

Helping people through pressure points in life

Helping others through grief

Introduction

I was reading a letter submitted in the letters to the Editor column of a national newspaper where the writer had said that 'We live in a time of vastly increased life potential, but we do not know how to die. We have lost our sense of God so that preparation for death cannot be easily talked about.'

Stuart Barton Babbage in his book 'The Mark of Cain' puts it, 'Our grandparents in their embarrassment and self-consciousness, said that babies were found under gooseberry bushes, and we, in our self-consciousness over the facts of death speak of 'passing on'. In our secularised, humanistic society, death enjoys an almost universal taboo amongst topics of conversation. Death and loss however, is one of the constantly and often unexpected intruding facts into our lives.

Grief and sorrow are normally the first aspects of death to touch others and our own lives. Some deaths are sudden and unexpected, some are slow, more predictable, we have grieved ourselves or we have suffered with friends who have grieved for those who have died. As we write or work through this study we may recall vivid memories ourselves. The more one looks at the ugly face of death, the more one is confronted by one's own mortality, and yet the more one knows how to help others who are in pain because of death. The question is not 'If when someone I know suffers bereavement how will I help them cope? But 'when'.

Our Christian faith does not offer an easy escape route from the pain of death. God does not suggest that we look the other way and avoid the tragedy of it at all costs. He doesn't even want us to act like it doesn't hurt. Jesus carried as he faced the death of his friend Lazarus. Jesus sweat drops of blood as he faced his own death. The Christian message offers us hope and grace as we face our own death; it also offers us these gifts as we walk through death with others.

These studies are all about helping us face our own grief in our own life, and the lives of others

These studies focus on grief through death, but there are also many other losses in life, which cause us to grieve, and the principles here relate to those losses as well.

Study 1

Overcoming the fear of death

Introduction

C.S.Lewis wrote that he was surprised how much grief felt like fear. We live constantly with the fear of death. When death does come, or any loss, because all loss reminds us of the ultimate loss in death. The feelings of grief come to the surface and magnify the fear that already existed, and may have been dormant for years. We just to reflect on how we can be freed from the bondage of fear.

The big picture

1. What are you like when you are afraid, in your behaviour, your attitudes, your perspective, and in your body [physically]?

The Biblical picture

Read Hebrews Ch 2 v 9-18

2. In verses 9-13 what do we learn about Jesus?
3. What is his relationship with his followers?
4. How do you respond to being in the same family as Jesus, and being called his brother/ sister?
5. What are the effects of Jesus becoming human and dying? [V14-18]
6. One of the purposes of Jesus coming is to free people those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death [v15]. Why do people fear death?
7. How do you see people expressing enslavement to this fear of death?
8. How does a lack of freedom in talking about death reflect this bondage?
9. Why do you think it is vital that Jesus became like his human brothers and sisters? V 17-18
10. What do you think is the relationship between the fear of death and the fear of meeting God, still such a powerful link in 21st century thinking?
11. How does the fact that Jesus dealt with the sin issue of mankind [the atonement] speak to this fear of meeting God?

Being in the picture

12. What difference does it make that Jesus has experienced death and has power over it?
13. How does this truth affect your attitudes and behaviour?
14. V17, speak of Jesus being a merciful and faithful high priest. How can you demonstrate this mercy and faithfulness to others by helping them to identify with their fears about death?
15. How can you communicate what this passage says about Jesus and death to those who are afraid?

Study 2 **Facing our own death**

Introduction

Two friends were once sitting chatting to each other, when Jane said to Rita, 'I always thought I was too young to die.' Rita replied 'Jane, it's too late'. We have to ask ourselves 'Is thinking about death a bit unhealthy?' 'Isn't it a bit morbid?' Well actually no, facing the reality of one's own death is one of the healthiest things one can do, in order for us to be a person who helps others through the pressure points on loss in their life.

