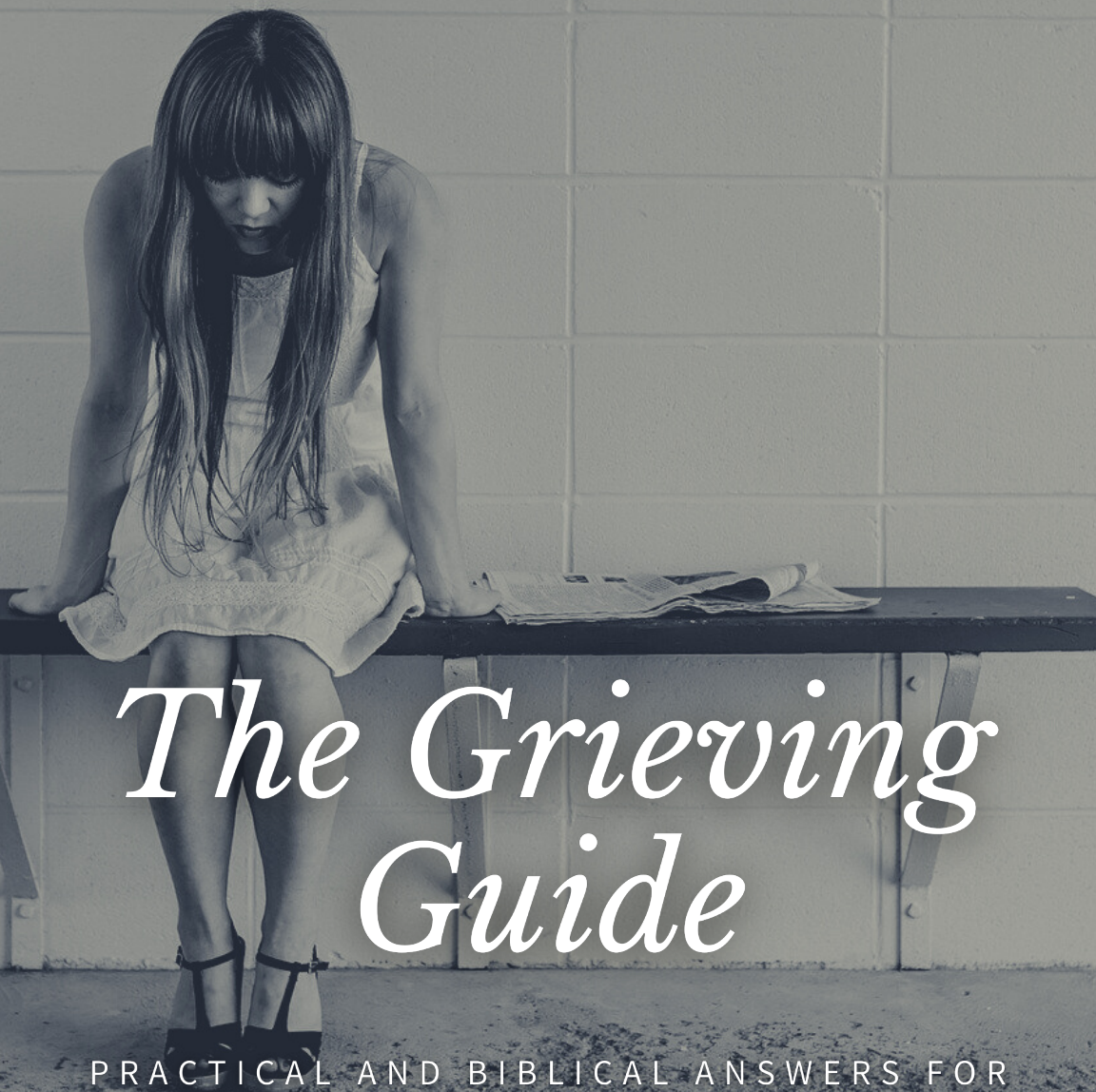


"The Grieving Guide is a must-read for anyone who is grieving."  
- Yvette Garcia, PhD - Baylor University

**DR. KEVIN HARRISON**



# *The Grieving Guide*

PRACTICAL AND BIBLICAL ANSWERS FOR  
QUESTIONS BROUGHT ON BY GRIEF

# The Grieving Guide

*Practical and Biblical Answers for Questions Brought on by Grief*

*by*

*Kevin Harrison, DMin, MBA*

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# Table of Contents

## BREAKING DOWN THE CONTENT

DEDICATION

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: WHY AM I FEELING THIS WAY?

CHAPTER TWO: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT GRIEF?

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT CAN I EXPECT IN THE FIRST MONTH?

CHAPTER FOUR: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE STAGES OF GRIEF?

CHAPTER FIVE: WHY DID THIS HAPPEN TO ME?

CHAPTER SIX: WHY DOES GOD LET BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?

CHAPTER SEVEN: WHY AM I STRUGGLING TO MOVE ON?

CHAPTER EIGHT: WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL COPING AND HOPING SKILLS OR STRATEGIES?

CHAPTER NINE: WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO MOVE ON?

CHAPTER TEN: IS THERE A BETTER WAY TO GRIEVE? (YES, THE FIVE STAGES OF HOPE)

CONCLUSION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# Dedication

REMEMBERING THOSE WE'VE LOST SINCE 2019

I dedicate this book to the memory of my dad, William Dale Harrison (2020), my brother-in-law, Robert Neel (2019), and my nephew, Matthew Dillon Neel (2020). Your lives and memories inspired me to write this book, and I miss you all more than words can say. I would give anything to have you here to read this. Dad, I know you'd get a kick out of me writing a book in your honor.

## ***Say What You Need to Say***

I'm grateful for my best friend and wife, Becky Harrison. When we got married on July 3, 1987, we never dreamed life would turn out like it did, in good and in more challenging ways. We did say for better or worse, and the better has been 99.832% of the time. I'm keeping track.

I'm thankful for my kids: Mikaela (daughter) and Ronnie Baker (son-in-law), and Julianna Harrison (daughter). You all make me a better person. Boy, we've had some incredible memories and difficult losses. We WILL get through them together with the help of Jesus!

Thanks to my mom, Jeanette Pinkham, for your constant love and support throughout my life, Dale Lee Harrison, who made dad's final ten years so special (GH), and my in-laws, AC and Mary Neel, for your more than 70 years of faithful love and devotion to Jesus and each other.

# Introduction

## THE SETUP

***Why do we need another book on grief?*** A quick search of the Kindle section on Amazon.com revealed over 40,000 grief-related titles available for instant download.<sup>1</sup> Isn't there a book already out there that can help answer my questions? While I'm sure there *are* many good books, I'm not sure they're answering the questions people are asking *right now*.

I'm the father of two daughters, Mikaela ('96) and Julianna ('01). My wife and I waited almost ten years after we were married to have Mikaela, and we talked about how we would be the "best" parents. At the time, I had worked with students for over ten years and saw a lot of emotional neglect. However, Becky and I determined that wouldn't be the case with us! I wouldn't be an absent father. I promised I would be "*THE PARENT*" who would answer any question my child had, no matter how uncomfortable.

However, that promise was put to the test in a hotel room in Branson, Missouri, when a 4-year-old Mikaela came up to me and asked me the question, "Daddy, what's sex?" I said to my wife, "Honey, you may want

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<sup>1</sup> "Amazon Search on Grief." *Amazon.com*, 22 Dec. 2020,  
[www.amazon.com/s?k=Grief&i=digital-text&ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss\\_2](http://www.amazon.com/s?k=Grief&i=digital-text&ref=nb_sb_noss_2).

to come in here for this one.” I’ll spare you the details, but I sat down next to my little girl and began gently explaining what sex was to her in an age-appropriate description. The whole time in my mind, I’m thinking, “I’m a great dad,” although I noticed that as I was talking, she was squinting her eyes and shaking her head. She looked puzzled. When I finished, she said these words to me that I’ll never forget. She said, “That’s not what I was asking you. Is sex an ‘M’ or an ‘F’?”

At that moment, I realized she was holding a hotel satisfaction card in her hand, and it was asking if the person’s sex who was filling out the survey was male (M) or female (F). It was “F” for her, but also for me as a parent. Mikaela asked me a simple question, but I heard her asking something different, so I ended up giving her a much different answer than what she was looking for or needed. (*I’m so glad we taught her to read early.*)

***Why do we need another book on grief?*** Google’s 2020 ‘Year in Search’ revealed that the number one most asked question of 2020 was, “Why?” It was such a big question that the title on the report’s cover page is even “Year in Search: The Search for Why.”<sup>2</sup> People are looking for answers to their *why* questions and more.

Why are people asking, “Why?” People are hurting, and they’re trying to make sense of their losses and grief. 2020 was the deadliest year in American history, with almost 3.2 million people dead; that’s 400,000

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<sup>2</sup> Google. “Google Year in Search: The Search for Why.” *Google Year in Search*, Dec. 2020, [www.popupmagazine.com/yearinsearch.pdf](http://www.popupmagazine.com/yearinsearch.pdf).

more lives lost than in 2019.<sup>3</sup> Globally, approximately 59.23 million people have died, and researchers forecast those “death numbers” to increase to around 121 million annually by 2099.<sup>4</sup> Covid-19, accidents, long-term illnesses, sudden or violent deaths, and more have broken people globally. Government-enforced lockdowns are compounding grief and have worn away at the emotions of hundreds of billions of people, literally. I’ve never seen so much global suffering in my 54 years on this planet than right now.

I understand grief and loss because, in the past year-and-a-half, I’ve lost my dad (heart failure), my brother-in-law (cancer), and my nephew (suicide) for three *very* different reasons. So, as I’m writing about grief to you, this isn’t just a clinical textbook that’s void of emotion. Grief is fresh and real for me. I’ve even experienced suffering differently based on the circumstances of their deaths. That’s important because the different types of losses will impact how we grieve and how quickly we can begin the healing process. I *NEED* the truths in this book, and, in reality, writing it has proven therapeutic for me.

As you read through the pages, you’re going to discover that *The Grieving Guide* is practical and filled with biblical passages I’ll explain to speak to the heart of your pain. For over 35 years, I’ve served as a pastor and counselor to thousands of families and individuals who were grieving. I’ve been in their homes, folded clothes on the floor with those

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<sup>3</sup> Stobbe, Mike. “US Deaths in 2020 Top 3 Million, by Far Most Ever Counted.” *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 21 Dec. 2020, [apnews.com/article/us-coronavirus-deaths-top-3-million-e2bc856b6ec45563b84ee2e87ae8d5e7](https://apnews.com/article/us-coronavirus-deaths-top-3-million-e2bc856b6ec45563b84ee2e87ae8d5e7).

<sup>4</sup> “Number of Deaths per Year.” *Our World in Data*, 22 Dec. 2020, [ourworldindata.org/grapher/number-of-deaths-per-year](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/number-of-deaths-per-year).



dying, spent thousands of hours in hospital rooms sharing their last moments on earth, and have performed more than 200 funerals and attended over 400 more. I've counseled people grieving onsite in NYC following 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, and the 2013 West, Texas fertilizer plant explosion. I've been around a lot of death and have seen a lot of grief.

Along the way, I've learned a lot about people and the grieving process. I've spent thousands of hours reading, researching, studying, and speaking on the topic of grief from a secular and biblical perspective. While I don't consider myself to be a grief "expert," the personal and ministry experience I've gained from grieving my losses and helping others do the same is something I know can help you, too.

***Why do we need another book on grief?*** People are asking questions during this global pandemic, one of the most vulnerable times in human history, and *The Grieving Guide* is here for you to provide answers where it can and help you process your grief when there are no answers.

# 1.

## WHY AM I FEELING THIS WAY?



I feel so empty. I can't stop crying. I can't breathe. I can hardly sleep at night and when I do, I can't stop seeing *them* in my mind. I just want to scream at the world! I need to take something to numb my pain. I feel so numb; like I feel nothing at all. I constantly feel nauseous. My body aches all over. I'm having chest pains. I'm not hungry. I can't stop eating. I feel so guilty whenever I hear something funny and I want to laugh. I'm angry and I feel like I'm going to explode. I don't want to celebrate Christmas or any other holiday. I don't want to be around anybody. I wish I was dead.

Many feelings and emotions accompany grief, and this is just a small sample size of what you're probably feeling right now. I'm sure you can add to this never-ending list of feelings and emotions that are *abnormally normal*. They're abnormal because you wouldn't be feeling

this way if everything was right in your world, but they're normal because you've suffered loss, and you're grieving. There are three basic principles you need to understand about grief upfront:

**Principle #1: Grief is a signal that your life has changed forever:**

Life simply can't be the same because someone you loved is no longer physically a part of your life. You've been there: You've got the urge to pick up the phone and give your loved one a call to tell them about something that just happened, but you realize you can't because they're not here. You dread the family getting together to celebrate Christmas (or any other gathering) because you know there's going to be an empty chair where they used to sit. It's an uncomfortable fact you're going to face at some point. Unfortunately, there's nothing you or anyone else can do to turn back time and change your reality. Life *has* changed forever, but that's not the end of your story!

**Principle #2: Grief is a symptom of a broken heart:** You're grieving hard right now because you lost someone you loved so very deeply. While that loss is indescribable, often the best way you tell others how you feel is by saying you feel like you have a broken heart. You may not know it, but there's a real condition known as *Broken Heart Syndrome* that was first classified by the Japanese scientist Sato in 1991.<sup>5</sup> According to the Mayo Clinic, *Broken Heart Syndrome* is "a temporary heart condition that's often brought on by stressful situations and

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<sup>5</sup> Merchant, Emily E, et al. "Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy: A Case Series and Review of the Literature." *The Western Journal of Emergency Medicine*, Department of Emergency Medicine, University of California, Irvine School of Medicine, May 2008, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2672240/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2672240/).

extreme emotions.”<sup>6</sup> A person with *Broken Heart Syndrome* can, literally, experience the symptoms of a heart attack, including shortness of breath, chest pains, an irregular heartbeat, fainting, low blood pressure, or possibly heart failure.<sup>7</sup> If you have any of these symptoms, you should speak with a medical professional ASAP. On the practical side, the fact you *ARE* grieving shows how much you cared for your loved one, and that’s why you feel like you have a broken heart.

*Broken Heart Syndrome* “is a temporary heart condition that's often brought on by stressful situations and extreme emotions.”

**Principle #3: Grief is a sign you need others:** One of the biggest mistakes many people make in the grieving process is that they completely isolate themselves from everyone around them. For some, they may think it’s easier to isolate than to talk about their feelings or answer questions from well-meaning friends about their loss. I’ve been there, and I get it. Talking about your loss all the time can feel like you’re ripping off a scab over a wound, thus stopping it from healing more quickly. While it’s probably not best to over-rehearse your losses in places like social media or with people who don’t understand your

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<sup>6</sup> “Broken Heart Syndrome.” *Mayo Clinic*, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 29 May 2020, [www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/broken-heart-syndrome/symptoms-causes/syc-20354617](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/broken-heart-syndrome/symptoms-causes/syc-20354617).

<sup>7</sup> “Broken Heart Syndrome: Causes, Symptoms, Diagnosis & Treatments.” *Cleveland Clinic*, 15 June 2018, [my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17857-broken-heart-syndrome](http://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17857-broken-heart-syndrome).

pain, there's *great value* in talking with the *right* people about your loss at the *right* time. Don't allow your grief to completely isolate you from the people who love you the most and who *want* to be there for you. Those people *are* the right people. You *need* others to walk with you in your grief!

## Grief Defined

There are many clinical definitions for grief, but, in reality, grief doesn't have a one-size-fits-all definition. As such, I want to share several definitions and make some observations about each, allowing you to see yourself in one, some, or possibly all of them.

### Grief doesn't have a one-size-fits-all definition.

**Definition #1:** The *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention* defines grief as "the primarily emotional/affective process of reacting to the loss of a loved one through death. Mourning, on the other hand, is the public display of grief."<sup>8</sup> Two things stand out to me regarding these definitions: 1) Grief is an emotional/affective process that will leave you feeling something. The fact you're feeling something is positive because, through it, you're expressing your love for the person you lost, and 2) There's a difference between grief and mourning. Grief is internal; it's what you feel that

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<sup>8</sup> Stroebe, Margaret S., Hansson R.O., Schutt, H., and et al., eds.: *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention*. Washington, D.C., American Psychological Association, 2008.

others can't see, while mourning is external and usually an outward expression of your inward pain.

**Definition #2:** In *Definition of Grief*, medical doctor William Shiel, defines grief as “the normal process of reacting to a loss.”<sup>9</sup> Pay special attention to how both of the first two definitions use the word *process*. *Process* reinforces the truth that what you’re walking through will take time, and that’s NORMAL. For some, that process may take months, and for others, it may take years, depending on the type of loss and its’ suddenness.

*Grief* is messy, and its’ emotional timing is unpredictable. You may be feeling great in one moment, and then you may be sobbing in the next; that’s part of the *process*. That’s NORMAL!

*Grief* is messy, and its’ emotional timing is unpredictable. You may be feeling great in one moment, and then you may be sobbing in the next; that’s part of the *process*. That’s NORMAL! You don’t need to apologize for your feelings, even when you find yourself crying at inopportune moments.

**Side Note:** If you need to have one of those, what I call *really good cries*, you may want to do that more in private than public. Most people likely

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<sup>9</sup> William C. Shiel Jr., MD. “Definition of Grief.” *MedicineNet*, 11 Dec. 2018, [www.medicinenet.com/grief/definition.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/grief/definition.htm).

won't understand, and their emotional rejection may potentially add another layer of grief on top of what you're already feeling.

**Definition #3:** Timothy Clinton and Ronald Hawkins defined grief as “intense emotional suffering caused by a loss.”<sup>10</sup> First, note the use of the word *intense*. Grief is fierce, strong, unrelenting, extreme, and enormous. When you're walking through grief, it feels like the pressure won't let up, and you can't see anything beyond pain. It's intense. You know that because you're dealing with it now. However, this definition also uses the word *suffering*, a term we all dislike. Nobody wants to suffer, but our loss doesn't ask for our permission; it just rips through our hearts. Whether through a terminal diagnosis, an unexpected knock on the door, or a phone call while you're in the Wal-Mart parking lot, whatever your experience was, suffering arrived cruelly like an emotional tsunami that destroyed the foundations of your life in an instant. Grief is *intense* suffering.

**Definition #4:** While similar to the other definitions, WebMD.com's description is a simplistic summary of the previous three with a notable addition: “Grief is a natural response to losing someone or something important to you.”<sup>11</sup> As we've read, grief is normal or natural, it's a reaction or response, and it involves loss. That's all true. However, WebMD.com's definition makes room for *something* lost, and not just

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<sup>10</sup> Clinton, Timothy E., and Ronald E. Hawkins. *The Quick-Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling: Personal and Emotional Issues*. Baker Books, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> DerSarkissian, Carol. “Grief: Physical Symptoms, Effects on Body, Duration of Process.” *WebMD*, WebMD, 9 Nov. 2020, [www.webmd.com/balance/normal-grieving-and-stages-of-grief](http://www.webmd.com/balance/normal-grieving-and-stages-of-grief).

*someone*. Now, I understand they're referring to a specific thing which may include a more wide-ranging list such as the loss of a marriage, job, pet, etc., and those *are* very important in our lives. However, I want to expand that understanding to include the fact that we also lose *something* when we lose someone. We lose the touch of the person we loved, the sound of their voice, the looks on their face, memories experienced together, the nightly rituals, and the missed potential experiences from them not being physically present with us. The loss is about more than the person; we grieve the loss of the life we knew.

The loss is about more than the person;  
we grieve the loss of the life we knew.

### **Primary Types of Losses**

The type of loss we have experienced directly impacts our grief's depth, breadth, and length. While every loss is painful no matter the circumstances, some losses are more challenging to deal with in the long run than others. For instance, grieving the loss of someone who died in a car accident can be more challenging to recover from than someone with a long-term illness because the former didn't have the opportunity to tell that person goodbye before they're gone. When their loved one drove off that day, the person grieving had every expectation they would return home again that night. The only problem is, they didn't, and there potentially could be a myriad of issues to deal with that adds to the grief process, especially if there was an unresolved conflict with the person who passed.



Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying: One person's loss is not any more significant than another because of *how* their loved one passed away. Instead, it's more about the lack of *closure* the grieving person, in this case, did not have with that person they loved *before* they died. They didn't get a chance to say goodbye, and that's painful. We'll talk in-depth about what I mean by *closure* in chapter nine, but for now, let's address the feelings you may be facing from one of three primary types of losses.

### **Loss #1 - Long-Term (Chronic) or Terminal Illnesses**

Diseases are labeled *chronic* when the course of the illness lasts for more than three months,<sup>12</sup> and terminal when there's no cure. Some examples of terminal diseases include cancer, Alzheimer's or dementia, Parkinson's, heart disease, and more. Patients diagnosed with a chronic or terminal illness may live for as little as a few weeks or even years, depending on when they received their diagnosis. The truth is, doctors don't know precisely how long anyone will live; they're still *practicing* medicine in that sense.

However, living longer with a chronic or terminal illness is becoming more of a norm in the United States. For example, according to the National Cancer Institute's *Cancer Trends Progress Report (2012)*, 69% of people are now surviving various cancer forms for five years or

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<sup>12</sup> Bernell, Stephanie, and Howard, Steven W. "Use Your Words Carefully: What Is a Chronic Disease?" *Frontiers in Public Health*, Frontiers Media S.A., 2 Aug. 2016, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4969287/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4969287/).

more.<sup>13</sup> As cancer seemed like an almost-immediate death sentence previously, advanced treatments have made it possible to extend life.

While those numbers are a blessing, they can also be a curse if you have watched your loved one go in-and-out of the hospital for years while being treated with chemotherapy and radiation. What's ironic is the treatment you hope is going to bring healing to their body is also the thing that's making them so incredibly sick.

Watching a loved one die over an extended period can be gut-wrenching. The marked physical deterioration of someone you love brings about an entirely different level of grief. In many cases, the person becomes a shell of their former self, and often the person requires extra care to perform some of the simplest chores, from bathing and brushing their teeth to using the restroom. What makes it challenging for the family member or friend is that our minds tend to take a mental snapshot of how they were at the end, rather than when they were strong and healthy.

For the caregiver walking through this grief, your grief is re-exposed every time you assist your loved one. Then, when the person passes, you may feel like you're personally lost and without a purpose. You may even feel guilty because you have a sense of relief, and that's OK. However, if you're not careful, it's easy for depression to set in and affect your physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

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<sup>13</sup> "Survival." *Cancer Trends Progress Report*, National Health Institute, 2012, [progressreport.cancer.gov/after/survival](http://progressreport.cancer.gov/after/survival).

## ***My Dad's Death***

My dad, William Dale Harrison, passed away on November 9, 2020, at 4:59 pm. I remember the time to the minute because we joked that he wanted to beat everyone out of the office, which was the antithesis of him at work. Dad was usually the last person in the building because he was in executive management, and he wanted things done right.

Dad was diagnosed with significant heart problems in 2009. In fact, at one point, our family was called in for his surgery because it was possible, if not probable, he wasn't going to leave the hospital. However, in true *dad fashion*, he lived another 11 years. We were able to create some incredible memories, including watching our favorite team, the Los Angeles Dodgers, play in games 3-5 of the 2020 World Series, a World Series they would win. As I got up to return home to Texas, we said a very special goodbye to one another because we knew this was the end. His breathing was labored, he had trouble walking, and he was cold most of the time. We took one last picture together in front of the TV with the Dodgers in the background, hugged, shed a few tears, and I left.

It was difficult for me to see my dad, who used to rule a basketball court, driving down the lane with ease, but now he could barely breathe or walk. It was agonizing to watch his decline as the effects of his long-term illness began to overtake him through the years slowly.

## **Loss #2 - Short-Term Illnesses**

Short-term illnesses that lead to death are typically less than three months in length. Covid-19 is a prime example of a short-term

condition that moves quickly in attacking the human body's immune system, affecting multiple organs. Many patient diseases receive a short-term designation, but it was only short-term because they didn't receive a diagnosis in the early stages. If your loved one received a Stage 4 diagnosis in the initial consultation, the disease was already in their body for an extended period. They were just unaware of the deadly consequences until it was too late.

### ***My Brother-in-Law's Death***

My brother-in-law, Robert Neel, was diagnosed with Stage 4 bile duct cancer on a Wednesday morning, and he passed on Friday evening. Robert knew something wasn't right, and he was seeking out treatment, but he was misdiagnosed by a doctor who thought he had pneumonia or heart problems. When he changed doctors and hospitals, they diagnosed his cancer within hours, and the new doctor was blunt about his prognosis. I'm grateful for his bluntness because when I asked him privately how much time Robert had left, he told me two to three days. His straightforward answer allowed us to contact his children and family to visit him in those last invaluable, memorable moments.

When a loved one is diagnosed with a short-term illness that results in their death, it just feels surreal; you know it's happening, but it feels like a dream. For us, 2-3 days wasn't enough time to process what was going on. How could Robert be dying? It was unthinkable, but at the same time, we were grateful that we had the opportunity to tell him we loved him and spend those last moments by his side. It's something we'll always treasure. If I'm honest, because of his passing's speedy

nature, there will be days where grief hits my wife and me out of the blue. We wanted more time.

For us, not only did we have to deal with the loss of my brother-in-law, but we also had to deal with the anger and frustration toward a doctor who could have potentially done something for him when he went to him months earlier. Could he have been cured, or his life been extended, at least? We'll never know. I share this because there are often extenuating circumstances that add to the burden we already feel.

