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The Sovereignty of God and the Death of Loved Ones

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The death of a love one pierces our soul which leaves us numb, distraught, and in disbelief. It does not matter if the person suffered from an illness, an accident or suicide, death takes a toll on the living emotionally, physically and spiritually. Death is a hard reality to accept because it shakes the foundation of our existence and being. As Christians we realize if we live in sin and without a relationship with God we are dead. **John 8:21-24** ²¹ "I am going away, and you will search for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come." ²² Then the Jews said, "Is he going to kill himself? Is that what he means by saying, 'Where I am going, you cannot come'?" ²³ He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. ²⁴ I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he."

Therefore, when we acknowledge from the time of our birth our days are numbered on this earth. We are not told when we or our loved one will die, but we know the day will come when YHWH calls us home to join the cloud of witnesses who died before us. When death invades our lives we realize it is the final destination for all living beings. There is no way to cheat or get around death because we all must die to this earthly world in order to live forever with our Lord Jesus Christ.

When a love one dies either suddenly or due to a short or long illness the grieving process starts from the time we receive the news. Many people believe when a loved one has been stricken with an illness they start preparing for the death of that person, but some people immediately go into death denial. When we go into death denial, we believe YHWH will restore this person to health because of our fasting and praying. As we look at the story of David and Bathsheba 2 Samuel 12, we witness the death of a child and the effects it had on the parents. The voice of Bathsheba was not heard but the action of David was seen by all. The action of David was the consequences of his sin, **2 Samuel 12:13-18** ¹³ David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan said to David, "Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. ¹⁴ Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die." ¹⁵ Then Nathan went to his house. The LORD struck the child that Uriah's

wife bore to David, and it became very ill. ¹⁶ David therefore pleaded with God for the child; David fasted, and went in and lay all night on the ground. ¹⁷ The elders of his house stood beside him, urging him to rise from the ground; but he would not, nor did he eat food with them. ¹⁸ On the seventh day the child died.

David was in denial because he thought his pleading with YHWH would change YHWH's mind, but as the story unfolded, David realized there was nothing more he could do. As a mourner, David was in the acute and transition stages of grief. "Most mourners progress through three phases of grieving: the acute phase, the transition, and finally, the time of acceptance. When grieving is acute, the pain of loss is just too tremendous to acknowledge, and the mourner may alternate between numbness and denial. The next phase can be called transition. Gradually, the pain sifts to the surface and the mourner tries to sidestep reality which such ploys as bargaining and anger" (Williams & Sturzl, 2001, pp. 40-41).

David's reaction to the death of his child and thus to the reality of all death is not to be viewed as stoic resignation. . . . David has a fresh view of the meaning of life and death, where his proper hopes and proper fears are to be located. This is more than a violation of common practice. It is an act of profound faith in the face of the most precious tabus of his people. David had discerned, for whatever reasons, that the issues of his life are not to be found in cringing fear before the powers of death, but rather in his ability to embrace and abandon, to love and to leave, to take life as it comes not with indifference but with freedom, not with callousness but with buoyancy. . . . For him there is none of the conventional paralysis in death. He knew death belonged legitimately to history, and he had no illusions about entering some kind of faith which did not know death (Brueggemann, 1969, 490).

In the midst of his suffering YHWH gave David and Bathsheba another chance. David consoled his wife, lay with her and she conceived another child. David's act of disobedience caused him the death of his child. Although the Bible does not talk about the grief Bathsheba was going through, Bathsheba suffered the death of her first husband Uriah and now the death of her son. At this point she is no longer known as the wife of Uriah, but is mentioned by name. The story of David and Bathsheba does not end with the death of one child and the new life of another. She had bore David's others son, but one in particular YHWH loved. His name was Solomon. YHWH blessed them with another child to love in their new life together. The first child was the product of adultery but Solomon was the replacement for their first child.

Although, YHWH gave them another child and a second chance we can only surmise Bathsheba's thoughts and feelings. Just from the text we know she was distraught because David consoled her 2 Samuel 12:24. The two of them were coping with the same type of pain due to the brief illness and death of their son. Bathsheba could have become bitter and pushed David away, but instead she embraced him and together they moved past this dark point in life. When we are faced with the death of a love one we hurt so deep that we wish we could die with them so we do not have to

suffer. “God does not remove Christians from suffering but assures us of the divine presence even in the midst of our sufferings. When suffering and pain come into your life and my life, God does not promise us that we will be spared. But we are assured that God will work in and through this difficulty to blend it into our lives and the lives of our family and community to bring out of it something good and worthwhile” (Tuck, 1997, pp 50-51).

