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**Why Did Andy Die?:
A Study In Growth Through Grief**

Brian K. Heldt

There was nothing about the day which intimated that it would be any different than any other April evening. Yet shortly after 6:00 p.m., while his daddy was teaching less than a mile away, while his mommy was resting after a long day's work, while his grandpa was cleaning the van and his grandma was preparing supper, and while his two older brothers and one sister were playing, Andy stumbled while pushing his tricycle near the family pool and both he and the tricycle fell into the water.

He had been told many times not to play near the pool. The door leading to the back yard was always kept locked. He never played in the back yard, unless supervised by an adult. His daddy had considered fencing the pool, but had refrained because of the high cost. Everyone had been warned to watch him, and everyone thought that everyone else was doing just that. Yet he fell. Unnoticed. Unnoticed?

Some time later, mommy found him on the bottom of the pool in the deep end. Retrieving him from the water, she restored his breathing with the guidance of the emergency operator. The paramedics arrived three minutes later. He was taken by ambulance, then by helicopter to Phoenix Children's Hospital, breathing irregularly. His parents, accompanied by a friend, drove madly into downtown Phoenix, with a crushing sense of despair tantalizingly mixed with an extra-human hope. After nine hours of prayer, waiting, and singing at the bedside of a little body convulsing sporadically on

Dedicated to a fine lady one of three who continued to be a part of our grief process for many months after our loss by ministering to my wife and thereby ministering to our entire family in spite of her busy piano-teaching schedule and in addition to loving her husband and raising her own two sons one of whom was Andy's best friend: Thank you, Shannon.

a life-support system, at 4:45 a.m., Andy's tired and swollen heart stopped beating forever.

Daddy and Mommy left the hospital just as the morning rush hour traffic was beginning. The shadows were long. The air was cool and dry. Birds were singing. Children were waking up and getting ready for school. One child would never wake up again. One child would never again shuffle out to the kitchen in his sleeper pajamas and crawl groggily into daddy's lap. One home would now face the reality, the emptiness, the loneliness, the practical fear, and the accompanying grief, of death.

Whose fault was this tragic accident? If only his brothers or sister would have paid closer attention. If only grandpa had spent a few more minutes playing with him near the van. If only grandma had looked out the kitchen window at the right minute. If only mom had not decided to lay down for a few minutes after baby sitting all day. If only dad had borrowed the money and put the fence around the pool. If only Andy had stumbled away from the pool instead of into it. If only God had not been momentarily distracted, turning back to find this tragedy. Or was it a tragedy?

Where was God when the pool swallowed Andy? Watching intently. Do you mean that He saw the whole incident and did nothing to stop it? Yes. Why would the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent God of love just stand by and do nothing? Because His desire to train His children was greater than His desire to shield them from distress. Are you saying that He loved that family so much that He allowed their brown-haired, brown-eyed bubbling bundle of joy to drown ignobly and shamefully under their very noses? Was this an evidence of His love for them? Yes. And He had four truths to teach them through grief.

The Experience of God's Love

The first truth which may be learned through grief is that it is a means whereby the Heavenly Father enables His children to more deeply experience His love. Warren Wiersbe writes, "When you and I hurt deeply, what we really need is not an explanation from God, but a revelation of God."¹ This revelation finds its greatest expression not through a theological study of His Word, but in the experience of personal fellowship with God. There are few more painful yet gratifying ways to come to a deeper knowledge of the person of God than through grief.

The response of sorrow over the loss of any significant person, object, or opportunity² is a part of the life of every child of God at some time. The believer who learns to take his grief to the Heavenly Father, finding comfort and courage in Him, will experience a knowledge of the love of God which could not be procured anywhere else at any price.

God is a person, and man has been created in His image. A little boy might know every statistic for a particular baseball player on his favorite team for any given year. He might know where and when that man was born, how many children he has, and where he lives. Yet he may never have the opportunity to get to know that man personally. That sort of knowledge requires many hours of personal contact in various life situations, both positive and negative. If a man is to experience God's love, he must do the same. A practical sounding of the depths of God's love will not come through a mental knowledge of all that the Bible reveals about that love, though this must be the foundation. Three facts, in particular, are revealed about the love of God through the experience of grief.

