

Joy in the Sorrow

*As you say goodbye
to your loved one*



Dedicated to my mother

Pastor Brad Brandt

We buried my mother last week.

She had battled Parkinson's disease for five years, the last three weeks in the hospital under Hospice care. It was my honor to be at her side a good part of her final six days on earth, along with my devoted father, brother, sister, other precious family members and friends, and the caring Hospice staff.

It may sound strange, but I experienced profound sorrow *and* joy as we gathered together around my mother's hospital bed. *And* is the key word in that sentence. I anticipated the sorrow, but I was sort of surprised by the simultaneous joy.

And I'm a pastor.

During my 26 years in the ministry, I've been with dozens and dozens of families as they've watched the Lord take their loved ones from this world into the next. But this time I experienced it. Sorrow *and* joy.

Sorrow, yes. Death is not normal. It's the tragic consequence of the first man's sin in this world.

But joy, too. Because of the work of the last Adam, Jesus Christ, the power of death has been broken for those who put their faith in Him.

Again, it may sound strange, but more than once in that hospital room I found myself thinking, "I want my brothers and sisters in Christ to experience this. I want them to know this same joy when the day comes for them to say goodbye to their loved ones."

I want that for you, too. That's why I've written this pamphlet.

I first shared these reflections with my church family just the day after my mother's funeral. A brother approached me right after the service and said, "Thank you, pastor. That was very helpful. I plan to use what you've shared with my own family."

And then he added, "I think you need to put this in writing so others can benefit. Do it while your experience is still fresh."

So here it is.

The question I'm seeking to answer is *how*. How can we experience joy in the midst of the sorrow that accompanies saying goodbye to a loved one?

It starts with recognizing that joy is a supernatural gift from God, the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The experience of true joy belongs to those who personally know the author of joy, Jesus, who said, "Apart from me you can do nothing," and, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete (John 15:5 & 11)."

But the experience of Jesus' joy isn't automatic. There are certain activities that promote its reality. That helps explain why two people who profess faith in Jesus can go through the identical experience of losing a loved one, yet one does so with joy, and the other without.

What are these activities that cultivate our hearts for the experience of joy? In a moment I'll share with you several that our gracious Savior used to enrich my family. But first, I want you to see the source. They're identified in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

I love Ephesians. Paul spends the first three chapters explaining what we have if we are in Christ—every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). He then concludes with three chapters highlighting the implications, including this one.

"Be filled with the Spirit," he says in Ephesians 5:18.

What does that look like? Is being filled with the Holy Spirit something mystical? No. Actually, it's something that happened in my mother's hospital room.

I say that because right after the command to be *filled with the Spirit*, Paul uses a series of participles to show what happens when believers yield to the control of God the Holy Spirit.

"Be filled with the Spirit, *speaking* to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing* and *making melody* in your heart to the Lord, *giving thanks* always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *submitting* to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:18-21, *NKJV*)."

So when the Spirit of Christ fills the people of Christ, this is the evidence. There will be Christ-honoring speaking, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting to one another.

That's what we experienced in my mom's room, and that's what I desire for you with your loved one. So let's consider some of these joy-promoting activities.

Listen to God-exalting Music Together

When you're sitting at a loved one's bedside, you have the opportunity to talk, which is a blessing. But you also have a lot of time to listen. You hear all kinds of sounds, too.

The oxygen machine. The air vents. The nurse aid in the other room. Sounds with which most of us aren't familiar.

So a familiar sound can bring great cheer.

My mother loved the Gaithers, so we listened multiple times to such favorites as, "Because He Lives," "He Touched Me," "There's Something about that Name," and "The King is Coming."

Listening to music is a powerful way to be reminded of who we are and what we know as the followers of Christ.

I've heard it said that the music of the church is "take home theology." You can take it to the hospital too. And while your favorite tune may give you a quick pick-me-up, it's the God-centered lyrics that will fill your soul with bedrock hope.

So I urge you to listen to songs that celebrate the person and work of Jesus Christ. But don't just listen...

Sing Gospel-Centered Songs Together

What do I mean by gospel-centered? I'm talking about songs that retell the good news of what Jesus Christ did.

Here's an example. We sang "Victory in Jesus" together (in fact, we sang it at mom's memorial service too). The lyrics simply tell the wonderful story of what God has done to rescue sinners and give them eternal life.

I heard an old, old story,
How a Savior came from glory,
How He gave His life on Calvary
To save a wretch like me;
I heard about His groaning,
Of His precious blood's atoning,
Then I repented of my sins
And won the victory.

Chorus

O victory in Jesus,
My Savior, forever.
He sought me and bought me
With His redeeming blood;
He loved me ere I knew Him
And all my love is due Him,
He plunged me to victory,
Beneath the cleansing flood.

You're probably not going to have a songbook with you, so just sing from memory. And don't worry if you miss a few words. The goal isn't to entertain. It's to encourage by affirming truth. And that's what these songs did for us...

"How Great Thou Art"

"Jesus Paid It All"

"It Is Well With My Soul"

"Amazing Grace"

Now I don't want to misrepresent this. There will be times when you won't feel like singing. That's okay. Don't force it. We didn't sing together a lot, just at a few appropriate times.

You say, "But I'm not very musical." That's okay. I'm not either. But again, it's not about the music as much as the truth we're affirming through song. You might start by listening to some gospel-centered songs, and then in time sing along with the CD.

Read God's Word Together

"If only God would speak to us in this difficult time," you say. "That would help us greatly."

