**The Last Gift My Father Gave Me**

A surprising encounter with my dad, Jesus, and Jerry Seinfeld opened a door to long-awaited healing.

Michael Cosper | Christianity Today | June 17, 2022

Last April, I found myself sobbing unexpectedly and uncontrollably while sitting in a barbershop for a haircut. It was the first time I’d really wept since my father passed away a month earlier.

I’ve had a complicated relationship with grief.

Six years before, I left vocational church ministry. I resigned from a church I’d helped plant 15 years earlier, a church I thought I’d retire from. But conflict and unhealthy leadership had wreaked havoc on my soul, and it was time to go.

In the intervening years, I found myself sitting on couches, in armchairs, and in Zoom rooms with various counselors and spiritual directors, trying to process my emotional and physical exhaustion.

“I’m anxious,” I’d say.

“You have grief work to do,” they’d reply.

“I can’t sleep,” I’d say.

“You have grief work to do,” they’d reply.

“I’ve lost the eagerness to work hard and build things. That’s not like me,” I’d say.

“You have grief work to do.”

I remember one day in particular sitting in my friend Bob’s office. A caring and generous soul, Bob had sat with me for untold hours by then. Our session ended like every other. “How’s your grief work going?”

I slumped in my chair and looked over at the fountain sculpture he had hanging on his wall. Water poured across from layer to layer, like barrels tumbling down levels in Donkey Kong. This question always felt like the barrel I couldn’t avoid. I shook my head and blurted out, “I don’t know what the hell that even means.”

Bob has this subtle, almost imperceptible smirk when he knows he’s hit a nerve. “Tell me about the last time you wept over any of this.”

I wasn’t sure I had, I told him. He nodded. “Consider why, and we’ll pick up here next time.”

In his book *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing,* biblical scholar Jonathan Pennington [argues](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Sermon_on_the_Mount_and_Human_Flouri/vxHeDAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=Get%20these%20right,%E2%80%9D%20he%20says,%20%E2%80%9Cthe%20whole%20thing%20falls%20in%20place;%20get%20it%20wrong,%20the%20whole%20thing%20falls%20apart.) for a shift in our thinking about two words found in the Beatitudes chapter—*makarios* and *telios.* If you get these right, he says, “the rest falls in place; get it wrong, and the whole thing falls apart.”

*Telios* appears in Matthew 5:48: “You must be *telios* as your Father is *telios*.” Most English translations render it as “perfect,” but Pennington argues that the word has important ties to the Hebrew word “shalom.”

Shalom is often rendered as “peace,” but peace is passive—implying the absence of conflict—while shalom is active. Shalom is a sense of wholehearted relationship with God and an awareness of the goodness in his care and rule of the world.

This also ties into the concept of Sabbath—the rest of God. Translating *telios* as “perfect” makes Matthew 5:48 an ethical command, while rendering it as shalom invites us into wholehearted relationship with God and rest in him. It’s a vision of grace.

He makes a similar argument for reframing *makarios*—a word that appears earlier and repetitively in the Beatitudes as “blessing.” But both Pennington and fellow New Testament scholar Scot McKnight see a broader idea in connection with Greek philosophy.

In *Sermon on the Mount*, McKnight [writes](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Sermon_on_the_Mount/3g1Kyb4vyHIC?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=%22Furthermore,%20the%20entire%20history%20of%20the%20philosophy%20of%20the%20%E2%80%9Cgood%20life%E2%80%9D%20and%20the%20late%20modern%20theory%20of%20%E2%80%9Chappiness%E2%80%9D%20is%20at%20work%20when%20one%20says,%20%E2%80%9CBlessed%20are.%20.%20.%20.%E2%80%9D%20Thus,%20this%20swarm%20of%20connections%20leads%20us%20to%20consider%20Aristotle%E2%80%99s%20great%20Greek%20term%20eudaimonia,%20which%20means%20something%20like%20happiness%20or%20human%20flourishing,%20but%20it%20also%20prompts%20us%20to%20consider%20modern%20studies%20of%20what%20makes%20people%20happy%22) that “the entire history of the philosophy of ‘the good life’… is at work when one says, ‘Blessed are…’ Thus, this swarm of connections leads us to consider Aristotle’s great Greek term *eudaimonio,* which means something like happiness or human flourishing.”

