

# Little Deaths

John 15:1-11

Jeremiah Ebeling ---- April 16, 2023

**“Life is a series of little deaths.”** That’s how Yale professor Charles Feidelson described life. He said that life is a series of little deaths. From beginning to end, life is a string of little endings, and we all experience them. You only have to live a short time to know that this is true, that little deaths, these small deaths, are stitched into the fabric of life.

And today isn’t so much about loss of life. This is not about the death of loved ones or family or friends. This is about the small deaths that we encounter, the micro deaths that we encounter along the journey of life.

And some of the little deaths that happen we are kind of glad to see. Right? Who wasn’t happy when suspenders and acid-washed jeans and fanny packs from the 80s and 90s went away? Right? We were happy to see those go. And how about big hair and big bangs and perms? We were happy to say goodbye to those too, right? If anyone here is a Gen X-er like me, you know I just described the entire cast of *Saved by the Bell*.



There it is. Somehow a lot of the styles are being resurrected, even today. I don't know how that happened. They didn't stay dead long enough ... I know. I'm seeing it in my own home.

But what about the tougher small deaths that we encounter in life? What about the ones that are a little more difficult to handle, to deal with?

Adulting: how about adulting? Adulting means that your childhood is in the rearview mirror. It means that now you get the privilege of paying your own bills—like, all of them. It's all on you now. Welcome to adulthood.

How about newlyweds? You know, that first year of marriage can be painful—surprisingly painful. Because you realize that saying goodbye to the single life also means saying goodbye to the freedom and independence you once enjoyed.

*Honey, are you telling me I need to run all my decisions by you before I make them? What?*

*Yes, honey, that's what I'm saying.*

And then children become young adolescents who become young adults, and each one of those passages is a small death to parents, isn't it?

And what about all those dreams that we had? Remember all the dreams you had for how your life was going to go, how it was going to turn out? I'll bet many of them—maybe they haven't materialized, or at least they've had to be altered.

Life is a series of little deaths. And that's true for every single one of us.

And this conversation is important because we live in a culture that does everything it can to shield us from death of any kind. Right? For each one of us, we would prefer to think pleasant thought; to watch movies and read books that have “happily ever after” at the ending. In fact, many of us are probably uncomfortable with how many times I've already said the word “death” today. *Could you stop saying that word?*

But what I love about God is how honest He is about this topic. I love that He does address this topic, and He does it over and over again. And He's all too comfortable with it, we discover. He doesn't try to shield us from the truths about life that we need to know, that we need to prepare for. He is a heavenly Father who goes after those important conversations. He touches on those subjects that He needs to talk about with us, His children. And so, what you see when you open the Bible is great candor when it comes to what God has to say about the little deaths that we experience in life, and when it talks about what we need to do to be able to handle

those well. He wants to use everything we experience in life, even little endings, to draw us closer to himself. He'll use those too.

And that's why this truth that life is a series of little deaths is spilled across the pages of Scripture, and especially in the wisdom books of the Bible. You see it in Psalms and Proverbs, you see it in Ecclesiastes, this reality that little deaths are a part of life and that God has an intention, a purpose, for those. And those wisdom books of the Bible in particular give us a template for how to think about them, how to prepare for them, how to respond to them.

**Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4, 11**

**There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens ... <sup>4</sup> a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance ... <sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time.**

For example, you see that in what God says to Solomon in Ecclesiastes chapter 3. Solomon writes, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance ..." Verse 11: "He has made everything beautiful in its time."

See, weeping and mourning are built into the emotions of life, because deaths of all kind are built into the seasons of life. And we might approach that weeping and that mourning, those little deaths, as a foe. We might see them as an annoyance to avoid, maybe even an enemy to hate. But that's not how God sees them. That's not His perspective on them. He says that those little deaths, the weeping and mourning that comes out of those, can have a beautiful purpose in our lives; that there's a proper and a right place that those have in our experience in this life.