Death has a way of shocking some of us into reality. When I turned 18 my father died of a long illness. My father was a minister in Islam after converting from Christianity as an evangelist prior to my birth. As his oldest daughter and a daddy’s girl, his death almost destroyed me. I was angry with God and I pleaded with God to let me be with him. I cried and yelled because that was my way of coping with the reality that my daddy was dead. My life spiraled out of control for almost a year but one day I woke up out of that fog and started picking up the pieces of my life. While picking up the pieces of my life God brought to my memory these words my dad uttered to me prior to his death, “It’s in your hands now”. I had no clue what it meant then but 20 plus years later and my own conversion from Islam to Christianity I finally understood. The legacy of spreading the Gospel in my family is now in my hands. Although, my story may not make an impact in history it will change the lives of those whom I encounter in this life time.

However, Bathsheba’s story is not the only story of a woman suffering because of the death of a love one. The story of Naomi mirrors the suffering and pain of losing a spouse and children. Additionally, the story of Mary the Mother of Jesus tells the story of losing an adult child. The death these women faced made a profound impact on their lives because of YHWH’s grace, love and mercy. These three women could have given up on life but instead they redefined themselves despite the darkness in their lives. We know that Bathsheba was instrumental in securing the throne of David for Solomon. In 1 Kings 1:11-31, Bathsheba is no longer the silent sufferer; she was a woman who is highly respected.

The story of Naomi in the book of Ruth tells of a woman in pain who did not want to let go. Naomi’s journey begins with her family from Bethlehem. Naomi’s husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion moved from their ancestral heritage land to Moab. They were the descendents of Ephraim and known as Ephrathites, a fruitfulness tribe in Bethlehem. Elimelech moved his family to the land of Moab for a while due to the famine in the land. This famine was during the time Israel had judges rule over them. Elimelech and his family settled in Moab for a while, about 10 years. In those 10 years life was good for them for a while. Then Naomi’s husband Elimelech died, her sons married Moabite women and then her son’s died leaving her alone with two daughters-in-law in a foreign land. Naomi was in so much pain that she tried to discourage her daughters-in-law from following her back to Bethlehem.

The future may seem uncertain for Orpah and Ruth, but Naomi thinks her own situation is even more bitter than theirs. They might still remarry and have children, but the older woman seems to have “no hope” (v. 12). In v. 9, Naomi expressed the wish that the LORD would deal even more kindly with Orpah and Ruth than they deserved. But v. 13 indicates

that Naomi does not think the LORD has dealt kindly with her at all. Unlike the land of the Ephrathites, which is able to recover from famine, Naomi expects never to become fruitful again.

Naomi is “bitter”, as she will say again in vv. 19-20, and she blames the LORD for bringing about the situation in which she finds herself: “the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” She argues that it does not make logical sense for Orpah and Ruth to align themselves with someone who seems to have the hand of the LORD turned against her (New Interpreter’s Bible, 2001).

In Naomi’s depression she could not see past the pain of losing loved ones. Naomi was suffering, grieving, destitute and feeling empty because she had no one to care for her. Naomi lost her livelihood and dreams for the future in Moab, but God had another plan for her. Naomi’s and Ruth journey back to Bethlehem was a blessing to both of them. Naomi was surrounded by her past where she felt a connection with husband and sons. She was surrounded by people who truly cared for her including Ruth. Since their arrival, Ruth has been the sole provider for her and Naomi. The harvesting of Boaz’s field was complete and the winnowing process began on the threshing floor. Since Naomi recognized the hand of God in her life she now has another dream for more hope in the future. Naomi realizes now that she needs to help Ruth secure her future which will also secure Naomi’s future. Ruth nor Naomi had no idea what would happen once they got there. It was Naomi’s obedience to God that helped them through this difficult time in life. She saw how God blessed them with food and shelter, but the blessing of a child may have not been the one Naomi saw. She knew what needed to happen but it was in God’s time. Naomi life started with joy, happiness and prosperity, but as time moved on and death invaded her life she still was obedient to God. She continued to do what she could do as woman in her time. She taught Ruth and gave her sound advice. The blessing for them was the birth of O’bed who really became the redeemer for Naomi. Ruth was redeemed by Boaz, but the birth of a son to carry on Mahlon’s lineage was the gift and blessing Naomi needed. He would be her protector as Boaz is Ruth protector. Naomi had no idea her obedience to God set the stage for the lineage of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Ruth 4:13-17** ¹³ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷ The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

We understand God does not waste a hurt or pain but uses these experiences to strengthen us. We may not know why we are going through certain tragic events in life, but God gives us the right opportunity to share our experiences with others. There is one more story to share, the strength of Mary the mother of Jesus Christ. In my personal opinion, this is the most profound story in the Bible as it relates to the death of a loved

one and how God used HIS death as the turning point for Christianity. There is no greater love than a mothers love for her child no matter the age of the child.

