Lessons Learned in Suffering

Calvary Chapel Pastors Share Their Experiences Responding to and Enduring Grief

Ed Taylor

The night after tornadoes struck the Oklahoma City area, pastor and police chaplain Jim Lawrence of CC Norman, OK, sat in a local church pew looking at pictures of strangers’ children by candlelight. Hours earlier, he had shepherded the families of two slain police officers from the devastated Plaza Elementary School to this location, where they awaited news of their children. As they shared favorite memories and described each third-grader to Jim, it was clear they held out hope of being reunited. However, Jim had learned about the magnitude of the灾难 from upper command. He was fairly certain of what the parents would officially be informed the following morning—for almost half of them, this had gone from rescue mission to recovery. He could not help thinking of his own 7-year-old, safe at home, and imagine the agony the parents were enduring.

Another chaplain called the parents together and announced an appointment for the following day, at which he and Jim could pray for the families. “Chaplain Lawrence will lead us in prayer,” he said. “It’s one of the hardest things I’ll ever do.”

Jim recalled, “I asked God to comfort them amidst tragedy any easier, Jim confessed. “I knew I could pray for them. He declared, “The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate— to those who fear him, for he knows whom we are weak for; he remembers we are only dust. “ Psalm 103:13-14, NLT

Last May, the Taylor family was struck by tragedy. Eddie, their eldest son—a healthy 26-year-old police officer with no history of drug or alcohol use—went into cardiac arrest while mowing the lawn. After 23 days in a coma, he died, leaving behind a wife and infant son. “It literally knocked me out,” Ed confided. “I was gone from the pulpit a long time and I didn’t know if I was coming back, if this was the end of my ministry. Satan was slapping us around, we were struggling through so many layers of grief, but the entire Calvary Chapel pastors quietly stepped in and let us begin the healing process. This was no small thing.” In fact, he related, there were no small things. Everything people did for the family was greatly appreciated. Meals were provided and anonymous notes of encouragement appeared in the offering boxes—these were things God used to hold back despair. One couple gave them saplings to plant in Eddie’s memory. A mother for whom Ed had conducted two memorials for stillborn babies within one year sent them helpful suggestions for facing anniversaries.

“Grief produces a wide variety of emotions that are very scary but also very normal,” Ed reflected. “We try not to live in the realm of ‘I should have’ or ‘I could have’—a dangerous, damaging place that does not take into account we are human beings who feel human pain.” The Bible says: “The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate— to those who fear him, for he knows whom we are weak for; he remembers we are only dust. “ Psalm 103:13-14, NLT

Battle for Hope

After a service at Orange County Christian Fellowship, Pastor Bryan Jameson approached Pastor Bryan Jameson. She was referring to the death of Bryan’s 10-year-old daughter, Trinity, in November 2012. Bryan continued, “We don’t avoid talking about Trinity, so people learn quickly. God continues bringing suffering people across our path. My grief has given me a credibility that I never had before. I don’t have to preach on suffering—knowing I have suffered, people believe what I say.” Recently Bryan offered premartial counseling to a non-Christian couple. The man had a violent past and a tough reputation. Amazed at Bryan’s faith amid his pain, both became believers during counseling and have become involved in the fellowship.

Before her death, Trinity met Christian surfer Bethany Hamilton, who lost an arm in a shark attack. “Trinity only had one question for Bethany,” Bryan remembered of the event, which happened during her daughter’s battle with cancer: “Can I touch your stump?” Bethany agreed, and Trinity reached out to touch her arm. Bryan’s point had begun. It was pain touching pain, the place where they have common ground. It has become a poignant illustration for me—when my pain touches another’s, it creates a bridge I can walk across to share Jesus.” Bryan’s current ministry is the result of walking day-by-day with Christ through his grief. He stressed—“Trinity’s death united our church even more deeply, yet God made me possible to share my pain. I learned to go in faith, the very thing uniting our church would be what tore it apart. He challenged me daily to choose hope. The very act of hoping can be exhausting, yet in that hope there is life because it means turning toward God. Job’s worship is very different from David’s, but that’s the worship I have right now—Job lifted his very pain as an offering to God. Our hearts are empty when we think of Trinity, but God is more real to me today than He was back when everything was fine.” Bryan Jameson

Tips for First Responders

“Effective counseling is less about what you say than how you listen,” Jerry insisted. “Our words can be salt in the wound or a balm in Gilead,” Jerry declared. “Don’t say things like ‘I know how you feel;’ or ‘I feel worse than you do,’ which puts the focus on you instead of the grieving person, or comments beginning with ‘At least …’ which minimizes rather than acknowledges their suffering. Do say things like, ‘I’m so sorry,’ or ‘My heart goes out to you,’ which conveys care and sympathy.”

“Grieving people often lack out instrumentally and ask lots of questions, but really they are venting rather than looking for answers. After Katrina, I rode along with a sheriff’s dep- uty. In all our conversations, he did about 95 percent of the talking. I occasionally asked questions to spur him on, but otherwise I just listened. He later told someone I was the best counselor he’d ever had. It was a healing experience for him, yet I’d done very little in terms of input.” Jerry concluded.

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Active Listening

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