The Big picture

1. What comes to mind when you think about dying?

The Biblical picture

Read Psalm 90

2. Most of this Psalm is about death. Why are verses 1-2 so important in talking about loss and grief through death?
3. What is life according to verses 3-10?
4. In what ways does the Psalmist express your feelings about God and life and death?
5. How are your attitudes different?

6. In verse 12 the Psalmist makes a request of God. What do you think it means to 'number our days'?
7. What do you think it means when it talks about a 'heart of wisdom'?
8. How does the knowledge that you are going to die affect the way you live your life?
9. Verses 11-12 stand between two contrasting sections. How do verses 3-10 differ from verses 13-17?
10. What does the Psalmist ask God to do in verses 13-17?
11. How does each of these requests demonstrate a 'heart of wisdom'?

Being in the picture

12. These verses turn the focus back on God, how does this change of focus put death into perspective?
13. Why can you more effectively care for someone who is facing death if you have looked at your own death?

Study 3 Offering Comfort

Introduction

The sermon had been on Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. During coffee after the service, Jill was speaking with her friend Peter, Jill said, 'It isn't fair, when my mother dies, I have to deal with it. When Jesus' friend dies, he just raises him from the dead'.

Jesus does more than just avoid the reality of death by raising Lazarus from the dead. We see how he related to people and experienced their sorrow as well as his own. So that when Lazarus eventually died his sisters could deal with the reality of death themselves, by what they had experienced from Jesus.

The big picture

1. Why does death often seem unfair?

The biblical picture

Read John Ch 11 v 17-44

2. What different emotions do you sense in this story?
3. In what different ways does Jesus respond to Mary and Martha's Grief?
4. Why doesn't he respond to Mary and Martha in the same way?
5. Three times, characters in this story says that Jesus could have prevented the death of Lazarus [vs. 21, 32, and 37.] Why didn't he do it?
6. What does Jesus say about himself in verses [25-26]?
7. Jesus ended his declaration in verses 25-26 with the question 'Do you believe this? How would you answer Jesus's question? Explain.
8. What effect does your answer to the above question have on the way you can give and receive comfort?
9. In verses 38-40 Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Why did he do this?

Being in the picture

10. When you have experienced loss, what responses of people were helpful in your various stages of grief?
11. What kind of responses was not helpful?
12. As a result of what you have learned from this passage in John Ch 11, how can you better comfort others who are facing grief?

Study 4

Offering peace

Introduction

When Oliver Cromwell's son Robert died at the age of seventeen, Cromwell said his death went as a dagger straight to my heart. Cromwell found comfort in the Bible. He said what brought comfort to me were the words. 'I can do everything through Him [Christ] who gives me strength.' The calming words of the Psalms or the words of Jesus to his disciples nourish the soul and grief is a time when the soul needs to be nourished.

The big picture

1. Describe what it was like if you were ever near death or thought you were

The biblical picture

Read John Ch 14 v 1-7

2. This discussion between Jesus and his disciples takes place at the last meal that they ate together before his death. They are aware that separation is coming soon. What might have surprised the disciples about Jesus instructions in v 11?

3. The first thing that Jesus promised his disciples is that he will prepare a place for them in his father's house. If you were going to a completely new place, what difference would it make if someone you trusted were preparing for your arrival?

4. Jesus's second promise is that he will come back and take them to be with him. For some the greatest fear of death is being alone. What is it like for you when you really feel alone?

5. In what ways can you help relieve this fear of being alone for a person who is dying? [What would you want someone to do for you?]

6. How is your anxiety about the unknown aspects of death affected by reading here that Jesus is preparing your destination and he will escort you there?

Being in the picture

7. How do you feel when you are driving and are lost or confused about the direction you are going in?

8. How does Jesus speak to this issue for those who are lost or uncertain about how to get to heaven?

9. What implications does Christ's statement that he is truth and life have for those who are looking for meaning, fulfillment and purpose in their life?