### ***Deaths Related to Covid-19***

A significant layer added to the mix of short-term illnesses in 2020 was the pandemic deaths related to Covid-19. As of this writing, the number of coronavirus deaths is over 411,000 people dead in the US alone, and over 2 million deaths worldwide.<sup>14</sup> Let me put that into perspective: 250,000 people were estimated to have died in the Haiti earthquake of 2010, according to World Vision.<sup>15</sup> Regarding the coronavirus, some have estimated that by the time the vaccinations begin to bring the virus somewhat under control, well over 100 times more US citizens will have died in this pandemic than died in 9/11. This fact is astounding, as

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<sup>14</sup> “Coronavirus Cases:” *Worldometer*,  
[www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm\\_campaign=homeAdvegas1%3F%22](http://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/?utm_campaign=homeAdvegas1%3F%22).

<sup>15</sup> Reid, Kathryn. “2010 Haiti Earthquake: Facts, FAQs, and How to Help.” *World Vision*, 27 Feb. 2020, [www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2010-haiti-earthquake-facts](http://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2010-haiti-earthquake-facts).

is the fact that as of December 3, 2020, one American is dying every 30 seconds.<sup>16</sup>

It's easy to become desensitized to the colossal number of deaths; that is until they directly impact people you know and love. Recently, a friend's mom passed away from the coronavirus, and my daughter's 10th-grade volleyball coach lost her 35-year-old brother to this lethal pandemic. Compounding the loss, we've all heard stories of people whose parents, spouses, children, or others who died alone because they weren't allowed into the hospital. Not being able to say goodbye in person or being relegated to saying goodbye on FaceTime or Zoom adds to the grief and feelings of disbelief.

### **Loss #3 - Sudden Loss or Death**

As painful as the other types of death are, sudden loss or death can be excruciating because you never saw it coming. One moment you're talking to your loved one, and the next, you're getting a phone call telling you they're gone. Within this type of loss, there are two primary types of losses, and I'm familiar with them because I've experienced them with family and friends, as well as with church members. These classifications of loss include accidental deaths and violent deaths.

#### ***Accidental Deaths***

The first type of sudden loss or death occurs as a result of an accident. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),

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<sup>16</sup> Weber, Peter. "1 American Is Dying of COVID-19 Every 30 Seconds." *The Week - All You Need to Know about Everything That Matters*, The Week, 3 Dec. 2020, [theweek.com/speedreads/953055/1-american-dying-covid19-every-30-seconds](https://theweek.com/speedreads/953055/1-american-dying-covid19-every-30-seconds).

road traffic crashes are a leading cause of death in the United States for people aged 1–54,<sup>17</sup> with just over 38,000 people dying in the U.S. in 2019.<sup>18</sup> Statistics gathered from the World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that the number of global road traffic deaths were 1.35 million in 2016.<sup>19</sup> Let that sink in for just a moment. Approximately 3,700 people die every day in accidents globally and leave behind mountains of grief endured by families and friends. While motor vehicle accidents are the most common, some of the other types of accidental deaths may include falls, poisoning, drowning, fire-related injuries, suffocation, firearms, industrial accidents, and medical mistakes.<sup>20</sup>

Several variables can potentially come into play following an accidental death. For instance, if someone watched their loved one die in an accident, that horrific image instantly became stamped in their mind and will, undoubtedly, be replayed over and over again in their mind. Most people experience some form of *Survivor's Guilt* where they wonder why they survived and their loved ones did not. Dr. Diana Raab,

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<sup>17</sup> “WISQARS (Web-Based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System) | Injury Center | CDC.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 July 2020, [www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars](http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars).

<sup>18</sup> National Safety Council. “Motor Vehicle Deaths Estimated to Have Dropped 2% in 2019.” *Fatality Estimates - Motor Vehicle Deaths Estimated to Have Dropped 2% in 2019*, 2020, [www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatality-estimates](http://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatality-estimates).

<sup>19</sup> World Health Organization. “Global Status Report on Road Safety 2018.” *World Health Organization*, 2018, [apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/277370/WHO-NMH-NVI-18.20-eng.pdf?ua=1](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/277370/WHO-NMH-NVI-18.20-eng.pdf?ua=1).

<sup>20</sup> Bernell, Stephanie, and Steven W Howard. “Use Your Words Carefully: What Is a Chronic Disease?” *Frontiers in Public Health*, Frontiers Media S.A., 2 Aug. 2016, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4969287/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4969287/).

in *Psychology Today*, provides a list of clues to help you understand if you or someone you know may be experiencing *Survivor's Guilt*, including:

- Having flashbacks
- Feeling irritable
- Having difficulty sleeping
- Feeling immobilized, numb, and/or disconnected
- Being unmotivated
- Feeling helpless
- Having an intense sense of fear
- Experiencing physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, and palpitations
- Having suicidal thoughts<sup>21</sup>

Another challenge you've probably experienced is the *if only* statements. *If only* I had gone to that place instead of them. *If only* I would have asked them not to come. *If only* they had left later. *If only* better safety protocols had been in place. And the list of *if only* statements could go on and on. H. Norman Wright notes that sudden loss or death fosters a stronger-than-normal sense of guilt expressed in *if only* statements.<sup>22</sup> Notice that Wright said the *if only* statements come from a sense of guilt. It's important here to understand that any guilt arising from your loved one's loss in an accidental death is *false guilt*.

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<sup>21</sup> Raab, Diana. "What Everybody Should Know about Survivor's Guilt." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 26 Jan. 2018, [shorturl.at/cvDY2](https://www.shorturl.at/cvDY2).

<sup>22</sup> Wright, H. Norman. *The Complete Guide to Crisis & Trauma Counseling*. Bethany House, 2014.



June Hunt wrote that false guilt occurs when you blame yourself, even though you've committed no wrong.<sup>23</sup> If this happened to you, you're not to blame. Their death was an accident.

Any guilt arising from your loved one's loss  
in an accidental death is *false guilt*.  
You're not to blame.

### ***Violent Deaths***

The next type of sudden loss or death occurs due to violence, specifically homicides and suicides. Violent deaths are the most difficult for me to write about or consider. Those who have lost loved one's this way understand my hesitation. To have a life senselessly ended is so hard to reconcile in your mind with, yet the number of violent deaths in America is staggering. In 2018, the CDC documented 18,830 homicides in the U.S., a number representing 5.8 deaths per 100,000 people.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the number of suicides in 2018 was 48,344, with suicide being the second leading cause of death among individuals between the ages of 10 and 34 and the fourth leading cause

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<sup>23</sup> Hunt, June. *Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook*. Harvest House Publishers, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> CDC Wonder. "Underlying Cause of Death, 1999-2018 Results." *CDC*, 9 Sept. 2020, [wonder.cdc.gov/controller/datarequest/D76.jsessionid=665E778B512C1953CFC438444F1F](https://wonder.cdc.gov/controller/datarequest/D76.jsessionid=665E778B512C1953CFC438444F1F).

of death among individuals between the ages of 35 and 54.<sup>25</sup> Alarmingly, the number of people who die via suicide is almost two-and-a-half times more than those who die via homicide.

While the feelings you will experience following a homicide and suicide are similar, they're very different. I know because I've walked through both as a friend and family member, so I'm not just speaking from a theoretical perspective.

### ***Homicide***

When someone you know dies due to homicide, it shakes the foundations of your world. *The initial reaction is often one of shock and disbelief.* How can this be happening to you and your family? How did this happen to your friend? You're hoping and praying you're going to wake up from this bad dream and that everything will be OK, but that's not your reality. I've watched mothers collapse to the ground in anguish and fathers cry like a baby when the news is delivered. I've also seen people go utterly numb as a means of not allowing their minds to think about what happened.

*Another common reaction is anger and the desire for revenge.* Families and friends want answers, and they want justice. They insist that law enforcement officials either solve the murder, or let them know who the murderer is because, at that moment, they feel like killing the person who took the life of their loved one. Feelings of anger and revenge are understandable when the tensions of this terrible loss are fresh. It's

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<sup>25</sup> NIH. "Suicide." *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018, [www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml).

difficult to resist the urge to take matters into your own hands, but you must resist the urge, because doing so would only compound the grief and pain for you and those you love.

*Another reaction is the feeling of helplessness and guilt because you try to rationalize that the outcome would have ended much differently if you had been there.* Your mind begins to think about the horrific manner in which your loved one died, and the scene gets stuck on replay. These feelings may be even more extreme in fathers who feel like they failed their child because they weren't there to protect them.

*The final reactions I'll address together are those of extreme sadness, worry, and fear.* Sadness, even to the point of sickness, can be expected following this type of loss. The harsh realization of being physically separated from your loved one on this earth is overwhelming. Fear may also play a role if the police have not captured the person who committed the homicide. In many cases, people may find themselves having trouble sleeping as they wake up at the slightest sounds that seem to be out of place. The companion emotion of fear, worry, is a real emotion as the survivor questions how they will move on in the future. Worry leads to uncertainty and uncertainty into bad habits and patterns, including poor decision-making.

The harsh realization of being  
physically separated from your loved one  
on this earth is overwhelming.

### ***Stories of Murder Victims I Knew***

I've personally known four murder victims. I won't share their names or full stories because I did not seek their families' permission. However, I want to share three of the four stories because I know some of you may be able to relate to their stories.

***Victim #1:*** The first victim was a young lady randomly murdered in 1983 when we were in high school by a convicted rapist who had been let out of prison not much earlier. She was only 18, and it was hard to wrap my brain around it because we had just spoken hours before. Her death was violent, and how authorities found her body was grotesque and sickening. Even as I'm typing, I'm tearing up thinking about the last moments of her life and what she must have felt. Her murder was so meaningless and unfair. The man who committed the murder was found guilty, but the courts eventually vacated the sentence because of legal technicalities (pre-trial publicity). What about her rights? What about the fact they found her jewelry in his vehicle? The only measure of justice, in this case, is that the man remained in prison on a heinous rape charge until he died in 2018...but he got to live.

***Victim #2:*** The second victim was a young lady whose killing occurred around the same time as the murder of the first victim. She was the daughter of the man I worked for while attending high school, and his daughter and I had met on several occasions. Police noted her disappearance in 1983 was similar to that of my first friend, and they found her body just over one month after the recovery of my other friend's body. While police had direct evidence, namely jewelry in his car that tied the man to her death, it was deemed inadmissible in a court of law due to a technicality. Unbelievably, the District Attorney's office

declined to bring charges in her murder. She needlessly died at the age of 19, and her family never got to experience justice for her murder. Her mother recently passed away without any judicial closure for her daughter, and her father and siblings are left to wonder if justice is real.

**Victim #3:** The third victim was a friend who was murdered in July 2015 by an ex-boyfriend. He had become obsessed with her following their breakup, and he repeatedly stalked her, texting her hundreds of times. She had filed a restraining order against him, but in July 2015, he broke into her house, shot her to death, and wounded one of her children. Eventually, the court system convicted this cowardly perpetrator to life in prison, but that didn't bring her back. Her family received an unjust sentence of life without their mother, daughter, and sister for the rest of their earthly lives.

As I reminisce about each of these stories, I find myself getting emotional and angry, even after all these years. If you've been there, you understand the anger. Every one of these people should still be alive today. It's not fair, even when someone gets convicted. It's just not fair, but it's a twisted reality. If this is your case, I'm so sorry! Please know that you're not alone and that I, and many others, are on your side. As awful as it feels to wake up each morning, you will get through this somehow, someday. Please don't give up!

**Side Note:** Identifying your loved one's body following a sudden or violent death is one of the hardest things in life to experience. If it's at all possible, let medical professionals or someone else do it. I've had to identify the bodies of friends on a few occasions, and trying to rid your mind of that memory is beyond difficult.

## ***Suicide***

Suicide is a very personal subject because I've known at least nine people who have taken their lives. The number of suicides has been steadily climbing on average, around 24% annually in the U.S. since 1999,<sup>26</sup> and suicide is the tenth leading cause of death among all age groups in the U.S.<sup>27</sup> Suicide is also the number three cause of death for those between the ages of 15-19.<sup>28</sup>

The number of suicides has been steadily  
climbing on average, around 24% annually  
in the US since 1999

When someone you loved commits suicide, it sets off a chain reaction of emotions similar to those experienced by those who lost loved ones due to homicide. However, it's different because there isn't another person to blame for their death. He or she *did it* to themselves.

**Shock:** The first emotion people often experience following a suicide is the feeling of shock. "Tell me this isn't happening! Tell me this is just a

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<sup>26</sup> Tavernise, Sabrina. "U.S. Suicide Rate Surges to a 30-Year High." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 22 Apr. 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html).

<sup>27</sup> CDC. "Products - Data Briefs - Number 361 - March 2020." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 8 Apr. 2020, [www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db362.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db362.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Shain, B. and the Committee on Adolescence, "Suicide and Suicide Attempts in Adolescents," *Pediatrics* 120, no. 3 (September 2007): 669–76.

really bad dream! Oh God, why did this happen? How could this happen to our family? Why didn't they say something? I would have done anything for them." I remember thinking and hearing those phrases over and over.

**Guilt:** The next emotion that inevitably arrives is guilt. If you're a parent, this is inescapable because you immediately begin questioning where you failed, but it's not just limited to parents. All relatives and family members seek answers, whether privately or together. You go through the *if only* scenarios of how things could have been different *if only* we had acted sooner to help. You probably will be tempted to believe that you must have broken your loved one in one way or another. Along with this feeling of guilt, you feel a sense of rejection because your loved one chose to die rather than remain with you. You may not have yet given voice to that thought, but deep in the recesses of your soul, their choice hurts.

**Hopelessness:** Guilt quickly begins to fade into hopelessness and confusion, as you can't see a way forward. You've been forced into funeral planning, finding pictures for a video, and setting up a memorial service. You don't want to think about anything because life feels completely and utterly hopeless at this point, and your hopelessness turns into helplessness. You feel as if there's a stigma attached to suicide and that no one needs to say *that* word because it may label our family. Our shame supports the stigma.

Once the funeral service is over, and you feel like you have no more tears to cry, your pain begins to shift to anger. You find yourself being angry with those close to you, and even those you don't know. There

comes the point where you feel mad at the deceased because you feel like their actions were so selfish. How could they leave you here to deal with all of this?

Please know that how you grieve a suicide victim will vary by individual. Your feelings may come at different times than the order listed, but I can guarantee you *will* experience these, and many more, emotions. I know. I've been there, done that, and I wish I weren't in that place.

### ***My Personal Loss as a Result of Suicide***

While I don't have time to share all nine stories, I can share a portion of the most personal loss my family has suffered. On June 13, 2020, my nephew, Matthew Dillon Neel, took his own life using a handgun. I'll spare you the awful details, but his mother and stepfather found him in their home—some things in life you can never unsee.

Matthew was a funny 16-year-old young man. I loved that kid so much! Matthew's "Pops," my brother-in-law, Robert, died in 2019 of cancer, as I previously shared, and it hurt him more profoundly than any of us realized. Robert was the center of his universe. We knew that after Robert died, Matthew struggled to get over his loss. However, from all appearances, he was doing great! He was writing and recording rap music, going to church with his family and friends, and we had just seen him three months prior at my oldest daughter's wedding. I thanked him for coming, and he told me with that giant Kool-Aid grin on his face, "Uncle Kevin, I wouldn't have missed it for nothing!"

On June 13, 2020, my wife, daughters, and son-in-law were on the final day of our much-needed vacation at Hilton Head Island, South



Carolina, trying to find some temporary relief from the craziness of the Covid-19 pandemic. We had just finished dinner at *Hudson's Seafood House on the Docks*. We were on our way to take family pictures that would capture the fun and pure joy of our week. We stopped at Walmart because an unnamed member of our party needed to use the restroom, as per usual. While waiting in the car, my wife called me from inside Walmart, asking me to get out of the vehicle. When I got out, she told me she received a phone call, and Matthew had taken his life. "Matthew?!? Our nephew?!?"

The next few moments were beyond difficult, as my wife and I had to get back in the car and tell our daughters that their cousin had taken his life. I'll spare you the intimate and emotional details, but my heart broke for everyone involved. It was devastating!

I had the honor of putting together Matthew's memorial videos, and every day that week, I just sat there and cried. As I looked at each picture of that smiling face, I couldn't believe it was real. He was only 16. As I listened to the lyrics of songs I didn't know existed, I heard his pain. Yeah, that hurt. I wish I had heard these songs before. Maybe, just maybe, I could have done something to stop this from happening. Hindsight is always 20/20, and we all wish we had done something differently.

You have to understand, Matthew had challenges for most of his life where he found himself being picked on often in school and even more severely on social media. Without going into too many details, certain individuals in a chat room had told him he should kill himself. In that

one moment, with no one else at home, the years of bullying had taken their toll, and Matthew took their evil advice. He killed himself.

We didn't think there would be an open casket, but the mortician did an incredible job of allowing there to be a viewing at his funeral. That was *good* and let us all have a measured sense of *closure*. As I stood there alone with Matthew at the coffin, I apologized to him. "I'm so sorry that I failed you. I would have done anything for you, little buddy. Please forgive me."

Life is full of "*if only's*," but the only things we can act on are the "*what is*" moments of life. For those grieving a family member or friend who committed suicide, I want you to know that you can find purpose in your pain. The Chinese character for *crisis* consists of two symbols: The first is for despair and the other for opportunity.<sup>29</sup> I've got the despair part down, but now it's time to find the opportunity to help others.

I'm determined that I won't allow Matthew's death to be in vain; that's why I'm sharing his story with you. And for those who are wondering: Yes, I still cry. I still hurt. I still wonder what I could have done, but I've also come to the realization that his pain must be used to help others heal.

## **Why Am I Feeling This Way?**

In short, *you're grieving because you're still living and loving*. The harsh irony of life is that we're all dying from the day we're born; we just don't

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<sup>29</sup> Wright, H. Norman. *The Complete Guide to Crisis & Trauma Counseling* (p. 128). *Baker Publishing Group*. Kindle Edition.

know our death date. As such, we're born into death and will experience it all our life. In a letter to Jean-Baptiste Leroy, Benjamin Franklin wrote, "In this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."<sup>30</sup> I would add a third certainty: Grief will inevitably leave us asking, "Why am I feeling this way?"

## You're grieving because you're still living and loving.

Rather than try to load you down with a lot of philosophical mumbo jumbo or information learned merely from a textbook, let me give you the practical reasons you're hurting. I've lived these reasons and gone through them with others.

**Reason #1 - Your loss is personal:** No one else can grieve your loss the way you do because your relationship with that lost loved one was unique, and that makes it painfully personal. Think about how your grief was different when it involved a friend versus your personal grief. Even if it's someone you love deeply, you can't fully grieve the way the family members do because those are different relationships. Those relationships come with far more powerful emotional attachments. I've cried with friends who lost their dads, but I cried differently when it was *MY* dad.

**Reason #2 - Your private life has gone public:** Regardless of how your loved one passed away, it becomes public news. Social media is full

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<sup>30</sup> Pirie, Madsen. "Death and Taxes." *Adam Smith Institute*, Adam Smith Institute, 13 Nov. 2019, [www.adamsmith.org/blog/death-and-taxes](http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/death-and-taxes).

of comments consoling and offering prayers for your loss. People show up to the funeral unsure of what to say, other than to let you know they love you and are praying for you. During this time, we develop this notion that we have to hold everything together and put on a brave face for everyone there because we're in public. Then, in the weeks to come, you're met with questions from well-meaning people that unintentionally continue to serve as a constant reminder of your agony.

You're an unwilling participant in a public event that stars your life. Worse yet, the invasion of your privacy grows exponentially in the event of an accidental or violent death that requires the authorities and often the media's involvement. When you're grieving, the last thing you want is to have to deal with those awful reminders, but you may have no choice. Your private life has gone public.

**Reason #3 - Your public world doesn't fully understand your private pain:** Returning to life's everyday activities at work, school, or even church can be challenging because death is an awkward subject for most people to address. Unfortunately, some may ask too many questions, and others may avoid you altogether because they're uncomfortable. My advice to you would be not to address it unless someone asks you directly. Then, share as much information as you feel comfortable, but keep your answers proportional to the level of relationship you have with that person. You should also limit social media posts because outsiders don't have the grace you have to deal with your pain. Why? Your public world doesn't fully understand your private pain.

As we come to the close of chapter 1, I want to tell you I'm genuinely sorry for the loss and pain you're feeling. Grief stinks! Having to face your feelings and emotions and deal with your loss is uncomfortable. It's much easier to tune everyone and everything out. The problem is that if we do that, things are only going to get worse. If you don't deal with what you're feeling now, you'll be facing MUCH bigger problems in the future, with more significant repercussions.

So, let's turn the page and go on this journey of healing together. Chapter one may be your present reality, but by the time you reach the end of chapter ten, I'm praying that God will show you a different way to grieve! Hope is coming!

# 2.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT GRIEF?



Any discussion defining grief would be incomplete without considering what the Bible says about its painful reality. I know I can trust the Bible because it's upfront about the existence of grief in this life. Scripture doesn't seek to candy-coat or gloss over grief's continual effect on all humanity. Even God *has* and *does* experience grief.

### ***Primary Hebrew and Greek Words for Grief***

According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, the Old Testament contains around 20 words for *grief*,<sup>31</sup> but I'll focus on three for this discussion. (I'm using the Hebrew words because the Old

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<sup>31</sup> Walker, W.L. "Grief." *Grief/Grieve*, 1988, [www.internationalstandardbible.com/G/grief-grieve.html](http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/G/grief-grieve.html).

Testament was written in Hebrew, and the Greek word since the New Testament was written primarily in Greek.) Each definition is essential to show how the feelings you're experiencing now are the same as those felt throughout human history.

The feelings you're experiencing now are the same as those felt throughout human history.

**Word #1: Chalah (kaw-law')** means "to be or become weak, be or become sick, be or become diseased, be or become grieved, be or become sorry."<sup>32</sup> Ten of the Old Testament prophets used this word to refer to the losses suffered by the Israelite people when they were sent into exile in Assyria and Babylon, losing loved ones and, in many cases, everything they owned. Their captors forced them to do things they didn't want to do and live in a land where they never wanted to be.

**Observation #1:** To *become* something requires something to happen. When you endure loss, grief will make you feel physically and emotionally weak, and it will wound you to your core. You feel as if your pain has exiled you into an unfamiliar region, and you can't think about the future when all you can see is your present life of separation from everything you've known. You find yourself in a place you don't want to be, and all you want is to get back to the familiar comforts of *home*.

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<sup>32</sup> Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. "Chalah Meaning in Bible - Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon - King James Version." *Biblestudytools.com*, [www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/chalah.html](http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/hebrew/kjv/chalah.html).

**Word #2: Yagon (yaw-gohn')** means "to experience extreme sorrow or anguish."<sup>33</sup> We see this in Genesis 42:38 with Jacob's reply to his sons, who were asking to take his youngest son, Benjamin, back to meet the ruler in Egypt so they could get food during a time of famine. Jacob told them, "My son will not go down with you. His brother Joseph is dead, and he is all I have left. If anything should happen to him on your journey, you would send this grieving, white-haired man to his grave."<sup>34</sup>

For those who may not know the story, the abridged version is Jacob thought his son Joseph was dead because his brothers faked his death when he was 17, sold him into slavery, and told their father a wild animal killed him. Despite his monumental challenges, God used Joseph's next 13 years of awful, unfair events to lead him to become second in command over Egypt. When his brothers came to Egypt to seek food, they didn't recognize Joseph as the ruler. Eventually, their family experienced reconciliation.

Notice how Jacob's extreme sorrow and anguish was still fresh 13 years later. We see it in what he said in his response to his sons: "Joseph is dead, and his brother (Benjamin) is all I have left." The truth was Jacob had 11 living sons, but his loss caused such extreme sorrow and anguish that he was struggling to move on.

**Observation #2:** Extreme sorrow and anguish have a way of making us feel hopeless. If we're not careful, it can also cause us to lose

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<sup>33</sup> Strong, James. "Yagon." *Strong's Hebrew: 3015. יָגוֹן (Yagon) -- Grief, Sorrow*, 2021, biblehub.com/hebrew/3015.htm.

<sup>34</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.



perspective on the good things we do have and how we'll view the rest of our life. Please understand I'm not, in any way, suggesting that Jacob could have, or should have, *replaced* Joseph with his other 11 sons and move on with life. On the contrary, I'm saying that the loss of one son was so significant that it was still impacting him heavily 13 years later. Jacob's sorrow and grief were extreme and compounded by the death of his wife, Joseph's mother, several years before.

**Side Note:** While it's easy to focus on Jacob's grief, we also must consider the grief Joseph experienced, having been betrayed by his brothers and separated from his family. Often, losing a relationship with a person who is living can also feel like death and leave us feeling grief.

**Word #3: Ka'ac (kah'-as)** refers to the sense of anger, vexation, and provocation people felt in their grief. Throughout the Old Testament, we read about people who mistakenly felt or believed God was *out to get them* or destroy their lives. The person that comes to mind immediately is Job. His words Job 6:2-4 demonstrate the *ka'ac* feelings: "If my misery could be weighed and my troubles be put on the scales, they would outweigh all the sands of the sea. That is why I spoke impulsively. For the Almighty has struck me down with his arrows. Their poison infects my spirit. God's terrors are lined up against me."

Job's grief is as intense as anyone who has ever lived, and it's understandable why he felt that way. He was a righteous man (Job 1:1) who suffered in ways we can't imagine. He was emotionally overwhelmed by the deaths of his ten children in a storm similar to a tornado, the simultaneous loss of his wealth and possessions, and

physical sickness that left him disfigured and in pain. One thing was going wrong after another. Job attributed his losses to God bringing the painful things in his life as a punishment. (Job's grief journey will serve as the basis for the *Five Stages of Hope* in chapter ten.)

**Observation #3:** Many people, whether or not they're Christian, blame their losses on God for either punishing them or being absent when they needed Him. We may make statements like, "I guess God is punishing me for not living right or being a 'good enough' Christian. God, if you're All-Powerful, then why didn't you heal my loved one when I was praying for him or her? The Bible talks about all these miracles that Jesus did, but the one time I *needed* a miracle, I didn't get it."