In Pennington’s translation of the Beatitudes, he makes the connection directly: “﻿Flourishing are the poor in spirit because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”

Pennington goes on to reframe Christ’s invitation in the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than seeing the Beatitudes as a new law, declared from on high like the Ten Commandments, it presents a new vision of the good life that is found through Jesus in the kingdom of God.

Dallas Willard often referenced the kingdom as the “upside-down world”—where we discover that true shalom is found in a life entirely inverted from our expectations: poverty of spirit, humility, persecution, and—critical to me—mourning.

My dad fell in January of 2021. It wasn’t a major thing; he felt dizzy and sort of melted to the floor. A month later, my mom texted the rest of our family that he was lethargic and mentally checked out. He went to the hospital that night, and we worried he’d had a stroke. But the scans came back negative.

This began a whirlwind of him spending about two weeks in the hospital, where COVID-19 restrictions kept most of us from visiting him. I only got to see him once—my brother and I talked to him over the phone through a glass window. I don’t think he even knew we were there.

About two weeks in, on his 75th birthday, he took some blood tests, and their results warranted a body scan. That’s when they found the cancer. It was everywhere, and his overactive immune system was attacking his mind. Within a week, he was gone—and my family spent just a few minutes with him the day before he died, as he fought for his final breaths.

He died on a Sunday, his memorial service was held on Wednesday, and life resumed on Thursday.

A month later, I was sitting in that barbershop when a jar of Barbicide caught my eye—the glowing blue disinfectant used to clean the stylist’s scissors and comb. I remembered a scene from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, where Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David talk about their fear of germs. Jerry says he likes to keep his pens in Barbicide, and an extended riff between the two of them follows.

The scene was a throwback to exchanges from *Seinfeld* between Jerry and George Costanza—a character based on Larry David. As often happened on the show, Jerry couldn’t keep a straight face. He and Larry grinned and laughed through every line.

That day, I laughed a little under my breath and mask. Then I thought of my dad.

In high school, we would watch *Seinfeld* reruns over dinner and new episodes on Thursday nights. We lived with the TV on—and my dad would talk through every show, repeat jokes right after they happened, or if he’d seen something before, he’d tell you a joke was coming moments before it did.

Remembering the *Curb* scene, I thought, “I should text him when I get out of here.” But that thought froze in midair. He was gone. An anchor point for 41 years of my life had been untied and I was floating in zero gravity.

The laugh under my breath became louder and Jamie—who had been my barber for years—thought I was laughing at the story she’d been telling me about fishing for leopard sharks.

But then the tears started to break through the laughing, and I began to fall apart. She took a step back as I slumped over in my seat and sobbed. Heat rose in my face and neck as I thought about the dozen or so people in the shop who were wondering why a grown man was crying over a haircut.

I sat up, made eye contact with Jamie, and rasped, “My dad just died.”

She stood still for a long moment before nodding in recognition. “Mine too. About a year ago. It hits like this a lot. Over and over.”

Jonathan Pennington translates Matthew 5:4 as “﻿Flourishing are the mourners because they will be comforted.” That day evoked a kind of comfort, and something in me began to crack open.

There’s a finality to the death of a loved one that cuts through abstraction. Life is unalterably different. In accepting the loss of my dad and the disorienting way it came about, I found an understanding of grief that cascaded backwards into my memory.

This incredible sense of loss—loss of a shared dream, of a community, of friendships—had finally found a place to settle in my heart. It was worthy of tears, but it is also held in tension as I wait for the making-new of all things Christ has promised.

As I grieved my father, I learned to grieve other things I’d failed to grieve in the past—and somehow that grief made me feel whole.

My dad loved Jesus, and I know the day will come when I see him again. But in losing him—and especially losing him the way we did—he helped me step into a different way of life, making sense of a complicated and soul-rattling decade.

The last gift my father ever gave me was the gift of grief. And in embracing it, I found a new understanding of what it means to flourish—the first glowing embers of true shalom.

Michael Cosper is the senior director of podcasts at Christianity Today.