**There's a good reason for entering fully into one's sorrow. Once you have experienced the seriousness of your loss, you will be able to experience the wonder of being alive.**

**---- H. Norman Wright**

And one of those purposes was touched on by H. Norman Wright. He's a Christian expert on grief and loss. Listen to what he writes. He says, "There's a good reason for entering fully

into one's sorrow. Once you have experienced the seriousness of your loss, you will be able to experience the wonder of being alive.”

Do you know what we find in the middle of little deaths, what we find in the midst of weeping and sorrow and mourning? We find this deep existential experience of being fully human, of being fully alive. That's what we get in that. And we have this experience with weeping and mourning after the little deaths. We have this experience that the animal kingdom will never know. These are emotions, experiences, that are observed for those who bear the image of the Creator. God has reserved them for us. And there's this profound sense of knowing who we were meant to be when we dive into those little deaths and when we respond to them with weeping and mourning. And so, God invites us into that sorrow, into that mourning that follows these micro deaths.

But what I love so much about God is that, like He does in so many other ways, He doesn't just teach us about this. He doesn't just tell us what's coming. He lived it. He experienced it. He experienced little deaths himself. In fact, when the Son of God came here to live among us, to sojourn with us for three decades, He experienced little deaths himself long before He ever tasted death on the cross. He went through those seasons of life. He crawled into the boat with us and traveled through that journey of life that includes those little small deaths, those little micro losses that we go through. And there were little deaths that He endured, little deaths that He chose.

And if you think about what Isaiah says as he's describing the Messiah, as he's saying what the Messiah is going to go through in His time here, this is what he writes in Isaiah 53:3. He says that Jesus would be “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Consider that for a moment. Jesus' constant companions in His time here on earth weren't just His closest disciples. Sorrow and grief were with Him everywhere He went, too. God went through this. God experienced this in His time here among us.

And think about the little deaths that He endured. Philippians 2 says before He even stepped foot on the planet, He set aside His divine privileges so that He might take on the form of a servant. Those divine rights He had had to die for a time so He could be here among us, so He could become one of us.

Or how about in the Gospels? We see that in the Gospel of Mark that as Jesus' ministry of teaching and miracles is really getting going, His mother and siblings show up to a place

where He's gathering with His disciples. And as they come there, they're not coming to learn from Him. They haven't shown up to follow the Messiah.

The Gospel of Mark tells us in Mark 3, "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that He and His disciples were not even able to eat. When His family heard about this, they went to take charge of Him, for they said, 'He is out of His mind.'"

The mother who had loved and raised Him and whom He had loved; the siblings He had spent decades with: they came, but not to join Him. They weren't there to follow Him. They were there because they thought He was nuts. This was a family intervention. They looked at Him and thought, *He's a lunatic. We are taking Him home. We are getting Him out of here.* And those relational losses, those huge relational losses, followed Him throughout most of His ministry. He experienced little deaths too in His time here with us—little deaths that He chose, little deaths that He endured.

And the same will be true for us. As we travel through the journey of life, we're going to encounter little deaths of all kinds and all throughout life.

You might find at some point in your career, you just realize, *You know what? I think I'm at the wrong company. This is not where I need to be to be the kind of husband and father or wife and mother that my family needs me to be.* Or you realize, *I think I'm in the wrong friendship. This is not the kind of friend that my soul needs.* And a little death happens. A little death takes place.

But there are also little deaths that take place just as we move through the stages of life. For the last three years I have studied a particular stage of life as part of my dissertation. And I focused in on parents of teenagers and looked at what they experience in that phase of life. I've got some teenagers in my home, so that really worked out. I was asking the question, What is it that gets parents of teenagers off track spiritually? What bumps them off course from their relationship with God? And what helps them, too, but specifically, what bumps them off course? And I read thousands of pages. I surveyed over a hundred pastors and Christian counselors here in the greater Austin area and said, "What gets them off course? What stops parents of teenagers from growing as disciples?"