It's imperative for you to know that *GOD DOES NOT BRING BAD THINGS* in your life to make you hurt intentionally. The pain of loss and separation originated with the Fall of Man in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commands in the Garden of Eden. Ever since suffering has been a part of humanity, the profound grief that led to Job feeling like his sorrows were heavier than the sands of the seas.

**Word #4: Lupe (loo'-pay)** is the primary Greek word in the New Testament for grief. Similar to the Hebrew words, *lupe* means *sorrow, pain, grief, annoyance, and affliction*.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus understands your grief because He experienced it fully. More than 700 years before Christ was born, the prophet Isaiah wrote this about the coming Messiah (Jesus) in Isaiah 53:5: "He was despised and

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<sup>35</sup> Tyrrell, Patrick, et al. "Stages of Dying." *StatPearls [Internet]*., U.S. National Library of Medicine, 27 Oct. 2020, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507885/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507885/).

rejected— a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.”<sup>36</sup> When He chose to come to the earth, He did so, knowing the losses and grief He would suffer.

## Jesus understands your grief because He experienced it fully.

### ***What losses (grief) did Jesus suffer?***

- Jesus’ father died at some point between the time His parents found Him in the temple (Luke 2:41-52) and the start of His public ministry. We know this because Joseph was never mentioned again after this passage in Luke 2. He would have been mentioned at the cross had he been there.
- Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, was beheaded in prison (John 14:1-12) after King Herod gave the order to have him killed.
- Jesus’ friend Lazarus died (John 11:1-44), and Jesus agonized, even though He raised Lazarus from the dead.
- In the Garden of Gethsemane, before His arrest, Jesus knew His crucifixion was imminent and He prayed to the point where He sweats drops of blood (Luke 22:44).
- Jesus was betrayed by His friends, arrested, beaten, and publicly crucified (Luke 22-23).

***Side Note:*** While grief was still a reality in New Testament times, there are far fewer words in the New Testament for grief than in the Old

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<sup>36</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

Testament. New Testament authors used two other words, but they don't capture the context of the pain found in the type of grief I'm addressing. This fact is because Jesus came to give rest to those who are weary and overwhelmed in life (Matthew 11:28-30).

**Observation #4:** In each instance of grief faced by Jesus, He continued living out God's purpose for His life. When Jesus received the news about John the Baptist, He got away from the crowd to pray, and He then fed the 5,000 (Matthew 14:13-21). When He received the news Lazarus had died, in His grief, He went to Bethany to comfort Mary and Martha (John 11:17-35). When Jesus was in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, He remained where He was to carry out God's will. Jesus then got up, like a lamb led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7), and faced horrific torture and physical death, as He gave His life to bring God's redemption in our lives. At any moment, He could have ordered it all to stop, but He didn't because He was the High Priest who could identify with us in every way (Hebrews 4:15). Finally, even though Peter betrayed Jesus, He gave him a second chance in ministry (John 21:15-19).

In each instance of grief faced by Jesus, He continued living out God's purpose for His life.

### **What Does the Bible Say About Grief?**

The Bible is painfully clear that grief is an inescapable reality of life, and being a Christian doesn't exempt you from pain and loss. God experienced and still experiences it. Jesus suffered many relational

losses. Every person in the Bible felt the sting of grief. The Bible's upfront discussion on grief serves to remind us that at some point, we will ALL face it again-and-again. However, Jesus is the answer to our grief! Having a biblical understanding of grief is crucial to moving forward and discovering HOPE for your future! It's coming.

# 3.

## WHAT CAN I EXPECT IN THE FIRST MONTH? (AND MONTHS?)



**I** can't believe we're going to their funeral today. How did we get here? I can't stop hurting. I wish everyone would leave me alone! Where did everyone go? I wish I had someone I could talk to. Don't talk about it, it hurts too bad. Could you please just back off?!? You could have stopped this from happening, God! God, I'll do anything if you'll just let them come back to me. What's the point of life if you're just going to die or lose someone else you love? How can the rest of the world continue to move on when my world is in shambles? What's left to live for? I just want to die. &!%#\*#@ (better left unsaid).

The first month after losing your loved one will be the most confusing and challenging month of your life. The funeral is over, and all the

attention you initially experienced is beginning to fade away slowly. You look around, and there's a part of you that feels like everything is so meaningless. You see people laughing, and you *wish* you could somehow get back to that point, but all you can think about is your loss. You already know your world has changed, but the shadowy blur you're living in can stop you from seeing the bigger picture.

Regardless of whether or not you knew this time was coming, you're never really ready. I want to prepare you for the reality of what you're going to face in the first month after your loss in this chapter, starting with these three truths you're sure to experience:

***Truth #1: People will do their best to share their love and pay their respects.*** The majority of loved ones and friends tend to rally around those who are grieving in the first two weeks. People know you're hurting, and they genuinely try to show their support in tangible ways. Most will show up at the funeral as a symbol of how much they care. Some will share their condolences on an online memorial page set up by the funeral home for you to read later. If you share your loss on social media, you'll find there will be even more responses of people expressing prayers, love, and well-wishes for you, more so than on any other post you make throughout the year. Generous people will bring meals to your home to help your family have one less thing about which to worry. You may even have some random stranger who pulls over to the side of the road and gets out of their car while the funeral procession is driving by, standing at attention to honor your loved one. Most family members and friends don't know what to do for you in moments of grief, but they'll try to show their love and pay their respects. Cherish and be thankful for each response.

***Truth #2: Well-meaning people will make insensitive statements to you.*** One observation I've consistently seen as people grieve is that smart, loving, and kind people will say dumb things when they're searching for words of comfort. Dr. Marilyn Mendoza shares a list of examples of offensive comments people have made, and I've highlighted five of the most common statements that I've heard:

- *Heaven must have needed another angel.*
- *God wanted them more than you did.*
- *Everything happens for a reason.*
- *I know just how you feel.*
- *It's time to move on.*<sup>37</sup>

It's quite easy to get offended by people who make these kinds of statements when you are vulnerable, but most of the time, people are saying these things with the right intention. The problem is their execution is like a bull in a china shop. As such, let me address each statement to help you process what they said versus what they were trying to say:

- *What They Said #1: Heaven must have needed another angel.* Please know that your loved one didn't die because God needed another angel. If God needs one, He will create one.

*What They Were Trying to Say #1:* Your loved one is in heaven right now.

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<sup>37</sup> Mendoza, Marilyn. "The Worst Things to Say to Someone Who's Mourning." *Psychology Today*, 17 June 2016, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-guest-room/201606/the-worst-things-say-someone-whos-mourning](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-guest-room/201606/the-worst-things-say-someone-whos-mourning).



- *What They Said #2: God wanted them more than you did.* Please understand God isn't playing a cruel cosmic trick on you by taking your loved one away because He wanted them more. God is *NOT* selfish, and He wouldn't take away someone from you to bring Himself pleasure at the expense of your pain.

*What They Were Trying to Say #2:* Your loved one was such a valuable and precious creation of God.

- *What They Said #3: Everything happens for a reason.* Everything indeed happens for a reason, but often we'll never understand the reasoning behind death. Be honest: Even if you knew the reason, it wouldn't take away your pain. You would still grieve, so the pursuit of answers may leave us where we started in the first place.

*What They Were Trying to Say #3:* There has to be a reason for this that we can't understand, and I'm so sorry. I'm really at a loss for words.

- *What They Said #4: I know just how you feel.* The truth is: People *don't* know *exactly* how you feel. None of us fully knows how anyone else feels since there are far too many variables that will affect us differently.

*What They Were Trying to Say #4:* I want you to know that you're not alone. I've walked through loss, and I've made it through, and you'll make it too!

- *What They Said #5: It's time to move on.* Let me be clear: YOU are the one who gets to say when it's time to move on. It's true, you *can't* spend the rest of your life living in the intense grief you're feeling now, but know there's not a magic formula to make grief disappear and never come back. There's no list of five steps or a prayer you can pray that will reduce your loss. There will *always* be a sense of despair as a result of your loss.

*What They Were Trying to Say #5:* I wish I could make you feel better, but I don't know how to help. Please find someone to speak to so you can heal as much as possible.

If someone says something like this to you, try to be gracious and thank them. They're not trying to be insensitive. Remember: Words don't flow as quickly and correctly as they should in times of loss, and sometimes we all stick our feet in our mouths.

***Truth #3: The average person will check on you for about two weeks after your loss.*** You should emotionally prepare yourself for the fact that the mass outpourings of attention you had before, during, and immediately after the funeral will soon be gone. In this, remember that the absence of people all around you is not a sign that people don't love you or that they've stopped caring about your loss.

There are three primary reasons people may not be around as much. *First, they may believe you want personal space and to grieve alone.* They genuinely think they're doing what is best for you. *Second, others moving on is a sign they don't share your loss at the same level.* How can they? If

you're a parent of a child who dies, everyone else grieves, but you gave life to your baby and raised them. You know them better than anyone else. Your level of loss will be exponentially greater than anyone else. *Finally, while it's hard for those who are grieving to consider, the statement is true that life goes on.* It's easier for others to get back into a routine, and they should. They're responsible for providing for their family's physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial needs. For you, it's far more complicated than just moving on; you have to figure out *how* to move on.

## **My First Experience with Grief**

My first experience with grief that I can remember happened on January 11, 1974. My uncle, Robert Harold Harrison, Jr., was on duty as a California Highway Patrolman. He was at the end of his shift; when a call came over the radio that a drunk driver was endangering lives on the Pasadena Freeway. Although he could have gone back to the station and clocked out, he chose to fulfill his duty to serve and protect. Another driver unintentionally changed lanes during the pursuit, clipping his cruiser, causing his car to plunge down a 25-foot embankment. Uncle Harold died instantly, while his partner escaped with minor injuries. He was only 26 years old.

As a seven-year-old, there are only a few details I can vividly remember. I remember waking up on Saturday morning and driving with my dad to a local convenience store to buy several newspapers. Uncle Harold's death was on the front page, and I recently received my dad's copy of that newspaper when he passed. The pages have yellowed, but I can

still see my dad's face reading that story in the car with tears streaming down his face. His grief was so real.

A second thing I remember is the viewing the night before the funeral. I stood near the casket, not wanting to get too close because I had previously touched my uncle, and he was cold. I was scared. I can still see what looked like an endless procession of *larger than life* officers walking past his coffin in tears.

A third memory was still at the viewing as we were preparing to leave when my dad bent down and kissed his brother's forehead and told him he loved him. I clearly remember standing about 10 feet away, watching my dad cry like a baby. I don't know if I cried or not, but that image has been stuck in my head ever since.

Finally, I'll never forget the black and white motorcade of officers and officials who had come to honor my uncle at his funeral. I don't know the exact number of cars and motorcycles, but it was as far as the eye could see. They were all there to pay tribute to the life of a hero, and it was encouraging. However, this was only the beginning of the grieving process. In that first month, there was a lot of quietness and tears.

**In that first month, there was  
a lot of quietness and tears.**

If I'm honest, my uncle's death scared me and had a lingering effect on how I processed grief for two decades. I never told anyone, but I was always afraid I would die at the age of 26. It wasn't until I turned 27 that I realized that was an irrational fear that didn't happen. As a kid, I didn't

understand what I was supposed to feel or react. I was just there absorbing and watching others. That was a defining moment for my life, and I didn't even know it. Looking back now, I can understand the emotional toll my uncle's loss had on my dad, both in the short-term and long-term, and how it impacted my life.

I share this because it's imperative in the first month to pay attention to children around you during times of grief and help them find a healthy way to process it. It's easy to get lost in our pain and forget children don't know what to feel or how to express their emotions. Talk to them. Ask them what they're feeling. They may look like they're all right, but many unseen questions are spinning around in their minds. They don't know how to process all this at such a young age.

## **The Stages of Grief Defined**

Your loss may or may not be your first experience with grief. As you grieve the loss of your loved one, recognize that your emotions are going to be all over the place. In the classic book, *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed the Kübler-Ross Model, also known as the *Five Stages of Grief*, to help people better understand their emotional responses. Those stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.<sup>38</sup> The five stages provide a foundational understanding of what grief may look like, but it's not a linear timeline for how everyone will grieve. It's not a perfect model because grief looks different for each person, and you will most likely experience things outside of the

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<sup>38</sup> Kübler-Ross Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying: Questions and Answers on Death and Dying*. Quality Paperback Book Club, 2002.

spectrum. Still, you'll likely encounter the first four stages of grief at some point in the first month following a loss (*and also in the months to come*).

## Grief is fluid, not fixed.

Grief is fluid, not fixed. Therefore, some may start in the denial stage, while others may begin in the anger stage or into full-blown depression. Your reaction is unique to your life. You may even bounce back and forth between stages daily for months, and that's ok. The key is not to get *stuck* in any of the first four stages or a similar place.

If you get *stuck* for a long time in one stage, you can develop what's known as *complicated grief*, a clinically recognized condition that occurs in about 7% of bereaved people. People with this condition frequently fixate on how a person died, fear its consequences, or show an excessive avoidance of reminders of the loss.<sup>39</sup> Complicated grief may be particularly challenging for someone who experienced a sudden loss or witnessed the death of a loved one.

Think of it like this: Imagine your car gets stuck in the mud. You can press on the gas all you want, but you're only creating a much deeper crater that will bog you down further. You need to get out of the car and get others to help you get out of the mud.

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<sup>39</sup> Shear, M. Katherine. "Grief and Mourning Gone Awry: Pathway and Course of Complicated Grief." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience*, vol. 14, no. 2, June 2012, pp. 119–128., doi:10.31887/DCNS.2012.14.2/mshear.

This book's ultimate objective  
is for you to experience healing,  
not merely the dulling of your pain.

*Important:* This book's ultimate objective is for you to experience healing, not merely the dulling of your pain. You *must* face your pain before you can arrive at a healing place, and the five stages can provide a basic framework to help you begin and walk through that process. Let me also make you aware that if you find yourself experiencing emotions outside of the five stages of grief, it doesn't mean that you're not grieving *right*; you're just grieving *differently*.

## **STAGE #1 – DENIAL**

Every time I hear the word "denial," my mind gets taken back to the Stuart Smalley (Al Franken) *Daily Affirmations* skit on Saturday Night Live in 1991. Smalley was a "non-licensed therapist" whose job was to make people feel better by affirming them. His "guest" on his show on this September night was basketball legend Michael Jordan, whom he called "Michael J" because he wanted to "protect his anonymity." At one point, he told Jordan he must be struggling to be as good as the other players, to which Jordan replied, "No, not really." That's when Smalley looked at Jordan and said, "Denial ain't just a river in Egypt."<sup>40</sup> That statement always cracks me up. It's ok to laugh in your grief.

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<sup>40</sup> Quotersearch. "Denial Is Not a River in Egypt." *Quote Investigator*, 17 June 2019, [quoteinvestigator.com/2012/05/11/denial-not-river/](https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/05/11/denial-not-river/).

The first stage of the Kübler-Ross Model is denial. Denial is a common defense mechanism used to protect oneself from the hardship of considering a disturbing reality.<sup>41</sup> Though it may sound strange, initial denial is an emotional and physical best friend. Think of it like this: If it weren't for the initial denials of your mind, your emotions would most likely cause serious harm to your physical body since our minds can't process such overwhelming horrific information all at once. So, denial kicks in and gives us a brief break to catch our breath in the first month.

Denial can be different depending upon the circumstances of your loved one's death. For example, the way you experience denial may differ if you *weren't* present with them when they died versus if you *were* with them. If they were healthy the last time you saw them and you later receive the awful news of their sudden or violent death, your mind will tell you it's not real because you haven't physically seen the evidence of them dying. In this case, your mind may try to convince you it's all just a dream, and you're going to wake up with everything being okay. On the other hand, if you're in the hospital room and you physically see your loved one pass away in an anticipated setting, your mind may try to stop you from *going there* with the thought they will no longer be a part of your life. At that moment, you don't want to talk about it because it won't feel *real* as long as you don't talk about it.

In either case, in denial, you're experiencing what's known as *emotional or psychological shock*. Shock tends to slow down the body's reactions

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<sup>41</sup> Tyrrell, Patrick, et al. "Stages of Dying." *StatPearls [Internet]*., U.S. National Library of Medicine, 27 Oct. 2020, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507885/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507885/).



and lead to confusion or unconsciousness.<sup>42</sup> Shock is like an anesthetic that causes you to go numb. It can make your mind feel like it's in a *fog* because you can't process what other people say to you or make sense of things around you. Your chest may feel tight, and you may experience a significant surge of adrenaline or feel physically sick like you want to vomit or have diarrhea.<sup>43</sup>

*Important:* Initial denial can be an emotional and physical best friend, but prolonged denial can be your worst enemy. The plain truth is you won't be able to move on without first recognizing your loss. You may try to convince yourself that you are using denial as a coping mechanism, but any hope you have for healing has a foundation in the need for honestly dealing with your grief. Start by being honest with God. Tell him what the loss feels like to you. To do this, you have to be honest with yourself.

Initial denial can be an emotional and physical best friend, but prolonged denial can be your worst enemy.

## **STAGE #2 – ANGER**

Anger is the second stage of the Kübler-Ross Model, and it's an emotional response to a real or imagined threat or provocation. It can

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<sup>42</sup> Good Therapy. "Shock." *GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog*, 25 Aug. 2015, [www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/shock](http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/shock).

<sup>43</sup> Boyes, Alice. "What Is Psychological Shock? And 5 Tips for Coping." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 6 Mar. 2018, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-practice/201803/what-is-psychological-shock-and-5-tips-coping](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/in-practice/201803/what-is-psychological-shock-and-5-tips-coping).

range in intensity from mild irritation to extreme rage,<sup>44</sup> and it's a potentially explosive emotion that gets amplified in a time of grief.

The anger stage is not a one-time event, and I guarantee you'll experience it whenever the anesthesia of denial wears off. There are many reasons why you may be feeling angry in the middle of grief. This list isn't exhaustive, but it will give you an idea of what may be behind what you are feeling:

- You may be angry because you didn't get to say goodbye
- You may be angry because a horrible disease stole the life of your loved one before their time
- You may be angry at the person who died because you feel like they abandoned you
- You may be angry because you don't feel like the doctors did enough to save your loved one
- You may be angry because you blame yourself for their death
- You may be angry because you had an unresolved conflict with the person who died, and you feel guilty
- You may be angry with family members who weren't there for you physically or emotionally when you felt you needed them
- You may be angry because the person who passed away didn't take care of themselves, and they directly contributed to their own death

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<sup>44</sup> Bushman, PhD, Brad J. "Anger Management: What Works and What Doesn't." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 25 Sept. 2013, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-psyched/201309/anger-management-what-works-and-what-doesnt](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/get-psyched/201309/anger-management-what-works-and-what-doesnt).

- You may be angry because someone else was responsible for an accident that took the life of your loved one
- You may be angry because someone violently took your loved one's life
- You may be angry because you've been left with a mounting pile of medical bills that you'll never be able to pay off, and no one is helping you figure things out
- You may be angry at God because you feel like He didn't answer your prayers
- You may be angry from the accumulation of losses in your life that were never fully dealt with, and your current loss may be stirring up this emotion all over again

Whatever the case, you have to be careful in the anger stage because it has the potential to destroy every area of your life, especially in your relationships. To help you understand what I mean, I want you to picture your anger like it's a stick of dynamite in your hand. It has the power to destroy everything around it, but it's not deadly unless the fuse gets lit. *You're* the one holding it, and *you're* the one who gets to choose if you will ignite it and, if you do, you decide what you intend to blow up. When appropriately used, dynamite can create tunnels to get you through the mountains standing in your way. When misused, it can kill you and those around you. You get to choose the outcome of your life.

### ***Two Explosive Mistakes in the Anger Stage***

One explosive mistake many make in the anger stage is that we unleash *misdirected anger* on others. *Misdirected anger* focuses on the wrong

person or source<sup>45</sup> and lashes out at others who are not responsible for our loss. In turn, they may, or may not, understand what you feel if you haven't shared your feelings, so they may take it as a sign of aggression that can injure the relationship.

For example, I've seen myself start to get irritated by my wife when she'll try to do something for me following my dad's death. I know she's doing it out of love, but I'll get frustrated because it's not what I want. Why do I do this? If I'm honest with myself, I'm doing it because the loss in my life caused me to lose control, and my mind is doing everything it can to reassert control in *any* area of life. I have to intentionally stop myself from responding like that when I recognize it because it's not her fault.

Another explosive mistake we make is when we *fail to let go* of our anger, and it turns into bitterness and resentment. You may have *the right* to feel like you do, especially if your loved one died a sudden death. Your mind will tell you that you are holding on to your feelings because you want to see justice. While everyone deserves and should experience justice, at some point, we don't let go of our anger because being angry is easier than forgiving.

At some point we don't let go of our anger  
because being angry is easier than forgiving.

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<sup>45</sup> Porter, Robert. "The Danger of Misplaced Anger." *Betterhelp*, BetterHelp, 5 May 2019, [www.betterhelp.com/advice/anger/the-danger-of-misplaced-anger/](http://www.betterhelp.com/advice/anger/the-danger-of-misplaced-anger/).

*Timing is Important:* When it comes to addressing someone walking through fresh anger, timing is important. I know a person who acted recklessly, leading to the death of a friend's child. It was in no way intentional, but that didn't make it any easier. My friends' child was gone. The person felt horrible about what they had done and wanted to ask for forgiveness from the parents. They approached me at the funeral viewing to ask if I thought it would be OK. I told them the timing wasn't right. That conversation would not have turned out well. How could it?

You can expect to experience anger initially following a loss. In the first month following a loss, you're going to have to work through multiple feelings and emotions you didn't even realize existed inside of you. You're probably going to get angry in traffic. You may feel this urge to hit someone or something. You'll need to have some conversations and address others at a later date. Bitterness is a prolonged, resentful feeling of disempowered and devalued victimization.<sup>46</sup>

Dr. Leon Seltzer shared the following concerning the high price tag for the anger that turns into bitterness carries in that it can:

- Prolong your mental and emotional pain—or make it worse
- Lead to long-lasting anxiety and/or depression
- Precipitate vengeful acts that put you at further risk for being hurt or victimized

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<sup>46</sup> Diamond, PhD, Stephen A. "Anger Disorder (Part Two): Can Bitterness Become a Mental Disorder?" *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 3 June 2009, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evil-deeds/200906/anger-disorder-part-two-can-bitterness-become-mental-disorder](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evil-deeds/200906/anger-disorder-part-two-can-bitterness-become-mental-disorder).

- Prevent you from experiencing the potential joys of living fully in the present
- Create or deepen an attitude of distrust and cynicism
- Interfere with your cultivating healthy, satisfying relationships
- Compromise or weaken your higher ideals, and adversely impact your personal search for purpose and meaning in life
- Rob you of vital energy
- Undermine your physical health
- Blind you from recognizing your own role, or responsibility, in possibly having been vindictively harmed by another
- By keeping you in a paradoxical state of “vengeful bondage,” erode your sense of well-being<sup>47</sup>

If you feel angry, that’s natural. What’s not *natural* or healthy is allowing anger to determine how you’ll live the rest of your life. Ask yourself: What would your loved one want for you? Do you think they want you to live miserably forever or enjoy life as much as possible under the circumstances? Understand: You’re not minimizing their death by trying to live as best you can. In reality, you’re doing what they’d want you to do, and, in the process, you’re honoring their memory through the way you live.

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<sup>47</sup> Seltzer, Leon F. “Don’t Let Your Anger ‘Mature’ Into Bitterness.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 14 Jan. 2015, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201501/don-t-let-your-anger-mature-bitterness](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/201501/don-t-let-your-anger-mature-bitterness).

If you feel angry, that's natural. What's not natural or healthy is allowing anger to determine how you'll live the rest of your life.

### **STAGE #3 – BARGAINING**

The next stage of grief in the Kübler-Ross Model is the bargaining stage. While this stage is practical, I would suggest that those who grieve may arrive here before the anger stage in cases of long-term illnesses. For many, it may even be the first stage of grief.

Bargaining occurs when we try to make a deal with God that we'll change our behavior or lifestyle if He heals our loved one. We make statements to God along these lines:

- God, if you heal them, I promise I'll live a better life
- God, if you heal them, I'll never sin again
- God, if you heal them, I'll never take them for granted again
- God, if you heal them, I'll be the best husband and father I can be
- God, if you heal them, I'll tell the world what You did

Bargaining occurs when we try to make a deal with God that we'll change our behavior or lifestyle if He heals our loved one.

*Why do we try to bargain with God?* Jodi Clarke believes that the feeling of helplessness can cause us to react in protest by bargaining, which

gives us a perceived sense of control over something that feels so out of control.<sup>48</sup> Bargaining is an admission that we don't have control, and we're attempting to cut a deal with the One who created everything and *is* in control. Interestingly, even people who don't believe in God will call out to God in moments of desperation because we're all vulnerable and in need of saving.

**Side Note:** I also want to acknowledge that bargaining may occur with doctors, hospitals, and insurance companies, as you may have tried to *cut deals* for preferential treatments for your loved one.

It's in the bargaining stage where far too many people get *stuck* in the grieving process, especially those with a loved one's prolonged death. You daily rehearse what you could have done differently or various scenarios that could have changed their current situation.

- What if they had diagnosed their cancer sooner?
- What if they had been driving my car instead of theirs?
- What if that person hadn't been drinking and driving?
- What if I would have had more faith in God?
- What if I had asked a question to the doctors when I first noticed *this* happening?
- What if it hadn't been raining?
- What if I had been there with them when they were attacked?
- What if they had been more honest with how they were feeling?

