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*Through faith in Christ, we can  
find strength and consolation  
when death takes one we love.*

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# COMFORT FOR THOSE IN MOURNING

D. F. MORAN, C.S.S.R.

When someone you love very much is taken from you by death, it is impossible for you not to feel grief. The whole world recognizes the naturalness of your tears. Friends extend their sympathy with a feeling that there is little they can say or do to dull the sharp edge of your sorrow. You experience the great loneliness that only death can bring to those whose loved ones it has taken away.

While it is most human and natural to feel sorrow over the loss of one who was greatly cherished, it is possible to learn how to grieve with profit both to yourself and to the one whom death has taken away from you.

There is nothing in human experience that cannot be faced and endured either in a right way or a wrong way. This holds true also for the experience of bereavement. However, it must be noted that the right way to endure grief over the death of a loved one cannot be learned on the spur of the moment, nor in the sudden hour of need. It must be learned beforehand. The right thoughts that must survive in one's consciousness through the emotional upheaval that goes with bereavement must have been pondered and made familiar long before the need arose.

That is why the thoughts here presented should be considered carefully by all, even those who have never yet seen death fixed on the features of someone very close to them. There is only one kind of person who has no need for these thoughts. It is the supremely selfish man or woman who has never forgotten self long enough to love someone else with a deep and wholehearted love. Persons of this sort do not grieve very much when a friend or relative is taken by death. There is, then, no need of trying to teach them

how to grieve with profit. They need something far more essential: they need to be taught how to forget themselves in true and in sincere love of someone else.

Two very special points should be noted here, before we consider the principles that can make grief in bereavement serve for spiritual profit. The first is the fact that we are considering here only those persons whose love has been honest and good in the eyes of God. One who has been living in a forbidden and sinful love and companionship with another, and who then finds this person suddenly taken by death, has reasons for grief for which there can be no palliation. To have contributed to the bad death of a human being, by living with that person in a sinful alliance or a bad marriage to the very end, is a cause of grief which no words can diminish.

The second point is that grief can be turned into profit only by a soul that has genuine faith in God, acceptance of the merits of Christ, convictions of the immortality of the soul, and dedication to the destiny for which God created all hu-

man beings. We confess to a sense of utmost futility in speaking to bereaved persons who, together with their deceased loved ones, have had no real faith in God or in the reality of that life beyond death which Christ proclaimed. At the same time, it can be said that a statement of the principles that make the grief of bereavement tolerable and profitable for Christians can serve to awaken in the irreligious a realization of how unnatural and empty are their lives and griefs so long as they turn their eyes away from God and the world that exists beyond the grave. It is hoped that these words may perform that service for many who need it.

## UNSELFISH SORROW

The first principle that must be tenaciously clung to in the dark hours and empty days that follow on the death of someone greatly loved may be phrased as follows:

*All human grief arises from a mingling of selfish and unselfish motives. The sel-*



*fish motives must be mortified; the unselfish motives can be turned into spiritual joy.*

Grief arises from the loss of something precious to us. This is a natural and spontaneous emotion, and is not to be entirely condemned merely because a selfish element enters into it. No normal human being can help grieving over the loss of a good mother, a loyal father, a faithful husband or wife, a beloved child, a close and cherished friend. The loss of someone good and dear naturally causes the emotion of sorrow. Though this cannot be prevented, it helps greatly to be conscious, in the midst of grief, that this selfish motive, arising from the sense of loss to one's self, is present, and to try to temper it as much as possible.

We all like to think, however, that it is not only our own loss that causes our grief in bereavement. We are so constituted that we do grieve spontaneously out of sympathy for others. This is the reason why people shed tears at the performance of a tragedy in the theater, or

if they happen to be present when somebody else is keenly suffering, even though they themselves are but little involved. So, too, when death takes from us someone whom we have greatly loved, our grief is partly a grief of sympathy. Death, we feel, is a misfortune that has befallen our beloved. Death silenced the voice and froze the hands and stilled the heart of one whom we cherished. We grieve, therefore, not only over what we have lost, but also over what has happened to the one we lost.