And do you know what the number one cause of parents of teenagers losing their way spiritually was? It wasn't the teenagers in their home. That wasn't it. The number one cause of parents of teenagers losing their way in their relationship with God is feeling overwhelmed.

That's what the response was—that they are overwhelmed. And one of the reasons that they feel overwhelmed is because that parent of teenagers is also a mid-lifer. And do you know what's really tough about being a mid-lifer? You are surrounded by death. You've got deaths taking place in every part of life, kind of all at once. It's a tough time of life. If you see a mid-lifer, give them a hug. They could use it.

Think about the losses. If you're there, if you've been there, think about the losses that happen in a mid-lifer's life. There's physical loss, right? At about the time that a parent has teenagers in the home, their body comes to them and their body says, *Hey, look, I'm kind of tired, you know? I've given you forty-plus good years and I need a break. So, if you ever want to read a book or see a billboard again, you're going to need some reading glasses immediately.* The body says, *That phone that you just dropped on the ground—yeah, you go ahead and bend down and pick that up, because that's all it's going to take for you to throw your back out. You're going to be on the floor in the fetal position for three hours followed by months of physical therapy—not to get rid of the pain, just to manage it.* It's a tough time physically, being a mid-lifer. There's physical loss. There are physical little deaths that take place.

There are also emotional and mental losses that take place for a mid-lifer. Your mind and emotions conspire together and they come to you and they say, *So, you're kind of at the fifty-yard line of life, Lord willing, hopefully. And so, it's about time that we do a review of your first half life. Let's just talk about how you've done. And we want to give you a heads up—this is going to hurt, badly. Because we're not really going to talk about or focus on the good stuff. There's good stuff. We're going to really zero in on the ways you've messed things up relationally, professionally, spiritually. We're going to focus there. So, prepare yourself. There's going to be some regret, there's going to be some guilt, there's going to be a lot of shame.* It's a tough time mentally. It's a tough time emotionally.

And then how about relationships? There's relational loss too. Because your teenager comes to you and says, *Hi, you don't know me, but I have possessed your son or your daughter for the next three to six years, and we just want to give you heads up now that everything you do is going to be absolutely embarrassing to us—I mean, like, everything. No reason to try and avoid it. There's nothing you can do about it. In fact, it's not so much what you do; it's more kind of who you are that embarrasses us. You know what I mean.*

*Okay, thank you. Thank you for that heads up.*

And then that's happening, and all the while, your parents are aging, and so you realize at some point that you're the parent of your parents now. That relationship just flipped. And so, you get to be squeezed in the vice grips of a dad and a teenage son who are both simultaneously livid with you because you have taken away both of their sets of car keys. Yep, it's like, *Dad, give me your keys. Son, give me your keys. I'm not sure either one of you is getting them back.* It's a tough time relationally. You can be squeezed. It's called the churning point, and it's not an accident that it's called that. It's an overwhelming time of life.

And I know. I am a forty-five-year-old, so I'm going through it right now. I mostly laugh so that I don't cry. Give me a hug after the service, maybe.

There are little deaths that we are going to experience just because we're alive. There are little losses that will happen just as you move through the stages, the seasons, of life. And it's part of the plan. It's what God has intended to happen.

And these little deaths that we endure, that we go through ... the best question to ask now is how do we deal with them? How do we handle these losses? How do we respond to the little deaths that take place in our life? How do we handle them in a way that allows us to recover, to heal? And what I want to do is share with you something that we can do before the little deaths come. And there's something that we need to do during the little deaths, as the losses are happening. And then, finally, what do we need to remember after the little deaths?

## **What We Can Do During the Small Deaths in Our Lives**

I want to start with what we need to do during the little losses, those small deaths in our lives, because that's going to help us prepare for the little deaths as they come, what we need to do beforehand? So, let's start with what we need to do during the little deaths.

