

Weeping with God: Scripture as the Language for Grief

By M. Todd Hall

How should the church respond to grief in her midst?

- Thesis: Most grief/trauma ministry is done *before* grief; the church must recover her biblical literacy—not merely knowing the words of Scripture, but drinking them in, living in them in order to equip faithful Christians for the grief that is to come.
 - This has always been a challenge for the church, in pre-literate and other times
 - It is perhaps particularly challenging for the church today—a “post-literate” church, living in the time of what Jacques Ellul calls the “humiliation of the word.”¹
 - In light of the current context, the church must recognize the importance of challenging the story and methods of the post-literate world, with its “distractiveness” and religious sleight of hand (more below).

The “post-literate distraction world,” and the recovery of the *word*

Bear with me for a moment, while we consider the current climate in which we are ministering. The congregations that we serve are challenged every day in their reading and appropriation of Scripture. Much of this is due to the massive shifts in media over the last century or so, especially with video and then the internet.

Problems with media-shift to video and then to internet:

- History of media²
 - Such as it is:
 - Oral → Print → Digital (Oral)
 - Postman offers an outstanding little overview of these transitions in *Amusing Ourseves*.
 - Imagine life in an oral culture, which, incidentally, is the culture of much of the Bible
 - Postman points to legal matters: how were these determined in an oral culture? Generally by the elders of a village, in the liberal use of proverbs and wisdom

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

² For this discussion, cf. especially Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* updated edition (New York: Penguin, 2005). Also see Arthur W. Hunt III, *The Vanishing Word: The Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern world* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003); Steve Talbot, *Devices of the Soul: Battling our selves in an age of machines* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly, 2007); for a more pastoral perspective: T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009).

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- By analogy, what does a worshipping community look like in this environment?
 - Clearly, the Psalms are meant to be memorized, and we know that they were, historically (cf. Daniel's presentation)
 - We know that new converts learned the Lord's Prayer and the (local) creed, via memorization
- Then imagine the shift that occurred when print really enters the scene
- Postman: with the coming of print, lawyers no longer needed to be wise, they need to be well-briefed
 - Many important changes by the print revolution
 - Word became "permanent" and easily transferrable
 - Word became, generally, accessible (Postman refers to the literacy rate in Puritan New England: near 95%)
 - The printed word allowed for far more complex epistemology, generally (extended argument is much easier to follow in print than orally)
 - The print culture is, in a sense, the victory of the philosophers over the rhetors
 - Imagine, though, what a gathering would look like in the true days of the dominance of print; Postman points out the Lincoln/Douglas debates.
 - Can you imagine 6 hours of debates, today?
 - Many problems with the print revolution, as well
 - In some ways, is tied to the technological revolution, the enlightenment and modernist idea of progress, etc.
- Finally, the transition to the digital culture
- I'm lumping a lot of things together here, between television and internet
- Television is, primarily, an entertainment medium

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- Television becomes the center of public discourse, and the medium itself demands a certain format, which demands a certain epistemological shift
- Television becomes, above most anything else, a commercial platform—a place to sell stuff
- Television advertising, according to Postman,³ becomes a “religious” narrative: “Like all religious parables, they put forward a concept of sin,” (technological naiveté, etc.) “intimations of the way to redemption,” (purchasing and using the product) “and a vision of heaven” (when the product successfully eliminates the sin).
- In this environment, *everything* is commercialized, and *everything* is trivialized, and necessarily so. Cf. “reality TV,” but even shows like “The First 48,” or “Everest,” which trivialize *real* death.
- The medium is distracting, and is in fact itself a distraction. It cannot maintain the kind of measured, logical progression of the print world. It is dynamic, ecstatic even, constantly shifting (cf. history channel documentaries, etc.)
- The medium, then, is fast paced, quickly changing, and distracting, and this definitely impacts the way we live life.
- It’s also geared toward giddiness. If we have a tragic event in a show, it must be resolved in a half hour (or an hour). Grief is a “downer,” and is something to be dealt with, rather than experienced in all of its long, painful details (Think of the constant mention of the “grief counselors” who seemingly parachute in to tragic situations to save the day).
- Enter the Internet
 - The internet has been hailed as a boon for democratic change, as a great equalizer in terms of information access, and as a promoter of social community
 - In some ways, this is true: we have a *ton* of access to information via the internet, and more people have a voice than perhaps ever in human history; additionally, through Facebook and other social media we are able to be in contact with distant friends, constantly
 - The drawbacks, though, are quite paradoxical: yes, we have a lot of information, but we suffer from “information glut,” and inevitably the

³ Neil Postman, *Conscientious Objections: Stirring Up Trouble About Language, Technology, and Education* (New York: Knopf, 1988); also cf. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* reprint ed. (Boston: MIT Press, 1994).