10. According to this passage how can a person know God?

11. How can you offer peace to someone facing death by sharing Jesus Christ?

Study 5 Offering hope

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was executed by the Nazis on the day before World War II ended, he called death, the supreme festival on the road to freedom. The story goes that Ruth and Billy Graham were driving home, when suddenly they were caught in some road works, they followed the detour for several miles taking note of the road signs along the way, they came to the last one which said 'End of construction. Thank you for your patience.' Ruth Graham turned to her husband and said, 'When I die, I want that engraved on my stone'.

The big picture

1. What do you hope heaven will be like?

The biblical picture

Read Revelation Ch 21 v 1-27

2. What is heaven like?

3. How does the description of heaven compare with what you want it to be?

4. Verses 1-8 use the word new several times. As you think of earth as it is now, what do you see in these verses that will be 'new'?

5. What difference will it make that God will finally dwell with people in this way? [Verses 3-7 22-23]

6. How might this kind of heaven meet your deepest longings?

7. How do you respond to the words? 'It is done, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end'? [V6]

8. How does the historical perspective seen in verses 12 and 14 add power to the words 'It is done', and the view that God is both Alpha and omega?

9. What do verses 22-27 further tell you about what life will be like in heaven?

Being in the picture

10. As you think through the entire passage, how does life in heaven compare or contrast with the life you are experiencing on earth now?

11. What aspects of life in heaven most appeal to you, why?

12. In what different ways do you see the glory of God revealed throughout this passage?

13. How does this view of heaven affect your sense of hope?

14. How can you offer this hope to someone who is facing death?

Study 6 Offering God's grace

Introduction

There was once a lively debate going on about the uniqueness of the Christian faith over and against other world faiths. C.S. Lewis was present and was asked what he thought. He replied simply, 'Oh it's easy, it's grace.' In marketing terms the unique selling point of the Christian message is grace. Grace alone explains the heights and depths of the Christian faith. Grace is undeserved, acceptance and love received from another, especially the characteristic attitude of God towards sinful mankind. It is favour or kindness done to another, when grace is viewed from the standpoint of the person who receives it grace is the thankfulness felt for the gift or the favour

The big picture

1. What do you understand grace to mean to you? [Describe it as best you can]

The biblical picture

2 Corinthians Ch 4 v 7- Ch 5-8

2. Though the word grace is only used once in the passage, what evidence is there of God's grace throughout this passage?

3. What is the treasure mentioned 4v7 [see also v 6]?

4. What are the jars of clay that Paul mentions?

5. How is the grace of God demonstrated by this treasure being placed in jars of clay?

6. How does the death of Jesus the Christian carries in their body reveal the life of Jesus in them? [4 v8-12]

7 How is the grace of God experienced through the hope of the resurrection [4 v13-15]?

8. How do you see the grace of God that results from the hope of the resurrection being demonstrated in Paul's life [4; 15-5; 8]?

Being in the picture

9. Compare your attitude towards illness, ageing and death with Paul's view of his difficulties?
10. In what ways would you like to reflect more of God's grace in your life?
11. What steps do you need to take in order for this to happen?
12. How can you offer grace to someone who is facing death?

Study 7

Dealing with the death of an older person

Introduction

I have had the privilege of being at the bedside of an elderly person as they have died. In both cases the person was surrounded by their family, they were all able to be present to say their last words, give their last hugs, and then watch as the person closed their eyes on a group of loving caring people. In both cases that person's death was precious to the people who were present. The tears were felt as deeply in each individual's heart as it was possible. The tears of the family lessened as time went by, but the place that the elderly person who has lived a full life never left the families memories.

The big picture

1. What are some of the common attitudes towards the elderly today?

The biblical picture

Read Genesis Ch 48 v 1-12 and 49: 22-Ch50; 14

2. How did Jacob respond to his impending death?
3. What things were uppermost in his mind as he prepared to die?
4. Why do you think these things were important to him?
5. What are the ways that you can help an elderly person in your life complete what is important to them?