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<sup>48</sup> Clarke, Jodi. "What to Know About the Five Stages of Grief." *Verywell Mind*, 21 Mar. 2020, [www.verywellmind.com/five-stages-of-grief-4175361](https://www.verywellmind.com/five-stages-of-grief-4175361).



The list of questions can go on and on as we try to think of ways to *fix the unfixable*.

*Guilt often accompanies bargaining.* We start to believe we could have done something differently to help save our loved ones.<sup>49</sup> When you think there was something you could've done, you blame yourself for their outcome. These feelings will overwhelm you in the first month if you *give them permission* to linger in your mind.

I want to release you from those thoughts of blame and guilt right now. You know, and so did your loved one, that if there were anything you could have done for that person, you would've done it.

#### **STAGE #4 – DEPRESSION**

Depression is the fourth stage of the Kübler-Ross Model. Encyclopedia Britannica defines *depression* as *a mood or emotional state marked by feelings of low self-worth or guilt and a reduced ability to enjoy life*.<sup>50</sup>

There are three observations about this definition that stand out to me as they relate to grief: 1) *The feelings of low self-worth are a ripple effect of your loss.* If your identity shares a connection with the person you lost, you're going to feel like you're not as valuable. THAT'S NOT TRUE! You are valuable apart from anyone and anything. 2) *The feelings of guilt are coming from inside of you and not from those around you.* Don't try to

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<sup>49</sup> Axelrod, Julie. "The 5 Stages of Grief & Loss." *Psych Central*, 8 July 2020, [psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/](https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/).

<sup>50</sup> "Depression." Edited by Kara Rogers 2020, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2020, [www.britannica.com/science/depression-psychology](https://www.britannica.com/science/depression-psychology).

read into what you think others may be feeling. Stay focused on what you know is TRUE. 3) *You will have a reduced ability to enjoy life because you have lost someone important to you.* This fact doesn't mean, however, that there's nothing left to live for in life. Stop for a moment and think about every blessing you have, and give thanks.

Now let's talk about the topic few want to address - depression. Most people, especially men in general, don't like to talk about depression because they believe it's a sign of weakness or a societal scarlet letter. As a result, many people stay isolated with unhealthy thoughts in their minds, taking them to a bad place. Be careful. The longer you harbor dark thoughts in your mind, the more difficult it becomes to heal. When walking through depression, talking exposes the darkness and permits light to shine where needed.

**The longer you harbor dark thoughts in your mind, the more difficult it becomes to heal.**

### **How can I know if I'm depressed?**

Dr. Steve Bressert lays out the symptoms of clinical depression characterized by the presence of five or more of the following symptoms. As you read through these, ask how many of these symptoms apply to you?

- Depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, as indicated by either subjective report (e.g., feeling sad, blue, “down in the dumps,” or empty) or observations made by others (e.g., appears tearful or about to cry)

- Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities every day, such as no interest in hobbies, sports, or other things the person used to enjoy doing
- Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (e.g., a change of more than 5 percent of body weight in a month), or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day
- Insomnia (inability to get to sleep or difficulty staying asleep) or hypersomnia (sleeping too much) nearly every day
- More days than not, problems with sitting still, including constant restlessness, pacing, or picking at one's cloths (called psychomotor agitation by professionals); or the opposite, a slowing of one's movements, talking very quietly with slowed speech (called psychomotor retardation by professionals)
- Fatigue, tiredness, or loss of energy nearly every day — even the smallest tasks, like dressing or washing, seem difficult to do and take longer than usual
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day (e.g., ruminating over minor past failings)
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day (e.g., appears easily distracted, complains of memory difficulties)
- Recurrent thoughts of death (not just fear of dying), recurrent suicidal ideas without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bressert, Steve. "Depression Symptoms, Signs, Types & Treatment." *Psych Central*, 22 May 2020, [psychcentral.com/depression/depression-symptoms-major-depressive-disorder/](https://psychcentral.com/depression/depression-symptoms-major-depressive-disorder/).

***Before I Move On:*** If you suffer from five or more of these symptoms, please speak to a professional counselor or an experienced pastor immediately. I believe this book is a tremendous resource for healing, but there are times when we need to allow someone else to look into our eyes as we're sharing our story so they can *see and hear* the things we aren't saying.

***Why is there a stigma around depression?*** We don't like to talk about depression because we're worried people will see us as less than whole, pathetic, or crazy. In reality, talking about depression is the exact opposite. Admitting you're feeling depressed as the result of a loss shows you *are* in your right mind. Something would be wrong with you if you *weren't* having feelings of depression. Don't impede your healing by worrying about what others will think when you admit you're hurting.

Before you think you're *broken* and can't be *fixed* because of your depression, understand the pages of history are full of people who suffered from depression and were still able to live meaningful lives. Some well-known people include:

- Abraham Lincoln
- Winston Churchill
- Isaac Newton
- Vincent van Gogh
- Ludwig von Beethoven

- Michael Phelps <sup>52 53</sup>

As you look at that list, there's one common thread connecting them; they all suffered multiple losses. How do I know? It's impossible to live and *not* suffer loss. *Every one of them* lost loved ones and friends. *Every one of them*, except for Michael Phelps, is dead. *Every one of them* suffered depression. Is it possible there could be a connection between their losses and depression?

It's impossible to live and *not* suffer loss.

**Cumulative Effect:** I don't know the depths of each story of depression with those on the list, so I can't speak definitively about them. However, I'm confident that unprocessed losses in your life will build-up, only to be re-exposed every time we suffer a new loss. We try to convince ourselves that if we keep pushing those thoughts and memories down, thinking that we won't have to deal with them again. What's happening is that we're stacking loss-upon-loss, and our burden is just getting heavier and heavier. I know because I did this for years.

For me, when my brother-in-law, Robert, died, I was taken back to my friend, Kevin, who died of cancer at the age of 51. When my nephew Matthew died, it brought to light how things would have been different

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<sup>52</sup> Hospital, Butler. "Famous People and Depression." *Butler Hospital*, 2020, [www.butler.org/blog/famous-people-and-depression](http://www.butler.org/blog/famous-people-and-depression).

<sup>53</sup> Michael Phelps, as told to Wayne Drehs. "Michael Phelps: 'This Is the Most Overwhelmed I've Ever Felt'." *ESPN*, ESPN Internet Ventures, 18 May 2020, [www.espn.com/olympics/story/\\_/id/29186389/michael-phelps-most-overwhelmed-ever-felt](http://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/29186389/michael-phelps-most-overwhelmed-ever-felt).

if Robert were alive. When my dad died in November 2020, it reminded me that my nephew had died less than five months before. Each loss reopened the wound of a previous loss, and I realized there's a long list of deaths I didn't properly grieve. Losses have a negative cumulative effect.

## **STAGE #5 – ACCEPTANCE**

The fifth stage of the Kübler-Ross Model is acceptance. Acceptance means that you can recognize what's happened, process it without denying what's happened, and you're at a better place than just after your loved one's loss.<sup>54</sup>

### ***What Acceptance Doesn't Mean***

Before I address acceptance in greater detail, I want to clarify misconceptions about what acceptance doesn't mean.

- *Acceptance doesn't mean you no longer miss the person who is gone or that you're moving on without thinking about them.* You're in an unfair position where you have to adapt to a new life and have found a way to *win* each day. As you go about life, you will see constant reminders of them that will cause you to remember them, and hopefully you will be able to do so with gratitude.
- *Acceptance doesn't mean that you'll never experience grief anymore.* I can promise that you will experience grief much more in the future, especially with every *first* experience after your loss, as

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<sup>54</sup> Hill, Támara. "Acceptance: 5 Stages of Grief & Loss." *Psych Central.com*, 24 July 2016, [blogs.psychcentral.com/caregivers/2016/07/acceptance-5-stages-of-grief-loss/](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/caregivers/2016/07/acceptance-5-stages-of-grief-loss/).

on the *first* Thanksgiving, *first* Christmas, *first* birthday, and so on.

- *Acceptance doesn't make everything normal like it was before your loss.* The separation from your loved one is abnormal, so you will never achieve the previous semblance of normal. However, acceptance can lead you to a *new normal* where your life can still be purposeful and peaceful.
- *Acceptance doesn't mean that you feel "all better."* There will be much pain in the days ahead, and there'll always be a part of you that feels incomplete. You will feel *better* at some point, but not *all better*. The only thing to make you *all better* would be to see your loved one again.
- *Acceptance doesn't mean you've crossed an invisible finish line and get awarded a medal of completion.* While acceptance is the goal, it doesn't mean the process of grieving is ending. Think of it like this: You're running a series of marathon races, one after the other. It's tiring, but you have just enough strength to get through each one.

### ***What Acceptance Looks Like***

- *Acceptance is a conscious decision to step forward into your new reality.* You acknowledge the truth of what happened to your loved one and that you can't change what happened. You have no other choice other than to continue living. You're not trying to forget the person you lost or what happened. Instead, you're determined to make the best use of what time you have left on the earth. You may even use their death as an opportunity to share their story and help shape the lives of others.

- *Acceptance means you can remember your loved one without being fixated on how they died.* You can now think about your loved one and laugh, or even shed a tear as you consider the precious memories. You may pull out pictures or watch home movies to see them or hear their voice. (It will take more time depending on the way they died.)
- *Acceptance is a process that you will continue to experience for days, weeks, months, and years to come.* Each time a memory confronts you, it has the potential to send you into an emotional spiral, but you're able to stop and take control over any painful thoughts. As I've told people for years: You don't need to *win* ten years down the road; you only need to *win* the next minute. Pretty soon, you'll be winning hours, days, months, and then years. Just win each *now* time.

You don't need to *win* ten years down the road; you only need to *win* the next minute. Pretty soon, you'll be winning hours, days, months, and then years. Just win each *now*.

### **What Can I Expect in the First Month?**

The first month and beyond will be full of emotionally intense experiences. It's going to be messy and chaotic, so you need to be prepared. You will experience some of the five stages, but you may even *make up* stages along the way. Don't think you're strange or doing something wrong. It's *your* grief, and *you're* the one who must face it.



# 4.

## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT THE STAGES OF GRIEF?



Every emotional response found in the Kübler-Ross *Five Stages of Grief Model* corresponds to emotive expressions in the Bible. In our humanity, we sometimes forget that God *feels* and *expresses* emotion, just as we do. Genesis 6:6 and Psalm 78:40 are biblical examples that remind us that God experienced grief. Psalm 7:11, Deuteronomy 9:22, and Romans 1:18 are verses that talk about God expressing anger (*and I could share many more verses on that topic*). Please understand: God is not a far-off, detached, and unemotional being who is devoid of feelings.

God is not a far-off, detached, and unemotional being who is devoid of feelings.

God is the Author of emotions, so you can know that it's only because He created it that you're experiencing any emotion. Since God cannot sin (1 John 3:9), there *must* be a holy and just expression of every emotion. Remember: God created you in His image (Genesis 1:26), so you possess the capacity to express your emotions, just like God does. Therefore, it's imperative to discover a healthy expression of every emotion. Don't allow yourself to bottle up, push down, or repress your emotions because that could result in an unhealthy explosion that will damage relationships and your reputation and leave you with lifelong regrets. Let's look at what the Bible says about the Five Stages of Grief, using the life and crucifixion of Jesus as the case study.

## THE BIBLE AND DENIAL

Throughout His ministry, Jesus told His disciples three times that He would suffer and die (Matthew 16:21, 17:22-23, Matthew 20:17-19). They *heard* what He said, but they didn't really understand because they didn't *want* to believe it. In their minds, Jesus was the Miracle Maker who could do anything. He was the Messiah who would set up a political kingdom, but God's plan was very different from theirs. They didn't want to believe that anything bad could happen to Jesus, so they just didn't think about it because it was too hard to consider.

***Biblical Response to Denial:*** The biblical response to denial is honesty with yourself and with others. It was Tuesday morning, six days before my dad passed away, and I had just finished getting dressed for the day. As I started to walk out of the bathroom, I knew God was telling me this was my dad's last week on the earth. I didn't have a dream or a vision from God, just a deep feeling inside. About an hour later, I received a

phone call from my brother-in-law, who told me my dad was being admitted into ICU so the doctors could try to help with his breathing. His call was an unwanted confirmation of the truth I already knew.

*Being honest with yourself doesn't mean that you don't have faith or that God can't still do a miracle.* I knew and still believe that God can do anything! For me, that's more than just head knowledge or rote memorization of Bible verses; I believe it with all my heart. I've *seen* God do miracles. Unfortunately, I also knew my dad's time on the earth was nearing completion. Being honest didn't make me feel better; it just helped me prepare for the coming reality.

### ***Ways to Honestly Address Loss:***

- *If your loved one is going through a long-term illness, do everything you can to celebrate and cherish each moment.* Theodor Seuss Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, is quoted as saying, "Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory."<sup>55</sup>
- *Allow your loved ones to share their feelings.* People who are dying often *want* to talk about what they're feeling because they're grieving. Death can be frightening because there's a sense of the unknown. None of us truly knows what it looks like when we close our eyes for the last time, so try to be sensitive in those final moments as they voice their concerns. While these

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<sup>55</sup> Svoboda, Martin. "Dr. Seuss Quote #1490624." *Quotepark.com*, 9 Dec. 2020, [quotepark.com/quotes/1490624-dr-seuss-sometimes-you-will-never-know-the-value-of-a-momen/](https://quotepark.com/quotes/1490624-dr-seuss-sometimes-you-will-never-know-the-value-of-a-momen/).

conversations may be uncomfortable for you, prioritize their needs over yours.

- *Ask doctors to be honest in their diagnosis.* I've spoken to hundreds of doctors over the years, and I've noticed that they tend to be as optimistic as possible because they don't want to be the bearer of bad news for families. While optimism is good to maintain, it's also essential to root yourself in reality and prepare for any possible scenario. Believe "for" the best but prepare for the worst.
- *Pray with your loved one, or let them pray if that's their desire.* My dad was a Christian since he was a small boy. Yet, the day before he passed, Dad told me he wanted to pray to make sure there was no unforgiveness in his heart and that he was pure before the Lord. I initially felt there was no need to pray, but I saw his face and knew this was something HE needed. So, dad prayed, and then I prayed for him. As he concluded, I saw peace on his face.
- *Talk about the hurt you're feeling.* When you lose a loved one or friend, it hurts. A real danger for a grieving person is to think you have to be strong at all times for everyone or that you just need to put your best game face on and keep persevering. Talk through what you're feeling.

**Believe "for" the best but prepare for the worst.**

## **THE BIBLE AND ANGER**

As Jesus and His disciples were in the Garden of Gethsemane, a large crowd armed with swords and clubs arrived to arrest Him. Thinking he was protecting Jesus and doing Him a favor, Peter drew his sword and

cut off the ear of a servant named Malchus (Matthew 26:51, John 18:10). Peter believed he was justified because of the injustice taking place, rather than considering the potential long-term consequences of his actions. At that moment, he reacted angrily and impulsively.

However, Jesus's responded to Peter in John 18:11 by saying, "Put your sword back into its sheath. Shall I not drink from the cup of suffering the Father has given me?"<sup>56</sup> When I read this, I thought: Many times, it's easier for the person going through the death process than it is for the person left behind.

Many times, it's easier for the person  
going through the death process  
than it is for the person left behind.

***Biblical Response to Anger:*** Anger is mentioned more than five hundred times in Scripture; the only emotion in the Bible more common than anger is love.<sup>57</sup> The irony of the relationship between anger and love, in this case, is we're angry because we've lost someone we loved.

At this point, it's important to understand that **ANGER IS NOT A SIN**. Ephesians 4:26 says, "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go

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<sup>56</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Clinton, Timothy E., and Ronald E. Hawkins. *The Quick-Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling*. Baker Books, 2009.

down while you are still angry.” Being angry *isn’t* a sin; it’s what you do with your anger that can potentially lead to sinful actions. Peter’s anger became a sin because it caused him to lash out and injure someone else.

***Holding on to anger hurts you more than anyone else.*** The first time I went kneeboarding, I was 16 years old. I was a “manly man” who was determined to be the best at whatever I did. As the boat took off, I rose out of the water and quickly got the hang of what I was doing. I jumped several waves and got confident way too fast. As I tried to make a left-to-right maneuver to jump a massive wave, I lost control and went headfirst into the water. It felt like I had just smacked my face into a wall, but that wasn’t the worst thing. In my little teen brain, I thought to myself, “I’m not letting go of this rope. I’ll keep pulling myself until I get back above water.” After my face smacked the water four more times, common sense finally kicked in and told me to let go of the rope. My pain stopped the moment I let go.

The moral of the story is I should have let go of the rope sooner because holding on was only going to lead to more pain for me. The driver in the boat wasn’t getting hurt. The passengers weren’t getting injured. The other people on the water were fine. On the contrary, my actions became a memory for them and me.

The reasons for your anger will differ based upon how your loved one passed. As awful as it is, the death of my dad, a 79-year-old man due to heart failure, is easier to understand than the murder of a teen. There are so many variables that will determine your anger level and the length of time it takes to process it. Still, left unchecked, anger will destroy you spiritually, physically, and emotionally.

## ***Suggestions for Biblically Dealing with Your Anger:***

- *Tell God how exactly you feel.* King David shared his anger with God through writing Imprecatory Psalms. These psalms contain curses or prayers for the punishment of the psalmist's enemies.<sup>58</sup> One example of this is in Psalm 109. In verses 1-5, he told God about how he was suffering. In verses 6-15, he asked God to bring judgment. In verses 16-20, he vented his anger against the person. In verses 21-25, David expressed dependence on the Lord. In verses 26-29, he called out for God's help. Finally, in verses 30-31, he praised God.
- *Address feelings of anger in private, not public.* There's a lot of things I tell God privately that I would never say publicly. Others may not be able to handle it, but God can. When you say something in public that you shouldn't say or that people don't understand, you can't "un-ring" that bell. You'll either look crazy, stupid or just plain ridiculous. Address your anger in private.
- *Don't act out against someone else for the pain you are feeling.* The moment you cross a line and allow your emotions to spill over into other areas of your life, it becomes sin. If you're not careful, the object of your anger could become someone like a server in a restaurant who's having a bad night. WARNING: This can become a real issue in families where small, meaningless things can become magnified for no reason.

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<sup>58</sup> Theopedia.com. "Imprecatory Psalms." *Theopedia.com*, [www.theopedia.com/imprecatory-psalms](http://www.theopedia.com/imprecatory-psalms).

- *Let go of your anger and move on emotionally, even if there's a legitimate reason.* If your loved one died at the hands of others, justice demands you *press on* to see them held accountable. Do that 100%! However, ask God to help *justice* to be your cause and not revenge. I've watched many beautiful people become embittered who died too soon.

## THE BIBLE AND BARGAINING

Jesus took His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray with Him because He knew that the time of His death was near. It was a physically and emotionally agonizing experience He didn't *want* to experience. The author of Hebrews wrote that Jesus endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2). He didn't welcome or enjoy death in any way. He was open to His Father having another way to accomplish His will.

In Matthew 26:39, Jesus gave us an example of what biblical bargaining looks like as He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."<sup>59</sup> The "cup" Jesus was referring to was the cup of suffering He knew He would face during the events of His arrest, mock trial, torture, and crucifixion.

I find it interesting that Jesus used the phrase, "If it is possible," because He had taught His disciples in Mark 9:23 that "everything is possible for one who believes."<sup>60</sup> Isn't Jesus contradicting Himself? Not at all. His prayer in the Garden shows the intensity of emotions Jesus was feeling in the moment. Though He was God, He was still human

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<sup>59</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



(Philippians 2:5-11). The prospect of death was horrific, especially the manner of death in which He died. The struggle He faced was not with God's ability to do anything, but in His human willingness to accept the cup He was about to suffer. Yet, He didn't sin, and He obediently trusted His Father in the most difficult of times.

***Biblical Response to Bargaining:*** Jesus didn't *want* to die, and we see that in His bargaining words, "Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from me." We have to be careful in talking about death because it's easy to quote Bible verses and tell someone their loved one is in a better place. Let's not super-spiritualize the truth that death is real and painful! It's miserable for the person dying and for those left behind.

**Death is real and painful! It's miserable for the person dying and for those left behind.**

At the same time, Jesus teaches us what biblical bargaining looks like in His next words: "Yet not as I will, but as you will." Jesus' ultimate conclusion was that the accomplishment of God's will in and through His life was the most important thing. Think about that for a moment: Does your bargaining with God conclude with that thought?

***Thoughts on how to Bargain Biblically:***

- *Pray for a miracle.* Ask God to do the impossible (Mark 10:27) and have your church leaders come and pray the prayer of faith (James 5:13-16) with your loved one. Remember: God is our creator (Psalm 139:13-16), and He can go beyond anything we can ask, think, dream, or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). However, if

God doesn't answer your prayer the way you hope He will, it's not because your prayers were inadequate, or God is angry with you. God doesn't always answer prayer the way we ask because He's God, and He knows what we need.

- *Work with medical professionals and teams to do everything possible for your loved one.* St. Augustine said, "Pray as though everything depends on God. Work as though everything depends on you."<sup>61</sup> Faith always begins with God, but James 2:17-18 tells us that our faith and works should go hand-in-hand.
- *Ultimately, you have to defer to God's will and not your own.* While this sounds simplistic, it's complicated for us to do because it requires that we surrender to a plan we can't see. It's easy to say that we trust God until He allows us to be in a position where we have to trust Him. Charles Spurgeon once said, "God is too good to be unkind, and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart." God's heart for you is love and blessing, even when it doesn't feel like it in the moment.

It's really easy to say that we trust God,  
until He allows us to be in a position  
in which we really have to trust Him.

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<sup>61</sup> "'Pray as Though Everything Depended on God. Work as Though..." *St Augustine's College*, 15 Dec. 2020, [www.saintaug.nsw.edu.au/news/pray-as-though-everything-depended-on-god-work-as-though-everything-depended-on-you-saint-augustine](http://www.saintaug.nsw.edu.au/news/pray-as-though-everything-depended-on-god-work-as-though-everything-depended-on-you-saint-augustine).

## THE BIBLE AND DEPRESSION

Following the death of Jesus, His followers struggled to figure out what had just happened. It didn't make any sense. There was no justice in His sentence, and life wasn't fair. The world had crucified their Lord and Savior, and depression had already begun to set in. Even after His resurrection, their grief led to them failing to recognize Him.

In John 20:11-18, Mary Magdalene was standing outside of the tomb crying. Two angels were there when she arrived, but Mary was so caught up in her grief that she ignored them. Did you get that? ANGELS! Jesus then approached her and asked why she was crying. Again, overwhelmed by grief, she didn't know it was Jesus speaking to her. She didn't recognize Him until He called her name that she recognized Him.

We see a similar experience in Luke 24:13-35, where Jesus approached two of His disciples on the Road to Emmaus. Verse 17 described their faces as "downcast" because depression had set in, and all they could see was their grief. Jesus began walking and talking with them, and they still didn't recognize Him until He went home with them and broke bread.

In both cases, these were people who *knew* and *loved* Jesus. Yet, their grief and depression desensitized them from recognizing Him. If we're honest, grief and depression can do the same to us. As we're engrossed in our loss, a part of our faith dies because we didn't see the answer for which we prayed. Depression can lead us to see life as unjust and unfair and make us question why we should move on from our pain or even continue to live.

***Biblical Response to Depression:*** Look, I get it. I understand why Mary and the two disciples felt the way they did and why you may feel that way too. Depression occurs as a result of our expectations, right or wrong, not being met. For them, the death of Jesus rocked their worldview instantly. Everything they had hoped for and planned was gone, or so they thought.

For us, our loss dealt a staggering blow and highlighted in our minds the list of other issues in our lives that didn't turn out as we had planned. The repressed anger over smaller losses in our life become increasingly magnified so that when we experience large losses, they work in conjunction to try to blow up what we believe about God. It's amazing what you'll remember from unmet needs, prayers, and desires from throughout your life. The devil will try to use our disappointments to prove God doesn't love you. However, that isn't Truth.

***How can things change?*** Both Mary and the two disciples had their perspective changed when they miraculously heard directly from Jesus following His resurrection. While I understand this isn't going to be our reality, the principle here is crucial for us to see: We need to hear from Jesus in our depression *before* it gets out of control.

We need to hear from Jesus in our depression  
*before* it gets out of control.

***Considerations for Overcoming Depression:***

- *Merely talking about your problems isn't the solution.* After a loss, some people will go to a counselor, hoping they will lead them

to a place of healing. Counseling can play an essential role in the healing process. However, I've witnessed some counselors who allow their clients to stay on the merry-go-round of story sharing too long. As a result, their clients developed a victim mentality where they see themselves through the lens of pain, hurt, and loss. Then, the next problem comes along, and all they see is the pain, hurt, and loss. IMPORTANT: When you look at life through a cracked lens, everything looks like it's broken.

## When you look at life through a cracked lens, everything looks like it's broken.

- *Getting a word from God starts in the Word of God.* I want to encourage you to find biblical passages on grief and depression and study them. Several people in the Bible who suffered from depression and whose lives are important to consider are Job, King David, Elijah, Jonah, Moses, and Jeremiah. You will quickly find that these are real people, just like you, who overcame incredible loss and depression. Discover how God used their pain to impact the lives of others. Also, do a word study over the words “grief” and “depression” and ask the Holy Spirit to show you hope offered by the Bible for your need.
- *Think about the good things in your life.* When you've suffered a loss, it isn't easy to see any of the good things in your life. I challenge you to create a thankfulness journal of all the blessings you have in your life and thank God daily for each one. Don't focus only on the big things you can tangibly see; be thankful for

the things we often take for granted like oxygen, good health, vision, the beauty of nature, etc.

