

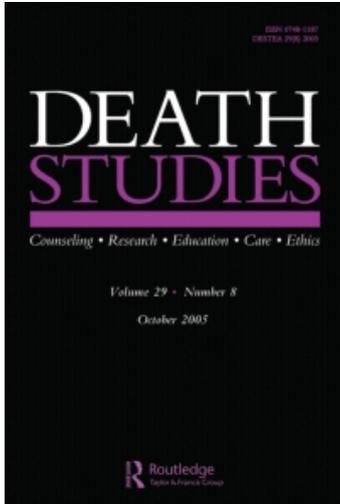
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Publisher Routledge

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Death Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713657620>

Comfort Following Loss: Using the Psalms as a Balm

Laurie A. Burke

Online publication date: 27 May 2010

To cite this Article Burke, Laurie A.(2010) 'Comfort Following Loss: Using the Psalms as a Balm', Death Studies, 34: 6, 566 – 571

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/07481181003772655

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481181003772655>

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BOOK REVIEW

Edited by
DAVID E. BALK

Comfort Following Loss: Using the Psalms as a Balm

A review of *The God of All Comfort: Finding Your Way into His Arms* by Dee Brestin. Grand Rapid, MI: Zondervan, 2009. 108 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-310-00000-0). \$16.99. Reviewed by Laurie A. Burke.

Dee Brestin is a writer, speaker, and teacher who has written 20 Bible studies and several books, one of which, *The Friendships of Women*, has sold over a million copies. She has a weekly radio program on Moody Radio and speaks to twenty large women's conferences each year. Dee is a graduate of Northwestern University and has studied with Covenant Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. She lives in Wisconsin and is the mother of six grown children.

Laurie A. Burke is a clinical psychology Ph.D. student at the University of Memphis. Her program of research surrounds various aspects of complicated grief, including the social and spiritual experiences of the bereaved. She is the Project Coordinator for Project BRAVEHearts, a study examining how African Americans who are bereaved by the homicide of a family member respond to traumatic loss, and Project INSPIRIT, a study exploring spiritual struggles following loss.

Dee Brestin's loss of her middle-aged husband, Steve, after a 14-month battle with colon cancer provided her an opportunity to not only traverse bereavement successfully herself but as a spiritual teacher to show others how to follow in her footsteps, as well. Her book, *God of All Comfort: Finding Your Way into His Arms*, whose title stems from II Corinthians 1:3, provides hope to the spiritually inclined and others who turn to God during crisis, by guiding them toward the Christian sacred text, in general, and the Psalms, in particular.

With the Christian Living section of bookstores flush with books on how to maneuver through life as a believer, one might rightfully question if yet another book is needed. The answer is

yes, stemming from the fact that we as a society, Christians included, do a poor job of facing death, dying, loss, and grief. Consequently, for those who grieve, finding understanding and assistance, even from the church, can be difficult. After the initial few weeks—the time surrounding the death and funeral—tangible and emotional support begins to wane. At that point, the believer is for the most part on his or her own to accept the death as final and to decipher how to make a new life without the cherished loved one.

Although she wrote this book four years after her loss, to an audience with a wide variety of losses, Brestin's biggest thrust is to encourage the reader to draw near to God well before the inevitable tempest arrives. She does this for good reason. Support from others is often not only insufficient by comparison but also often rife with rigid expectations and thoughtless comments, as she and her family unfortunately experienced firsthand. Conversely, her example of God's ability to provide supernatural social support came through a note, found after Steve's death, to his daughter on her wedding day, at a time when she desperately needed to know that he could "see" her and was happy for her. Another reason Brestin's book is needed is because she offers specific, tried-and-true suggestions about what really helps. This, in contrast to other lengthy books that offer nothing more than a continual reiteration of the basic theme that we have a "God of all comfort." Though Brestin, too, rides on the crest of this well-known Scripture theme, she delineates its structure and carefully guides us toward specific portions of the Psalms that show not only that God is our comforter but how we can actually take hold of these heartening precepts, as well.

In the first several chapters, the author lays the book's foundation by describing her husband's cancer trajectory and by building a case for the beneficial use of both the religious songs found in the Bible and those in use today. Brestin sees the power of spiritual songs such as the Psalms as having a three-pronged influence over the forces of evil that plague Christians, especially while in a weakened state such as bereavement. In essence, she believes that spiritual songs provide the power of music, of poetry, and of the Holy Spirit. Chapters 4 and 5, entitled *Deep Calls to Deep* and *Why Are You Downcast, O My Soul*, respectively, tackle some of the tougher questions resulting from stressful times, such as one's sense of

abandonment by God. Brestin argues that despite our interpretation of the situation—despite what we might think we deserve—Jesus was abandoned by God on the cross so that we would never be. Moreover, in her effort to avoid drowning in her own sorrow, she proactively took steps to maintain her physical health, to stay in contact with others, and to consider the plight of women who will never know the love she enjoyed for 39 years.

