

Blessed are Those Who Mourn...

Bible Study for Youth Grieving Unexpected Loss

By Kristin Schmidt

It was my sophomore year in high school, and the student body had just experienced a week-long (pretty costly) program admonishing us not to drink and drive. This effort was purposely arranged right before prom weekend, and included dramatic stories that were emotionally charged but fictional. Prom came with its usual excitement and preparation. On the way home from the dance, an eleventh grade student fell asleep at the wheel and ran the car into a barrier. His girlfriend (also a junior) was killed.

This was a shocking event for everyone at the school, even those who did not know the young lady. One thing that stood out in particular in my mind, though, was the response I heard from the Christian group on campus. Though this was a public high school, the club met weekly for prayer and fellowship. The week after the accident, the leader speaking for the day casually acknowledged the sadness of what had happened, but told us that we ought to be joyful for her and her new Heavenly home. Of course, we know it's true that we have ultimate hope and peace in Heaven. However, after a jarring loss, a cheerful platitude is the last thing teenagers want to receive. I did not attend the Christian club much longer after that message.

So how can we or should we respond when youth experience grief? An unexpected loss may manifest in several ways. It might be a tragedy such as a school shooting. In some cases, it might be the death of someone in or near to the group. It might also be a loss involving a building or the way of doing things. Unexpected loss can also take place on a more individual level, perhaps the loss of someone known only to a few in the group, but impacting a great many more. It can be especially challenging to face such sorrow if, as a leader, you are also mourning what has happened.

Regardless of the situation, the church simply must be a safe source of comfort when teens are encountering pain. Students must be allowed opportunity to grieve in whatever way suits them. They need space and time to process what they are going through, and to communicate to others if and when they feel comfortable doing so. Youth leaders and members ought to provide supportive presence, but also a personal presence that is willing to pause and weep alongside the mourners. Grief is a necessary and functional component of overcoming loss. There will eventually come a time to move on, but in the initial wake of a death or drastic change, allowing emotion is key. Not all adolescents will go through "typical" grief stages like denial, anger, depression, and acceptance. Grief can be a roller coaster of psychological and physiological effects. There are no easy answers or quick-fix videos. As we provide tools to assist youth in processing sorrow, the most vital element is often presence. Simply letting teens know that someone cares is essential. Sometimes it is impossible to be present in person, creating an even greater challenge. Leaders need to identify creative methods for reaching out to youth going through a sudden loss.

There are a few critical things to keep in mind when dealing with youth who are grieving in any way:

- Acknowledge that grief is normal and acceptable, and experiencing a range of emotions is healthy and appropriate.
- Understand that the way we express grief is as unique as we are. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve.
- Check in regularly on teens, and demonstrate genuine care.

- Recognize that grief lingers. It may look different over time, but likely will still be present years after a tough loss.
- Avoid providing trite answers like “just look at the positive” or “you’ll be fine; you can get through it.” Teens need space to experience emotions. They might be open to public prayer or Bible verse suggestions, but do not merely toss those things out casually as a quick fix. Let them know you are experiencing true feelings *with* them.
- Be present and ready to listen. You don’t have to “fix” anything. Just be willing to be there for students.
- Provide gentle, but specific opportunities for teens to share. Rather than broad statements like “let me know if you need something” or “how are you feeling?”, try something like “who else can you talk to about this?” or “I am praying that God’s peace and presence overwhelm you tonight.”
- Genuinely admit that you do not have all the answers or understanding, but you are willing to listen and to pray.

**Remote Note: If possible, it is helpful to meet grieving teens in person. However, there are times that require meeting from a distance. This study includes suggestions to adapt activities for such conditions.*

Opening: (5-10 Minutes)

The recommended format for a Bible Study on grief is somewhat different than other group studies. While laughter can be a helpful distraction, students in mourning might not feel as energetic about goofy games or wild opening antics. It’s important to allow space for teens to share and participate as much or as little as they prefer. Give them time to talk through feelings and to explore the comfort of God’s word, but don’t force them to do more than they might want to. The process of grieving a sudden loss, whether one within the group or a more general experience, is something that will be unique to each individual. Students may be overly talkative or completely taciturn. They may be willing to share emotions, or want to hide them. Be sensitive to how much teens want to engage.

As an opening for this study, look at a few historical examples of people who have encountered grief and loss. In particular, consider a hymn or two that have powerful and perhaps painful stories behind them. Play the hymn for students, maybe in a music video mode with lyrics displayed, or just the tune on its own.

Describe the story behind the writing of the hymn. A few options include:

- *It is Well*: The words to this hymn were penned by Horatio G. Spafford, following the tragic death of his four children in a ship accident. He wrote the lyrics while traveling over the spot where they had drowned.
- *My Redeemer*: This is one of many well-known hymns by Philip Bliss, who also wrote the music for *It is Well*. Bliss perished in a train accident in Ohio, but this song survived the wreckage.
- *Great is Thy Faithfulness*: This song does not have quite the dramatic story as some others, but its author (Thomas Chisolm) experienced a great many health struggles. He recognized that despite life’s pains and ups and downs, God was always faithful to provide.
- *How Great Thou Art*: Carl Gustav Boberg penned this remarkable reflection on God’s majesty after witnessing an incredible thunderstorm, followed by the calm splendor of a rainbow.
- *Blessed Assurance*: This beautiful reminder of Christ’s presence was written by Fanny Crosby, who lost her sight after an illness as a young girl. The blind hymn writer contributed many powerful songs to Christian music.
- *Abide with Me*: This somber, yet hopeful hymn was written by Henry F. Lyte, who was near death, but focused on God’s presence through life’s sorrows.