## THE BIBLE AND ACCEPTANCE

While Jesus was on the cross for six hours, He made seven statements. Only one of those statements was in the form of a question in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34 where He asked, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” It’s the only time where it *appeared* there was a moment of weakness for Jesus. (Notice: I used the word “appeared”)

Why would Jesus ask this question? Was this a sin of unbelief? To answer the second question first, it was NOT a sin of unbelief because Jesus never sinned (1 Peter 2:22). There are, however, a couple of explanations for why Jesus asked this question that will help us as we seek to find acceptance for our loss.

First, as Jesus was dying, the sins of the world were placed on Him (1 John 2:2, Isaiah 53:6, 2 Corinthians 5:21), and that sin weighed so heavily that He felt separation from His Father. It’s possible the weight of sin led Jesus to ask this question: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? At the same, Jesus already knew the answer because His question comes from Psalm 22:1. Later in Psalm 22:24, the Psalmist wrote: “For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.” The Father would NEVER abandon Him and 22:24).

***What can we learn from this, and how can it help us?*** We struggle with loss because sin has separated us from our loved ones, leaving us to feel abandoned. However, in our moments of deepest despair, we must

remember that the Father will NEVER abandon us! As you're walking through your grief, you can know you're not doing it alone.

Secondly, in asking this question, Jesus may have been driving people to study the Scriptures so that they would know He was the Messiah. Psalm 22 would have been a passage many Jews would have known since it related to Messianic prophecies. Asking this question would have certainly caused many of them to recall this Scripture and go back to re-read what they said. Jesus was the Word (John 1:1) who pointed everyone to God's Word.

***What can we learn from this, and how can it help us?*** Jesus asked a question in the most challenging time of His life, and it's OK for you to ask questions too. We just have to be careful that we go to the right source to find Truth. There are answers to your questions in the Scriptures. Man's knowledge is limited, but God's wisdom is limitless.

Man's knowledge is limited,  
but God's wisdom is limitless.

The final words of Jesus from the cross was a statement of acceptance in Luke 23:46: "Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last."<sup>62</sup> Just as He did in His prayer in the Garden, His question on the cross, and His final words, Jesus accepted God's will for His life. How

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<sup>62</sup>*Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

will you respond when God's will is different from yours? Are you willing to accept it, or will you fight it?

***Biblical Response to Acceptance:*** Acceptance is the last stage because it's the last thing we want to do. My dad was so ready to go to heaven at the end. I mean, he was *REALLY* ready. He asked my sister, who is a nurse, "Am I dying wrong? What do I need to do?" We were *very* fortunate to spend time with him as he was dying in ICU and say everything we all wanted and needed to say. Intellectually, I know He's with Jesus, but in my mind, I keep wanting to talk with him and share what's going on in my life. Each time that thought crosses my mind; I have to accept his death all over again. Acceptance is a painful process.

***Truths to Consider Regarding Biblical Acceptance:***

- *Biblical acceptance comes with an expectation.* For the Christian, death is the beginning of life, not the end. The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:8 that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. In other words, the moment your loved one died, they were with Jesus. Paul also reminds us in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 to comfort one another with the words you'll one day be together again with your loved ones in heaven.
- *Biblical acceptance is rooted in Truth.* As believers, we must speak the truth at all times because God demands the truth from His children, and Jesus is Truth (Zechariah 8:16, Ephesians 4:15, John 8:32, John 14:16). As difficult as it may be, we have to speak the truth about our losses and pain. To ignore their effect on our



lives isn't being truthful. Own your hurt. Accept your pain, so you can begin to heal.

- *Biblical acceptance will result in us using our story to impact the life of someone else.* Everything that happens in life has a purpose. As you're hurting right now, understand others in your community and worldwide are in a similar place. Consider how you can use your story to impact and help others.

## Biblical acceptance comes with an expectation.

### **What Does the Bible Say About the Stages of Grief?**

God is the Author of emotions, and He *feels*. Since you're created by Him and in His image, if you're experiencing an emotion, there's a holy outlet of that emotion that will allow you to express your feelings.

You're going to overcome your grief and experience life again! How can I be so sure? You've already made it this far, and so have I. What the devil wants you to think is that your pain can never heal. That's not true! Things *will* never be the same again, but God isn't finished writing your story. Keep pressing forward. The *Five Stages of Death* are going to give way to the *Five Stages of Hope*!

# 5.

## WHY DID THIS HAPPEN TO ME? (AND THEM)



**I** never saw this coming. They were sick for so long. I wasn't ready for them to go. I'm glad they're not suffering anymore, but I miss them. They left me all alone. I'm so messed up. I feel like I'm cursed. Everyone I get close to dies. Here we go again. My life is so hard. I hurt so bad! My tears are like a river. I can't cry another tear. I'm miserable and I'm making everyone around me depressed. I'm the poster child for grief. I feel so lost. Is God mad at me? What did I do to deserve this? Am I the only person feeling this way? Why do bad things always seem to happen to me? Why, God? Why?

The most common questions in the middle of grief start with "why?" Why did they get sick? Why did they have to die like *that*? Why did they

get cancer? Why did they die in an accident? Why did they overdose? Why did they kill themselves? Why were they taken from me before their time? Why am I feeling this way? Why do I have to grow up without a parent? Why did they leave me? Why can't I stop crying? Why did God allow this to happen? Why me, God? Why? Why? Why?

Asking questions is a significant part of our lives from the time we begin speaking. One study found that very young children ask their mothers almost 300 questions per day.<sup>63</sup> Using the findings in this study, children would ask nearly 110,000 questions per year. Probably closer to reality, Author Warren Berger estimates the number of questions asked between the ages of two and five to be approximately 40,000.<sup>64</sup> While most questions seek a simple “yes” or “no” answer for small children, by the age of 5, an average of 30% of children's questions are request for explanations.<sup>65</sup>

As children, we're inquisitive, and we want answers. However, as we grow older, our questions become fewer. Perhaps the reason for this is we attended school and had a bad experience asking a question. Maybe you saw someone else get embarrassed, and you thought to yourself,

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<sup>63</sup> Agencies, Telegraph Staff And. “Mothers Asked Nearly 300 Questions a Day, Study Finds.” *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 28 Mar. 2013, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9959026/Mothers-asked-nearly-300-questions-a-day-study-finds.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9959026/Mothers-asked-nearly-300-questions-a-day-study-finds.html).

<sup>64</sup> Berger, Warren. *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*. Langara College, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Frazier, Brandy N, et al. “Preschoolers' Search for Explanatory Information within Adult-Child Conversation.” *Child Development*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2009, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2784636/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2784636/).

“I’m not going to let that happen to me.” We don’t ask questions because we don’t want to be embarrassed or sound stupid in front of others. Possibly we ask fewer questions because we sensed others were getting annoyed with us when we did ask questions. Whatever the reason, the older we grow, the fewer questions we ask, but that inclination to question things we don’t understand never leaves us.

When confronted by death, our minds reset  
to a time when we were younger,  
when questions demanded answers.

When confronted by death, our minds reset to a time when we were younger, when questions demanded answers. In grief, our minds want a packaged solution to help us develop a measure of understanding that will, hopefully, lead us to find some level of comfort. Questions are the vehicle that takes us to the desired destination. Questions are right, and we should ask them. However, as you’re asking questions, I want to give you three warnings I’ve observed to help prepare you for the responses of others:

***Warning #1: Some people will give cliché answers to your difficult questions because it’s what we’ve learned to do in times of loss.*** We live in a cliché society that seeks to provide answers as a clever catchphrase. People of faith are often guilty of oversimplifying answers by using the closest biblical mantra available. (Remember: I’m a Christian, so I’m qualified to speak to both sides of this issue.) People will say things that *sound* profound, but you’ll filter the words

differently when *you've* just lost someone *you* love. Rather than being so profound, they're what I call "*fauxfound*."

When you ask, "Why did this happen," you may hear responses like: "God's ways are higher than our ways." "It was God's will." "Your loss is heaven's gain." "They wouldn't want you to be sad." "Heaven's going to shine a little brighter." Yes, many of these statements may be accurate; they're just not helpful when you're suffering.

Let's be honest: We've all been guilty of making one or more of these statements in hopes of providing our friend or loved one with a measure of comfort. However, there's no simple, neat answer to our *why* questions that an explanation in a few sentences will resolve. The painful realization is: The mystery you're asking can't be answered on this side of eternity in a meaningful way so that it will give the peace you're seeking.

***Warning #2: Many people are uncomfortable when grieving people ask questions out loud, and they may try to avoid you.*** If they do this, understand it's not a personal attack against you. The reason people may avoid you could go back to our days in school when we didn't want the teacher to call on us when we didn't know the answer. *We're afraid to say the wrong thing.* It could also be that this question could cause someone else to face losses they've suffered, and they don't want to open themselves up emotionally again. In general, men are particularly not good at answering these types of questions because it requires that we explore our feelings, and, as a whole, we aren't good at questions that require us to consider our emotions. So, what do you do? At this point, you need to understand who you're talking with before you ask a

question. Do they share a similar emotional attachment to the loved one you lost? Are they emotionally equipped to handle the question? Ask questions that are appropriate for the person with whom you're speaking.

***Warning #3: Generally, people are afraid of death and don't want anything to do with a discussion surrounding it.*** There are several reasons why this may be the case, but I'll focus on four. First, the death of someone we know is a blatant reminder that our time on earth is limited too. People don't like to consider their mortality, especially if the person who passed was close to their age. Secondly, people are overwhelmed by personal life challenges, including their demanding schedule that revolves around their children, financial problems, work issues, aging parents, and an overabundance of other life problems. They can't consider death because they have too much going on. Thirdly, some people are superstitious and think that if they talk about death, they will die. In order not to tempt fate, people decide to say nothing about it. Finally, our world has become desensitized to death because it's all around us in life, TV, movies, video games, and more. Until it directly impacts you, death doesn't feel like it's real; it just feels like another scene designed to transition to new characters.

### **Why Questions I've Had**

I've had a lot of personal experience with death throughout the years. Truthfully, I haven't thought a lot about the vast numbers of losses I've experienced in my 54 years circling the sun before writing this book. Here's a brief listing of some of my other experiences with death:

- I knew seven people who were killed in accidents in high school alone, six in car accidents and another in a freak horse-riding accident
- Over 34 years, I've spoken at over 200 funerals for precious people between the ages of 9 months and 99 years, literally
- I've attended, at least, another 400 funerals of either people I knew or family members of people I knew
- In only two months since my dad's death, thirteen of my friends have lost one of their parents

I've had a lot of experience with death, and I notice that the *why* questions I've asked over the years have significantly differed based on the situation. For example:

**My grandfather:** Why did my grandfather die of esophageal cancer when he didn't fall into any risk category? He never smoked, and he didn't drink, so why him?

**9-month-old baby:** Why did a mom leave her baby in a bathtub running with water while doing drugs in the room next door? I had to perform the funeral for this sweet baby that drowned for no reason because of a selfish addiction. This funeral was on my birthday in 2005.

**11-month-old baby:** Why did a mom let her boyfriend (*with anger issues*) watch her child, and who shook this precious baby to death because it would not stop crying? I'll never forget standing at the end of this miniature coffin and watching it lowered into the ground.

**6-year-old girl:** Why did God allow a precious, beautiful 6-year-old girl to be diagnosed with DIPG, Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma, a brain

tumor that took her life? She was so innocent, and she LOVED Jesus! She had as much faith as anyone I've ever seen. Why Layla Grace Evetts?

The questions could go on and on: Why is my friend burying their child? Why did my friend commit suicide? Why did my friend die of cancer when he had such a long life seemingly still ahead of him? Why did a drunk driver drive on the wrong side of the highway and hit my friend head on and kill him? Why did a healthy mother of four end up with a brain tumor that would take her from her children before two of them would ever *know* her? Why did my dad cutting his hand in such a small area lead to complications that caused his death? These are all real questions I've asked about my friends and family members. Why?

## **Tackling the Complexity of Suffering**

At the heart of any grief-related, *why* question is the issue of suffering. No one wants to suffer, and we all wish there were an easy fix that could instantly lessen our pain. Carl Goldberg and Virginia Crespo suggested that suffering is “humankind’s most puzzling and persistent concern.”<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately, there’s no physical or psychological prescription or even words of wisdom anyone can offer to make you *feel* better. People turn to self-medication through alcohol or drugs to lessen the pain of a moment, but your suffering is still very much real when the numbing effects wear off.

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<sup>66</sup> Goldberg, Carl, and Virginia Crespo. “Suffering and Personal Agency.” *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2003, pp. 85–93., doi:10.1080/13569080310001612734.



We ask why because we *need* an answer that can help us make sense of the loss of our loved one or friend. If you're asking the question, "*Why*," you're not alone. Human history is full of suffering and the attempts of man to answer the *why* questions. Why me? Why them? Why now? Why this pain? Why can't I stop hurting?

## **Greek and Roman Philosophers on Suffering**

**NOTE:** I'm only addressing Greek and Roman philosophers because much of their theories and thoughts are foundational in modern-day counseling.

Greek and Roman philosophers taught that suffering would be faced more deeply by people who truly appreciated life. Many of the well-known philosophers also believed that *knowledge* held the key to understanding and overcoming suffering. One fifth-century Greek philosopher, Antiphon, even went so far as to advertise he could *cure* those suffering from grief through the power of words.<sup>67</sup> Let me ask you: Are there any words a psychologist, counselor, relative, or friend can say to you in one meeting or series of meetings that will *cure* your suffering? Words *can* help, but promises of a *cure* are nothing more than empty lies.

Nonetheless, the Greek and Roman philosophers' contributions about suffering deserve examination since many of their classical teachings form the basis for much of modern-day counseling. I'm going to share

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<sup>67</sup> Baltussen, Han. "How to Console Yourself and Others: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on Managing Grief." *Humanities Australia*, 2011, [www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/AAH-Trendall-Lect-Baltussen-2011.pdf](http://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/AAH-Trendall-Lect-Baltussen-2011.pdf).

three statements on suffering from Socrates, Aristotle, and Seneca, and follow each message with a real-life observation:

**Socrates Quote:** Socrates said this about suffering, “If you don't get what you want, you suffer; if you get what you don't want, you suffer; even when you get exactly what you want, you still suffer because you can't hold on to it forever. Your mind is your predicament. It wants to be free of change. Free of pain, free of the obligations of life and death.”<sup>68</sup>

**Real-Life Observation:** There's a lot of truth to unpack here, but the bottom line of Socrates' message was that regardless of your situation, you're *going* to suffer for one reason or another. His assessment is accurate: We suffer because of lack, life, and loss. How many times have you not gotten something you wanted or something you didn't ask for, and you ended up suffering? Then, in what seems like a cruel joke, you finally get what you want, only to lose it too. Life's not fair sometimes.

Socrates also stated that *most* of our minds want lives free of change. However, that's not totally accurate. I think it's more precise to say that *we only like the change we want*. Truthfully, our minds can absorb and welcome change, as long as it's a change that benefits us. For instance, if a baby's born into the family, we celebrate change. It's a good change! Still, a baby *will* alter your reality for the rest of your life, especially if it's *your* baby and lives in *your* home.

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<sup>68</sup> Stroebe, Margaret S., and Emmy van den. Blink. *Handbook of Bereavement Research and Practice: Advances in Theory and Intervention*. American Psychological Association, 2008.

## We only like the change we want.

The death of someone we loved, on the other hand, is the type of change that none of our minds want to embrace. It's too much change, and it comes too quick, regardless of whether or not you've suffered a sudden loss or a loss via a long-term illness. The first time you go home after your loss, and each subsequent trip, after that, will remind you that your loved one's gone. You'll find yourself saying, "I can't believe they're gone." Then, when you think you're doing ok, BOOM; grief smacks you right in your face, and you get back on the suffering see-saw again. Up and down. Up and down.

Socrates was on to something when he wrote that *your mind* is your predicament. That's good knowledge to have because your mind can be your best friend or your worst enemy. However, this knowledge is incomplete and insufficient to help us understand suffering.

**Aristotle Quote:** Aristotle, a student of Plato, addressed suffering as follows: "Suffering becomes beautiful when anyone bears great calamities with cheerfulness, not through insensibility but through greatness of mind."<sup>69</sup>

**Real-Life Observation:** Aristotle's statement has a lot of truth in it. I think most of us would agree that finding a way to express cheerfulness and being able to laugh as we're grieving can prove helpful. I know it

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<sup>69</sup> Aristotle. "A Quote by Aristotle." *Goodreads*, Goodreads, 2020, [www.goodreads.com/quotes/505724-suffering-becomes-beautiful-when-anyone-bears-great-calamities-with-cheerfulness](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/505724-suffering-becomes-beautiful-when-anyone-bears-great-calamities-with-cheerfulness).

has for me in my losses. However, in reality, it's a lot easier to say than to do. I've often seen how a small child at a funeral or viewing can bring joy in the middle of suffering, even if only for a moment. Aristotle was right to that extent. We *NEED* those moments.

However, his *profound* words began to ring empty as he reached the climax that beauty occurs "but through greatness of mind." What does he mean by that? Get real: Suffering removes the façade of the greatness of any of our minds, in that it demonstrates to us that regardless of how good we are, or how smart or strong we are, we're limited. Like it or not, we all have a shelf life, an expiration date. None of our minds are *that* great that we can rise above the pain through knowledge alone.

Aristotle's conclusion implies that all you need to do when you're suffering is to find a way to think yourself above the pain. According to him, all we need is to have the "greatness of mind." His assessments are complexing because his mentor, Plato, struggled with extreme emotional suffering after the execution of Socrates, his teacher.<sup>70</sup> Did Plato not have "greatness of mind?" Philosophical wisdom *sounds* good until *YOU'RE* the one suffering.

Philosophical wisdom *sounds* good  
until *YOU'RE* the one suffering.

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<sup>70</sup> Wilson, Emily. "The Death of Socrates'." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 24 Nov. 2007, [www.wsj.com/articles/SB119559033449699536](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB119559033449699536).

**Seneca Quote:** Seneca was a Roman philosopher who was Rome's leading intellectual figure in the mid-1st century during the first phase of the emperor Nero's reign.<sup>71</sup> He made a strange assessment regarding suffering: "You have buried one whom you loved; look about for someone to love. It is better to replace your friend than to weep for him... the most shameful cure for sorrow, in the case of a sensible man, is to grow weary of sorrowing."<sup>72</sup>

**Real-Life Observation:** Wow! Where do I begin assessing this statement? Seneca's words remind me of the saying in sports, "Next man up." It means that if an injury stops a person from playing in the game, the next person has to step up and take their place. On the surface, his comment appears beyond shallow. "If someone you loved died, that's OK because there are a lot more people out there who need friends, and you need to find one." However, the closer we examine what he is saying, we find *some* truth, even if he said the right thing insensitively.

When we grieve, it's easy to forget the relationships we *have* because we miss the relationships we *had*. Seneca was essentially saying that there's nothing we can do to change our present reality, so we must invest our lives in other relationships. To a degree, I believe Seneca was correct.

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<sup>71</sup> Dudley, Donald Reynolds. "Seneca." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2020, [www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Annaeus-Seneca-Roman-philosopher-and-statesman](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Annaeus-Seneca-Roman-philosopher-and-statesman).

<sup>72</sup> Schneider, Ben. "Seneca, Letter 63." *Seneca Epistles Book 1*, 2020, [www.stoics.com/seneca\\_epistles\\_book\\_1.html](http://www.stoics.com/seneca_epistles_book_1.html).

When we grieve, it's easy to forget  
the relationships we *have* because  
we miss the relationship we *had*.

*CAUTION:* If you spend all of your life grieving, you'll be alive but not living. If you're not careful, suffering can even become your reason *for* living. You may feel this way for many reasons. Maybe you think suffering is your punishment because of something you did that was *bad*. Perhaps you feel guilty about moving on with life when your loved one didn't get a chance to live theirs fully. You believe you *need* to suffer for *their* sake. Or possibly, in a twisted kind of way, you've become familiar with grieving, and publicly suffering your loss has become your identity. You *want* the attention brought on by your loss to keep the memory of your loved one alive or to make sure other people don't leave you alone. I'll share later in the book about how we can healthily reinvest in relationships to help us as we grieve.

*The BIG Problem with the Greek and Roman Philosopher's Response:* The BIG problem with the Greek and Roman philosopher's response to suffering is that it's too grounded in knowledge and almost void of emotion. When you're suffering, you know it's *IMPOSSIBLE* to suffer without having an emotional response. You may fall to the ground in agony, scream, get angry, laugh at a funny memory, feel shocked, or introspectively reminisce. The reason we're emotionally responding is because of knowledge gained that has shaken us to our core. Knowledge and emotion go hand-in-hand. The more knowledge we have about a person in our life, the more emotional we may be upon their death.

If you studied psychology in high school or college, you might remember that the most basic emotions we experience routinely are anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise.<sup>73</sup> As I look at that list, I see a *Who's Who of Emotions* I've encountered in my grief journey. I've felt each one extensively throughout the past year-and-a-half, and I could add on about 15 emotions others, if not more. (On a side note: Those are all emotions I daily experience as I read my Facebook wall, too; just for different reasons.)

## **Conflicting Worldviews on Suffering of Freud and Lewis**

Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis's worldviews are two prominent twentieth-century voices that have shaped the discussion on suffering from two entirely different perspectives in our generation. Freud, angered by it, used suffering as an argument against God's existence,<sup>74</sup> while Lewis attempted to explain the process of grief through the lens of God. Both were intelligent men, but each came to very different conclusions about the problem of suffering. Let's look at their opposing views and find their significance for us.

### **Sigmund Freud**

Like all of us, Freud attempted to find a way to reduce the level of pain in human suffering. His work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was written

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<sup>73</sup> Walinga, Jennifer, and Charles Stangor. "11.1 The Experience of Emotion." *Introduction to Psychology 1st Canadian Edition*, BC Campus, 17 Oct. 2014, [opentextbc.ca/introductiontopsychology/chapter/10-1-the-experience-of-emotion/](http://opentextbc.ca/introductiontopsychology/chapter/10-1-the-experience-of-emotion/).

<sup>74</sup> Oden, Thomas C. "Freud and the Problem of God." *Theology Today*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1980, pp. 248–250., doi:10.1177/004057368003700218.

following his father's death, which triggered a personal emotional crisis and led to him self-analyzing his dreams.<sup>75</sup> Over the years, he had developed a painful mouth cancer due to smoking cigars, which ultimately led to his death in September 1939. Adding to his suffering was the fact Freud was a Jew living in Vienna, Austria, as the Nazis expanded their fascist control over Europe. Both he and his daughter, Anna, were arrested by the *Gestapo* but were later released.

Like all of us, Freud experienced suffering and wrote about his feelings in *Civilization and its Discontents*. He wrote, “It is that we are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love.”<sup>76</sup> Freud’s words reflect his pain, and I think we can all agree with his premise: The more you love, the more helpless you feel, and you hurt when you lose that special someone you loved.

Freud’s suffering led him to reach the following conclusion about it in a 1933 lecture: “It seems not to be the case that there’s a power in the universe that watches over the well-being of individuals with parental care and brings all their affairs to a happy ending. On the contrary, the destinies of mankind can be brought into harmony neither with a

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<sup>75</sup> Thornton, Stephen P. “Sigmund Freud (1856—1939).” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020, [iep.utm.edu/freud/](http://iep.utm.edu/freud/).

<sup>76</sup> Freud, Sigmund, and Joan Riviere. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Hogarth and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1930.



hypothesis of a universal benevolence nor with a partial contradictory one of a universal justice.”<sup>77</sup>

**What was Freud’s conclusion?** Suffering proves there’s no God and no justice. He thought people who believed in God were disillusioned and in need of a father-figure who could absolve them of their guilt.<sup>78</sup> In his world, it was impossible to reconcile how a loving God (*parent*) could watch over His children and allow them to suffer. It was pointless, meaningless.

**Significance for us:** Freud’s thoughts are echoed throughout our society today. In an article titled *Suffering Serves No Divine Purpose*, Jonathan Romain wrote: “I do not believe in a God who uses individual lives as a blackboard for lessons about the human condition.”<sup>79</sup> People question God, and that’s OK. Why would a loving God allow suffering? Why would God *invite* evil to be a part of the world? Let’s make your question even more personal: Why would God allow *MY* loved one to suffer? Please know: The fact you’re asking *why* questions is evidence that proves the existence of God.

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<sup>77</sup> Nicolli, Armand M. “C.S. Lewis and Sigmund Freud: A Comparison of Their Thoughts and Viewpoints on Life, Pain and Death: Armand M. Nicholi II.” *The Independent Institute*, 23 Sept. 1997, [www.independent.org/publications/article.asp?id=1668](http://www.independent.org/publications/article.asp?id=1668).

<sup>78</sup> Cherry, Kendra. “Did Freud Believe in Religion?” *Verywell Mind*, 30 Mar. 2020, [www.verywellmind.com/freud-religion-2795858](http://www.verywellmind.com/freud-religion-2795858).

<sup>79</sup> Romain, Jonathan. “Suffering Serves No Divine Purpose.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 18 Feb. 2010, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/feb/18/suffering-religion](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/feb/18/suffering-religion).

# The fact we ask *why* questions is evidence that proves the existence of God.

Let me explain that statement. Thomas Aquinas' Cosmological Argument for God contends that: 1) Something exists, 2) What exists was caused by something or someone, 3) There must be a necessary being that causes all things, and 4) That being must be behind the cause.<sup>80</sup> In asking the *why* questions, we're admitting we know someone is behind the universe and that Truth assigns intention, meaning, and purpose to every event that takes place.

Where Freud struggled is where we can easily find ourselves getting messed up, as well: Suffering rarely makes sense. At the same time, knowing God is in control of everything doesn't make suffering easier, either. It may even lead to you ask more questions. Freud's perspective was hurt and jaded. However, we gain a MUCH different perspective on this topic from C.S. Lewis.