It is here that the realities of faith must take over to temper both the selfish and unselfish elements of our grief. We think of death as a misfortune for two reasons: first, because of what it does to the body, and second, because it is contrary to that strong instinct of our nature which clings to life on earth as a most precious possession. Both these reasons must yield to convictions born of the revealed teachings of the Son of God.

Death does treat the body cruelly, but it brings about a great release, a happy liberation, for the soul. The very cold-

ness and stillness of a body in death should be a reminder of the new freedom and exaltation of the soul. If the eyes could still see and the hands still move and the heart still beat, the soul would still be there. That the body can no longer act must be a reminder, even to those whose eyes are blinded by tears, that the soul is elsewhere, and that it now has a knowledge and love to which all that it had while united to the body cannot even dimly be compared.

It is true that all human instincts resist death and cling to life, so that one who dies appears to have failed in his battle to hold body and soul together. But even though one whom we loved did, as all men do, try to cling to life to the very instant when death occurred, it must never be forgotten that immediately after death every good Christian finds himself infinitely better off than he was in this world. He knows then that his battles are over; his loves are purified and exalted; his sufferings, if any remain to be endured in purgatory, are but a pledge of a most certain and unlimited

happiness. With far deeper meaning than is sometimes put into the words by those bereaved, it can be said of those who died in the Lord that "they would not want to come back again." This is true even of a child whose soul death has taken from this world.

Thus, pity and sympathy for those who died with the love of God in their hearts turn out, in the light of faith, to be in reality misplaced. What is left is the sense of loss to ourselves. We cannot smother this, nor even hide it. It irresistibly charges our feelings and emotions with pain. But in the depths of the soul, where convictions born of faith remain strong, there is comfort and hope and peace.

## MEMORIES

There is a second principle which, when remembered and made conscious in the midst of the grief of bereavement, helps to bring solace and peace. It may be worded as follows:

*Human grief in bereavement is intensified by the remembrance of hurts that were inflicted on the one who cannot suffer such hurts any more. This feature of one's grief should be turned into deeds of mercy for the dead that will far outweigh the hurts that were given in life.*

All human loves on earth are imperfect. Two people who love each other dearly, even husband and wife, mother and child, brother and sister, friend and friend, inevitably find over the course of the years that they sometimes hurt each other. It may be by thoughtlessness or neglect; or through misunderstanding or difference of opinion; or as a result of sensitiveness or impatience. The hurts inflicted may range from the momentary ones resulting from a sudden harsh word or gesture, to the long enduring heartaches that result from bitter quarrels or downright sins. Love is rarely experienced for very long on earth without some heartache and pain.

To the thoughtful, this is proof that human beings were made for the perfect

loves of heaven, and that they will never know an all-satisfying love until they have attained that goal. It is also a reminder to those who have been bereaved that they are now to make up for the slights and hurts that they inflicted on the one who has now been taken from them. They can no longer slight or hurt their beloved dead any more. But the memory of the past shortcomings of their own love can be turned into wonderful deeds of charity and mercy in behalf of their dead.

Indeed, this seems to be one of the reasons why God does not reveal to the living when or how soon the souls of their dead are admitted into heaven. He wants true love and deeds of mercy to continue for a long time after death — even till a reunion is enjoyed in heaven. He wants love's wounds to be healed in death. He wants the memory of the imperfections of one's love to send forth into eternity a continuing flow of prayers and meritorious offerings that will speed the beloved's passage through purgatory and add to his happiness in heaven, as

the imperfections of earthly love continue to be atoned for.