First, the believer can learn that his Heavenly Father loves His child so much that He is even willing to cause him distress so as to advance his sanctification. The preacher who declares that God loves His children too much to hurt them may mean well by his statement, but his words are unfounded. Christian growth comes through the application of the Word of God to life situations, many of them adverse, distressful, and involving grief of varying intensities.

Second, the child of God can learn through grief that the veracity of God's love is unaffected by a devastating situation. C. S. Lewis wrestled arduously with this truth after the death of his wife. Sorely tested to deny the love and goodness of God, he asked himself in his diary why God seemed so near when He was not needed, and so unapproachable when He was.³ He also wrote, "The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"⁴ Yet, upon later reflection, he repented of these thoughts, having come to a deeper knowledge of the faithful love of his Father.⁵

Third, through grief God's children can learn a greater trust in the love of God for them in the future. King David had experienced the love of God as a shepherd boy in the rocky hills near Bethlehem, as a political refugee in the wilderness of Judah, and as king over all Israel. In his old age he was able to affirm that Jehovah would love him unto the end (Ps. 37:23-27). God has not changed. The believer

in this dispensation can experience the same faith in God through the work of grief.

Why did Andy die? God wanted this family to realize that His love for them would remain constant and trustworthy even though it would, at the same time, cause distress and necessitate reorganization on a monumental scale. The love of God and the grief of His children are not incompatible. They are sometimes the parts of an equation which, together, may equal closer fellowship with the Almighty.

A Component of Christian Vitality

The second truth which may be learned through grief is that grief is a natural and essential component of Christian vitality. The word vital comes from a Latin root meaning pertaining to life. Grief is not only a means whereby the love of God may be more deeply appreciated, but it is both a natural and an essential ingredient for spiritual growth.

A natural element of Christian vitality

When Job faced the loss of all his earthly possessions, his friends came to comfort him. After remaining silent before him for seven days they sought to extract from him a confession of the secret sin which had caused his loss. Their theological system wrongly taught that the sole reason for suffering was sin. This same improper concept is still, consciously or unconsciously, part of the theology of many believers today.

Any loss, whether devastating or minimal, should cause the child of God to carefully examine his spiritual walk. If such a loss comes, and there is no unconfessed sin in his life, the believer may rest in the fact that God has his further spiritual growth in mind. If there is known sin in the heart, the loss should first excite personal confession of sin, then a time of drawing near to the Heavenly Father. Does God cause others to suffer or die to bring a man face to face with his sin? Mr. Wiersbe asserts that this question is best left with God.⁶ God's will for His child at the time of loss is a continued holy walk with Himself,⁷ and the reorganization of life under the parameters of John 10:10.⁸

Grief is a natural part of the life of every believer living in a sin-cursed world. One should not assume that sin and grief are intrinsically connected. In fact, unless God has directly revealed that

He brought the grief situation into the life of the believer because of sin, the believer should not brood on that possibility.⁹

An essential element of Christian vitality

Not only is grief a natural part of the Christian life, but it is an essential part. In his correspondence to the churches in Rome, Paul taught them the blessing of grief (Rom. 5:3-5). Believers, said he, can glory in distressing circumstances, knowing that the exercise of faith in God through those circumstances¹⁰ will produce in the believer a confidence which will produce spiritual fruit.

Contemplating what she had learned through the tragic death of her son at the hands of a drunk driver, Marilyn Heavilin said that if she were ever offered the opportunity to have her loved one back, she would unhesitatingly accept; but she would not want to be the person that she was before he passed away.¹¹ The glory of grief is not to be found immediately in the circumstance of the loss, nor is it to be found in the weeks and months to follow. June Kolf observed,

Grief is work - hard work. It has to be talked out, cried out, acted out, before changes can be made. This process takes time, and that is the reason that society assumes that time heals the hurt. In actuality, it is the work taking place during the passage of time that is easing the pain. The lost one is never forgotten; the pain never disappears. However, as the grieving person adjusts to a new lifestyle, acceptance arrives. With acceptance, the agony eases gradually until at last it is hardly noticed.¹²

Throughout this healing process the Wonderful Counselor, the Other Comforter, is soothing, confronting, guiding, loving, and chastising to bring the child of God into a more exact replica of the risen Messiah.

