

**“ Sitting by the Sandcastle ”**  
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*Second in a series about Grief*

Job 14.7-17

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At least there is hope for a tree. If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant.

But human beings die and are laid low. They breathe their last and are no more. As the water of a lake dries up or a riverbed becomes parched and dry, so they lie down and do not rise. Till the heavens are no more, people will not awake or be roused from their sleep.

God, if only You would hide me in the grave and conceal me till Your anger has passed! If only You would set me a time and then remember me!

If someone dies, will they live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come. You will call and I will answer You. You will long for the creature your hands have made. Surely then You will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. My offenses will be sealed up in a bag. You will cover over my sin.

Job 14.7-17

(Today's New International Version, alt)

What might we say to someone who is grieving? Sometimes, we say and do things that are really helpful, and are blessings. Sometimes, we say and do things that, despite our best desires, end up hurting. Often, we don't know what to say.

So I'm calling this little series of reflections, *“What Can I Say? Helping Through Times of Sorrow.”*

Last time, I talked about things we say to hide grief. Grief is like a beach ball, and we try to hold it under water, out of sight. We can try, but it will come to the top. Better to let our grief float, in all its chaos. Better to say things that show our sorrow and support, without trying to hold their grief under.

II

Today, I want to move on to some other things. Have you heard these, or said these, or things like these?

- *At least she lived a long life.*
- *At least he is in a better place.*
- *At least you can have another child.*
- *At least you should be happy her suffering is over.*
- *At least. . . .*

What do these “At Leasts” try to do? Find a sunny edge to a terrible cloud? Lighten the pain of loss? “You don’t need to be so sad, because there are things to be happy about.”

I fear they suggest that the loss of death is less than it is.

These “At Leasts” can be true.

*At least she lived a long life.*

Yes, let’s celebrate a full and good life. Yet we ache to live without them.

*At least he is in a better place.*

For us who live in the hope of God, the assurance that their death is not their end is a precious truth. Yet they are no longer in this place, and that tears at us.

*At least you can have another child.*

Barb and I lost our child to a miscarriage. Later, we were blessed with our son. Yet his wonderful self in no way replaces our child who died.

*At least you should be happy her suffering is over.*

Death ends suffering, and ending suffering is good. Yet what a price to pay.

These “At Leasts” can all be true. Yet they try to be shields from the deeper truth, of how horrible death is.

### III

With a person's death, a universe collapses. A beautiful song silences. A magical story stops. A preciousness vanishes, never replaced. They are no longer with us, and that will remain numbingly true for every breath we have left.

Who wants to face that? Who wants to see someone they care for face it? So we put up shields against the horrible truth.

Yet, horribly, it remains true.

Believe me, I face death with hope. Living in Jesus gives hope to grief. Our Bible reading from Job faces death in an honest way. It contains seeds of hope, hints of resurrection, renewal of life after the grave. But still, the grave.

I've told you about Nicholas Wolterstorff. He wrote about his experience of his son's death. Let me share something of his with you:

*Don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic. If you think your task as comforter is to tell me that really, all things considered, it's not so bad, you do not sit with me in my grief but place yourself off in the distance away from me. Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.<sup>1</sup>*

### IV

What can I say, if I'm to sit close to someone on their mourning bench?

This is one of the most important things I have learned as a minister who leads funerals: Nothing I say will make death better. I can't make the person who died less dead. I can't make the loss of who they were and what they meant to those who loved and knew them any less of a loss. In fact, I've learned that I become most unhelpful, most quickly, when I try to make it less.

What can I say? Here is the best thing I ever learned to say. . . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 34.

I learned from a minister who was called to a woman's home. A car had hit her child, and he died. The minister went in, torn at what he could say. He sat beside her. Words gagged in his mouth, but his tears flowed free. They cried together. She later said that was what she needed most.

Words can help. Here's something you might say. (I learned this from one of you.) Suppose the person who died is named Sarah. You might say, "*My favourite memory of Sarah is. . . .*"

Telling stories helps us to remember people, without trying to lessen their death.

## V

I don't know what it is, but as I'm thinking of grief these days, pictures of summertime on the beach are coming to me. Last time, I talked about beach balls. Now, I'm thinking of sandcastles.

With careful packing and shaping, crafting and cutting, mixing sand and water, we form millions and millions of grains of sand into something beautiful. Something fragile.

Such is each of us. Picture you as a sandcastle. It's a group effort. Many people craft and shape you, make you what you are. God is the Master Crafter, bringing the sand and water, the tools and creativity, the work of others and you, to craft you. Millions and millions of experiences and influences, of moments, form you. You are beautiful. You are fragile.

When someone who is vital to you dies, it is like something nasty has come and kicked you.

Most of the sand is still there. Though some has been irretrievably, irreplaceably washed into the waves. Much of the structure is still intact, though it is sagging and split.

You will be put together again. God remains the Master Crafter, bringing in more sand and water, tools and creativity. God will use many people to continue to craft and shape you. You are still beautiful. You are still fragile.

However, you, this castle, will always be different from before. You will always have cracks. You will always lean to one side, because a hole is missing. Yes, buttresses will form to support the broken bits. Still, they will remain broken.

As well they should. We grieve because we love, and the death of one so loved should always mark us. There is no use denying it. Or covering it over. Or making it less than it is. Love won't allow it.

## VI

Nick Wolterstorff writes this:

*I will not look away. I will indeed remind myself that there is more to life than pain. I will accept joy. But I will not look away from Eric's death. Its demonic awfulness I will not ignore. I owe that—to him and to God.<sup>2</sup>*

We can look at death. And at ourselves, us kicked-over sandcastle selves.

For God sits beside us. And God looks with us. And God looks at us.

We need no other shield against death's truth. Those other shields break anyway; they do not do the job. God is our shield and protector. For in Jesus, God has looked death straight on. And by his wounds, he heals us.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 53.5.