

BY LILLIAN V. GRISSEN

Grief and Grace

OLD AGE BRINGS MANY blessings. But it also brings loss. Eyes, ears, limbs, and sometimes our minds, function less efficiently.

And death comes. "To die once" (Heb. 9:27) is our destiny. And death opens the door to heaven, right? But death, so *ordinary* among old people, imposes loss that is painfully unique and exquisitely personal.

My husband and I had six months to anticipate his death. We wondered aloud and often about the mystery of heaven. We shared our faith. We shared memories—family, marriage, heartaches, and humor. We laughed and cried together. He was prepared to die.

But I wasn't prepared for loss. Grief cannot be anticipated. "Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). For my husband death was indeed victory, but I was left with the sting. And hope, so grounded in my lifelong belief in my Savior, eluded me.

Something within me died with my husband. Grief penetrated my soul. The grief of loss is physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

Grief disturbed my sleep. Tylenol did not reduce my headaches. Tears burned. The pain of needing to hold and to be held, to touch and to be touched enveloped me. Henri Nouwen said, "[Grief] is the experience of *not receiving* what you need most. It is the place of *emptiness* where you feel the absence of the love you most desire" (*The Inner Voice of Love*, p. 27).

Aloneness is a hole in my heart, a hole too big for Band-Aids, glue, staples, or stitches.

One's loved one lives on in memory, but good as these memories are, they are a poor substitute for a warm embrace or an ever-endearing, "I love you." After more than 61 years of togetherness, I was not prepared for the awful aloneness—the empty chair, the absence of hidden caches of chocolates, corny jokes, the teasing smile, the reruns of old TV shows, and more and more.

I watched him die. He took so much of me with him. I was alone, "uncoupled" in a couples' world, no longer the *center* of someone's life. The chapter of my life still to be written would be autobiographical, not "duo-biographical."

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I had expected my deep faith and belief to comfort me. But the absolute finality of the end of my marriage to my husband tormented me. It was done. Forever. Eternal life without my husband? I shuddered involuntarily. A very dark cloud, seemingly without the silver lining of faith, enveloped me. I stumbled alone in the valley of the shadow of death. I had to go on. And I wasn't sure I wanted to.

With God's grace and the help of many, I finally found peace in Paul's words: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

Not that I had lost God—or worse, that God had lost me. No, I was experiencing that common frailty of old age—forgetfulness. I forgot just where I had put God. Like King David, I lamented God's silence. I had not anticipated the stunning pain of loss. I learned too that often we Christians hide our grief; it

seems sometimes that we dare not mourn and cry openly. Too often we are afraid to admit and ask questions that might expose our doubts.

I had to learn anew God's presence. Children, grandchildren, family, pastors, the hospice counselor, and friends—the family of God—helped me to mourn actively and openly and to begin healing. But first I had to reach the point of despair, the point where I consciously and willingly accepted God's love and help given me through his family.

Many continue to help me as I travel through this valley of death's shadow, and I fear no evil (most of the time), for God is with me (Ps. 23). Very gradually the ragged edges of loneliness are being softened into the flowing lines of God's grace, and, yes, his grace is sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9). With the apostle John I believe that someday "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Rev. 21:4).



Lillian V. Grissen is former associate editor of *The Banner* and a member of Grace Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Mich.