## **C.S. Lewis**

C.S. Lewis reached a far different conclusion regarding suffering than Freud. Lewis was no stranger to suffering in his life:

- His mother died of cancer when he was a young boy
- He sent to boarding school that had an abusive leader who was later determined to be mentally ill

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<sup>80</sup> GotQuestions.org. "Home." *GotQuestions.org*, 26 July 2005, [www.gotquestions.org/cosmological-argument.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/cosmological-argument.html).

- He was wounded in World War I, but his father would not visit him in the hospital
- His wife, Joy, was diagnosed with cancer after they were married; the cancer would take her life four years later<sup>81</sup>

Lewis wrote two books on the topic of suffering. He wrote his first book a year after Freud's death. Lewis', *The Problem of Pain* (1940), makes a theological argument that pain is not a sufficient argument to reject God. He deals with the topics of Divine Omnipotence, Divine Goodness, human wickedness, the fall of man, human pain, animal pain, and heaven. It's a theological book.

Suffering will challenge every theory and belief you have about God. In his second book, *A Grief Observed*, Lewis wrote about the loss of his wife, Joy. The tone of this book is much different than the first. It was painful and angry. In fact, it was so emotional he first published it under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk because he didn't want his name on it. It was only published under his real name after his death in 1963.<sup>82</sup>

Suffering will challenge every theory  
and belief you have about God.

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<sup>81</sup> Lindsey, Art. "C.S. Lewis on Grief." *Knowing and Doing: CS Lewis Institute*, 2001, pp. 1-3.

<sup>82</sup> Hooper, Walter. *C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide*. HarperCollins, 2005.

Lewis learned this lesson as he walked through the greatest loss in his life, his wife. We can see his raw pain in several quotes in *A Grief Observed*:

**Quote #1:** “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.”

**Quote #2:** “Aren’t all these notes the senseless writings of a man who won’t accept the fact that there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it?

**Quote #3:** “The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just that time when God can’t give it: you are like the drowning man who can’t be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.”

**Quote #4:** “For in grief nothing ‘stays put.’ One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral?”

**Quote #5:** “Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms ... But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.”

**Quote #6:** “God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn’t.

In this trial He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box, and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down.”<sup>83</sup>

Lewis’ pain was fresh. Remember: Twenty years before these quotes, Lewis wrote *The Problem of Pain* and stated, “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>84</sup> Many people have used the last portion of that quote regarding the megaphone as a clichéd meme. However, we see in *A Grief Observed* that Lewis was struggling with *the megaphone*. Theory met reality. However, in the end, he continued to trust God. He never left his faith. He held on to what he had believed for years, and it sustained him through the depths of grief.

We see in *A Grief Observed* that Lewis  
was struggling with *the megaphone*.

**IMPORTANT:** It’s important to note that there’s nothing wrong with expressing your emotions to God! Lewis was angry, and you may be too. The key for Lewis, and us, was that he didn’t allow his emotional responses to cause him to lose his faith. He asked questions to help process what he was feeling. His response was real, raw, and revealing

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<sup>83</sup> Clerk, N. W. (Pseud., and C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*. Faber and Faber, 1961.

<sup>84</sup> Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. Collins, 1940.

for what we may experience. Just don't allow your faith to become a victim of your emotions.

## **Why Did This Happen to Me?**

Suffering happens to everyone. As I'm typing, my 19-year-old daughter just shared with me that a friend of hers lost control of his truck today on a rain-soaked road, and he tragically passed. My oldest daughter just called and told me a friend of hers died in a car accident. Yesterday, my sister told me a doctor from her clinic collapsed and died of Covid-19. Why?

In *Christian Disciplines*, Oswald Chambers wrote, "Suffering is the heritage of the bad, of the penitent, and of the Son of God. Each one ends in the cross. The bad thief is crucified, the penitent thief is crucified, and the Son of God is crucified. By these signs we know the widespread heritage of suffering".<sup>85</sup>

While there may not be a specific answer for your *why*, that fact it happens to everyone reminds you that God isn't *out to get you*. As you pass someone today, understand they've experienced grief. The only people alive who may not have experienced grief are small babies.

In Chapter 6, we're going to look at another question intertwined with this one, why does God let bad things happen to good people? Stay with me on this journey as we shift gears and consider a biblically-based theology of suffering.

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<sup>85</sup> Chambers, Oswald. *Christian Disciplines*. Discovery House, 1995.

# 6.

## WHY DOES GOD LET BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE?



There are 393 *why* questions in the Bible, with 275 being in the Old Testament and 118 in the New Testament.<sup>86</sup> One thing that sticks out to me in the Old Testament is people asked God many questions. Here are six examples of these questions from Job and Jeremiah:

- **Job 3:11** - Why did I not die at birth, come out of the womb and pass away?

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<sup>86</sup> “Bible Gateway: Why?” *BibleGateway.com: A Searchable Online Bible in over 150 Versions and 50 Languages.*, 2020, [www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?qs\\_version=NASB](http://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?qs_version=NASB).

- **Job 7:20** - Have I sinned? What have I done to You, Watcher of mankind? Why have You made me Your target, so that I am a burden to myself?
- **Job 13:24** - Why do You hide Your face and consider me Your enemy?
- **Jeremiah 15:18** - Why has my pain been endless and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will You indeed be to me like a deceptive *stream* with water that is unreliable?
- **Jeremiah 20:18** - Why did I ever come out of the womb to look at trouble and sorrow, so that my days have been spent in shame?
- **Lamentations 5:20** - Why will You forget us forever? *Why* do You abandon us for so long?<sup>87</sup> (Lamentations is written by Jeremiah)

*Why* questions are NORMAL for you to ask, so before we move on, I want to address the most common *why* question people ask because I know it's crossed your mind. Please understand that the answer to this question could require an entire book to answer, so this will be an abbreviated overview, more than a comprehensive explanation.

### **The BIG Question: Why does God let bad things happen to good people?**

This question is probably the most asked question by people who believe in God and even those who don't because we struggle with *fairness* in suffering. We think to ourselves, "If God is really in control, then He must have *caused* what happened to me, or He *allowed* it to happen." In either case, it's hard for us to reconcile how a good God,

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<sup>87</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.



described as a Heavenly Father, would allow anything bad to happen to His children.

If you're asking this question, you're not alone. You don't have to feel guilty for asking it, and your question isn't too big for God to be able to handle. The Bible is *full* of questions the authors had for God when they didn't understand why they endured suffering. Let's take a brief look at three of the Psalms:

- Psalm 10:1 - Why do You stand far away, Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?
- Psalm 44:24 - Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and oppression?
- Psalm 88:14 - Lord, why do You reject my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me?

**Psalm 10** was written by David in a time of persecution by King Saul, and it was given the title by Charles Spurgeon, “A Cry of the Oppressed.”<sup>88</sup> David was crying out to God because of his overwhelming suffering. Interestingly, the phrase “times of trouble” in the ancient Hebrew vocabulary was used only here and in Psalm 9:9. The term meant they felt like they had “no hope for deliverance.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Spurgeon, Charles. “Charles H. Spurgeon's Treasury of David Old Testament Only.” *Charles H. Spurgeon's Treasury of David - Bible Study Online*, 2020, [www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=spur](http://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=spur).

<sup>89</sup> Guzik, David. “Psalm 10.” *Enduring Word*, 18 Mar. 2020, [enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-10/](http://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-10/).

Was there “no hope for deliverance?” Was that really the case? No, but that’s how David *felt* at that moment. He felt like God had abandoned him and was hiding from him. I can’t criticize David because I’ve felt that way before too. If we’re honest, we’ve all felt this way, especially as we’re grieving. C.S. Lewis, a man who unquestionably believed in God, wrote the following when he learned his wife had died: “Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms ... But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside.”<sup>90</sup> Yes, I’ve felt that way too!

**What can I learn from Psalm 10?** It’s important to understand that God created us with emotions, and He won’t *punish us* for expressing those emotions in our pain. He already knows what we’re feeling, so why should we try to fake our way through the grieving process as if we’re OK with what happened? It’s OK to express and vent your pain. Tell God how you feel. Find a place where you can get alone and scream into a pillow or hit it over and over. It’s not fair. Don’t allow your toxic thoughts to choke the life out of you.

It’s important to understand that God created  
us with emotions, and He won’t *punish us*  
for expressing those emotions in our pain.

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<sup>90</sup> Clerk, N. W. (Pseud., and C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed*. Faber and Faber, 1961.

**Psalm 44** was a psalm of the Sons of Korah. These were the men responsible for taking care of the Tabernacle for worship in the Old Testament, and they were authors of 11 Psalms.<sup>91</sup> Although we don't know the exact timing of this Psalm's writing, reading the text shows it came after a time of a painful defeat. The mood of the chapter is dark and bitter. Two things stand out to me in reading this chapter: 1) The first eight verses speak about what God had done for other people, and 2) The last 18 verses making it sound like they're blaming God for what has happened to them.

One word that's important to understand in the suffering question of Psalm 44:24 is the word "face." When the people of that day heard the word "face," they would associate it with *The Priestly Blessing* spoken by Aaron in Numbers 6:24-26:

24 The Lord bless you and keep you; 25 the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; 26 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.<sup>92</sup>

For the Israelites, there was a connection between God's blessing and His face. So, if God turned His face from them, it meant they lost the favor and blessing of God. In other words, they believed God was *against* them, but He was *for* the previous generations. If that's what you believed, how would you live?

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<sup>91</sup> Krejcir, Dr. Richard J. "Statistics on Pastors." *Into Thy Word. Teaching People How to Study the Bible*, 2016, [www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/?articleid=36562](http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/?articleid=36562).

<sup>92</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

**What can I learn from Psalm 44?** Suffering has a way of causing us to compare our circumstances with other people. It's easy for us to look at our friends, neighbors, or people in general and think everyone else has it better than we have it now. If we're not careful, we can fall into the pity trap where we believe God is against us and is punishing us through suffering by taking away a loved one. Remember: It's unfair to compare your life with others because they may have already suffered or could be about to suffer. While you may be suffering right now, it's not a sign that God loves you less and loves them more.

We also need to understand that if there isn't a specific person to blame, many people will become angry with God for His refusal to stop their suffering. It's easy to blame God when things don't go right because we can't physically see Him. As a result, we view Him as a mystical force somewhere in the universe that must be to blame for our suffering either by commission (*doing it to us*) or omission (*not acting on our behalf when He could have stopped it*).

**Psalm 88** was a psalm of Heman the Ezrahite, who was also a Son of Korah. He was the grandson of Samuel, who was the last judge of Israel.<sup>93</sup> According to 1 Chronicles 15:16-17, he was one of three men appointed by King David to be a worship leader. Those looking at his life from the outside would think that everything was going right for him. He came from a respected family, had a great job, and had the king's favor. He had a great life, right?

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<sup>93</sup> GotQuestions.org. "Home." *GotQuestions.org*, 26 July 2005, [www.gotquestions.org/cosmological-argument.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/cosmological-argument.html).

Psalm 88 has three very distinct different voices throughout that reveal the depths of the suffering and depression of Heman. In verses 1-8, he cries out to God to save him from a lifelong illness. Then, in verses 9-13, he's reasoning with God that his death would not look good for God, so he pleads with God to save him for God's sake. Finally, in verses 14-18, he appears to have given up hope and expresses his feelings of rejection of both God and his friends. As I read this passage several times, I saw a rollercoaster of hope, depression, and rejection; a rollercoaster I've been on too often.

If you're a Christian (or even if you're not), when you received a negative diagnosis or got a knock on your door that changed your life forever, the first thing you probably did was to cry out to God, begging Him to change your circumstance. Then, you asked other people to pray for you too, because the weight of what you're feeling is far too heavy to deal with on your own. I've done it, and it's a response I regularly see as I counsel people and on various social networking sites as people deal with suffering.

As I've been writing this book, doctors put the husband of a friend in ICU due to complications from the coronavirus after his body began shutting down. He contracted the virus while on his first business trip since the pandemic started. Now, he's fighting for his life. His wife immediately, and rightly, got on Facebook and asked everyone to pray, and people have rallied around her. As I've followed her posts, I see the same rollercoaster of emotions we all face.

The rollercoaster of emotions takes us up the first climb of hope, where you can sense the fear of what is coming. Then, it feels like the bottom

has dropped out from under you, and a feeling of fear develops in the pit of your stomach. Unfortunately, there will be many ups and downs for you in the coming minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Where you can choose to get off a rollercoaster in a theme park, suffering seemingly keeps you strapped in the chair for ride-after-ride.

Unfortunately, there will be many ups and downs  
for you in the coming minutes, hours,  
days, weeks, months, and years.

**What can I learn from Psalm 88?** Psalm 88 is an authentic reflection on the feelings of a person who loved God, gave his life in service to Him, and yet felt the sting of suffering and rejection. You know what that feels like, and it hurts. If you're honest, death feels like the *ultimate rejection* from God. If you've prayed for the healing of someone who died or something horrendous happened to your loved one that was beyond your control, you feel rejected by the One who could have stopped your pain. Heman teaches us to give words to our emotions and expect many ups and downs along the way.

Death feels like the  
*ultimate rejection* from God.

In all three Psalms, these were *good* people who faced terrible outcomes. It would be easy to make a case for each person that they didn't deserve the lot that life had given them. Yet, life turned out different than they and we thought it would. So, how do we start to answer the big question?

## **The “Answers”: Why does God let bad things happen to good people?**

I acknowledge that any answers I can provide to this question won't fully satisfy your need for “the answer” in *your* suffering. You must also recognize that there's not an answer that will make you feel better, nor is there a blanket response that will make sense of every loss for every person.

*Case in Point:* Tzivy Ross shared a story of a Jewish woman who lived through the Holocaust, but she lost her entire family. She remarried, moved to America, and gave birth to three children. One of those children, her daughter, was killed in the terrorist attacks on 9/11.<sup>94</sup> I can only imagine how many *why* questions I would have asked.

What answers can I, or anyone else, give to this grieving woman that will make her *feel better*? Those answers don't exist in this life, and they may not exist for your loss either. As such, my approach here is not to give you the answers that may or may not exist but to help you gain perspective about this terribly difficult *why* question.

### **Perspective #1: Bad things happen to ALL people.**

When we're suffering, it's easy to forget that other people are suffering from similar situations worldwide. Let's use one type of death, cancer, to illustrate my point. In 2018, an estimated 9.5 million people died of

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<sup>94</sup> Ross, Tzivy. “When Bad Things Happen to Good People: Grief Counseling & The Question of Why.” *StackPath*, Jewish Press, 2002, [www.ohelfamily.org/?q=content%2Fwhen-bad-things-happen-good-people-grief-counseling-question-why](http://www.ohelfamily.org/?q=content%2Fwhen-bad-things-happen-good-people-grief-counseling-question-why).

cancer. The number of deaths by the five most prominent types of cancer are as follows:

- Lung cancer: 1.76 million
- Colorectal cancer: 862,000
- Stomach cancer: 783,000
- Liver cancer: 782,000
- Breast cancer: 627,000<sup>95</sup>

In 2018, an estimated  
9.5 million people died of cancer.

My brother-in-law died of a rare type of cancer, *cholangiocarcinoma*, or bile duct cancer. We don't know how long he had the disease, but he only lived two days after his official diagnosis. At that moment, we didn't know the statistics, and I had never met anyone else before who died of this disease. It felt like he was the only one, but that wasn't the case.

Each year, approximately 8,000 people are diagnosed with this form of cancer in the US, and the five-year survival rate is only about 10%.<sup>96</sup> Thailand has the highest mortality rates for this type of cancer, 100

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<sup>95</sup> Khatri, Minesh. "How Many People Die of Cancer a Year?" *WebMD*, WebMD, 18 May 2020, [www.webmd.com/cancer/how-many-cancer-deaths-per-year](http://www.webmd.com/cancer/how-many-cancer-deaths-per-year).

<sup>96</sup> Webmd.com. "Bile Duct Cancer (Cholangiocarcinoma) - Statistics." *Cancer.Net*, 15 Sept. 2020, [www.cancer.net/cancer-types/bile-duct-cancer-cholangiocarcinoma/statistics](http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/bile-duct-cancer-cholangiocarcinoma/statistics).



times more prevalent than in the US.<sup>97</sup> When my wife shared with her primary physician that her brother died of this cancer, he shook his head and somberly remarked, “That’s a death sentence.”

My brother-in-law was one of the most remarkable people I’ve ever met. He graduated from Texas A&M University with an engineering degree and worked for 30 years for the Department of Transportation for the state of Texas, designing bridges and roadways. He also served as a pastor, college professor, and historian for the local paper. He was as kind and knowledgeable a person as you would ever want to meet. He could talk about any subject with insight. Those who knew him loved him, and he loved them back. So then, why did Robert die of *this* type of cancer?

In Matthew 5:45, Jesus taught His disciples: “For He (God) causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”<sup>98</sup> Suffering is much like the sun and rain. When the sun comes up, everyone gets to enjoy its warmth regardless of whether or not someone classifies them as *good* or not. Then, when the rain comes to farmlands, it doesn’t discriminate on which farm it will fall on. The result of rain is everyone in its’ path getting wet. For us, part of our answer regarding Robert was knowing that God didn’t *do* anything to Robert; it was just the rain falling on “the just” as it fell on 8,000

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<sup>97</sup> Clarke, Jodi. “What to Know About the Five Stages of Grief.” *Verywell Mind*, 21 Mar. 2020, [www.verywellmind.com/five-stages-of-grief-4175361](https://www.verywellmind.com/five-stages-of-grief-4175361).

<sup>98</sup> *Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Bible*. Zondervan, 2015.

other people that year diagnosed with the same type of cancer or the 9.5 million people who died, as well. Death is a part of life.

I realize it won't make your loss any less painful, but you have to remember that you're *not* alone in your suffering. Since others have walked through similar circumstances, they may be an excellent resource to reach out to for understanding how to process what you're feeling. You may also learn lessons from their suffering that will help you with yours. Make no mistake: Suffering certainly feels lonely, but it doesn't mean you're alone.

Suffering certainly feels lonely,  
but it doesn't mean you're alone.

**Perspective #2: There are no *good* people in this world.**

There's a perspective you don't hear often. There are no good people in this world. Before you think I've completely lost my mind, or I hate everyone alive, take a moment to consider what I mean by this statement.

All of us have a worldview that forms our values system. In this values system, we knowingly or unknowingly assign labels to people based on how their lifestyle matches what we believe. However, value systems differ from person-to-person. One example would be two people who come from different political parties and who have very different beliefs. One may believe abortion is acceptable and that anyone who opposes it is bad. The other may believe that abortion is a sin and that anyone who supports it is bad. What makes one person good and one

person bad is defined by what you believe. One system labels people as bigots, while another labels them as murderers. In either case, about 50% of people in the US are labeled as bad people by people on the other side. The problem with our values systems is that they're all flawed.

What makes someone a good person? Is a good person one who doesn't lie, cheat, or commit crimes? Is a person defined as good by the good things they do in life? Does character play a role in goodness? All of those things are good, but are they good enough? *Psychology Today* shared their four cardinal virtues to help determine if you're living a virtuous life. They are:

- **Prudence:** You use wisdom in decision-making
- **Temperance:** You practice moderation
- **Justice:** You are fair and respectful of others
- **Courage:** You stand up for and do what is right<sup>99</sup>

Possessing all these character traits are commendable, but they don't mean that you're a good person. Why? Each requires that we *do* something to be recognized as good. The reality is that every person has done good things, but we've also done bad things in our lives. So, are we good or bad? Even if you're the most moral person in the world, you've still failed at times. Paul wrote to the Romans, "We all fall short

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<sup>99</sup> Riggio, Ronald E. "How Can You Tell If You Are a Good Person?" *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 14 Oct. 2016, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201610/how-can-you-tell-if-you-are-good-person](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cutting-edge-leadership/201610/how-can-you-tell-if-you-are-good-person).

of God's glorious standard" (Romans 3:23).<sup>100</sup> So, we *ALL* have a problem with the bad in us.

If you're a Christian who still believes there are good and bad people, there are two problem passages for your beliefs. The first is in Isaiah 64:4, where Isaiah wrote to the Israelites during the Babylonian Captivity and likened their righteousness to "filthy rags."<sup>101</sup> When I think of *filthy rags*, the image that comes to mind is a person working on their car and having grease on their hands and under their fingernails, so they need a rag to wipe off the grime. That's "bad," right?

However, J.A. Motyer provides the exact meaning of what it meant to the Israelites in their context: "Filthy rags was 'a garment of menstruation; bodily discharges were considered a defilement because they were the 'outflow' of a sinful, fallen human nature."<sup>102</sup> This description was Isaiah's word picture of the righteous deeds of the Israelites. Do these words make it sound like we can be good enough? Our righteousness is like *filthy rags*.

The second problem passage regarding there being good people is Mark 10:18, where Jesus responded to a man who called Him good and asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Consider Jesus' words: "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except

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<sup>100</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>101</sup> *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

<sup>102</sup> Motyer, J. A. *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1994.

God alone.”<sup>103</sup> Jesus made this statement to draw attention to the fact that the young ruler couldn’t *do* enough to be called good. If you continue in this passage, you will see the young man has kept all the commandments since he was a child. He had done all the right things, but they didn’t make him good. Only God is good.

**Side Note:** Jesus didn’t deny His Deity in this passage, as some have suggested. On the contrary, Jesus’ question was drawing attention to the fact that He was God, and he wanted the young man to realize it, as well. Without going into a long theological explanation, the simple logic goes like this:

Jesus said only God is Good, but He called Himself the Good Shepherd in John 10:11.

- THEREFORE: If Jesus claims that He’s Good, then He’s also claiming that He’s God.

*The bottom line:* As good as our actions may be, they don’t qualify any of us as good. We’re only made good in the sight of God by what Jesus did on the cross. Remember the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Our righteousness, or goodness, is 100% dependent on Jesus, not us.

We’re only made *good* in the sight of God  
by what **Jesus** did on the cross.

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<sup>103</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

### **Perspective #3: Bad things happened to God's Son, Jesus.**

Think about that statement for a moment. Often, in our suffering, we forget the suffering of Jesus. We ask, "God, why did you let this happen to us?" We can get so lost in *our* pain that we forget God allowed suffering in the life of His only Son. This truth is a reason many people have a difficult time with Christianity. It doesn't make sense in the natural that a loving Heavenly Father would allow His Son to die in this manner. How can any loving parent do such a thing? While I could write an entire book on this alone, briefly consider two bad things that happened to Jesus:

*"Bad" Thing #1 - Physical Torture:* Jesus went through unthinkable physical torture. Following His arrest, an unjust court sentenced Him to a humiliating, public death on the cross. In those days, persons punished by the Romans were scourged (*or flogged*), a process so brutal that it often ended in the person's death before their final punishment.

We don't know the exact number of lashes Jesus received because the Bible doesn't tell us, but we know His beating was so severe that He couldn't carry His cross.

The condemned was beaten with a *flagellum* or a *flagrum*, a whip with multiple leather pieces knotted with pieces of metal, usually iron or

zinc, that would violently remove the person's skin.<sup>104</sup> The Jewish Law required that no one receive more than 39 lashes because they believed 40 lashes would kill the person.<sup>105</sup> However, there's no reason to think the Romans would have followed the laws of the Jews. So, we don't know the exact number of lashes Jesus received because the Bible doesn't tell us, but we know His beating was so severe that He couldn't carry His cross (Matthew 27:32).

When they arrived at the place where Jesus was crucified, the Roman soldiers drove 5-7-inch spikes into his hands and feet to attach Him to the cross.<sup>106</sup> The nail would sever the median nerve, which not only caused immense pain but would have paralyzed the victim's hands.<sup>107</sup> According to Josephus, a small bench-like *sedile* was used to rest a person's private parts on, so the Romans could drive a nail or spike through the genitals.<sup>108</sup> Beyond that, the weight of Jesus' body pulled

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<sup>104</sup> Bible History Online. "The Roman Scourge (Bible History Online)." *Roman Scourge Instrument*, 2020, [www.bible-history.com/past/flagrum.html](http://www.bible-history.com/past/flagrum.html).

<sup>105</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica. "Flogging." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Thomson Gale, 2007.

<sup>106</sup> New World Encyclopedia. "Crucifixion." *Crucifixion - New World Encyclopedia*, 2020, [www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Crucifixion](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Crucifixion).

<sup>107</sup> The Guardian. "How Did Crucifixion Kill?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 8 Apr. 2004, [www.theguardian.com/science/2004/apr/08/thisweekssciencequestions](http://www.theguardian.com/science/2004/apr/08/thisweekssciencequestions).

<sup>108</sup> Josephus, Flavius, and Henry St. John Thackeray. *The Jewish War*. Harvard University Press, 1997.

Him downward for six hours, as He struggled for breath and was suffocating.<sup>109</sup> The physical torture endured by Jesus was unimaginable.

*“Bad” Thing #2 - Relational Abandonment:* Beyond the physical torture, Jesus experienced relational abandonment. Matthew 26:56 tells us, “The disciples deserted him and fled.”<sup>110</sup> These were the men with whom He had invested over three years of His life in ministry. Mark 15:40-41 and John 19:25-27 revealed that the only ones who stayed there with Him through the crucifixion were Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, Salome, and John. Although Luke 23:49 does state that some watched from a distance. God allowed His Son to be relationally abandoned when He needed His family and friends the most.

Remember: “Bad” things happened to the only Perfect One who ever walked this face of this earth. Jesus willingly chose to come to this world and to suffer on a cross (Philippians 2:8), so He could identify with our pain (Hebrews 4:15) and remove the penalty of our sins (1 Peter 2:24). Jesus knows your pain because He took that pain on Him on the cross.