Why did Andy die? God wanted this family to realize that He had magnificent plans for their future life ministry which no longer included Andy, but which would be impossible without his death.

A Corporate Growth Avenue

The third truth learned through grief is that it is the Heavenly Father's avenue of granting to the local body of believers the privilege of sharing in and growing through the anguish of His children. From Genesis to Revelation the Word of God emphasizes the importance of spiritual growth through fellowship. The author of Hebrews

encouraged fellow believers to fellowship through the local church, exciting one another unto spiritual growth (Heb. 10:24-25). It is evident that the avenue of corporate growth through grief has both a personal and a public application.

Personal support

In the past century secular psychology has demonstrated the spiritual truth that there is more benefit to being a vital part of a caring social entity than meets the eye. A popular and successful type of therapy in the modern psycho-analytic world is group therapy. The therapeutic landscape is dotted with support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Compassionate Friends, and a host of others which reach out to hurting and troubled people.

This is exactly why it is so essential for the believer to be a vital part of the body fellowship of a local church. This fellowship becomes his support group in times of loss and grief. June Kolf writes, "A person's previous support system will make a big difference in the grief process. We need to assess our own support system before our lives are touched by loss."¹³ The local church should not only be the pillar and support of the truth (I Tim. 3:15), but it should also be the hospice of comfort for grieving believers, and the source of guidance for reconstruction. It should be a haven of broken-hearted people who are able to help other broken-hearted people (II Cor. 1:1-4).

Public benefit

Several weeks after the death of her teen-age son, Marilyn Heavilin was approached by a friend who said

Marilyn, I just want to tell you how much I appreciate it that you're letting the people in this church watch you grieve. You are open with how we can help you. You aren't trying to hide your feelings from us. We're a new church, and we need to learn how to work with people in crisis.¹⁴

The church will benefit from the grief work of its members when two practical truths are simultaneously realized.

First, the individual who is grieving must be willing to share their feelings openly. The greater extent to which the hurt is shared will produce greater benefit for the body. Wisdom must direct this sharing. Some things are more appropriately shared on a small-group

or personal level. A common misconception is that those who are grieving do not want to talk about the loss, or mention the name of the dead loved one. It is felt that it is best not to remind the bereaved about the deceased. In actuality, the griever is probably thinking about the deceased all the time. There is great healing in talking (in wisdom) about the loss.

Second, the church must be willing not only to accept the openly stated feelings without reservation, but must stand ready to confront, console, and counsel the bereaved at appropriate times. This will necessitate educating God's people about the grief process and making use of those who have been through grief in counseling the bereaved.

Why did Andy die? God not only wanted this family to practically realize the eminent importance of Christian fellowship, but He also, in His omniscience, had hundreds of lessons to teach relatives, friends, associates, neighbors, and acquaintances from Arizona to Iowa to Pennsylvania to the subcontinent of India.

An Exhibition of God's Goodness

The fourth truth learned through grief is that it is the Heavenly Father's way of exhibiting His characteristic goodness through chosen individuals to both angelic and human observers. God is good, not only in reference to His sinlessness, but also with regard to the quality of His works on behalf of His children. He is neither capricious nor sadistic in discipline or chastisement. All His works toward His children are both good and perfect (Jas. 1:17).

Edith Schaeffer, wife of the late Francis Schaeffer, relates an experience which she had in an Amsterdam hospital in her book *Affliction*.¹⁵ She had been called to the bedside of a dear friend who had brain cancer, and who would die in just a few days. Until just one week earlier, Mr. Van der Weiden's life had been filled with a flurry of activities including family outings with his wife and nine children, managing his furniture store, and directing Bible studies with numerous student groups at Leiden University. Now he lay dying. His last coherent words bemoaned the fact that before he could do everything; now he could do nothing. His ministry for the Lord was over. All that remained was to wait for death.

In the remainder of her book, Mrs. Schaeffer expands the truths which she showed to Mr. Van der Weiden in the final moments of his conscious life. Whereas Hebrews 11 speaks of the hall of faith, Mrs.