### **Grieve Well**

The first thing we need to do during those losses in life is that we need to grieve. You've got to grieve them. And we need to grieve those little losses. And how do we grieve well? We're going to need three things. You're going to need three things to grieve well.

And the first is that you're going to need prayer. You are going to need prayer in your life. You're going to need a conversational relationship with God, this back-and-forth where you

are talking to God, you're listening to God as He responds back to you. You're having this conversation with Him about life, and you do that a lot. And what I appreciate so much about the Psalms is that they show us. They prove to us that God can take every emotion that we have. He welcomes every emotion. He's not shy, He's not embarrassed. No, He wants us to bring those to Him, to share those with Him, to talk to Him about those things through prayer. And the reason is that He's the only one who can help us through them and help us to heal. And so, we're going to need prayer. We're going to need that back-and-forth conversational prayer life with the Lord.

The second thing you're going to need is a person. You're going to need a person. If you're going to grieve effectively, if you're going to grieve well, you need a safe person. Call it a friend—no, a real friend. You're going to need the kind of friend who knows how to listen to you, someone who's not embarrassed by tears or anger. They can handle those things. Or at least they can learn how to handle those things. You're going to need the kind of friend who knows when to speak up and when to bring God's wisdom to the conversation. But they're not going to cram Scripture down your throat. They will have wisdom about when to listen and when to say something.

You're going to need prayer. You're going to need a person, a friend, a real friend. And the reason why we need both of those is because unexpressed emotions, emotions that we bottle up and hold in, are like frozen water. And what does that frozen water do? It expands. And it can burst open a steel pipe. And so, in prayer and in this relationship with God and with this friendship—in both of those relationships, what we can do is share those emotions. We can release them. Because if we don't release them, what happens is that they get stuck. They get stuck inside our souls and they will eventually erupt. And it's almost always on the people that we love the most.

We're going to need prayer. We're going to need a person. And then, third, we're going to need pforgiveness, with a "P." That's right. All you Baptists out there, don't you love that alliteration? People from Pflugerville, you like to throw that "P" in front of a word any chance you get. We're going to need some forgiveness too ... probably. If you're going to grieve well, you just don't need prayer and a person. There's a good chance that you're going to need forgiveness; that you're going to need to offer forgiveness to a person in your life in order to be able to grieve that loss well.



And this is what forgiveness means: forgiveness means letting go of the anger that we're holding against someone. Whatever you're holding against someone, it means releasing that, letting go of that. And so, if you've endured a little death that was caused by someone else's choices--even if those choices were good, even if they were for your benefit--if you're holding on to something against them, if you're holding on to anger against them, this is the only path. It's releasing that. It's letting go of that. It's choosing to forgive them.

And I've got some great news for you. The great news is that you don't even have to want to forgive them. Look, this is the process that I use when I need to forgive someone, especially when I don't want to, when I have no desire to do so. This is my process. This is my series of prayers that I will pray to the Lord.

The first is I will say, "**God, I don't want to forgive. Please help me.** I can't do this without You. I can't want to forgive them. I'm going to need You to steer this ship. I need You to help me through this. God, I don't want to forgive. Please help me." And I pray that. I pray that a couple of times a day for however long it takes.

And once I start to experience the Spirit of God changing my heart (He does that, right? He changes our heart and softens it towards a person)—as I experience that beginning to happen, then I'll pray the second prayer. The second prayer is, "**God, all right, I want to forgive. Please help me.**" Even when the desire is there we still need God's help. He's going to have to be the one who empowers this process, who empowers this forgiveness. So, "God, please help me." So, I work through that, spend a little time praying, "God, I want to forgive." It's a little emotional at this point. It's got to become volitional. It's got to be a choice.

So, that third prayer is, "**God, I choose to forgive. Please help me.**" Because even when you're ready to choose, you still need God to power that forgiveness. So, you say, "God, I choose to forgive." And then you do that. You make that choice and you release that anger. And that is part of how you grieve. It's an important part of that process.

