

THE IMPORTANCE OF GODLY GRIEF AS A MINISTRY/PASTOR'S WIFE

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When faced with the unknown, are you more likely to jump ahead in excitement or linger behind in the comfort of the familiar?

Your answer to that question is a good indicator of whether you struggle more to celebrate or to grieve. When faced with a transition or unfamiliar territory as a ministry

wife/pastor's wife, those that tend to run or jump ahead probably find celebrating easy – but struggle to take a moment to grieve what has been lost in the past season. And then those that find themselves lingering in the places where they've seen God work through the people that have become dear, those familiar gardens that gave rise to those flowers you know by name – well, they likely find it easier to recognize loss, to grieve and to honor the past. But, they'll have a harder time finding reason to celebrate the unknown field ahead, because even though it might be “white for the harvest” it may feel more like a jungle.

Regardless of which you are – a jumper or a lingerer – there is deep value in practicing BOTH of these, especially when we are in transition. That space between what was and what will be needs to be filled with a unique rhythm of grieving and celebrating. Sometimes we'll encounter both in the course of a day. Other times, God may call us to spend a prolonged time in one before moving to the other and maybe revisiting each in cycles.

Last year, I spent about six months studying the book of Lamentations. I was also reading a great book called *Dark Clouds Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* by Mark Vroegop. Now just as a side note, if even the mention of words like “lament” and “grieve” make you groan, you might have some of that Mid-west grit in you that would rather just “get over it and move on” or

“suck it up, Buttercup” rather than dig into experiences that are painful, even when that process might bring healing. I’m a little like that too. I get you. So stick with me. When I pressed into this practice of Biblical lament, it changed how I encounter loss and even how I pray for myself and others who are in pain.

Here are some key things I learned about lament:

Lament isn’t just complaining. It isn’t just focusing on the negative. It gives us “permission to wrestle with sorrow instead of rushing to end it.” (Vroegop, 19). It’s more than “sorrow or talking about sadness. It is more than walking through the stages of grief.” The runner in me wants to rush to celebrate, but when I make myself wrestle with the sorrow of loss, I honor what God has done and the people He has done it through.

Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust. When we jump too fast to the celebrating, it can feel incomplete because we haven’t allowed ourselves the space to acknowledge what has passed.

Here’s a model that is helping me to practice lament as a pastor’s wife:

STEP 1 – TURN TO GOD, acknowledge Him and His place in my life. Even if I can only utter “Lord, I’m here,” the act of turning to Him is where it all starts. Often, my aloneness in transition can make God feel distant too, so the turning to Him is even more important. It’s refusing to let that feeling of distance call the shots.

STEP 2 – BRING MY COMPLAINT. The first three chapters of Lamentations as well as a third of the Psalms are laments, so there’s something important in this model, even if the mom in us is telling ourselves to “stop whining”. But instead, “we complain on the basis of our beliefs in who God is and what He can do.” I need to bring my questions and my frustrations. And I need to do it in honesty and humility. Giving our complaint words isn’t where it ends. While it’s an important place to visit, we don’t stay there.

STEP 3 – ASK BOLDLY. This is where I need to rely on God’s character and ask (no, more likely plead) for Him to intervene based on WHO HE IS. Vroegop says, “Part of the grace of lament is the way it invites us to pray boldly even when we’ve been bruised badly.” I love that.

STEP 4 – CHOOSE TO TRUST. This is where the “But God,” comes in. In Lamentations, the key pivot point is when the author moves from complaint

to trust. “Yet, this I call to mind and therefore I have hope...” (Lam. 3:21) And then the author preaches to his own doubt by reminding himself of what is true about God and why He is worth trusting. And that needs to be the destination of our laments as well – but the destination means nothing without the journey.

When I think about what lament and grieving look like as we transition from one ministry to another as pastor’s and ministry wives, several applications come to mind. So let’s tease them out together.

Change always involves some type of loss – and loss needs to be recognized and grieved.

If we are leaving a place full of rich memories and ministry, we’ll grieve that they are past and that they won’t continue in the same way. They are being given up. If we are leaving a place full of hardship and heartbreak, we need to grieve what “wasn’t”. The people that weren’t reached. The opportunities that were missed. The relationships that didn’t heal. Either way, there’s some loss that needs to be counted. Action point: make a list of the losses you are encountering as you leave.

Grieving loss doesn’t mean you aren’t thankful for new blessings. We often think it’s one or the other. But in this process of transition particularly, we have to learn to press into both – the grieving and the celebrating. Action point: set aside specific, regular time with your spouse to do BOTH grieving and celebrating. Be specific. Make a list, because it will be important later in the process.

Our congregations need to see us grieve. Tears actually validate their impact on our lives. Often though, the difficulty comes because by the time we are ready to announce our departure to our people, we’ve already worked through the hardest grief part ourselves. In some sense, we just want to get it over with and move on. Resist this though. They still need us to shepherd them through the process – and we can’t do that when we’ve already left in our hearts. Action point: resist the desire to hide your tears. I came to a point where my tears were all gone and my heart had moved on. But our congregation was hurting. So I prayed God would give me tears when His people needed to see them.

Be patient. This process takes longer than a plane ride or even than a cross-country road trip in a U-Haul. You’ll have to circle around it and offer over to the Lord, in new ways, the losses you’ve experienced. But offer them over,

again and again, to the Lord as a sacrifice of worship. Unique to you. Unique to this new space that He is calling you to be in...for such a time as this. When we allow ourselves to face loss head-on, we recognize that even painful pasts have nuggets of good that we will miss and that exciting opportunities often come with unforeseen sacrifices. When we acknowledge these losses and invite the Lord into that conversation, He is able to take us by the hand and show us the way forward into trust. He shows us the redemption of what seemed lost and how He is forging a new path ahead in unknown territory. Then we can move ahead wholeheartedly, saying,

“Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord’s great love, we are not consumed. For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness.” Lamentation 3