

## Grief and Faith? Can They Co-Exist?

*by Dave Matthews*

Julie is a 'God' person, who once thought she had a deep faith. When her 10-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, naturally deep grief and sorrow followed – and questions concerning God began to dominate. She felt guilt that she had such questions, and questioned not only her God but also her faith. "Something is wrong with my faith" she cried in my office that day. "If I had a stronger faith, I wouldn't feel this way."

Julie's struggle with her grief and her faith are common. We hear such stories often. Those who are grieving might not grieve as others think they should, or that they think they should. Some do not want to go back to attending their religious services. Some find praying almost impossible. After all, they prayed for God to protect their loved one, or to heal them, had perhaps thousands of others praying, and their loved one still died.

Still others might be experiencing a non-death loss. Their child is addicted to drugs, and they have prayed thousands of prayers for them, yet the addiction continues. Or their marriage is in shambles, and they had prayed for a Godly spouse for years, and for a marriage that would honor God. They also have prayed for their spouse to love them again, to stop the affair, or even for them to love their spouse again. Yet the marriage falls apart anyway.

Many develop resentments toward God, and at times doubt whether he exists or not, or if he does, does he really care about their problems. Then guilt floods them. How can I have these bad thoughts about God? they may ask. They might assume their faith is weak or non-existent.

Religious people do not help here at times. Efforts to 'fix' the griever by attempting to get the griever to come back to their place of worship, or small group, etc., usually do not help. In fact, these efforts can reinforce the belief that there is something wrong with the griever. Someone lost their husband and was back in their religious service the next week after the funeral. The minister or other religious leader might say something like: "We extend our sympathy to Mary in the loss of her husband John this week. And her faith is remarkable, as she is back with us already. We love you Mary, and your example of great faith inspires us all."

While these words are kind and thoughtful, they can be damaging to someone who experienced loss and it took them a year to come back to their place of worship, or to someone who was angry at God and didn't want to come back at all. These words might reinforce to those people that something is wrong with their faith, that they are weak in faith.

We have for the most part been taught that great-faith people do not complain, and do not have bad thoughts about God, and certainly do not stop attending services regularly.

This thinking can lead me to stuff my feelings, and think something is wrong with my faith. But a closer look at scripture reveals that it is alright to grieve, and cry out to God, and to ask God those 'Why?' questions.

By far the largest type of Psalms are those commonly called 'Lament Psalms.' Some have estimated that out of 150 Psalms, nearly one-half of them could be laments. These psalms are also known as psalms of protest or complaint.

The main point to accept is that questions concerning God and the 'fairness' of life are natural, and are not 'unspiritual', even when someone else has more and deeper loss than I have experienced.

D.A. Carson says, "There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God's people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but to a faith so robust it wrestles with God".

Psalm 13:1-2 also comes to mind: "For the director of music. A psalm of David. How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"

**Our encouragement for you is to accept deep grief as part of your faith journey. Though your faith might indeed feel weak and even non-existent at times, these feelings do not mean there is something wrong with you or your faith. Give yourself permission to feel what you feel, whatever that is.**