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Harvest Ministries

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# Grieving the Loss of a Child On Father's Day

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As we look to our annual celebration of Father's Day this Sunday, I know there are many dads out there, like me, who may experience a fresh wave of grief on this occasion, as a result of no longer having one of our children here on earth to mark the day with us. The pain can seem as overwhelming as it ever was, so I wanted to share my heart with parents who may find themselves walking that path for the first time this year, in hopes that it will provide some measure of comfort.

When my son Christopher died unexpectedly five years ago, I have to say it was the worst day of my life. I was completely overcome with grief. I knew he was in heaven, not because he was my son, but because he put his faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ.

But he was no longer here with me, and that hurt, much more than I could ever have imagined.

I know many parents in our country may find themselves on this journey with me as a result of the recent violence and tragedies our nation has suffered. I want to share some things that have helped me to endure what no parent should ever have to: outliving one's own child.

People like to commiserate and say they know what you're going through. Most likely, they don't know. I don't even necessarily know what my wife is going through, and we are together all the time. Her grieving process is different than mine.

Someone said to me, "I know what you're going through; my grandmother just died." With all due respect, though I am sorry for that person's loss, the loss of a grandmother is not the same as the loss of a child. As hard as it may be, everyone's grandparents, and even parents, will eventually die. Unfortunately, this is the way life and death work. But children are not supposed to die before their parents. That is not the natural order.

Some people seem to expect us to "recover" at some point. As someone who lost three family members in a car crash wrote, "We recover from broken limbs, not amputations.

Catastrophic loss, by definition, precludes recovery. It will transform us or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same. There is no going back to the past, which is gone forever; only going ahead to the future, which is yet to be discovered."

I will never "recover" or "go back to normal," because that would imply going back to life the way it was before. Life will not be the same without my son.

So now, I am living a new kind of normal.

Others have asked if I am "at peace" with my son's death. Of course not! We should never be at peace with anyone's death. Death is an enemy. The Bible says that "the last enemy that will be defeated is death." I am at peace with God, and I trust Him for the future, but we will never be at peace with this thing that we call death. Death is an enemy, but God is a friend.

While there are moments of laughter and joy in our lives today, as anyone who has lost a loved one knows, we have times of deep, deep sadness. But we know God is with us, and there is a blessedness in mourning. Jesus said in Matthew 5, "Blessed are those who mourn."

Another way to translate the word *blessed* is "happy." So, in effect, Jesus is saying, "Happy are the sad." How is such a thing even possible?

It is possible when you realize that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, you will see again your loved ones who have passed on. That is, if they too have put their faith in Christ. Jesus said, "Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

The Christian is never alone, no matter how deep their pain. David, in Psalm 23 said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." There are things you learn in this valley that you will not learn anywhere else. Now, if we had our say in the matter, we wouldn't be in the valley. But we *are* here, so we want to learn what we can.

So why does God take choice servants "before their time"? Why does He allow torment for some and triumph for others? No one can say, this side of heaven. The fact is, life just doesn't make sense a great deal of the time. God's purposes often remain a mystery to us.

When we say someone "died before his or her time," we are making a false assumption. What we are assuming is that there's an unwritten promise of a long life. We somehow think that everyone, in the words of Spock from Star Trek, is entitled to "live long and prosper"! But we have no such guarantees. We really have nothing to say about the date of our birth or death. But we should remember we do have a lot to say about the space in the middle, and we need to focus on making that time count. Here are my suggestions for this:

1. Don't take any of your loved ones for granted.
2. If there's someone who needs to hear you say, "I love you," *say it now!*
3. If there's a change you need to make in your life, *do it now!*

In the final analysis, it's not a matter of *if* you will die, but only *when*. So do what you need to do now, and then you can live with a clear conscience, ready to meet God at the time He appoints, whether it be today or 80 years from now. My son Christopher was walking with God when he was called home. I was proud of him then, and I am proud of him now. Why do some die young, while others live long lives? We can come up with all of our fanciful ideas as to why God lets one live and takes another. I've heard them all, regarding my own son. People will say things like, "Maybe God was saving him from something bad," or "It's just that God wanted another angel in heaven," or "flower in His garden," etc.

I simply fall back on the fact that I will probably *never* know why. And even if I did, I seriously doubt I would understand. I look forward to the fact that one day, however, I will know.

How does a person get through such a dark and difficult time? I'll tell you what helps me: thinking about heaven. The more I think about heaven, the better things often are.

Christopher and I were both runners in school. I was a sprinter while he was a long-distance runner. So every now and then, I would challenge him to a short race. We did this a number of times through the years, and though he got faster as he grew older, I could still beat him every time. I have to admit, it always felt good. *Old Dad can still beat his son. I guess I'm not over the hill yet!*

Then one day we were on the beach and I challenged Christopher to another short-distance race. We got to that point where I would put on my last burst of speed, and this time, it wasn't there. Christopher went cruising on by me and won the race. I couldn't believe it. Actually, I was proud of him and crestfallen at the same time. "Way to go, son; you finally beat old Dad."

I had always assumed I would finish my race before my sons, and that I would pass the baton on to them, but my son Christopher beat me again -- beat me to heaven! And now, in effect, he has passed the baton to me, and I have to finish my race. We all have a course marked out for us and a race to run to the finish. We don't know how long this race is going to be; we never know when our lives will end. So we need to be ready, and we need to run our race well.

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