And then a month later you get down the road and you realize, *Oh, no, I'm taking that offense back. I'm taking that anger back.* Then you pray this last prayer: "**God, I choose to forgive again. Would You please help me to do that?** Help me to forgive again." And you release that again. You need to do that again. You do it once more down the road.

There's a good chance that somewhere along the way you're going to need forgiveness too. And so, you go to your friend or your wife or your husband and you tell them, "Look, I

know it's hard to forgive me. I'm asking you too. And I'm praying that God will help you to be able to forgive me." They're going to need His help too.

But what do we do if the person who we're angry at is God? What do we do then? What if the person who we're holding onto anger against or some other emotion is God Almighty? How do we let go of that? How do we find freedom from that?

Often times our perspective is that this little death, this little loss—*God, You're sovereign. You could have stopped it. You could have done something about it. And why didn't You?* And the reality is that if you're going to let go of anger towards God that you've been holding onto, you're going to have to forgive God. I know it kind of sounds wrong. It almost sounds like heresy to forgive God. But remember that forgiveness means letting go of anger you're holding onto. It's letting go of this anger that you're holding against someone. So, if you're holding anger against God, what do you have to do? You've got to forgive Him.

And the irony in this is that God is going to have to help us to forgive Him. He's got to be involved in that process too if we're really and truly going to forgive Him and let go of that anger. So, what do you do? You can work that same process, that same set of prayers where you go to God and say, "I don't want to forgive You. Would You please help me?" And you let God do some work on your heart. And emotionally He's making some changes in your heart. And then you say, "All right, God, I want to forgive You. Would You please help me?" And then, "God, I choose to forgive You. Please help me. Please empower that. Please make that happen in my life."

And if you're pulling back, if you're grabbing hold of that anger again, you say, "God, I choose to forgive You again. Please help me." It's the same process. You need to forgive God? He's ready to help you do that. And after we've prayed that set of prayers to Him, we follow that with, "God, I apologize that I have held onto my anger against You. Would You forgive me?" And He is ready, He is willing, He is glad to help us do that.

He's glad to forgive us, He's glad to help us to forgive Him. He will empower us through. You might need to be patient, it might take some time. But God is committed to that. He will help You. You bring that to Him. He'll help You forgive another person. He will help You forgive Him.

So, to grieve well, you're going to need prayer. You're going to need this conversational relationship with God. You're going to need a person, this friend who is able to work through

this with you, to pray with you, to talk to you. And you're going to need forgiveness. There's a good chance that you're going to need forgiveness. Release that anger, release those emotions. Let them go with God's help.

### **What We Can Do Before the Small Deaths Come**

And now that we know what we're going to need during the little deaths, what do we do before that? What do we do before they show up?

#### **Expect Them**

We need to expect them. We've got to expect that the little losses are going to come. We need to write them into our calendars and plan on them. I mean, what if we expected all kinds of little deaths instead of hoping they won't happen to us? What if we planned on them instead of resisting them? What if we did that? Because unmet expectations are painful. We all know that. And what happens is that unmet expectations give birth to frustration and disappointment. But they can also become not just the parents of frustration and disappointment; they can become the grandparents of anger, and then the great-grandparents of bitterness and resentment.

And so, if we planned on the little deaths, if we expected them, if we knew they were coming, that might help us. When we get to the frustration and disappointment, that might help us to deal with them with God's help so that they don't give birth to those harsher emotions that can hold onto us and that we can hold onto.

And so, we need to expect them. So, look, if you're in your thirties, you are preparing for midlife, you're getting ready for midlife, what you need to do is you need to know that this is coming over your next decade and a half. You need to know that the midlife experience is coming your way and you cannot stop it. But you can prepare for it. You can get ready for it.

#### **Prepare for Them**

And what are you going to do? What do you need to do to get ready for it? Well, the first thing I would say is that you need a rock-solid, truth-filled relationship with God. You need to follow Jesus so closely that you know that He is your Savior, that He is your Lord, and that you trust Him. Because the middle of the storm is no place to start wondering if you trust the captain

of the ship. And so, you pursue God full out, wholeheartedly. You get that rock-solid, truth-filled relationship with God and you do it now.