Through her pages, she shares that by using the mantra *Be Still My Soul* one is reminded that others, including spouses and children, were not designed to supplant the place of Christ in our lives. She found, however, that resting in this actuality was no mean feat, but rather something she and most believers must continually strive toward. But, in courageously choosing to release her grip from those things that provided false support, she asked herself the age-old question: If I let go will you catch me, God? If I trust in you solely will I be disappointed? To comfort her soul, Brestin found three Psalms on which she could rest and wait: one that speaks of God's heart (Ps. 103:13), another about the history of believers (Ps. 78:14), and a third that promises a heavenly home beyond this earth (Ps. 115:15). As she noted in her own life and that of others, the real battle is not coping with the loss of a loved one or with the other forms of distress we might be asked to endure but, rather, whether we can believe, day after agonizing day, that God is real and that he cares about our pain. Yet, even when we cannot bring ourselves to trust, Brestin reminds that Psalms 39 and 88 assure us that both the psalmists and Jesus understood what it was like to feel forsaken by God for a time.

Aptly titled, "I Know My Redeemer Lives" is a chapter that among other things describes this act of putting one foot in front of the other in the course of suffering. Like Job, who suffered greatly without ever knowing why, the bereaved heart of the believer aches in anguish as he or she is asked to blindly trust in God, whose best intentions are believed to be for his or her ultimate good, in spite of tremendous loss. Still, walking away from God requires far less courage than forthrightly approaching him in our frustration and anger, asking that he prove that he really is who he said he was. But, according to Brestin, when in honesty we do so, we can expect that he will respond with open arms and a heart full of compassion. In fact, his nature is literally to feel the pain that surrounds him. She claims that even if we cannot sense

that our agony influences him emotionally, we can know that it does because it did so countless times in the Bible in relation to others. In her final chapter entitled, “God Has Not Hidden His Face,” the author demonstrates a metaphorical use of the Psalms, systematically making them even more effective in providing comfort. In a poignantly illustrative way, Brestin uses the analogy of their adopted daughter’s abusive early childhood that fostered an attachment disorder in which others abandoned her and, likewise, she failed to bond with her primary caregivers. Humans seemingly experience the same two-sided severance in relation to God the Father when they believe the lie that their sins are insurmountable in spite of God’s grace or that he is distant and uncaring. Again, Brestin uses the Psalms as a grounding rod for the troubled, bereaved soul.

With the plethora of mawkish Christian writings on every imaginable topic, Brestin’s book was surprisingly honest and instructive. Despite that, I have two criticisms—one, rather minor, but the other of greater concern. First, the book’s format was comprised of Brestin’s general dialogue with the reader and excerpts from her journal. The latter was both a chronological account of what transpired following the death and a conversation with God during that time. Neither is problematic in and of itself, except that her journal’s chronographic benefits were lost due to their sporadic presentation. The final chapter exemplifies this lack of focus by jumping back and forth with accounts from various time periods following Steve’s death: “four years and four months,” “three and a half months,” “three and a half years,” et cetera. Had these accounts been presented systematically throughout the book, one could track better Brestin’s journey through bereavement. Unfortunately, as it was, by the end of the book my understanding of her grief experience across time was blurred as a result.

More problematic was the author’s seeming dismissal of the distinctive importance of the marital relationship—implying that somehow it could be totally subsumed by one’s relationship with God. For instance, though theologically accurate, I question if conjugally bereaved women would find this statement comforting: “I want to tell you that Christ loves you better than any earthly husband ever could” (p. 213) True? Perhaps. Helpful? Perhaps not. Not only does research examining social support following loss indicate that the spousal/intimate partner relationship is

irreplaceable in its ability to supply unparalleled comfort that other types of social supporters cannot (Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996), but recognition that earthly, spousal relationships are not fully synonymous with the one shared by the believer and God—despite the fact that God is seen as our husband (Isaiah 54:5)—should also be stressed. And, while the scriptures do state, and Brestin's book is based upon the concept, that God, alone, is to our be comfort in every form of distress, for her book to be useful as a tool that mental health professionals can offer to their Christian clients some noteworthy reference to the herculean struggle some individuals, including Christian individuals, experience in grasping this concept should be included. Similarly, it must be acknowledged that not all widowed spouses can take hold of God's comfort as easily as did Brestin. Lastly, because even her own grief experience included brief moments of searching in vain for a God whose absence rather than his presence was the most palpable, this rarely discussed reality also deserves greater emphasis. For some grievors, making sense of and rising above such seeming discrepancies in God's omnipresent nature produces a crisis of faith rather than a catalyst that propels them *Into His Arms*.

Finally, several researchers have mapped the trail of bereaved Christians who struggle tremendously, both in their grief and in their faith, following loss (Becker et al., 2007; Hays & Hendrix, 2008; Shear et al., 2006; Wortmann & Park, 2008). While it was reassuring that Brestin endorsed the use of psychological services in the wake of loss, in return, astute clinicians might still choose to offer clients who are believing Christians this informative and helpful book along with the caveat that for some individuals its guidelines might require additional and ongoing dialogue for full implementation.

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