- *If God Himself Be for Me*: This hymn was written by Paul Gerhardt, who lived through the horrors of the Thirty Years' War, including the destruction of his hometown, and also saw the death of his wife and four of five children.
- *Be Still, My Soul*: Not as much is known about the story of this hymn, written by Kathrina von Schlegel, but the melody and words are soothing to a grief-laden spirit.

Of course, there are many more wonderful songs of comfort and inspiration. Sometimes music can speak where words cannot, providing a unique consolation in times of grief. Focus on just one or two of these songs and stories (or a different one of your choosing), allowing the music to take priority and providing time to process it.

**Remote Note: if going through this study virtually, you may screen-share and describe the events and authors surrounding hymns. You might also play a sampling of several songs, and provide additional information for students who are interested in further details.*

Bible Exploration: (Approximately 20 minutes)

Grieving a sudden loss will involve a range of feelings. Students might still be in shock or numbness. They may be expressing anger or uncertainty. They might be exhibiting doubt or rebellion. Youth need to experience the comfort and hope of Scripture, but should not merely be presented with a laundry list of verses. For this study, it might be most beneficial to select two or three passages to concentrate on. Go through them with the whole group, either reading aloud or letting students read them silently but simultaneously. Provide background if necessary, but focus on the comfort the words bring. Invite students to share emotional reactions if they care to do so. You may also consider providing a list (ahead of time or after) of verses that might be helpful. Many Psalms contain genuine solace for grief or trouble. A few suggestions include:

- Psalm 22:23-26: God hears our cries and will not be far from our needs.
- Psalm 31: In spite of extreme sorrow, the Psalmist recognizes God's goodness and hand in his life.
- Psalm 56: Man has no ultimate power, because God knows our struggles and will deliver us.
- Isaiah 53:3-5, 11-12: Jesus knows our grief; by His pain and suffering we are healed.
- Lamentations 3:16-26 (several verses in this chapter): though Jerusalem was besieged and unspeakable horrors were taking place, there is yet recognition that God is gracious and merciful, and will ultimately bring hope.
- Matthew 5:4: Those who mourn will be comforted.
- John 11:17-36: Even though Jesus knows Lazarus will rise again, He is deeply troubled and moved, and weeps over His friend and in solidarity with Mary and Martha.
- Revelation 7:17; Revelation 21:4: God will wipe away every tear; mourning and death shall be no more.

There are many people in the Bible who experienced sorrow and loss. These examples may or may not feel relevant to a teen who is suffering grief. In later sessions, it might be appropriate to explore characters like Jacob, Job, David, Elijah, or Jeremiah. For teens still raw with emotion at a recent loss, concentrating on such figures may or may not be particularly helpful.

Follow-up and Fellowship: (10-15 minutes)

After discussing the scripture passages, provide a couple of opportunities for students to experience a sense of closure over their loss. These options could be brief and immediate, or they could be more long-term projects. Again, be mindful of how teens are feeling and reacting. Don't force anything they would rather

not do, but make certain they have ideas to assist with coping.

If time and space do not allow for these activities, consider offering them for youth to do on their own time, if desired. Consider inviting them to:

- Write a letter to the loved one who passed. Express feelings and appreciation for who they were and what they meant to the teen's life.
- Write a card to a family member of the deceased, describing how important they were and that they will be remembered always.
- Write a letter to God, opening up about anger or confusion. (Remind teens that it's okay to express emotions to God. He gives us emotions, after all!)
- Plan something in memory of the person (or thing/place) that was recently lost. This might be a special garden, painting, or even building renovation.
- Visit the grave, if possible.
- Visit family and friends of the deceased, if possible.

Some of these activities will bring up a lot of emotion, and that is fine. Grief is positive in its own way. Teens (and all people) need to experience genuine mourning and be allowed to grapple with it. Only then can they process and move on, and it still takes time, effort, and prayer.

Close with a prayer. If time and willingness allow, have students share prayer requests and pray for one another. Otherwise, offer a general prayer asking for God's comfort and peace, and recognizing His love and nearness.

If space and time offer availability, let students have a few minutes to chat and fellowship before they depart. If you are using an online format, and have a large group, you might even split students into "breakout rooms" for them to talk in smaller clusters of friends. (Close: 2-5 minutes)

Suggested Resources for supporting grieving teens and coping with loss:

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends (Helen Fitzgerald)

When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing (Marilyn E. Gootman)

Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love (Earl A. Grollman)

Resilient Grieving (Lucy Hone)

I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye (Brook Noel and Pamela Blair)

A Grief Observed (C.S. Lewis)

On Grief and Grieving (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler)

Living with Grief: Bound by Sorrow, Wrapped in Comfort (Kristian Kincaid)

Death, Heaven, Resurrection, and the New Creation (Kent Burreson, Beth Hoeltke)