Without this principle there is too often an element of hypocrisy in a show of grief at the death of one who was close and dear. A son who often hurt his mother deeply during her life may act at her death as though his had been always a perfect and unselfish love. A daughter who was given to quarreling often with her mother while the latter was alive may manifest uncontrollable grief now that her mother is dead. A great variety of motives and feelings enter into such displays. We tend to idealize the dead and to grieve for the ideal we have lost. Consciousness of our own faults toward the dead makes remorse a part of our grief. Even human respect, in the form of a desire to grieve as the world expects of those who have lost a loved one, plays its part. But all the mixed emotions that come together in grief over the body of one who was close and dear, bear wonderful fruit if they are directed toward the deeds of mercy for the dead that both atone for the faults of the living and pay

the penalty still due for the faults of the dead.

## LESSONS

The third principle that takes some of the sharp sting out of bereavement may take the following form:

*Death is always a valuable reminder to the living, especially to those who have known and loved the one whom death has taken, of the shortness and uncertainty of life on earth, of the importance of living in such a manner that death need not be feared, and of the joyful reunion that will take place after a while between those now separated by death.*

God intends that what happens to one human being should serve as a lesson for others. This is so because of the identity of the destiny that all men are created to achieve, and of many of the means to its attainment. All men have been made to win heaven through the manner in which they lived on earth. Therefore, the end of one person's life on earth should remind others who witness it of their



own principal goal. All men must die, even though many like to live in forgetfulness of this fact. The death of one we love breaks through that forgetfulness and drives home the salutary truth that death cannot be evaded. All men must win heaven only by loyalty to God and true faith in Christ on earth. The death of a loyal and faithful Christian is a reminder to the living of the only source of hope on which they can rely.

The closer one has been to the person who dies, the greater should be the force of these lessons. All deaths are a lesson to the living; but the deaths of loved ones are like direct and inescapable reminders from God of the most important things. That is because the death of a loved one punctures the dangerous dream to which all are tempted to succumb, that life on earth may be sweet enough to cling to without thought of heaven. The longer God permits true love to be enjoyed on earth, the more danger there is that men will be deceived. Inevitably, sooner or later, God lets death speak for Him to

tell them that they must not turn astray from their true goal.

This is one of God's purposes in permitting death to strike into the midst of happy families, or to sever friend from friend. It is evident in the fact that death often brings about wonderful conversions in the living that nothing else seemed capable of effecting. The wayward children of good mothers are sometimes brought to their senses and inspired to give up their sins only after they see their mother's features fixed and peaceful in death. Men and women who had thought they needed nothing except the little circle of human beings their love had created, sometimes find themselves suddenly realizing their need of God when He has reached down and taken one most beloved out of that circle.

To look at death properly requires humility. Proud men and women only become embittered when they have to face the death of a dear one. Humble people, on the other hand, when confronted by death, acknowledge God's supreme rights

and infinite wisdom, even though they had been thinking little about them before. And they let their thoughts go out of this world with the one whom God took to Himself, until those thoughts rest with the loved one in God.

There are certain thoughts that inescapably come to the minds of those who are left to grieve over the death of one whom they loved. The first consists in the question: "Do the dead still know and think about and love those whom they knew and loved on earth?" The right answer to this question is yes, they do. God does not inspire the close relationships which true and virtuous love creates between human beings on earth only to smash and destroy them at death. Love is God's creation; He gave it the instinct and longing for permanence. It can, then, be taken for granted that even in the bleak and silent separation that death effects, He permits the dead to think of the living, just as the living cannot help thinking of the dead. Who will not be a better man or woman if the solid conviction is possessed that those

whom we have loved and lost in death are not really lost, but are thinking of us in the presence of God in another world?

A second thought that makes the lessons of death more profitable arises from the right answer to the question: "Shall I ever see my loved one again?" Once more, the answer is yes, provided you live in such a way as to deserve a union with God and a union with your lost loved ones when your life is over. Death plays a wonderful part in God's plans for the salvation of all men when it inspires the bereaved living to say with all possible resoluteness of soul: "I shall now make straight for heaven where my loved one waits; I shall never more be turned aside from that goal." The waiting period will seem short and swiftly passing for one who has thus fixed his eyes on its glorious end.