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information that rises to the top is trivial information—who won the '39 world series kind of stuff, or elevating the volume of political discourse while greatly diminishing the quality, etc.

- This information is largely context-less information, which is more damaging in some ways than mis-information.
- We also have a lot more voices with a platform, but these are drowned out in the cacophony of voices—the Internet = the church at Corinth, and it'd be hard to describe it as “decent” and “in order.” ☺
- Finally, we do maintain contact and “virtual” relationships, but this leads us to oddly distant relationships in real life. It hurts our social skills (we can always leave Facebook, delete a comment, whatever; you don't have to smell me when we talk; you don't have to *see* the depths of my grief), and a lot of research suggests that virtual community actually crowds out real community.⁴

About now you're thinking, “I thought this was a talk about grief ministry.” Bear with me just a bit longer: we're really laying out the context of the congregations with which we're working. The Internet and Television are so pervasive as to effect *all* of us, from Maine to New York to Texas to LA, and all points in between.

So in summary, the digital age, with all of its many benefits, has also left us with (and perhaps exacerbated) problems:

1) The humiliation of the word

- The printed matter that most folks consume today via the Internet is ephemeral and in many ways trivial.
- Reading habits and comprehension have suffered in the fast-paced, convenience-driven digital world—skimming has become the major form of reading, and thus Internet readings are of necessity truncated.
 - This has further implications, which I'm not overly qualified to discuss, but I do know that neuroscientists have begun embracing the concept of neuro-plasticity, the idea that the brain actually *physically* changes through our habits of thought and action. Think on that one for a bit.⁵

⁴ Cf. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

⁵ Cf. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

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- This has accelerated what some are calling a “post-literate” culture—a culture that relies more on visual imagery than printed material for communication.⁶
- We need to know this: people just don’t read like they used to, and when they do, they’re reading pragmatically—people tend to read, whatever they read, as if it were an instruction manual. Even better if it has illustrations.
- Incidentally, this means we have a loss of ability to really appreciate literature—and this bleeds into how we read Scripture, where we read for *content*, rather than experiencing the text on its own merits (especially in the Psalms)
- All of this has very real implications for people in grief—in the midst of the deep moments of trauma and the indescribable pain of grief, they are wrapped in a world of triviality. This can lead to serious nihilism.

2) The loss of community

- The collapse of genuine community in the United States has been well documented, and I won’t belabor the point here.⁷
- It is important to note, here, that the impulse toward community on the Internet is a sign of the deep longing for community in post-industrial America.
- Our churches are certainly suffering from this, as we have gone from community to commuter churches.
- Paradoxically, the possibilities for community in the virtual world actually diminish the kinds of work and duty that it takes to maintain real community—how many folks have you removed from your “feeds” list on Facebook?

What do we do with all of this? So what?

I’d like to share with you a vision of the church as a community of the word. As I’ve mentioned before, I believe that the vast majority of grief ministry is done prior to the event(s) leading to grief.

⁶ This has been a feature of society in the West for some time, and as early as 1962, Marshall McLuhan discussed the phenomenon in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

⁷ The classic discussion of this is Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001); also cf. Turkle, above; John McKnight, *The Careless Society: Community and Its Counterfeits* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler, 2010).

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And the thing is, the church offers an excellent antidote to the problems mentioned above, founded as it is upon the *Word* and community. I want to look at a couple of ways that the church can challenge the prevailing triviality of the culture and present a substantive, alternative community and language for people, especially those in grief. Then I'll have some practical suggestions regarding how we can incorporate into our churches a holistic, word-centered life that prepares them for trauma and grief.

1) The church as alternative community

- The church already provides a powerful counter-narrative to the culture's underlying narrative.
- The story of the church is the story of *meaning*—it is the opposite of the meaningless nihilism of contemporary American pop-culture.
- The church provides not just the opportunity but the *demand* for the creation of real community—community that exists within the social divisions so easily swept under the rug in social media (race, class, etc).
- In addition, the church is built on the story of redemption—it counters the myth of techno-consumerism and places the locus of meaning in a transcendent place.
- The church's worship is already inherently counter-cultural. It is the perfect place to reclaim a holistic view of life and creation. Where else, in all of our culture, do you see people gather for quiet reflection, for listening to a lecture (better: sermon), for singing songs together, for prayer, and for communal reading?
- And, as above, the church preserves the idea of transcendence and the sacred. Rather than trivializing everything, the church in a sense sanctifies everything through the doctrine of the incarnation.
- In this context, grief is no longer a “process,” or something to get beyond. It is a sacred moment of profound import, as it takes place within the story of the people of God.