The ministry of Jesus Christ started when he was 33 years old. For 33 years she cooked, cleaned and nurtured him. Mary watched her son grow and mature into the greatest person whoever lived. Mary knew he was destined for greatness from his birth but nothing could prepare her for the day he would die an agonizing death upon a cross. The book of John records the intimate conversation Jesus had with his mother and his beloved disciple, **John 19:25-27** “Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home”. In this moment at the foot of the cross,

Jesus speaks parallel sentences to his mother and the beloved disciple. The precise symmetry of Jesus’ words reinforces the symbolism of this exchange. Both Jesus’ mother and the beloved disciple function as symbolic figures. As Jesus’ birth mother and as someone who has been a witness from the beginning, Jesus’ mother represents the continuation of Jesus’ earthly ministry. The beloved disciple represents the Johannine community and is the symbolic connection between the Jesus tradition and the life of the faith community. At his death, Jesus ensures continuity between the past and the future. At the heart of Jesus’ ministry is the creation of a new family of God. The creation of this family is symbolized here when the beloved disciple takes Jesus’ mother to his own home. Jesus was rejected by “his own”, but the beloved disciple’s reception of Jesus’ mother signals the possibility of a future marked by acceptance, not rejection (Newsom & Ringe, 1998, p 388).

Although, Jesus’ earthly mother had other children to comfort her as time moved forward Jesus wanted to give her the assurance she will be cared for in the Jewish tradition. We are not sure if Mary was a widow at this time since there was no mention of Joseph at this point. However, according to the Law of Moses, “widows with children had other options open to them. From the deuterocanonical book of Tobit we learn that some moved back to the family of their father or brother (Tobit 1:8). If the widow were elderly, one of her sons might care for her. If she had become financially secure, she might live alone” (Packer, Tenney & White, 1995).

The introduction of Mary to the beloved disciple brought together an extended family beyond blood relationship. After the death and burial of a love one, the calls are numerous but in time the calls will slow down, the letters and cards will cease and finally people move on with their lives. The relationship formed outside the immediately family will help the person through the grieving process. These relationships provide an opportunity to share the impact that person had on their lives. If a person died of an accident or illness they living spouse or love one may take up their cause to help raise awareness for the illness or the accident.

The death of Jesus Christ changed the community of faith, family relationship and empowered the women to move beyond culture and custom at HIS tomb. One may say on the day Jesus gave up his spirit to death, it affected God in a way that the invisible hand of YHWH tore the temple curtain from top to bottom. The tearing of the curtain “effectively demolishes the Temple as the site of God’s presence and is a prolepsis of the Temple’s destruction. Jesus had predicted the destruction of the Temple as part of the eschatological events (Matthew 24:1-2). With his death, the judgment and destruction begin, as do the eschatological events themselves” (New Interpreter’s Bible, 2001). When we recall the death of a loved one and how their death impacted our lives with changes, we realize this is not our death and we can readjust, modify or correct our way of life to honor our loved one. When we honor those we love God gives us a sense of peace to help us heal and recover from losing a family member, a friend or a spouse. In the midst of tragedy God works mysteriously in our lives to reveal the goodness that has been left in our heart. The stories about Bathsheba, Naomi and Mary are indications that life continues with an alternate end because we lost those we love. For those who believe in Jesus Christ and have faith in God to comfort and heal in the midst of trials and tribulations, we are given an inner strength, peace and closure with those beyond the grave. The spirit of our loved one walks with us everyday because we keep them close in our heart. As we keep them in our hearts we ask God to search our hearts and make us a better person. We want our living to glorify God in all the things we do. When our life is shaken to its core it is the sovereignty of God that put us at peace.

The Sovereignty of God. What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the god-hood of God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him what doest Thou? (Daniel 4:35). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in Heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purpose, or resist His will (Psalms 115:3). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is "The Governor among the nations" (Psalms 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the "Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.

The doctrine of God's Sovereignty is one that is full of consolation and imparts great peace to the Christian. The Sovereignty of God is a foundation that nothing can shake and is more firm than the heavens and the earth. How blessed to know there is no corner of the universe that is out of His reach! as said the Psalmist, "Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? *or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?* If I ascend up into Heaven, *Thou art there*: if I make my bed in hell, behold, *Thou art there*. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; *even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me*. If I say surely the darkness shall cover me; *even the night shall be light about me*. Yea, the darkness hideth not from Thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee" (Psa. 139:7-12).

How blessed it is to know that God's strong hand is upon every one and every thing! How blessed to know that not a sparrow falleth to the ground without His notice! (Pink, 2005).

When I think about the sovereignty of God and the death of love ones I accept the fact that we all must die one day and our spirit return to God. Our loved ones will never return to us but we will go to them one day. There is no deeper pain than death. Death can destroy or bring friends and family together. Death can reconcile relationships and give new life to people. When we believe in God there is nothing that can separate us. The Apostle Paul says it better in **Romans 8:35-39** ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. As we live with Christ and our loved ones in our heart, we are overcome by the gentleness of God's love, grace and mercy. We have dominion over death because of Jesus Christ and a relationship with God. Death is our enemy as long we are in this body but our ultimate goal is to spend eternity with God. In order to spend eternity with God we must be born of the spirit and be Christ like. When we are touched by God our lives ought to change because God cared so much about us that HE gave us HIS Son. When we chose life with God we do not give death power over us.

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