## HARMFUL ATTITUDES

There are two harmful attitudes toward the death of a beloved person that

must be considered in conjunction with the right principles set down above.

The first is the attitude of self-recrimination that some bereaved persons fall into, on the score that they did not do enough, or failed to do some simple thing, that might have prevented the death over which they grieve. Too often people torture themselves with thoughts like these concerning their dead: "Oh, if only I had recognized the symptoms of his disease when they first appeared, he would be alive today!" Or, "If only I had called a doctor a month earlier, his life would have been saved." Or, "It was my fault that he died because I did not insist that he give up working." This self-accusation takes its most acute form when death was due to an accident, whether the grieving person played a part in the accident or not. Over and over, in agonizing detail, such a person will think of how small a thing, what little watchfulness and care, would have prevented the tragedy that occurred.

This wrong attitude, to which all bereaved persons are tempted to succumb,

except sometimes in the case of the death of the very old, can be banished only by bringing to mind the providence of God. As responsible human beings, we are bound to do, indeed we can do, only the things that our conscience tells us are practically prudent and morally necessary here and now. If we neglected something, without any consciousness of neglect, even though it seems, after the event, to have had some bearing on a loved one's death, we must not give in to tortured self-accusations, but peacefully recognize the working of the wise and loving hand of God's providence in the event that occurred. Even when there was some conscious neglect, but without realization of how serious the consequences might be, it must, after the fact, be accepted as part of God's plan that the death of one we loved should take place at this time and in this particular way. If, as our Lord said, God numbers the very hairs of our head, He must also have watched over the circumstances that led to anyone's death, and permitted this for His own infinitely wise and loving purpose.

A second wrong attitude that sometimes leads not only to prolonged grieving, but also to a habit of sin, is that which arises from the thought that it was the neglect or mistake of someone else that occasioned the death of a loved one. A doctor, for instance, did not come at once when he was called; or he made a wrong diagnosis; or he prescribed a medicine that, instead of helping the patient, seemed to hasten death. Bereaved persons sometimes permit their grief to turn into hatred of the physician. We know of cases in which such persons have refused for years to speak to the doctor who was called for their mother or father, or husband or wife, because the patient died, and who have done all they could to harm the professional reputation of that doctor.

Of course, no one can say that it never happens that the neglect or mistaken diagnosis of a physician enters into the chain of circumstances that lead to death. But only one who is very proud of his own judgment, and forgetful of Christian principles, would set it down as certain

that in a particular case this was actually the sole cause of death. And even where there are some grounds for believing that someone's neglect or carelessness may have contributed to the death of a loved one, it must be remembered that even such things could not happen except they were wisely permitted by the providence of God. There are no accidents with God. He permits nothing to happen that is not taken into His universal plans.

For this reason, it is tragic for bereaved persons to permit the death of one whom they love to lead to hatred and detraction. If someone else sinned by neglect, it does no good to an individual who suffers from the result of that neglect to pile other sins on top of that sin. This only makes grief more bitter and unprofitable and vain, when it might have borne great fruit both for the one who died and the one who was bereaved.

## CONCLUSION

When confronted by the death of a loved one, the Christian must not grieve



like the pagans, for whom death is the end of love, but must look forward in faith to the resurrection of the loved one in eternal life. St. Paul says: "We would not, brethren, have you ignorant concerning those who are asleep, lest you should grieve, even as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, so with him God will bring those also who have fallen asleep through Jesus. . . . And so we shall ever be with the Lord. Wherefore, comfort one another with these words" (1 Thess. 4:13,14,17,18).

Those who have faith in Christ can derive comfort and hope from the words which He spoke to Martha after her brother had died: "Jesus said to her, 'Thy brother shall rise.' Martha said to Him, 'I know that he will rise at the resurrection, on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, even if he die, shall live; and whoever lives and believes in me, shall never die'" (John 11:23-26).

Therefore, those whom we have loved and lost still live in Christ, and we shall meet them once again in the glorious resurrection to eternal life.







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