#### **Perspective #4: God is Sovereign and sees things we don’t.**

There’s a concept in theology known as the *Sovereignty of God*, which, at its most basic level, means God is in control of all things at all times. He sees things we don’t, He’s working when we don’t see it, and He has a plan that far exceeds anything we can understand. God loves and

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<sup>109</sup> Davis, Dr. C. Truman. “A Physician’s View of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.” *CBN.com*, 10 Apr. 2020, [www1.cbn.com/medical-view-of-the-crucifixion-of-jesus-christ](http://www1.cbn.com/medical-view-of-the-crucifixion-of-jesus-christ).

<sup>110</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.



wants the best for His children, and He's working every aspect of our lives together for our good (Romans 8:28), even when it doesn't *feel* good.

Pastor Chip Ingram wrote the following about God's Sovereignty to help simplify this concept:

- *God is above all things and before all things.* He's the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. He's immortal, and He's present everywhere so that everyone can know Him (Revelation 21:6).
- *God created all things and holds all things together, both in heaven and on earth, both visible and invisible* (Colossians 1:16).
- *God knows all things past, present, and future.* There's no limit to His knowledge, for God knows everything completely before it even happens (Romans 11:33).
- *God can do all things and accomplish all things.* Nothing is too difficult for Him, and He orchestrates and determines everything that's going to happen in your life, in my life, in America, and throughout the world. Whatever He wants to do in the universe, He does, for nothing is impossible with Him (Jeremiah 32:17).
- *God is in control of all things and rules over all things.* He has power and authority over nature, earthly kings, history, angels, and demons. Even Satan himself has to ask God's permission before he can act (Psalm 103:19).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ingram, Chip. "What Does the Phrase 'God Is Sovereign' Really Mean?" *Christianity.com*, Salem Web Network, 1 Oct. 2007,

“God is Sovereign” sounds great in a sermon  
until you lose someone you love  
in a way you don’t understand

“God is Sovereign” sounds great in a sermon until you lose someone you love in a way you don’t understand, and you’re trying to make sense of why God would allow it to happen as it did. When you’re walking through the valley of the shadow of death, David referred to in Psalm 23:4; “God is Sovereign” *feels* like a cliché, but it’s not. He really *IS* in control and, even when we don’t see or feel it, God is working.

## **A Theology of Suffering**

One of the reasons Christians struggle with suffering is that most churches and pastors haven’t done an adequate job of helping our people understand a theology of suffering. Let’s be honest: Nobody wants a pastor to preach about suffering. Instead, people sitting in the pews desire a positive, inspirational message that will lift their spirit and cause them to aspire to do and receive great things. People want to hear a theology of *blessing*, but you’re going to experience suffering at some point in life. I’m not cynical, just real. If you don’t have a firm theological foundation when the suffering begins, it may shake your faith to its core. *(Just an observation: Churches that preach suffering are typically smaller than those who preach blessing.)*

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[www.christianity.com/theology/what-does-the-phrase-god-is-sovereign-really-mean-11555729.html](http://www.christianity.com/theology/what-does-the-phrase-god-is-sovereign-really-mean-11555729.html).

At the beginning of 2012, I suffered many very personal losses that I didn't understand at the time, and, if I'm honest, I still don't have the full understanding today. My losses caused me to question everything I believed about God's goodness because what I was facing was more than textbook suffering. Mine was experiential suffering to the max.

My pain left me feeling, at times, like I didn't care if I continued living or not. I cried, prayed, worshipped, and did all the *right* things I knew to do to seek God for hours a day, but the pain still felt unbearable. My body ached all over, and I almost always felt nauseous. I was so angry with God and people because I was hurting inside. BUT I was a pastor, so I couldn't let my guard down and let people know how deeply I hurt. It was my job to help other people who were hurting. So, I just put on my *happy face* and just kept going in day-after-day and preaching week-after-week. Most people didn't even notice, but I did.

In April 2012, as I searched for answers while struggling with my feelings, I preached a sermon series entitled "The Cup of Suffering." I dealt with eight myths around suffering and countered them with eight truths. I want to highlight four of these myths and truths because they're essential in our development of a theology of suffering:

**Myth #1: As Christians, we shouldn't suffer in this life.** There's a mindset in Western culture that suffering is for those who don't know Jesus or follow Christ but lack faith. I've really heard people make the statement, "If you're suffering, there must be some sin in your life." That sounds spiritual, but that's not Truth. (It's really religious garbage.)

**Truth #1: We *are* called to suffer for Christ (Philippians 1:29, 1 Peter 2:20-21).** I encourage you to read through Hebrews 11, also known as the Hall of Faith. Find one person who had great faith who didn't have great suffering as well. Their life calling required suffering, and so do ours because you don't need faith without suffering. Remember: Without faith, you can't see God (Hebrews 11:6-8). Let me take it one step further: Any form of faith that rejects suffering also rejects salvation because Jesus suffered for us to experience salvation. How can we be like Jesus if we don't experience pain as He did?

**Any form of faith that rejects suffering  
also rejects salvation.**

**Myth #2: When we're living in God's perfect will, living godly lives, we should experience few hardships.** Did anyone ever live a godlier life than Jesus? Did He suffer? There's nothing like the suffering of God's Son to break through this false, detrimental "gospel."

**Truth #2: We MUST go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:21-22, 1 Thessalonians 3:2-3).** The Bible doesn't hide the fact that suffering is part of the Christian faith. You don't have to look beyond the words of Jesus to His disciples in John 16:33 when He told them, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."<sup>112</sup> Remember: Jesus also told the disciples on three different occasions that "the Son of Man must suffer many

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<sup>112</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (Luke 9:22)." Hardships and suffering are unavoidable.

**Myth #3: Suffering means something is wrong and is God's justice on those who deserve it.** In Bible times, people had a faulty understanding of God. They thought that any time a person was going through something difficult or bad in their life, they had done something to arouse God's anger or the gods (little g). That's why when the crowds began turning against Jesus and that He was going to be publicly tried and executed, the masses thought this was God's justice.

**Side Note:** There are times when people break societal laws or God's Laws that the penalty requires justice. However, just because a person suffers doesn't mean they've violated God's laws.

**Truth #3: Suffering is normal and is designed to turn us into God's masterpiece.** In John 19:30, Jesus said, "'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."<sup>113</sup> These were the final words of Jesus on the cross, but He wasn't referring to His impending death. He had finished the assignment God had given Him on earth. Note: *How* Jesus died wasn't typical, but the fact He suffered and died was normal. In that, Jesus allowed God to work out His purposes in His life. When we accomplish the assignment God has given us, *we* too become God's masterpiece. The end product may not look like you thought it would, but in God's sight, it's more beautiful than any work ever created by DaVinci, Michelangelo, or Monet.

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<sup>113</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

When we accomplish the assignment God has given us, we too become God's masterpiece.

**Myth #4: Suffering means we can't have joy.** Many people believe when it comes to grief that they can no longer experience joy.

**Truth #4: We have a choice to rejoice in our suffering.** The Holman Bible Dictionary tells us that the words *joy* and *rejoice* are the words used most often to translate the Hebrew and Greek words into English. *Joy* is found over 150 times in the Bible. If we include such words as "joyous" and "joyful," the number comes to over 200. The verb *rejoice* appears well over 200 times.<sup>114</sup> That's a lot of joy. One of the most famous "Joy Scriptures" in the Bible is found in Philippians 4:4: "Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!"<sup>115</sup> Just a reminder: Paul was under house arrest when he wrote this, so it's possible to have joy even when life was hard. You're not happy because they're gone, but you find joy as you remember the good in their life.

Simultaneously, the Bible mentions the words "suffer," "suffering," or a variation of them over 150 times. Here are two words included approximately the same number of times in a book filled with loss, hurt, grief, pain, joy, hope, and life. Is it possible the message in this is intentional? Could it be a reminder that we will experience both and that joy is a choice in the middle of suffering?

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<sup>114</sup> Holman Bible Dictionary. "Joy - Holman Bible Dictionary - Bible Dictionary." *StudyLight.org*, 2020, [www.studylight.org/dictionaries/hbd/j/joy.html](http://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/hbd/j/joy.html).

<sup>115</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: *Tyndale House Publishers*, 2004. Print.

**Side Note:** There's a big difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is often associated with what's happening, while joy is the choice to have an attitude that acknowledges God's goodness.

## **Why Does God Let Bad Things Happen to Good People?**

Let me assure you: I wouldn't have written this chapter if I had wanted to sell millions of copies of a book that would excite people about their destiny. Unfortunately, I don't think enough pastors preach or teach on a theology of suffering because that doesn't *move the needle* in church growth or finances. However, this chapter is needed to develop strong disciples who understand that hardships are a way of life. BUT GOD!

### **A theology of suffering reminds us that:**

- We *are* called to suffer for Christ
- We **MUST** go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God
- Suffering is normal and is designed to turn us into God's masterpiece
- We have the choice to rejoice in our suffering

I know that sounds harsh and hopeless, but it's actually the opposite. Remember: Suffering allows us to identify more closely with Jesus. In your suffering, know you're closer to Jesus than you've ever been.

# 7.

WHY AM I STRUGGLING TO MOVE ON?  
(AND HOW CAN I?)



I can't stop thinking about what happened to them. I wonder if they felt pain. I had such a hard time watching them die. I can't get the picture out of my mind of them struggling for every last breath. When I close my eyes, I hear the sound of the machines. I can see the flatline on the monitor. I'm glad they're at peace now. I still see them in the coffin. I hate that it has to be a closed casket. They told me I wouldn't want to see them "like that." Identifying their body was the most difficult thing I've ever done. It was so hard watching their body being lowered into the ground. I want begin to heal from all this pain.



Watching someone you loved die is traumatic and painful. Even if your loved one died what most would consider a peaceful death, if you were by their side and watched their struggle at the end, it's a memory that's difficult to erase. My dad was blessed, as were we, that his real *struggle* only last about the final 10 minutes of his life. I have a video on my phone of my dad talking to my girls two hours before his death, and I haven't been able to watch it yet. It's just too painful. Every time I open my pictures on my iPhone and scroll through *All My Pictures* looking for another, my heart sinks when I see it, and I quickly move past it. Dad didn't look great at the end, and that's not how I want to remember him, at least not yet. Even a peaceful death can be traumatic as your mind tries to take you back to those final moments regularly.

## Watching someone you loved die is traumatic and painful.

Another excruciating circumstance is watching your child die of a debilitating disease, such as cancer or a host of other cruel sicknesses. I've spent countless hours talking and praying with parents who ask so many questions. Why did this happen to *my* baby? Where's the justice in this disease? Why did they go before me? Where's God in all of this? I have to be honest: This is one of those things I'll never understand on this side of heaven. Seeing your baby's body ravaged by disease and taking their last breaths on the earth is gut-wrenching. In reality, there are no words that can describe *that* pain or offer meaningful comfort. Instead, a simple hug or sitting quietly next to someone who is grieving can be powerfully memorable.

However, if your loved one died a violent death, your heartache is exponentially compounded, especially if you witnessed it or found their body. The fact they're dead is awful enough, but knowing they died like *this* is shockingly painful. When my nephew committed suicide, his mom and stepfather discovered his body, and, to make matters worse, family members had to clean up the home afterward. Without going into the details of what that involved, I ask, "What do you do with that?" There are some things you can't *unsee*, as they make a permanent impression in your mind.

Regardless of their manner of death, you need to be aware there will be several hurdles that will seek to complicate any potential of future healing:

***Hurdle #1: Trying to forget how they died or how they looked in those last moments out of your mind.*** If your loved one died a violent death, there's a tendency to wonder what their final moments were like as you agonizingly consider what they were thinking and feeling as they passed. You may even feel guilty that you weren't there to help stop their pain, and your feelings are *normal*. The fact you're having these thoughts is positive because it reinforces how deeply you loved them and would have done anything to protect them from their pain. As hard as it is to accept, you couldn't be there 24/7/365 to protect them, and you couldn't take away their sickness or pain. I know you would have if you could have. Your mind will be your #1 hurdle to overcome in seeking to move on and continue to live.

***Side Note:*** One of the unintentionally insensitive things you will hear at funerals as people view your loved one is something to the effect, "They look so good." While I understand they're trying to speak

encouragingly in an awkward moment, I hate it when people make this statement because regardless of how *good* they look, it's not as good as when they were alive. It's no consolation for them to look good in a casket.

***Hurdle #2: Overcoming the daily pain of your physical separation.*** For me, when my nephew died, I stood by his graveside, and the thought crossed my mind, "He's going to be here all alone for his first night in the cold, dark ground." For many weeks after, I pictured this and wept each day privately. I missed Matthew (*and still do*), and I felt guilty. Why? The two weeks leading up to his death, I told my wife I sensed an urgency to go into public schools to speak about teen suicide. I even bought the domain name, [www.teenagesuicide.org](http://www.teenagesuicide.org), and listened to DeGarmo and Key's song, *Teenage Suicide*, over 100 times the two weeks leading up to his suicide. Over 100 times, no exaggeration!

So, when Matthew died, I had an immense sense of guilt because here I was trying to *save the world*, and I failed to save my nephew. My mind kept telling me, "Who wants to hear from this guy?!?" I kept kicking myself for not *knowing* he was in pain. Why didn't I see a warning sign? Standing at that cemetery as his body was getting ready to be lowered into the ground was one of the most profoundly sad moments in my life. I had never felt the cold sting of separation like I did that hot June afternoon.

Those moments at the graveside are only the beginning of the sense of physical separation. I know you hurt deeply up to this point, but watching your loved one's body, slowly lowered into the ground makes it all so real, so final. When you walk back into the home for the first

time after the funeral, there's a different sense of separation. Again, there's more of a finality. As you wake up the morning after, there's an indescribable emptiness that makes you feel queasy. You'll wonder how you can continue to live. You'll go into their room, look at their stuff, smell their clothes, and touch anything that reminds you of them. Unfortunately, they only serve as a reminder that they're gone. I'm not telling you this to depress you, but to help set the expectations of what you're most likely going to feel. The emotional sense of separation is the beginning of your journey, but it doesn't have to be the ending of how you will feel forever.

***Hurdle #3: Taking care of yourself physically.*** Losing someone you loved will lead many people to engage in extreme behaviors like not eating or overeating, or not sleeping to sleeping way too much. Additionally, you may feel the urge to step away from any activities you previously did for your health, or you may find yourself trying to compete like a world-class athlete in an average human body. The latter will probably result in a foolish injury if you're not careful. Extremes are not healthy on either end of the spectrum.

*A Personal Example:* I've loved to exercise/workout since I was a child. I've run marathons, was actively involved in sports and worked out lifting weights, and more. However, after my dad died, I temporarily lost my interest in running, something I've been doing for over 25 years. (Actually, the first full day back home following the funeral, I ran my fastest half marathon time ever, but then I lost interest and stopped.) Over the next two months, I did very little running, and I found myself eating all kinds of sweets and snacks. You have to understand, I'm a person who takes great pride in my physical health and appearance, but

I found myself finding reasons not to work out or go for a run. It was easier to stay at home and eat. I've even had the thought, "What's the use of exercising anyway when we're going to do is die anyway?" I couldn't sleep. I didn't feel like exercising. I just wanted to be left alone.

Dr. Coralease Ruff noted how the stress of grief could potentially chemically impact the human body and cause *strange and unfamiliar* symptoms. She wrote, "Because grief is long term, these chemical reactions continue to occur, resulting in some of the following common signs and symptoms of grief:

- Digestive problems such as loss of appetite or overeating
- Sleepiness and sleeplessness
- Heartache and chest pain
- Forgetfulness and memory loss
- Cognitive changes including general confusion and difficulty concentrating
- Emotional changes including sadness, crying, and prolonged weeping
- Respiratory problems including shortness of breath and asthma
- Panic attacks, i.e., sweating, rapid heartbeat, numbness, and tingling
- Confusion with an associated feeling of loss of control or a feeling of 'losing one's mind'"<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Ruff, Coralease. "The Mind-Body Connection: Taking Care of Your Health During Grief." *Compassionate Friends*, 4 Jan. 2019, [www.compassionatefriends.org/blog/the-mind-body-connection-taking-care-of-your-health-during-grief/](http://www.compassionatefriends.org/blog/the-mind-body-connection-taking-care-of-your-health-during-grief/).

Failing to take care of yourself physically will result in a prolonged time for healing. Good physical health supports good emotional health.

## Good physical health supports good emotional health.

### **Takeaways About Grief from the Serenity Prayer**

Most people have heard of *The Serenity Prayer*, as it's used in 12-step programs to assist recovering addicts who seek to make amends for their failures and losses. The prayer most of us are familiar with on a decorative sign is an abbreviated four-line version that reads:

God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
And wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;  
Enjoying one moment at a time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world  
As it is, not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make things right  
If I surrender to His Will;  
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life  
And supremely happy with Him  
Forever and ever in the next. Amen.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. "The Serenity Prayer." *Serenity Prayer*, 2020, [shorturl.at/rBPU4](https://shorturl.at/rBPU4).

It's believed Reinhold Niebuhr, a son of German immigrants, wrote The Serenity Prayer as part of a sermon he gave at the Heath Evangelical Union Church in Massachusetts.<sup>118</sup> Niebuhr was a minister and professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City who actively persuaded Christians to support the war against Hitler.<sup>119</sup> Interestingly, Niebuhr was friends with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a noted theologian who was convicted and executed for his role in a plot to assassinate Hitler.<sup>120</sup> Though Niebuhr's full intent for writing the prayer isn't known, some have speculated his prayer was about the rise of Naziism in his homeland of Germany. When you read it through that lens, it does make sense. In any case, his remarkable prayer serves as a template for those struggling in life, for whatever reason.

Niebuhr's prayer is a great first step on the pathway as you navigate the physical, emotional, and spiritual journey in your grief recovery. I'm going to breakdown the full prayer line-by-line and connect each section to thoughts that can help in your struggle to overcome grief. Ask God to speak peace and serenity to you through this prayer.

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<sup>118</sup> Lighthouse Treatment Center. "The Complete History of the Serenity Prayer." *Lighthouse Treatment Center*, 18 June 2018, [lighthouse-treatment.com/the-complete-history-of-the-serenity-prayer/](http://lighthouse-treatment.com/the-complete-history-of-the-serenity-prayer/).

<sup>119</sup> Bennett, John C. "Reinhold Niebuhr." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., [www.britannica.com/biography/Reinhold-Niebuhr](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Reinhold-Niebuhr).

<sup>120</sup> History.com. "Anti-Nazi Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer Is Hanged." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 5 Nov. 2009, [www.history.com/this-day-in-history/defiant-theologian-dietrich-bonhoeffer-is-hanged](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/defiant-theologian-dietrich-bonhoeffer-is-hanged).

**Prayer Section #1:** God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

- ***Calling on God.*** Let me unequivocally state that God is your answer. Go to Him early and often. Numerous studies note how a person's faith has a direct impact on their healing following a death. One study by Kiri Walsh and team came to the following conclusion: "People who profess stronger spiritual beliefs seem to resolve their grief more rapidly and completely after the death of a close person than do people with no spiritual beliefs."<sup>121</sup> Why? Their belief in God gives them hope for the future. When you're struggling, begin by calling out to God for hope because He hears you. The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 34:18, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."<sup>122</sup>
- ***Request for serenity.*** According to *Webster's Dictionary*, *serenity* involves "calm, peace, quietness, restfulness, and tranquility."<sup>123</sup> Those things sound nice, especially when you're grieving, but it's hard to see how you can ever experience them again. One of the reasons we feel this way is that we misunderstand what serenity,

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<sup>121</sup> Walsh, K. "Spiritual Beliefs May Affect Outcome of Bereavement: Prospective Study." *Bmj*, vol. 324, no. 7353, 2002, pp. 1551–1551., doi:10.1136/bmj.324.7353.1551.

<sup>122</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>123</sup> Webster, Daniel. "Serenity." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, 2020, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serenity](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/serenity).



or peace, involves. Peace doesn't mean that you won't face trials; it means you won't face them alone. God is with you, but there will also be people who love you who will remain by your side if you let them. Serenity doesn't make everything *right*; it helps you to *be all right* in everything. Ask God to give you His peace that passes understanding (*Philippians 4:7*).

**Side Note:** The Greek word for “peace” in *Philippians 4:7* is *eirene* (*i-ray'-nay*), which implies “harmony, security, and safety.”<sup>124</sup> The word picture is one of two things previously divided being brought back together whole, as one. When we don't have peace, it's because our mind is divided from the mind of Christ, which Paul addressed in *Philippians 2:5*. When we pray and trust God, we're joining our mind with the mind of God, to think as He does.

Serenity doesn't make everything *right*;  
it helps you to *be all right* in everything.

- ***You can't change some things in life.*** This admission is a difficult one to make. Our minds want to tell us that this is all just a dream, and they're going to come walking back through the door or call you on the phone any minute. Unfortunately, that's not going to happen. If possible, we'd all like to go back in time and do whatever was necessary to change the outcome. However, we can't, and acknowledging that reality is critical for acceptance. If

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<sup>124</sup> Strong, James. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.

you spend all your energy thinking on these thoughts, they'll drain you on every level. It may be hard to hear, but unfortunately, you can't change some things in life.

- ***Courage to change the things that can change.*** Fear is a horrid companion of grief. You may fear what life will be like moving forward without your loved one. You may fear losing control or being in isolation. You may even fear death because it's more real to you now than ever before. Please understand: Fear is an enemy of healing that seeks your full emotional surrender, so moving forward requires courage.

Erica Jong wrote the following about facing her fears: "I have not ceased being fearful, but I have ceased to let fear control me. I have accepted fear as a part of life, specifically, the fear of change, the fear of the unknown, and I have gone ahead despite the pounding in the heart that says: turn back, turn back, you'll die if you venture too far."<sup>125</sup> (I don't agree with everything Erica Jong wrote, but her description of fear here is accurate.) Surrendering to fear will paralyze every area of your life, but courage will help you take one small step at a time toward your future uncertain destiny. Courage says, "Yes," when everything inside of you is saying, "No." Do I get up in the morning? Yes. Do I keep connecting with people around me? Yes. Should I get the rest? Yes. Will I continue to miss them? Yes.

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<sup>125</sup> Jong, Erica. *What Do Women Want?* Penguin Group, 2007.

## Courage says, “Yes,” when everything inside of you is saying, “No.”

**Side Note:** Be careful because fear in grief can lead anyone to engage in bad habits and negative thoughts that can lead to substance abuse, sleep disorders, relational problems, and even suicidal thoughts. Have the courage to do the right things even when you don't feel like it. With each *courageous* decision you make, you're one step closer to healing.

- **Wisdom to know the difference.** Getting wisdom is the most important thing you can do. (Proverbs 4:7)<sup>126</sup> There are two types of wisdom: 1) *Man's wisdom*, where the desired outcome results in the preservation and glorification of self; and 2) *God's wisdom*, where a person's life where a person's life honors God regardless of their circumstances. The need for wisdom in this prayer is to distinguish between what you *can* and *can't* change. God's wisdom will ALWAYS benefit you more than man's wisdom because it's unchanging and centers around Truth (*with a Big T*). So, where can you find out more about God's wisdom? God's wisdom ALWAYS begins with God's Word. When I struggle with grief, I go to the Bible and find similar stories of people who went through what I'm going through now. I learn from what they did

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<sup>126</sup> *Good News Bible*. Bible Society, 2018.

right, and what they got wrong. When I pay attention, I find the wisdom I need for making decisions.

## God's wisdom ALWAYS begins with God's Word.

**Prayer Section #2:** Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.

- ***Living one day at a time.*** We live one day at a time because we don't know how many days we have left on this earth. We all *plan* on living a long life, but none of us truly knows when our time will be up. There's a website, [www.death-clock.org](http://www.death-clock.org), that allows you to input data to receive an estimated date of death. I entered my information and found my estimated death day is November 17, 2054. If that's the case, I'll live to be 88 years, 1 month, and 3 days old. Most of us would consider that to be a long life, and I'd be willing to take that right now. However, the only day we know we have for sure is today. James 4:14 tells us, "Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone."<sup>127</sup> As such, we must embrace every moment as a gift from God and make the most of every opportunity to make memories.
- ***Enjoying one moment at a time.*** As I look back on my life, one of my chief regrets is that I spent too much time thinking about what was coming rather than embracing the moment I was experiencing. If I'm honest, as I look back on the losses in my

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<sup>127</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

life, I feel somewhat guilty because I wasn't *in the moment* enough at times. I took for granted that there would always be more times in the future until there wasn't.

I even watched myself get upset on Christmas Eve, just one month and 15 days after my dad died, and I allowed my frustrations to take away from the joy of the moment for my youngest daughter. I *gave permission* to my grief to steal what should have been an enjoyable memory. And I saw it coming. There's no one to blame but me. I felt frustrated because no one talked about my dad, so when the project we were doing didn't go right, I expressed my frustration through it. There was a part of me that was wishing I could have one more moment with dad. I learned my lesson and will do my best not to repeat it: I will do my best to enjoy every moment as I am in the moment. Don't let your loss lead to lost moments. Enjoy every moment!

## Don't let your loss lead to lost moments.

- ***Seeing hardships as the pathway to peace.*** One of the few lessons I remember from my high school science classes is that water always follows the path of least resistance. In reality, everything in the universe seems to follow the same path, including electrical circuits, mountain climbers, my iPhone's Apple maps, and human beings. Get real. None of us would willingly invite hardship; we want softballs lobbed our way that

we can knock out of the park. We want the easy way out, but yet hardship invites itself into our lives.

That leaves the big question: How can we see hardship as a pathway to peace? The only way is to look at it through the eyes of faith in God. We have to accept that He's in control over every event in our lives, even when things don't turn out in ways we don't like. The most significant discovery I've had in the depths of my grief has been that my pain allowed me to experience God in a way I would have never known otherwise. While I don't invite or *want* pain, I'm grateful God showed up for me in it. Without that, there's no way hardship can be a pathway to peace.