2) Scripture as the language for the people of God

- Scripture offers the church a resource unparalleled in majesty or import. It offers us the language of God, that transcends time and space.

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- The words of Scripture are far from trivial. Throughout the centuries, theologians and writers and churchmen and preachers and even politicians have savored, explored, and employed the words of the Bible.
- And, when read for more than just content, the Bible offers language which can and should be employed by God's people in every aspect of life—whether in prayer, in funeral services, at weddings, over the dinner table, or behind the wheel. Scripture's language should become *our* language (more on this below).

Unfortunately, you and I both know that this is often not the case. Pressure on churches to maintain large numbers has an inevitable, dramatic effect on church practices, especially in its public worship and work. More and more worship services have come to look like television (or internet video counterparts) broadcasts.

What can the church do to prepare folks for grief? Part of the job is to reclaim the non-trivial nature of real Christian worship and truth. This will mean resisting some of the contemporary practices that reinforce the distraction and triviality of our culture. It will also mean reclaiming and incorporating other methodologies, intentionally, that are somewhat foreign to our tradition.

So, some practical ideas to help you equip your congregations for grief.

1) Immerse them in Scripture, corporately.

- Incorporate regular readings into *all* of your public worship services. And more than just a few.
- Incorporate Psalms at least weekly into your service.
- Follow a lectionary of some kind—a regular reading schedule. You want to cover the entire breadth of Scripture.
- Resist the urge to minimize troubling or painful texts. The language of the Bible ought to be the language of the church. We have lost this language (e.g., Mark Shipp's *Timeless* often makes us uncomfortable in singing, because we have lost the language of the Psalms)
- Preach from across Scripture (cf. *Feasting on the Word*)
- Carefully design your services. I know that in ministry there are so many other things vying for your attention, so many pressing crises. I know this! But do not neglect the design of your corporate worship. Put together a committee, study it with them, and put together theologically and liturgically sound worship services.

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- Be careful with your song selection.
 - Here, I am not saying do not sing joyful songs; rather, do not sing *only* joyful songs.
 - And don't songs that truncate the full scope of Scripture (e.g., As the Deer, one of my favorites, does no justice to Psalm 42)
 - Incorporate “interactive” moments of Scripture reading and praying as much as possible
 - Responsive Psalms
 - The Lord's Prayer
 - All of this, incorporating as much Scripture as possible into your services, will help to disrupt the trivial information environment in which we live, and it will trouble the underlying narratives of American culture.
 - In addition, it will provide people with a much needed language for times in which language goes wanting
 - Further, it will provide a common bond and a common language for the congregation. We believe in the efficacy of Scripture, and the seriousness of the *word*, so we believe that the more we immerse ourselves and our congregations in it, the great will our transformation be, and the more engrained in our hearts the word will become.
- 2) Help your people to immerse themselves in Scripture *personally*
- We need to recover pre-literate techniques for a post-literate culture.
 - I have a former professor who tells me that upon his arrival at a Presbyterian Seminary, he was told “we love our church of Christ students, they know their Bibles!”
 - This was certainly true, at one time, but is less true today. Several studies have suggested that biblical literacy is dropping away.
 - We need to encourage our congregations, through daily Bible reading programs (such as at my home congregation) and the like, to make regular prayer and Scripture reading a part of their lives. This can include, I think, an encouragement to pray the hours, something like what is found in the BCP or elsewhere.

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- Encourage memorization, starting with young folks, but keep it going. Cf. Daniel Napier's presentation.
- Encourage the daily praying of the Lord's Prayer.
- With all of these, of course, if you are not practicing them yourself, you have no business asking others to do it. Bury yourself in the word, make yourself take the time, three times a day, for a moment of prayer and Scripture reading.

Why? Because Scripture becomes a part of those who read and pray it. Let me share a couple of anecdotal stories with you. There are legions of stories like these, several of which are in print. But I bring these up because these are mine, I witnessed them.

We had a lady at our congregation who was quite uncomfortable, because of some theological concerns, with praying the Lord's Prayer. She regularly made this known, but she was not combative and the church was engaged in dialog. During this discussion, she became ill and had to have a emergency surgery. I went and visited her shortly after, and she grabbed my arm and said "Todd, it was crazy, I was laying there on that table and I'm desperate to pray, I'm trying hard to say something, and I can't think of anything. And all of a sudden I hear myself saying 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...'"

