

Sermon: The Steadfast Love of the Lord

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, October 5, 2025)

Before I share with you today's message, I would like to first offer condolences to Alice Teng and her family Vivian and Anika, for the passing of Alice's younger brother a week ago. I take comfort in the fact that my message last week about finding God in hopelessness, has been a word of comfort to Alice. I trust that God is with her now in this time of grief, and I pray that God will keep her safe in her journey back to Taiwan. Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Grief is an inevitable human condition, and facing grief is a sure sign of growing in maturity. For the past couple of days I participated in the Presbytery Youth Retreat, taking place at Gracefield Camp, with the theme of being rooted and grounded in God. (As matter of fact, the retreat is still going on today, but I had to leave earlier to return to Ottawa to lead worship here today).

During one of the teaching session, on the subject of growing emotionally, the subject of grief was brought up. It was a difficult subject to deal with, particularly for teenagers, but a necessary one. For dealing with grief is a part of gaining maturity emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Reflecting on grief is much easier to do when one is not grieving over a sudden loss of something or someone beloved.

What exactly is grief? Instead of providing you a dictionary definition, I rather point to the words of Edgar N. Jackson, the author of *You and Your Grief*, to what he had to say about grief. (Here I quote:) "Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children, alone. Grief is the man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person. Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day. Grief is the silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there. Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years. Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will be again. Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments,

apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life.”

In another word, grief is a natural part of life, while dealing with sudden loss, trauma or crisis. And it really should be noted there is no expiration date on grief, it doesn't just go away all on its own. One has to face it, and deal with it.

The discipline of psychotherapy has contributed greatly to a framework of dealing with grief. I think most of us have heard of the five stages of grief (or the expanded seven stages). The original theory was proposed by the Swiss-American psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. While working with terminally ill patients, Kübler-Ross noted the five common stages her patients had faced and had to cope with.

The first stage is '**denial**'. This is the initial reaction to a precipitating event, while thinking and hoping that it is somehow mistaken—I can't believe it is happening. I won't believe it has happened.

The second stage is '**anger**'. This is when denial can no longer continue. The individual becomes frustrated, may even lash out at those around them—Why me? Why is this happening? Who allowed it? Who is to blame?

The '**bargaining**' stage involves hope, albeit a false one as the individual clings to it in order to somehow avoid the cause of the initial grief. Examples include a terminally ill person bargaining with the divine for a bit more time in exchange for a reformed lifestyle; or bargaining on behalf of someone else, such as 'if I could trade places, to give my life for a loved one'.

The stage of '**depression**' inevitably follows when one comes to the realization that nothing they do will make a difference—I am so sad, why would I bother with anything. I miss my loved one so much; why go on?

The final stage of '**acceptance**' may come when the individual embraces the inevitability of mortality for oneself or a beloved—I can't escape it; I might as well prepare for it. Or she is gone, and there is nothing I can do to bring her back, as she would want me to go on.

There are alternative constructs proposed by other, such as the seven stages of grief, which to my understanding elaborates on the final stage of acceptance, stretching to include upward move and hope. As with most constructs and theories, progression through the stages are not linear, and in some cases (in most cases), setbacks do occur frequently.

Imagine being stuck in a never-ending loop of denial, anger, bargaining and depression, and never able to find a way out. That is simply horrible.

For the people of faith, the Scriptures provide us with another mechanism of dealing with grief. I am referring to lament, or the act of lamenting. Though in the Book of Psalms, roughly 1/3 of the collection of 150 deal with some forms of lament, grief or complaints. Most people, when it comes to lament, naturally think of the Book of Lamentations.

Lamentations is a rather unique book in the Old Testament. It contains five poems, written by Prophet Jeremiah (according to tradition), reflecting back on the Babylon's siege of Jerusalem and the destruction and exile that ensued. Take for example, the opening verse of the book setting the tone and poetic flare of the book:

*"How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become subject to forced labor."* (Lamentations 1:1)

Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as the weeping prophet as he witnessed the dying days of the Kingdom of Judah. I have quipped that there were probably not enough words to express the prophet's sorrow in the first book, that he had to resort to writing a second book to continuing his cry—ergo the Book of Lamentations.

Our responsive reading today, in Psalm 137, reflects back to this same period, but from the exiles' perspective.

*"By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

*How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4)*

These biblical poems of lament are indeed a form of protest, drawing attention to the horrible things that happen in this world that should not be tolerated by a just God. They are also a way of processing raw emotion, allowing God's people to vent their anger and dismay at the chaos and trauma caused by violence and sin. Finally, these laments give voices to our confusion, putting our questions directly to God. Why? What for? How long?

It should be noted, though many of these questions are framed in explosive and accusative manner, they are nevertheless permitted, never frowned upon in the Bible. Just the opposite, these poems of lament give a sacred dignity to human suffering, for they are preserved as Scripture, as God's words to the people of God.

It should also be noted that lament is not always doom and gloom. In chapter 3 of Lamentations, in the midst of his wailing and crying, the prophet gave hope. Like a ray of sunshine breaking through the eye of a hurricane, knowing although the worst is yet to come, hope is not too far. This is what the prophet says in verse 21-23, “

*“But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.” (Lamentations 3:21-23)*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**