6. How did Jacob's relationship with *God* affect the way he faced death?
7. What evidence do you see that the past was important to Jacob?
8. How might you free your own elderly friends or relatives to talk about their past?
9. What attitudes did Joseph demonstrate towards Jacob?
10. What was the value of Joseph bringing his children to see Jacob prior to his death?

Being in the picture

11. Compare the attitude of Joseph towards Jacob with the attitudes commonly expressed toward elderly people?
12. In order to effectively care for the elderly who are facing death we need to know how to age and die with dignity ourselves. What changes do you need to take in your life now in order to be able to face death like Jacob did?

Study 8

Dealing with the death of a child or younger person

Introduction

Someone has said that the measure of life is not its duration but its donation. There is some pain that one never seems to get over, and the death of a child or a young person would appear to be one such pain. Time may lessen the intensity of such pain, and God's love and grace may heal, but the scar is never completely gone. Grief can never be run against someone else's timetable. The death of a child young person or someone in the prime of life is as one put it, 'a period placed before the end of the sentence'.

The big picture

1. How do you think you would respond if your child/ grandchild was diagnosed with a terminal illness?

The biblical picture

Read 2 Samuel Ch 12 v 15-23

2. Describe David's attitudes and behaviour during the illness and after the death of his child?

3. What similar responses have you seen or heard of in parents of a child who is dying?

4. How might your response be like David's if your own child/ grandchild were critically ill?

5. How free do you think you would be to allow someone to express overwhelming grief?

6. How might you effectively support someone who is in the process of losing a child?

7. In what ways did David's servants fail to understand his grief?

8. How do their reactions reflect some of your own fears of relating to parents of a child/ young person who has died?

Being in the picture

9. What kinds of responses might be helpful when relating to parents after their child has died?

10. David's behaviour changed dramatically after the death of his son. Why did he respond in this way?

11. What comfort did David have in the child's death [v23]?

12. How can we know this comfort personally?

13. How can we share this comfort with others?

Study 9

Offering the gift of good grief

Introduction

Grief is not an indulgence, which is grudgingly permitted, in our brittle, fun-orientated society. But newly bereaved people are often surprised and frightened by the sheer intensity of their emotions and imaginings after bereavement. Reassurance that they are not going mad and such feelings are perfectly natural, and that crying does not mean a nervous breakdown, can be given explicitly, especially by an attitude which shows that the helper is not alarmed, frightened or even surprised. We need to recognise that people do not 'waste' time grieving, and that we just need to get on with life. If we do not learn to grieve personally we will not be able to assist others in their grief journey, and our care for others will be hindered. The Apostle Paul did not tell those who were bereaved not to grieve, not to stop grieving, but he did say that Christian grief is different, and better.

The big picture

1. Describe grief. [What causes it, how does grief feel, what does a grieving person do and think]

The biblical picture

Read 1 Thessalonians Ch 4 v 13-18

2. If you were caught in grief how would these words make you feel? Explain your response.

3. What words and phrases in this passage would help you believe that the events described here will really come about?

4. Paul speaks about not having his readers being ignorant about those who have fallen asleep. What did he want us to know about them?
5. Jesus Christ is mentioned eight times here. What can we know about Jesus from these verses?
6. One person in the midst of grieving said that 'The Christian faith offers hope, and I don't see much else to hope for right now.' What is there about death that diminishes hope?
7. What aspects of Paul's information here can keep believers from a 'grief like the rest of men who have no hope'?
8. Paul did not prohibit grief. He spoke instead of a grief that contains hope. Why might some Christians feel that it is wrong to express grief?
9. What problems do you think can result from such restraint [consider physical, emotional, spiritual results]
10. Using the concepts of this passage, how would you describe good grief?

Being in the picture

11. If you had a friend caught in grief, how could you offer godly hope, without denying a healthy grief process? [What specifically could you do to encourage healthy grief, what could you do specifically to offer hope]
12. Paul ends this section of his letter with 'therefore encourage one another with these words'. If you were dying how would this passage encourage you?
13. If you were one of those who 'are left' how does this passage encourage you?