Additionally, I remember a couple of years ago when my grandmother was drawing near to her death. She had struggled with Alzheimer's for many years, eventually even forgetting her direct relationship with my father (she asked him in the car once, "now, how are we related?") I remember noting, one Sunday, that though she couldn't remember her own family, and had lost a lot of language skills, she could still sing the hymns without the book (not that the book would have done much good). In addition, and more interestingly, she could pray the Lord's Prayer. I say this is significant because she had come to join our congregation about 5 years before that time, and prior to joining us she had not prayed the Lord's Prayer at all in her life. But from the regular praying of the prayer, week to week, the words of Scripture embedded themselves in her heart, and became her own, when she could not find her own.

This is one way that we prepare our folks for their impending grief. We equip them with the words of Scripture. We offer them the language of God himself, given to us in revelation, so that, when words go lacking, they find the Word of God within them.

A couple of years ago I was able to share some thoughts with you about grief, some basic ideas about grief ministry. I include those here, below, in prayer that they might be useful to you in your ministry.

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- Theological background
 - Much of what must be done in terms of grief ministry is actually done beforehand, I think.
 - Groundwork must be laid to give proper context for those who suffer grief
 - First: remember the incarnation
 - The shortest verse, the one we all wanted to memorize when we were kids, John 11:35.
 - In many ways it is the most profound verse, the most complete picture of incarnation: *Jesus wept*.
 - This is what is denied in a lot of modern funeral and memorial services. I heard a story the other day about the sound one hears at funerals today is not weeping but laughter, as more and more people want funny stories, etc. at funerals.
 - Also in that story, though, was the discussion of the lingering effects of grief upon those who go through the funeral as “celebration.”
 - When we teach the church about the fact that we have been made in God’s image, that we live in a sinful world in which death is a reality, an unwelcome aberration which is overcome in the resurrection, but not destroyed until the parousia, we encourage them to weep, not “as those who have no hope,” but to weep the tears that Jesus wept.
 - It is God in the flesh.
 - When we remind the church—in our songs and prayers and sermons, and especially in the Supper—that Jesus is indeed *fully* human, subject to all the frailties (physical and emotional) of humanity, we give permission to grieve, and we reveal the false authenticity of the modern indifference to death as event and reality.
 - This is also driven home in the Supper, the place at which Jesus says “do this in remembrance of me.” *Remember* me.
 - We remember at table on Sundays a risen Lord, but also a crucified Christ, a man who experienced the peaks and valleys of human life

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and brought to full expression the condescendence of God to humankind.

- If we are to give hope to those in grief, we must prepare them with a truly *incarnational* message, for it is the message of a God who has not left us to our suffering, but who participated and continues to participate in them fully.
- Second: we need to incorporate the grieving life into the life of the church
 - Let me qualify this by saying I don't mean church services should be morose, difficult affairs
 - BUT, we need to bring in to our corporate worship and times together an element of the reality of this experience of life
 - Tom's sermon preparation: the note cards
 - Our public prayers
 - Remembrance services for those who have passed—name them.
 - Incorporate the Psalms. (Plug for *Timeless* here!)
 - Remember that we are the “body of Christ,” and that as members of the body of Christ we must experience all that the members of Christ experience.
 - The Sunday after Jenny died I went to church. I didn't want to, I wanted to stay in bed, but I remember as I evaluated that morning whether or not to go, that I felt a sense of duty to the church. I believed and still believe that the church *needed* my experience as much as I needed the church.
 - Remind those who grieve that they are needed, that their experience is a part of the whole fabric of the church, that they have an important place.
- Third, the resurrection.
 - It might seem strange to hold this point until now—Paul saw this as a great comfort, hence 1 Thess 4.
 - However, in my experience, it was a distant thing, a hope only to be fulfilled after a long life without her and my own long sleep.