But God does speak to us, through His Word, the Bible. One of my mother's favorite verses was Joshua 1:8, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night... Then you will be prosperous and successful."

As a pastor I've seen the simple reading of God's Word put hope into needy hearts countless times. Now I've experienced the same in my own family.

Here are some of the passages which encouraged our hearts.

Psalm 23

Psalm 46

Psalm 121

Psalm 131

Romans 8:18-39

2 Corinthians 5:1-10

1 Peter 1:3-10

And there are so many more! You might read about the place Jesus is preparing for His own (John 14:1-6; Revelation 21:1-5). Or read about His precious work to save us (Ephesians 2:1-10). Or read about His purpose in our trials (James 1:2-5).

There will be passages that will literally come alive to you in this time of trial. As the Psalmist testified, "It was good for me to be afflicted, so that I might learn your decrees (Psalm 119:71)." He also said, "If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction (Psalm 119:92)."

Pray Together

It's staggering to think that the Almighty God who created the heavens and earth listens to our lowly cry, but He does if we're approaching Him through His Son.

"Since we have a great high priest, Jesus the Son of God... let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16)."

So pray. Pray individually. Pray together. Spend time calling upon the Giver of life. Worship Him. Adore Him. Express your love for Him. And bring your needs to Him. And your fears, and concerns, and burdens. He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7).

Look at Family Pictures Together

I know there's a personal element in all this. Your family may not have hundreds and hundreds of pictures stashed away. Ours does.

But regardless whether it's hundreds, or just a few, what a great time to get out the pictures, and remember, and tell stories, and laugh, and cry. And do it together.

Related to this...

Laugh Together

That may sound odd at first. Laugh? When a loved one is dying?

Maybe our family is odd, but we did laugh a lot together during mom's final earthly days. We told stories, relived memories, even watched a couple of our favorite episodes of The Andy Griffith show (how can you not chuckle at Ernest T. Bass?).

I prefer the term sacred over serious. Losing a loved one is a sacred time, a time to honor God and this special person He has placed in your life. And we do that with a variety of appropriate responses, including, at times, laughing.

Take Breaks Together

We spent a lot of time with mom in her room, but we also left her room at times. To get a meal, or just take a walk, or make phone calls to update family and friends, or to get some rest.

Granted, not all families are the same and you may choose to do otherwise, but we found it beneficial to leave the hospital at times. We knew that mom was receiving wonderful care from the hospice staff. So we would leave.

And each time we left, we entrusted mom to the One who ordained the number of her days before He ever created the universe. (Psalm 139:16)

Expressing Thanks Together for God's Gifts

Even in our time of loss, God is still sending wonderful gifts our way. It's easy to overlook them. But joy comes to those who see these gifts, and express thanks to Him for them.

For doctors and nurses who provide selfless care. Church family and friends who visit and pray and send cards. Neighbors who prepare meals.

One question that caused some concern for us in those final days was, "How long?" On two different nights the hospital called and said, "We think it's time." So our family gathered around mom's bed, and said our goodbyes, and committed her into the Lord's hands.

But He didn't take her home.

Why not? What would the Lord allow our mother to lie there hour after hour, day after day? Of course, the Sovereign One always has a million reasons for what He does, but one that became apparent to us, which resulted in thanksgiving was this. Our mother's extended life meant further opportunity for her family to enjoy time together.

That's something that seldom happens with a brother living in Colorado and a father and sister four hours away on the other end of the state. Time together. A blessing, that led to thanks, that resulted in joy.

Plan a Christ-exalting Memorial Service Together

As it became apparent that the Lord was taking mom home to be with Him, we began to talk about her memorial service. In a very real sense, funeral services are not for the dead as much as for the living. Since the Lord gave mom her life and then by His grace blessed her with new and eternal life in Christ, we wanted her memorial service to glorify Him.

There are so many details involved in preparing for the memorial and committal services of a loved one. While these can be burdensome, they can also be opportunities to see the Living God work in our midst in ways that reflect His sufficiency.

And so we talked about it together. Which songs to sing. What Scriptures to read. What pictures to use. What people to include, and in what capacity.

God has gifted family members differently. It's a beautiful thing to see what can happen when the various members work together, in this case, to plan a memorial service.

But it necessitates open and honest communication. Speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Affirm the Gospel Together

I mentioned earlier that as a pastor I've been with dozens and dozens of people as they've prepared to leave this earth, and I would say this. It's not like it appears in the movies.

Death does not follow a script, at least, not one that we write. Which means there can be awkward moments at times. Tense moments. Frustrating moments. Moments that give us cause to go back and affirm what we truly believe.

Some say that death is natural. Not so, according to the Bible. Death exists in God's world because the first man rebelled against His Creator, and so death passed upon all men, for all have sinned (Romans 5:12).

But the good news is that God sent His only Son into the world to defeat the foe of death. On the basis of His Son's perfect life, substitutionary death, and victorious resurrection, God gives the guarantee of life beyond the grave. Not to those who deserve it, but to those who believe that Jesus accomplished it.

According to God's Word, eternal life isn't something we earn. It's something we must receive. But it's not just something. It's Someone. The person of Jesus Christ.

So saying goodbye to a loved one is the perfect time to affirm personally and together as a family the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not by works, so no one can boast."

That was one of my mother's most cherished passages in God's Word. And my family's too. That's why, though saying goodbye was difficult, there is joy in the sorrow.

My prayer is that this will be your experience as well, for the honor of the One who gave us life.

If you would like to know more about experiencing joy in sorrow, please contact me at brandt@wheelersburgbaptist.com.

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