What else do you need to prepare for what's coming in midlife? You're going to need three things. You're going to need prayer, you're going to need a person, and you're going to need forgiveness. You're going to need prayer in this relationship with God where you're bringing everything to Him all the time. You're going to need a person, this friend of virtue who loves you for you. And then you're going to need forgiveness. Practice forgiving early and often right now. Do it now. Because these micro deaths are coming in midlife. And you can't step into the batter's box and hope to hit a ninety-five miles per hour fastball without practice. It just doesn't work that way. It takes thousands of reps. And so, suit up. Get in the batting cages now so that you're ready then, so you're ready when those little deaths start hitting in midlife.

Before the little deaths come, we need to expect them. We need to prepare for them. Please don't wait to do that. During those little deaths we need to grieve them. We need prayer. We need a person. We're going to need forgiveness.

### **What We Can Do After the Little Deaths**

And then what about after? What do we do after the little deaths? Enjoy the resurrection. You see that quote that started this sermon doesn't have a period at the end of it. It has a comma. And here's the rest of it. **“Life is a series of little deaths, out of which life always returns.”** You see, the only way you get to a resurrection is through a death. And that's even true in nature. Every day has to die for a new day to spring to life. It's the cold, the drab, the gray of winter that you have to make it through to get to the sunshine, the life, the vibrance of spring. And think about this for a moment. I bet this is true for every single one of us, that every good thing in your life probably came after something else died. That job that you love so much came after the job where you were let go, that didn't work out. The spouse that you love and are married to—you probably met them after that previous relationship that didn't pan out and you didn't end up marrying that person like you thought you would. I mean, even think about parenting. Parenting has to die in order for you to become a grandparent, right? And is there anything better in the world than being a grandparent? Come on. I mean, I've heard. All the fun, none of the rules, all the theme parks, none of the fights. All the chocolate, none of the broccoli. And the best part

may be that you are not the one who has to deal with the consequences, right? *You're welcome, mom and dad. Here you go. Go see your parents.*

That's true for all of us. Every good thing that God has brought into our lives probably came after something else had to die. And so, we can have hope as we expect, as we prepare for the little deaths, as we grieve them and as we dive deep into that process--praying, having a friend, pursuing forgiveness—we can trust and we can worship the Lord who brings resurrections out of the little deaths in our lives, right? Because we worship Yahweh and He invented resurrections, didn't he? I mean, He perfected resurrections. And so, if you attach yourself to Him, you're going to love the resurrections that He brings into your life. Those little deaths just lead to a resurrection. That's how Yahweh works. That's what He does.

Life is a series of little deaths. Every little death that we encounter is a rehearsal. It's a rehearsal for our actual death one day. And yet even that death is no death at all. Because God assures those who are His that all death does is unlock the door to our final resurrection. And then one day even death itself will die and we will get to enjoy life everlasting with Him. That's His promise to every single one of His sons and daughters. That's His promise to us.

Let's go to Him in prayer. Let's thank our gracious and loving God who turns those little deaths into resurrections.

*Heavenly Father, we thank You that You are a courageous and loving Father; that You have prepared us for the little deaths that we experience, that we will experience; and that You, Lord, have promised to be with us through each one of them; that You will never leave us and we will never be alone. And we thank You for that. We praise You for that.*

*And the reason that You know what we need is because You experienced them yourself. You were not immune to them. You chose to enter those losses too when You came here to be among us. And so, we ask that You would show Your great power by bringing life out of these small deaths that we experience in this life. Lord, You did that with Your Son. We ask You to do that over and over again in our lives as we experience those losses.*

*And we ask, Lord, that You would use those little deaths in our lives to make us more and more like Jesus, that we might become like Christ in all of life. And we pray that in Your Son's name. Amen.*