Schaeffer spoke of the museum of faith which God maintains in heaven. In that museum there are two galleries. In one gallery stand many monuments to people who have endured their own unique set of life's afflictions to the glory of God in spite of their prayers for deliverance (II Cor. 12:8). These are abiding testimonies of the grace of God to both elect and evil angels, as well as to human beings whose lives they might have touched.

In a second gallery of this great heavenly museum stand many monuments to those children of God who have faced grievous affliction and have been delivered by God through prayer. These circumstances are also testimonies of the grace of God to any who might observe them.

Mr. Van der Weiden needed to understand that he had triumphed to this point in his life in a multitude of human endeavors to the benefit of many of God's children. Now, in the remaining pain-filled days of his earthly existence he must triumph in God's grace while facing the greatest grief of all, the loss of his own life. In doing so, he would be an exhibition of God's goodness to his family, to his students, and to his acquaintances in Europe, as well as to both good (I Pet. 1:12) and evil angels (Job 1:7, 2:3).

The believer who is wrestling with grief on the human plane of existence is also contending with a far weightier matter on the spiritual plane, the clear manifestation of the goodness of God. He is passing through the valley of the shadow of death. He must patiently wait on the Kind Shepherd to guide. He needs the support and understanding of all the brethren, especially those in his local church. He will, one day, realize how his life was showered in a special way with the goodness of God, and he will more clearly know abundant life through Jesus Christ.

Why did Andy die? God wanted this family to realize that the ultimate purpose of any life experience was not to provide blessing for them but to exhibit God's goodness through them to all who might see (I Cor. 10:31). This, in turn, would both bring joy to the heart of Andy's surviving family and strengthen their faith in their Heavenly Father.

Conclusion

Grief is an intrinsic part of the Holy Spirit-directed growth of the believer. Through it the believer develops a more perfect knowledge of the love of God, finds further spiritual growth, becomes a more

intricate part of the local body of Christ, and is carefully fashioned into a trophy of the goodness of God. The work of grief in a believer's life, or in a family, can give a sense of purpose to a tragic event, and should be a time of reorganization unto greater glory. Andy's daddy, mother, sister, and two brothers have learned through his death that life is not just about living. It is about caring, loving, hurting, and dying.¹⁶ It is also about pressing ahead to continue serving the Lord.

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Notes:

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Why Us? When Bad Things Happen to God's People* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H Revell Company, 1984) 51. Pastor Wiersbe's book was written as the Christian counterpart to Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Press, 1981).

² This is a commonly accepted definition of grief. See Gary Collins, *Christian Counseling*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1988) 344ff.

³ CS Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961) 19. This classic work on grief should be read by every counselor who anticipates counseling this type of distress.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 84.

⁶ Wiersbe, *Why*, 118-9. He further cites Abraham's statement in Genesis 18:25, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

⁷ This includes two applications: confess any known sin without brooding about whether it caused the loss, and be sure that human reactions to the loss are not sinful (depression, anger, revenge, blame shifting, neglect of local church).

⁸ That is, with the knowledge that God intends this for the good of His child, even though its immediate result is painful. An abundant life is yet ahead, but God will no longer be using this person or possession or situation to promote that abundance.

⁹ Note II Sam. 12:14. Even with this direct revelation from God, all David could do was confess his sin, accept the consequences, and go on walking with God, saddened, but wiser.

¹⁰ The psalmist found confidence in Jehovah, his Shepherd, having wailed THROUGH distressing circumstances. The song writer stressed, "We WILL understand it all by and by." Both recognized the necessity of patient perseverance through tribulation to find God's intended growth.

¹¹ Marilyn Heavilin, *December's Song* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1988) 132-3.

¹² June Cerza Kolf, *How Can I Help? Reaching Out to Someone Who Is Grieving* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989) 87-8.

¹³ Kolf, *Help*, 61.

¹⁴ Marilyn Heavilin, *Roses in December* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publisher, 1986) 62.

¹⁵ Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H Revell Company, 1978) 67-9.

¹⁶ Heavilin, *Song*, 133. These thoughts were first penned by Glen and Marilyn Heavilin. Their experiences and feelings closely parallel those of our own family.