

A Pastor's Perspective: On Rethinking Faith during Grief

“Rethinking My Faith in the Face of My Grief: My Faith (Part 1)”

My professional, ministry career has spanned nearly five decades as a pastor, elder, and professor that has engaged me in deep (not superficial) thinking about God. Yet I have sensed myself of late uncovering more questions than my previous years of mastering the “certitudes of the Christian faith” have afforded. I am seeking clarity ultimately asking what God may be up to in my life and beyond.

I have always affirmed God's existence. To me, God is the only rational explanation for the universe. My years of teaching theology and philosophy have led me to the proposition that such a remarkable, beautifully sophisticated, and orderly universe could not have come from “nothing.” Something pre-existed and caused what exists. For me this was/is a “Someone”—the God of the Bible.

I continue to affirm the traditional attributes that describe the God of the Judaic/Christian faith. While I do hold a couple of unique theological understandings, I have tried never to say more about God than the Bible itself affirms. My common refrain to students has been, “When the Bible is clear, be clear. When the Bible is vague, be vague. And when the Bible is silent, be silent. And for Heaven's sake, develop the wisdom to know the difference between these three.” The spirit of this mantra is to acknowledge that there is so much that we do not understand about God. He can be a rather opaque God.

I also affirm the traditional six (or seven) “fundamentals” of the Christian faith. However, I am always quick to reject the “Fundamentalist” label because I have known such people to be very difficult to be around. They are far too strident and unpleasant, combative and confrontational about many of the “lesser issues.” I am a “big picture” person—so is my understanding of the Bible—and I can't see myself getting down into the weeds to debate brothers and sisters who love to argue. Neither do I claim to be an “evangelical,” for in recent days this term is fully misunderstood and used by about everyone. So now, I simply refer to myself as a “follower of Jesus.”

Despite my professional career and “certitudes of the Christian faith,” my current grief has resulted in a crisis of faith, a crisis I wish to share with anyone who thinks such a crisis of faith represents some unspiritual glitch in our view of faith.

“Rethinking My Faith in the Face of My Grief: My Grief (Part 2)”

The short version of my crisis of faith is the recent death of my beloved wife of fifty-four years, coupled with two major surgeries that put me flat on my back with little to do except ponder my first Christmas without my beloved Carol in more than fifty-seven years.

Carol passed away last August (2017) after a courageous battle with breast cancer. I am not being dramatic when I say this is the greatest disappointment in my life. Carol is no longer present in my life, so I am only left with memories. She is gone and ***I miss her*** deeply...every day, all day.

I miss her joyful nature. ***I miss her*** daily ritual of sitting at the piano at the end of the day rehearsing until the miscues were gone. ***I miss her*** nagging me to put away the dishes after drying because “the kitchen isn't cleaned up until they were put away.” ***I miss her*** occasional complaints that I didn't hear because I was engrossed in a book or ESPN. ***I miss her*** philosophical/theological push-back at some of my arguments. ***I miss her*** rare mistakes in the dishes she prepared. ***I miss her*** dislike of “big box stores” that

required me to take her shopping across deadly crossroads for material. *I miss her* expectation that I keep her car gassed because “that’s a man’s job.”

I miss her “crafty” hands that were always busy exercising her mother’s gift taught to her as a child. *I miss her* busy stitching tens of thousands of items (e.g., bookmark crosses; knitted baby caps for the newborns at our local hospital; beaded colored salvation messages for mission agencies; quilts, etc.) now scattered all over the world. She, like her mother, modeled herself after the woman who anointed Jesus for his burial (Mark 14:8); she used her gift of giving and “did what she could.” *I miss her* crafting clutter (something that friends are helping me dispose of). *I miss my wife*.

These memories are quite insufficient compared to her actual *living presence*. Strangely, I would even love to have her back to continue her battle with cancer, which she took on so joyfully. I would give anything for those days, for at least she would be *here*.

In my grief, I have received much advice from other believers, especially from other widows and widowers, which have surely been well-meaning. I have appreciated the spirit of such remarks, but right now I consider such “Christian happy talk” to not be particularly helpful.

I am happy that my Carol is free of a horrible disease, but the theologian in me continues to wrestle with 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says, “to be absent from the body is to me present with Christ.” Is Carol in the presence of her Redeemer as I write this? I believe in the eternal condition, but is this her state now?

This is a frustrating mystery to me. What I know for certain is that my beloved is gone, and my eyes are “leaking” as I write this. While she is no longer suffering, I remain disappointed that God would take her. I am told by others that “You will never get over this, but you will get used to it.” No, I can’t see this as likely for me.

“Rethinking Faith in the Face of Grief: My Rethinking (Part 3)”

In the final stage of my lament, I wrestle with God in my current circumstance. I deal with *how* the death of my Carol left me and *why*. Again, I am forced to consider the question of God’s providence. *Exactly what has God been up to following this life altering event?*

Within four weeks of Carol’s passing, I underwent two significant surgeries, confining me to my home for nine weeks. Worse, the recovery regimen required that I lay flat on my back, either in bed or stretched out in a recliner. Nothing to do except read or watch TV; neither of which is convenient in a completely supine position. So, I simply pondered the loss of my wife. None of the recommended “distractions” was available to ease the grieving.

So, what was God up to? He certainly wasn’t coming to my rescue and helping me with my grief. It was mental torture! I did have friends make brief visits, which I appreciated, but then I was alone again with my grief and attending thoughts.

Providence is a theological derivative from the Bible. It is not a biblical term. It is our human way of seeking an answer to, “How did this happen?” or, perhaps, “Why did this happen?” or “What is God up to?” Providence seeks to understand God’s purposes and how these get accomplished.

Now, I believe that God directs the history of the universe toward some ultimate end. But I cannot accept the notion that the Creator God put an orderly world into place and then leaves its day-to-day operation to chance. Nor can I accept that God directly intrudes or otherwise manipulates outcomes. For example, I

am very familiar with statements like Proverbs 21:1 (“God turns the king’s heart”), but what exactly does this mean? How does it work out in the existential circumstance?

God does not “wake up” in the early morning and “zap” up our weather for the day. Nor does he intercede/interfere in a human psyche and physically, emotionally, or volitionally alter human behavior. God invested the original humans (and successive generations) with the matter of choice. Finally, my theology presupposes God “ordered up” (decreed?) Adam and Eve’s choice to fail miserably and the course for all subsequent natural and human events. Hence, disease, accidents, natural disasters, and human misadventures result from the Genesis Fall. Some people get sick and die, while others recover from serious surgeries. But why the differences in experiences and outcomes? *And what is God’s role in this?*

So, my exasperating question remains – What was/is God up to in my recent, serious, life experience that *required* (apparently in his view) me to have this extended period with little to do except think about my Carol’s death...and with little relief? I know from many biblical stories the implied teaching that *God doesn’t promise immediate understanding of his ways and purposes*. Perhaps understanding will elude us throughout our lifetimes. God’s ways and purposes are too vast and complicated that we may never understand.

This is what is so frustrating, especially following the death of someone as close as a life-long mate and ministry partner. Humanly speaking, I want to know. No, *I need to know*. But the heavens are silent. Am I wrong to be unsatisfied with this? Am I demonstrating an absence of faith?

So when people ask how I am doing, my typical answer is, “I’m managing.” But I’m not happy about it. I pray this feeling will pass someday...even in the absence of understanding.

Skip Forbes
Former pastor of Bluffton Baptist Church, Bluffton, IN
Prof. of Religion and Philosophy at Grace College and Seminary (Ret.)
Elder at Fellowship Baptist Church, Warsaw, IN