I. PASTORAL CARE

A. Correct Perspective on Death

1. The Bible records the tragic day when Adam sinned and spiritual and physical death entered the human experience. In fact, the grave will open its mouth today wide and 150,000 persons will fall head first into its jaws.

27...It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment… (Heb. 9:27)

2. Jesus was asked in Luke 13 about a recent tragedy in Israel and responds with the correct perspective on the reality of the human situation and God’s ongoing mercy. We should not be shocked by the depth of human sin and suffering but use it as an opportunity to turn to God with our whole heart.

1There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? 3I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. 4Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? 5I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." (Lk. 13:1-5)

3. James reminds believers of the temporality and fragility of this life in order that we might approach God with gratitude and humility.

13Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; 14whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. 15Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” (Jas. 4:13-15)

4. The Bible also tells us that the death of God’s children is very precious to Him and that our times are in His hands. We are told not to fear, for not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father’s will.

15Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints. (Ps. 116:15)

5. We also know that in Christ death has been defeated for all who trust in Him, and Christ will raise them from the dead unto everlasting life on the Day of Christ. The true hope for every believer is not escaping our physical death. It is the second coming of Jesus and the resurrection of our bodies from the dead! In Christ, death has become but the passageway unto a resurrected, everlasting life.
B. Recognize the Mysterious Tension

1. Death, especially premature death, is a complex issue involving many factors and creates various tensions for the believer that are hard to navigate. Who is sufficient to speak with clarity on all the mysteries of life and death through the paradigm of time and eternity? Who is sufficient to understand the many complicated factors and all the nuances of Jesus’ wise administration of history? Jesus’ death is an example.

2. The Bible has always left a tension between now faith and the not yet fullness of the kingdom. Daniel’s three friends recognized this tension, and in the face of the mystery they proclaimed their absolute trust in the Lord who can deliver but may not in this life. The three in wisdom recognized the purposes of God in both deliverance and martyrdom. We see this in the New Testament.

   a. John 11
   b. Acts 5-7 – An angel of the Lord opened the prison doors for the imprisoned apostles in Acts 5, but in Acts 7 God allows Stephen to suffer death at the same crowd’s hands.
   c. Acts 12 – James is killed by the sword and Peter is delivered from prison. Herod’s violent death follows.
   d. Romans 8
   e. Hebrews 11
   f. Rev. 6:9-11
   g. Rev. 7 – One group is sealed with divine protection. The other group is composed of martyrs who sing the song of God’s salvation (deliverance) as a prophetic statement of how God will bring the sealed ones safely through the tribulation and into Jerusalem.

C. Trust in Jesus’ Wise and Kind Leadership.

The key to enduring suffering is a covenant of trust in the person of Jesus. Apostolic encouragement for the enduring of suffering is grounded in the person of Jesus. We are exhorted to look at His sacrificial example. We are reminded to keep our present focus on Him and trust in His wise administration of history. The One who laid down His life at Calvary can be trusted to unfold the intricacies of history. We are encouraged to rejoice in His future coming when all things will be made right. Faith in Christ, hope in Christ, and love for Christ. See 1 Thess. 4:13-18, 2 Thess. 1:5-10, Heb. 2:8-10, Heb. 12:1-2, 1 Pet. 1:6-9, 2:20-25, 3:13-22,

D. Maintain an Eternal Perspective.

In the midst of suffering and tragedy we must maintain an eternal perspective. The Bible also reorients our focus to an eternal perspective. This life is but the internship for the rest of eternity. We are promised that our sufferings are producing an eternal glory. John 16:33, Luke 18:29-30, 2 Cor. 4:16-18, James 1:2-4.

33These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)
Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

II. PASTORAL CARE TIPS IN MINISTERING TO OTHERS

A. Prayer is your primary and greatest response.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. (Jas. 5:13)

B. Bear Each Others’ Burdens Patiently.

Know that grief takes time and resolve it in your heart to walk through the season patiently. People will most likely display the five stages of grief listed below. These stages are responses to powerful feelings and may not take place in a linear fashion, but the person may move in and out of the stages in response to differing emotions.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. (Rom. 12:15)

Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2)

1. Denial – state of shock and numbness. This first stage is a survival mechanism which helps the person simply get through the day and function.

2. Anger – feelings and questions of anger begin to emerge directed towards God and others. The anger is the result of the intensity of one’s love for the person lost.

3. Bargaining – feelings of guilt begin to surface as one wrestles with all the “what if” questions. What if I had done more?

4. Depression – grief intensifies as the person begins to ponder a future without the one lost. The depression is not mental illness but a natural response to grief.

5. Acceptance – the permanence of the situation is accepted.

C. Restrain from offering advice. Romans 12:16 follows Romans 12:15’s admonition to weep with those who weep by adding the charge to not be wise in our own opinions. Our posture is to have very few opinions and join the person suffering in a covenant of trust with Jesus. In other words, press people to not yield to the temptation to give “the solution” to this crisis by using their wisdom or their prophetic insight/dreams. Who is sufficient to speak with clarity on all the mysteries of life and death through the paradigm of time and eternity?

D. Restrain from blaming everything on the enemy. Death is part of the human tragedy. All persons experience it. The reasons for this tragedy are complex and complicated.
E. Wait patiently and be ready to listen when the person is ready to share. Do not force vulnerability or force conversation when one’s emotions are jumbled. Provide loving presence to them.

F. Know that anger and disillusionment are part of the package in suffering. Don’t take it personally when you become the outlet for these emotions. Remember you do not have to defend God’s reputation or faithfulness.

G. Lovingly focus them on the goodness and sovereignty of God found in Christ Jesus. We do not know all the answers for the suffering of God’s people, but we know the God who shared with us in our affliction and in fact was crushed for our affliction in order that we would have life. The divine exchange in Christ Jesus: our sin/affliction/death for His purity/peace/life.

H. Meditate upon the cross. Ask Jesus what it was that He knew concerning His Father that He could commit His spirit unto Him in the hour of utter darkness, suffering, etc.

I. Be the presence of Christ. Let the compassion of Christ move through you with silent presence and weeping. Serve and serve again, quietly and without attached expectations.

3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 5For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ. 6Now if we are afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. 7And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation. (2 Cor 1:3-7)

J. Give grieving persons time and room. Hold the person of Jesus ever before them and be patient. Have others check in on them regularly. Let comforting love work its course over time.

K. Trust in the grace of God to sustain them. Jesus is an expert at comforting the heart.