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- But, there remains great hope in the truth of the resurrection.
 - We must reclaim the idea of *resurrection*, though: not a bodiless existence, not a release from this body, but the raising of *this body* and its transformation to a new, immortal building from God.
 - Why resurrection? As I reflected on this, some years later, it occurred to me why this is so important: we are not Hindus or Buddhists, our hope is not the absorption into a single consciousness or the inheritance of a new and different life.
 - Dr. Weed pointed out something that I'd not noticed, many years ago, which has stuck with me. The resurrected body of Jesus still bore the scars of the crucifixion. Why? I think it is because our scars tell our human story, in a sense they give us our character, make us who we are.
 - Our hope is resurrection—restoration. A constant cry of the lament Psalms is “remember me!” And the promise of resurrection is that it is the *me* of me that will live again—changed and sanctified, certainly, but *me*. Immortal and powerful and without blemish, but it is *Jennifer* that God will remember and raise, not a copy or some greater consciousness.
- Resurrection is the promise of God's remembrance!
 - I remember walking outside and looking at the hills and trees around my house and wondering how many people those hills and trees had seen buried. Who remembered?
 - I remember writing to Jennifer on the second anniversary of her death: she had been out of my life for longer than she'd been in it. My memory was hazy, fading. I couldn't hear her voice anymore, couldn't catch her scent on the breeze.
 - But the resurrection reminds us that even though our frail memories fade, God will *not* forget, and in his own good time he will raise and restore.
 - We must continually remind the church of God's never failing memory and of our ultimate destiny in Christ. Doing so will equip for the moments of loss which are coming our way (and I'm quite certain have already come our way).

- Individual ministry

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- We have looked at a few theological truths of the church that sort of lay the groundwork for surviving grief.
- We need, as well, to consider how to respond to those who suffer among us.
 - Here, let me say that we're all different.
 - Amazon reviews, responses
 - I'm amazed, but even after all this time, I don't know what to say. And I always tell them that.
- A few tips, though.
- Remember, you are on holy ground.
 - The best response: Silent presence: Jeffrey Zurheide, story of the little boy, "needed someone with skin on"
 - John Mark Hicks, hug, "tell me your story"
 - The chaplain at Seton: overwhelmed, had nothing but silence and presence, but that was just what we needed
 - David: as far as I can remember, he was always there
- Job's friends did exactly the right thing, until they started talking.
 - Be present, be incarnate. Be Jesus "with skin on."
 - People say a lot of dumb things, but those who grieve generally are understanding, *if* those same people have been present with them in grief.
 - A few phrases to avoid: God took him/her home; this makes God into the thief, the bad guy; he/she's in a better place (this might be OK for those who struggled with long and painful illnesses, but even in that case, it is a realization that must be *come to* by the family, not forced upon them by those around them);
 - Serve as best you can: the immediate time of grief can be (and I'm sure always is) overwhelming. There are bills still to pay and many procedural things that must be done (death certificates and the like). Help with that sort of thing if you can—ministers, you should familiarize yourself with this process completely.

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- Secondly, Shun quick fixes or pat answers.
 - Pat Harrell: WEED, TONY ASH, Claude Hocott reported to Weed later that Pat Harrell asked “when can Tony come back and see me?”
 - To me, it is the same with the idea of a grief “process.” We live in a culture that wants there to be a fix (if not a quick fix) to *everything*, and so we have the label of a grief “process,” as if it’s some mechanical thing to be worked through.
 - In reality, grief is more organic than that, it is a cycle, it comes and it goes, and it does so at the most inopportune times.
 - Don’t tell people “you’re in stage 3.” Especially don’t tell them “you should be in stage 5 by now.”
 - Let them grieve. “Worldly sorrow leads to death.” This is a denial of the incarnation, it is Gnostic, not Christian.
 - We are a culture unaccustomed and uncomfortable with grief
 - But the church must embrace the grieving in all their pain and allow them the time and place and proper context to grieve.
 - Remember their loved ones lost. Call them by name. Do so before the congregation. Remind them that *you* remember them as well, that they are special to *you*.
 - H.S. prayer garden, letters to Madison, etc.
 - You’d be *amazed* at how far it got me through grief to know that others were deeply hurt by her loss as well
 - Those in grief understand that “life goes on,” especially for those around them.
 - But remember that those who have lost a loved one are left with only broken pieces of a life that once was and will not be again this side of the resurrection. They must try to put together some semblance of “living” first, and only then, after much time and tears, may they rebuild a “life”
 - Pause with them, then, especially at special occasions. Send a card at Christmas, at anniversaries, at birthdays—and yes, at the birthday of the one they’ve lost.

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- Call their loved ones by name.
 - Bill, using his son's *name* in the email, and the difference it made.
- Ultimately, grief is a mystery to be approached with fear and trembling. It is a moment of profound *human* experience. As a church, we need those who grieve, we need the scars they bear in order to give the body of Christ great character. We need the reminder of the hope that we have in the "God who raises the dead."
- Our culture is an odd one. It is uncomfortable with those in grief. It likes to shuffle them off to the side. The church cannot be the same. It must incorporate them fully into its life and weave that grief into the fabric of the story. Only a church that does this may pray "Marana, Tha!" "Lord Come!"