of *unhelpful* ways that we can respond to people in their grief. I have a couple of books I'd recommend reading if you are someone who is regularly in contact with those who are grieving. And we'll link those below, and in the e-News. Because as a church, we want to do our best to love one another, and also to reach out into the Napa Valley and beyond with the love of Jesus. And if we can learn this lesson well, it sets us up to be

a light in the darkness, to be a source of comfort when people are in pain. And to gently hold out a torch of hope when hope seems lost.

Joy

Because that's what Jesus does for the disciples in the second part of v20:

You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. ²¹ A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.

Jesus says that the disciples' grief will turn to joy, just like a woman giving birth moves from the moment of labour pains, to the joy of holding her newborn child. And all of that anguish disappears because of what came out of the pain.

Well Jesus says it will be the same for the disciples. The crucifixion, Jesus' death, all of that grief will come to an end when they see Jesus again. But it's more than that, because Jesus' death wasn't just an aberration in the story. It's the centre of the story, it's through the very death that causes them so much grief, that Jesus is able to put a future end to death and grief for everybody. The very thing that brought them so much grief, will also be the thing that brings great joy. Jesus death deals with sin and opens the way to the Father. That terrible Friday becomes a Good Friday as Jesus dies so that we will live.

And I think for us, in the middle of our own grief, and as we sit with others in their grief, there is always the hint of this hope in the middle of the grief. Jesus' death and resurrection mean that we don't grieve like those without hope (1 Thess 4:13). And when the time is right, God willing you'll be able to share that hope with your grieving friend.

Notice again how Jesus does it – and this is *before* their time of grief – but he gently reminds them again in v22 that their grief will have an end:

²² Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

For the disciples, they would have been overjoyed that first Sunday to see the risen Jesus. And when we look through the rest of the New Testament, the resurrection is one of the cornerstones of the message that the Apostles take to the ends of the earth. In the resurrection we have the hope of our own resurrection to life beyond these 80 or 90 years.

And for us, the joy has to be that one day we will see Jesus face to face. We don't get that immediate confirmation that the disciples had, we won't get the grief-turned-joy that they must have felt, when they saw their friend who was dead now and is now alive – we don't get that, not yet anyway. But we will one day!

That's why Jesus will say in John 20:29 –

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. (John 20:29)

Jesus promises that our grief will turn to joy when we put our trust in him. When we align our lives with his.

And there's much more to say from our passage today, but I just want to finish with one idea from the end of today's Bible reading. And it's this: Jesus has warned his disciples about a very difficult time of trial ahead for them. The earlier chapters talk about persecution, this chapter talks about grief. And now Jesus even talks about the reality that the disciples will be scattered when the temple guards come to arrest him. You can see it there in v32.

I just want to share a word of encouragement for anybody today who feels like the circumstances of this life have left them scattered, that is somehow away from Jesus. Maybe you're feeling separated from Jesus because of something difficult in your life, something that you are struggling to process, or perhaps you are feeling distant from Jesus because of a time of suffering or grief in your life. If that's you, I want you to look at what Jesus says here in v32 and v33.

Jesus says to the disciples there in v32,

"A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone.

The truth is we will all abandon Jesus at some time. We will all turn our backs on him in some way, whether it's in a momentary decision to sin, or in a more concerted time of leaving Jesus. He knows that about us. It's part of who we are as sons of Adam and daughters of Eve.

But even though we are prone to wander, Jesus is not. His Father won't leave him alone, and Jesus won't leave us alone. And for those disciples, when they came out of hiding three days later, when they came back to Jesus, he didn't hold it against them. No, that's exactly why he died, so that he could forgive them. And he'll forgive us in our own sinful wandering, when we come back to him.

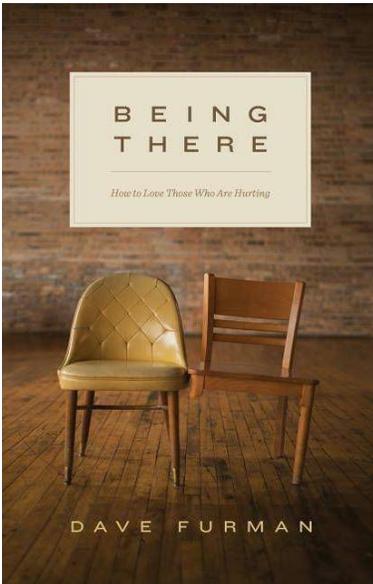
And when we do come back to him, when the grief lifts, when we can see clearly again, Jesus will give us that peace that transcends understanding. It's there in v33:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Jesus has overcome the world – he has dealt with sin, he has conquered the grave. And so even in the moment of grief, we can find peace through Christ.

Will you pray with me?

Book Review



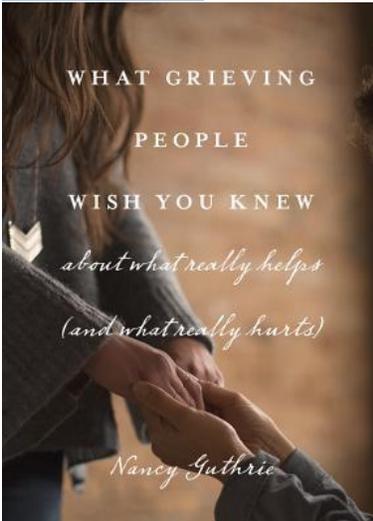
Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting

By Dave Furman (Crossway 2016, \$14.99)

Everyone has friends or family who suffer from sickness, disability, depression, or the death of a loved one. Oftentimes, the people who love the hurting also struggle in their own unique ways. They tend to suffer in silence and without much support from others.

Writing from the unique perspective of one who needs extra help on a daily basis, Dave Furman offers insight into the support, encouragement, and wisdom that people need when helping others. Furman draws on his own life experiences, examples from the Bible, and wisdom from Christians throughout history to address the heart and ministry of those who are called to serve others. Deeply personal and powerfully pastoral, this book points readers to the strength that only God can provide as they love those who are hurting.

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What Grieving People Wish You Knew about what really helps (and what really hurts)

By Nancy Guthrie (Crossway 2016, \$12.99)

When someone we love is grieving, we want to be there. But it's easy to feel paralyzed, worried that we might say or do the wrong thing. Nancy Guthrie has personal experience dealing with pain and knows what words of encouragement are helpful and what words are harmful.

Drawing from her own life experiences – including the loss of two young children – Guthrie has written this helpful resource for Christians who want to be better friends to those who are suffering. Practical and down-to-earth, this book includes examples and helpful tips from real grieving people who have been helped (and hurt) by friends who meant well, equipping readers to come alongside and comfort loved ones who are hurting.

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[BONUS VIDEO:](#) Nancy Guthrie shares the top four things grieving people wish we knew about grief, helping us to confidently interact and helpfully take action.