**Prayer Section #3:** Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make things right, if I surrender to His will; So that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever and ever in the next. Amen.

- ***Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it.*** We live in a fallen and broken world filled with sin. Death was the penalty for sin (Romans 6:23) that entered the world due to Adam and Eve's choice to disobey God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). As a result, every person after that pays the penalty through the death of loved ones and, eventually, themselves. That part of this world stinks. If you're like me, you don't like the way the world is today between sicknesses and diseases, violent protests, political upheaval, and the daily death reported on social media, our TV screens, internet news sources, and in newspapers (if you still have a subscription).

However, through the madness, you have to remember this isn't how *God* intended for the world to turn out. God created the world perfect and without sin, and *man* messed that up. Still, Jesus came to this messed up place and gave *His* life as a sacrifice for our sin (John 3:16) so that we can be brought back into a right relationship with God. Jesus took this sinful world as it was (*and is*) and found a way to redeem humanity.

Similarly, we must find a way to accept that this world isn't playing out as we want, but God still has a good plan to redeem your life and pain. Look: What you're feeling right now is certainly not the plan you would want for your life; I understand. *This* plan isn't my plan either. My plan would include my family members living much longer lives. Unfortunately, this is a product of the sinful world we live in and must face daily.

- ***Trusting that He will make things right.*** Two things stick out about this part of the prayer, and they're trust and surrender. The word "trust" appears in the Bible 134 times, depending on the version you're reading.<sup>128</sup> There are four primary Hebrew words in the Old Testament that describe what it looks like to trust God.

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<sup>128</sup> Blue Letter Bible. "Trust." *BlueLetterBible.com*, 2020, [www.blueletterbible.org/search/search.cfm?Criteria=Trust&t=KJV#s=s\\_primary\\_0\\_1](http://www.blueletterbible.org/search/search.cfm?Criteria=Trust&t=KJV#s=s_primary_0_1).

**Note:** All four definitions come from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance<sup>129</sup> and all five verses come from the New Living Translation.<sup>130</sup>

**Word #1 Chacah** (khä-sä') means "to flee for protection; figuratively, to confide in — have hope, make refuge, (put) trust." We see this Psalm 18:2, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the power that saves me, and my place of safety." In this meaning, trusting God reminds us that there's a place of refuge we can go when we need protection.

**Word #2 Betach** (beh'takh) means to have safety, both the fact (security) and the feeling (trust); often (adverb with or without preposition) safely — assurance, boldly, (without) care(-less), confidence, hope, safe(-ly, -ty), secure, surely. A variant of this word means *to cling*. We see this word used in Psalm 56:4, "I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?" I love this word because trust is a fact and a feeling. It's something you can cling to when everything else is uncertain.

**Word #3 Yachal** (yawl-chal') means to wait; by implication, to be patient, hope — (cause to, have, make to) hope, be pained, stay, tarry, trust, wait. We see this Job 13:15, "God might kill me,

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<sup>129</sup> Strong, James. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007.

<sup>130</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: *Tyndale House Publishers*, 2004. Print.



but I have no other hope. I am going to argue my case with him.” This word implies an utter dependency upon God that if it were to be lost, you’d be hopeless. Job had lost everything he had in the world, except for his wife, but he never lost hope in God.

**Word #4 Aman** (ä·man') means to render (or be) firm or faithful, to be permanent, steadfast, sure, surely, verified). God told the people of Israel they could trust Him in 1 Kings 11:38, “If you listen to what I tell you and follow my ways and do whatever I consider to be right, and if you obey my decrees and commands, as my servant David did, then I will always be with you. I will establish an enduring dynasty for you as I did for David, and I will give Israel to you.” God reminded the people He was faithful, permanent, and sure. As such, He was worthy of their total and complete dependency. God also wants to remind you and me that He’s still the same today as He has always been or always will be. God is faithful and can be trusted!

What do these verses and definitions tell us when joined together? God is a refuge you can cling to, and He gives hope and certainty. You can trust He will make things right. Simultaneously, just because He makes it *right* doesn’t mean that it’s always going to *feel* right.

**Side Note:** Your feelings are often the enemy of Truth. You may *feel* like your life is over, but God still has a firm and steadfast plan for you that you just don’t see yet.

## Your feelings are often the enemy of Truth.

- ***If I surrender to His will.*** Surrender means “to yield to the power of another; to give or deliver up possession of (anything) upon compulsion or demand; as, to surrender one's person to an enemy or to an officer; to surrender a fort or a ship.”<sup>131</sup> Total and complete surrender is often the largest barrier to moving forward. Surrender requires us to acknowledge that life's out of control. It's an admission that someone is greater than you, and you're willing to submit your plans to the plans of someone else. However, in this prayer, as in our lives, everything is predicated on the enormous two-letter-word, *IF*.

None of the things previously prayed before in this prayer will have a lasting impact unless we decide to surrender to the will of God. *What does surrender to the will of God mean?* It means we ask God what He wants from us in prayer, we search for the answers in His Word, and we willingly and obediently carry them out.

- ***So that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever and ever in the next. Amen.*** The first phrase that jumps out here is “reasonably happy in this life.” It implies you may never reach the same level of happiness you were at previously before your loss, but you can still experience a level of it. Remember: It was never God's goal for us to be

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<sup>131</sup> Stein, Jess, editor. *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*. Random House, 2001.

*happy*, but instead to live *blessed* lives. When I use the word *blessed*, I'm talking about Jesus' definition of the word in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: 4, where He taught His disciples: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."<sup>132</sup>

The Greek word for "blessed" used throughout Matthew 5 is ***makarios*** (*mak-ar'-ee-os*), and "it describes a believer in the enviable ("fortunate") position from receiving God's provisions (favor)."<sup>133</sup> Losing someone you loved isn't a *blessing*, but receiving comfort from God and *His* Comforter, the Holy Spirit, can be remarkable. As I walked through my losses in 2012, my grief level was humanly indescribable, but at the same time, so was the comfort I received from the Holy Spirit. So much so that one day in my prayer time, I remember praying, "Thank you for my pain because without it would have never known you like I do now."

**A part of us dies with every loss,  
but God's mercies give us new opportunities  
daily to experience His faithfulness.**

*How could I pray a prayer thanking God for pain?* Please know it took a lot of time, tears, anger, yelling, study, and worship to

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<sup>132</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>133</sup> "Makarios." *Strong's Greek: 3107. Μακάριος (Makarios) -- Blessed, Happy*, 2020, [biblehub.com/greek/3107.htm](http://biblehub.com/greek/3107.htm).

reach that point. It was almost a year later before I could pray this prayer, but I did because God gave me His perspective of eternity. I've learned to be content in this life, like Paul in Philippians 4:11, because I have everything I need. Did it change me? Yes. Many things changed in me. Do I still laugh and enjoy life? Yes, but it's different. A part of us dies with every loss, but God's mercies give us new opportunities daily to experience His faithfulness (*Lamentations* 3:22-23). When you view life through this lens, it helps focus your eyes on eternity, where we will be *supremely happy* one day because there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain (*Revelation* 21:4).

## **The Relationship Between Coping and Hoping**

If you've spent any time with a counselor, psychiatrist, or pastor discussing your loss, one of the first things you will hear them talk about is developing coping skills or coping strategies. While many complicated clinical explanations sound good, my simple definition is "coping skills or strategies are the activities you do to help you make it through from one day to the next." My desire for you throughout the remaining portions of the chapter and the following is that you're going to learn how to do more than exist; you're going to move forward and discover your renewed purpose in life.

### *Viktor Frankl's Story*

Viktor Frankl was an author, professor, psychiatrist, neurologist, and philosopher. However, those roles didn't *shape* his life. Frankl was a Holocaust survivor, where he lived in four concentration (*death*) camps

from 1942-1945, including Auschwitz. His father, mother, and wife were all executed by the Nazis, while he was one of approximately 15% of people who entered Auschwitz and made it out alive.<sup>134</sup>

In 1946, Frankl released *Man's Search for Meaning*, which has sold over 16 million copies. The book detailed his theory of logotherapy (from the Greek word for “meaning”) as a conviction that the primary human drive is not pleasure, as Freud maintained, but rather the discovery and pursuit of what the individual finds meaningful. He believed suffering in a vacuum was meaningless, but instead that we give suffering meaning by our response to it.

Here's one of the examples he shared: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”<sup>135</sup> In a place of meaningless suffering, each man who gave away their bread viewed their suffering as a means of helping someone else. In doing so, they assigned a purpose to their pain, and you have the same opportunity.

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<sup>134</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Viktor Frankl.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2020, [www.britannica.com/biography/Viktor-Frankl](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Viktor-Frankl).

<sup>135</sup> Beacon Press. “Man's Search for Meaning.” *Beacon Press: Man's Search for Meaning*, 2020, [www.beacon.org/Mans-Search-for-Meaning-P602.aspx](http://www.beacon.org/Mans-Search-for-Meaning-P602.aspx).

Frankl also described the awful living conditions in this book and how being around a lot of death led to many prisoners giving up. People who lost hope would predictably become the first to die. One of Frankl's coping skills was to think about his wife and what it would be like to see her. His coping was directly tied to his hoping that he would see his wife again.

### *Andressa Oliveira Castillo's Death*

I was eating lunch with my great friend and mentor, Rev. Dr. Antonio Carlos Oliveira, who recently remembered the 8<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of his daughter, Andressa. Andressa was a remarkable young lady who died at the age of 34, following her diagnosis with an inoperable brain tumor. She left behind her husband, Joe, four beautiful children, her parents, three sisters, and a host of family and friends. I knew her because I was her youth pastor for her final two years of high school, and I also performed her wedding ceremony and funeral.

Andressa and her family were preparing for a trip from Arizona to Disney World in March 2012. She shared with her mom, Selma, that she had a headache for several days, so her mom encouraged her to see a doctor before leaving. The doctor found a very aggressive brain tumor and didn't give her a lot of time. I was living just outside of Waco, TX, at the time in a small town, Hewitt. I can vividly remember numerous nights speaking with Andressa on the phone and praying for her as I walked around my backyard. She fully trusted God would take care of her and her family.

By December 2012, her cancer had progressed, and her time left on earth was short. I took the two-hour flight from Dallas-Fort Worth to

Phoenix to see her one last time. Everyone warned me that she probably would not recognize me because the tumor had impacted her memory. However, when I walked in the door, I was shocked when her eyes got big, and she let out a familiar Andressa cry, “Pastor Kevin. It is so good to see you.” (*I wish you could have heard it in her beautiful accent.*) We spoke for several hours before I left so she could rest. However, during this time, Andressa shared the following powerful words with me she wrote on May 12, 2012, and I would later share at her funeral:

“So much can happen in one moment, and each moment has a way of becoming a defining moment – a way to divide my life into “before” and “after.” Of course, there is the “before salvation” and the “after salvation.” For me, that moment happened when I was 9 years old, by myself, in the back seat of our family car. I remember, at that moment, deciding to follow Christ. Later in life, in one moment, I became a wife. In another moment, a mother. I find myself saying, “Before I was married.” Or “after we had children,” etc. Right now, though, I find myself with another “moment” happening: Brain cancer. There is the “me” before and the me “after.” And as much as I don’t want to be defined by this moment, it is one whose impact has made quite the impression. And as each past moment has changed me in some way, so has this one.

Do you believe God heals? Yes! Do you believe that God will heal you? Yes! And if I believe all these things, then how do I live? What do I do? There’s only one thing for me to do – TRUST GOD! There is one thing that I am convinced of – that God is Good! He is the definition of Good! And if He is Good, and He is my God,

then anything that happens to me will be for my good. And God is familiar with sorrow and well acquainted with grief. He knows exactly how I can feel and still gives me strength and encourages me by reminding me that He overcame the world! Another thing that gives me so much strength and peace of mind is that I am not of this world! I am here so that one day I can get to heaven and be with Jesus forever! He is my reward. But while I'm here, I want to run the race, fight the good fight. Only in fighting can you be crowned a victor, a champion, a conqueror! Let the fighting begin..."

Andressa fought a good fight, and on December 29, 2012, Andressa went to be with the Lord. Andressa, through her words, assigned meaning and purpose, much like Frankl, to her life and death. She knew anything God did was for her good, even though it didn't *feel* good.

As Pastor Antonio and I were talking about Andressa, I asked him, "Pastor, what has helped you to be able to cope with Andressa's loss?" Without hesitation, he responded in his precious accent, "Because I know I will see her again. I have this hope (Philippians 3:20)." The one thing that has helped my friend these last eight years to cope is hope. I would suggest to you that there's no way to truly cope without hope.

**There's no way to truly cope without hope.**

### **Why Am I Struggling to Move On?**

The answer to this question ultimately varies from person-to-person. However, if you're still asking the question, you probably haven't had



enough time to grieve, or you haven't grieved properly. In either case, the principles you learned in this chapter will help you take the next big step forward in your healing. Remember: You can never move on if you stay where you are. It's time to cautiously move on to God's plan for your revised life and learn coping and hoping skills or strategies.

Will you allow God to turn your story of loss into one like Viktor Frankl or Andressa Oliveira Castillo? Are you willing to take the first step?

# 8.

## WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL COPING AND HOPING SKILLS OR STRATEGIES?



In this chapter, I want to share several coping strategies, and tie each to what I term a “hoping strategy.” These will be extremely practical skills and strategies that give you a template in your grief as you seek to move on from your current place of pain to a place of healing. However, before we talk about the things you *need* to do, we need first to address the things you *don’t* need to do.

**Side Note:** While I’m sure someone will make the statement that “everyone needs to grieve in their own way,” the following activities I’m going to address are NOT a part of healthy grieving. When people are struggling, they will often turn to these, or even more, unhealthy behaviors to seek to alleviate their pain.

## Three Unhealthy Coping Skills

- ***Unhealthy Coping Skill #1: Substance Abuse***

According to numerous studies, people who drink alcohol or take drugs before their loss, whether prescription medicines or illegal ones run a substantial risk of addiction following grief. In particular, men who have experienced losses are twice as likely to develop alcohol-related substance abuse than those who are not suffering from grief.<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, McComish and her partners' research found that most women in substance abuse treatment have experienced significant losses.<sup>137</sup>

Men who have experienced losses are  
twice as likely to develop alcohol-related  
substance abuse than those  
who are not suffering from grief.

From a common-sense perspective, we understand that people who have a history with a particular substance are likely to use that substance to help mask their pain. However, those things are

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<sup>136</sup> Stahl, Sarah T, and Richard Schulz. "Changes in Routine Health Behaviors Following Late-Life Bereavement: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Aug. 2014, [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4197803/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4197803/).

<sup>137</sup> McCommish, Judith Fry, et al. "Evaluation of a Grief Group for Women in Residential Substance Abuse Treatment." *Taylor & Francis*, 13 Dec. 2009, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08897079909511393](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08897079909511393).

temporary. If you never deal with the root of your pain, you will quickly find that substance abuse will ruin your life and destroy your relationships.

### ***Three things to remember about substance abuse:***

*1) Alcohol is a depressant, so it's not going to make you feel good long-term or help you make better decisions.* In every case I've personally witnessed, the inverse is true. What does a depressant do? It slows down your body's reaction time and hinders your decision-making. While under the influence, you're more likely to become moody and belligerent, isolating yourself emotionally from those you love. Substances will never make you a better person in any respect.

*2) You can't replace a person with a substance.* People who are grieving are quick to put up emotional walls around them because of irrational fears that they may lose someone they love again. Instead, they prefer finding "friendship" in a bottle or pill because they will never leave them. Look, I know that sounds crazy, but I've seen it happen. Someone may not articulate it in the same way, but this is what they've done through their actions.

*3) Addictive behaviors can become costly, at best, and deadly, at worst.* People who immerse themselves in substance abuse may find themselves in trouble with legal, financial, and social problems. I've seen grieving people make bad decisions that resulted in their arrest, others who died in a drunk driving accident, and some who committed suicide while under the influence.

*What's the solution?* Avoid alcohol and drugs of any kind if you know you are predisposed to addictive behaviors. Even if you're not, be careful. Proverbs 20:1 says, "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise."<sup>138</sup> You won't need to spend money on costly rehab or hit bottom if you find healthy alternatives. Drink water. Go on long walks outside. Sunshine will help your moods, so stay, play, and pray outside.

- ***Unhealthy Coping Skill #2: Disordered Eating***

Disordered eating can become a real problem as you struggle with grief. Anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating are common eating disorders that can occur as you attempt to recover from grief. It may begin by you being offered food and responding that you're not hungry or in you eating what seems like almost everything in sight. Disordered eating in grief may occur because you've lost control in the area of your life, but you seek to regain it by choosing to eat or not to eat. Conversely, you may also think there's no need to be healthy because you're only going to die anyway, so since food makes you feel better at that moment, you eat and eat.

***Three things to remember about eating disorders:***

*1) Major fluctuations in weight are a sign you have a problem you can't ignore.* Let me be clear: You need help because extreme weight loss or gain can turn deadly. This problem will not simply go away over time because it becomes a learned behavior. I've counseled several eating disorder victims who began to engage in their unhealthy behavior

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<sup>138</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

following some trauma. Some felt guilty to eat, and some had just given up all hope and no longer cared. They did a lot of damage to their bodies, and some damage was permanent. If you're in this position, please stop now and get help before you go any further.

*2) Comfort foods will eventually have uncomfortable consequences.* Beyond the problem of weight gain, comfort foods can lead to serious physical issues that contribute to heart disease, stroke, diabetes, kidney failure, digestive issues, and more. Overeating is also a contributing factor to a person's low self-body image, resulting in self-loathing and self-hate. Most people know they're doing this, but the addiction has either become too strong to deny or no longer care.

*3) Involvement in extreme activities is a warning that things are not OK.* As part of this addictive behavior, many people will begin bingeing and purging, exercise too much, and use laxatives for weight control and dangerous, potentially life-threatening activities.

*What's the solution?* Eat healthy, exercise, lower your caffeine intake, and don't take unnecessary chances. Resist the urge to eat more and more junk food, as it will fill your stomach and cause you to gain weight. From experience, I can tell you that moderate exercise will help improve your mood, so exercise on a comfortable level and add activities as you are physically able. (I can also tell you that over-exercising will have the opposite effect and will drain you.) Also, the reason you want to lower your caffeine intake is so you will be able to sleep. Moderation is the key in everything you do! Remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?"

You do not belong to yourself, you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.”<sup>139</sup>

## Honor God with your bodies.

- ***Unhealthy Coping Skill #3: Retail Therapy***

Yes, retail therapy, aka shopping, is a potentially dangerous addiction. You see, medical experts tell us grief occurs because the person we lost brought pleasure in our lives. As a result, being around that person often would trigger a dopamine response. Losing this person and relationship cuts off the dopamine response, and thus, grief occurs.<sup>140</sup>

Raypole wrote that “experts believe the dopamine reward system that plays a part in addiction also contributes to compulsive behaviors like shopping.”<sup>141</sup> While you may not usually be a compulsive shopper, your loss triggers a *need* in you for a temporary replacement to regain that feeling, and *voila*, shopping seems to be the answer. It doesn’t solve the problem, but it will provide a temporary high.

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<sup>139</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>140</sup> Brogaard, Berit. “Breakup: How to Tell If You Suffer from Complicated Grief.” *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 16 Apr. 2015, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mysteries-love/201504/breakup-how-tell-if-you-suffer-complicated-grief](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-mysteries-love/201504/breakup-how-tell-if-you-suffer-complicated-grief).

<sup>141</sup> Raypole, Crystal. “Retail Therapy: Is It Really That Bad?” *Healthline*, Healthline Media, 15 Jan. 2020, [www.healthline.com/health/retail-therapy](http://www.healthline.com/health/retail-therapy).

### ***Three things to remember about retail therapy:***

1) *The bills will come due at some point when you're finished shopping.* Unless you have a lot of money to spend (*or waste*), you have to be very careful that you're not spending money in such a way that it'll hinder your long-term financial health. I've seen people buy expensive cars or homes following a loss when they weren't clear-minded enough to make a rational decision. If you do this, you'll only be adding more stress to an already stressful situation.

2) *Buying "stuff" won't help heal your pain.* The problem with buying "stuff" is that it'll wear out eventually and be gone, too. Then what do you do? It will only serve to remind you of your other loss again down the road because there will be a direct connection between the item you bought and the person you lost. Also, remember that Jesus told His disciples in Luke 12:15, "Beware! Guard against every kind of greed. Life is not measured by how much you own."<sup>142</sup> More possessions will never equal more happiness, joy, or contentment.

3) *Retail therapy can develop into an addictive "need."* There's nothing wrong with making purchases in moderation. However, if you find yourself developing a "need" to shop, there can be many harmful consequences. Hull noted that among compulsive shoppers:

- 58% have large debts
- 42% can't make their debt payment
- 45% experience guilt about their shopping
- 33% receive criticism from friends and family about their shopping

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<sup>142</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.



- 8% have financial legal problems
- 8% have criminal legal problems<sup>143</sup>

Though it seems innocent, and it can be, retail therapy has the potential to become equally as addictive as substance abuse, although the consequences less destructive.

*What's the solution?* If you feel you *need* to shop, withdraw a reasonable amount of cash you can afford and go bargain hunting. Sometimes, the “*hunt*” is as fulfilling as the actual purchase. Moderation is the key in life, and our compulsions and addictions reveal deeper heart issues. Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:21, “Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.”<sup>144</sup>

**Side Notes:** Though not included in this list of the top three unhealthy coping skills, I want to address another, known as avoidance, briefly. There will be a temptation to avoid everyone around you and anything that reminds you of your loved one. You may need to take it slow, but be sure to confront your fears and allow other people to be a part of your healing. You *need* others to be a part of your healing story. Along these lines, you may also feel like avoiding God because you may think He let you down. Tell him what you’re feeling. I’ve been doing this a lot lately, and it has certainly helped me. Avoidance is NEVER the best option.

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<sup>143</sup> Hull, Megan. “Shopping Addiction Statistics.” Edited by Andrew Proulx, *The Recovery Village Drug and Alcohol Rehab*, The Recovery Village Drug and Alcohol Rehab, 28 July 2020, [www.therecoveryvillage.com/process-addiction/shopping-addiction/related/compulsive-spending-statistics/](http://www.therecoveryvillage.com/process-addiction/shopping-addiction/related/compulsive-spending-statistics/).

<sup>144</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

## Three Healthy Coping Skills and Hoping Strategies

As we wrap up this chapter, I want to explore five healthy *coping skills*, followed by a *hoping strategy* for each that will help you move on and not get stuck in the grieving process. Don't be fooled by the lie that "time heals all wounds." It doesn't. Instead, doing the *right things* over time will help you as you seek to move on and live, not to move on from your loved one.

Don't be fooled by the lie that "time heals all wounds." It doesn't. Instead, doing the *right things* over time will help you as you grieve.

So, why do I include a *hoping strategy* with each? The answer is simple. The word *coping* implies you're just trying to get by in the moment, and, at first, that's what you need to do to survive. However, if *coping* is the best life has to offer moving forward, that can be depressing.

- ***Healthy Coping Skill #1: Praying - Talk with God***

Honestly, I'm hesitant to use the word *pray* because there are so many misconceptions about prayer in our world. Some misunderstandings include:

- I'm the only one talking in prayer
- God only listens to *good* Christians
- If I don't say the *right things*, then God won't answer my prayer
- Only pastors can pray in church
- I'm just an ordinary person

- Prayer is too difficult and requires too many big words
- Prayer doesn't really make a difference anyway

In 1990, MC Hammer, aka Hammer, released the song *Pray*, in which he rapped, “We got to pray just to make it today.”<sup>145</sup> The song became a cultural phenomenon, with the lyrics being flippantly tossed in and out of Christian circles to sell over 18 million albums.<sup>146</sup> Hammer made prayer sound *cool*, but in it, he spoke to people throughout, not God, although He did reference the *Lord* twice in the song. MC Hammer hit on a truth that we all need to pray to make today, even if his lyrics and video's execution missed the mark.

*What is prayer?* Prayer involves ANYONE talking with God, regardless of whether you consider yourself a Christian. God wants to hear from you! I could give you a much deeper theological answer, but I don't want to make it more difficult than what it is. When Jesus disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray, in Matthew 6:9-13, He told them:

### **Matthew 6:9-13**

9 Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. 10 May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. 11 Give us today the food we need, 12 and forgive us our sins,

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<sup>145</sup> Hammer, MC. “MC Hammer – Pray.” *Genius*, 21 Sept. 1990, [genius.com/Mc-hammer-pray-lyrics](https://genius.com/Mc-hammer-pray-lyrics).

<sup>146</sup> Editors, LEVEL. “Thirty Years Ago, 'Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em' Changed Everything.” *Medium*, LEVEL, 12 Feb. 2020, [level.medium.com/thirty-years-ago-please-hammer-dont-hurt-em-changed-everything-e515fa274d45](https://level.medium.com/thirty-years-ago-please-hammer-dont-hurt-em-changed-everything-e515fa274d45).

as we have forgiven those who sin against us. 13 And don't let us yield to temptation, but rescue us from the evil one.<sup>147</sup>

I share Jesus' prayer, also known as *The Lord's Prayer*, because He kept it simple. He didn't complicate it or tell His disciples always to "pray these exact words;" instead, He told them to "pray *like* this." In other words, include these priorities as a part of your prayer. He also didn't go into an eloquent speech that would impress those listening. No, His words were simple and to the point, and they focused on God's will being the priority.

***Healthy Hoping Skill #1: Develop a good prayer template to help you start to pray when you don't feel like praying.*** Taking into account Jesus' teaching in *The Lord's Prayer*, here's a simple template to help you pray:

***1) APPRECIATION: Start your prayer with an appreciation for who God is and for His goodness in your life.*** Identify one character trait of God each day that you are grateful for and thank Him. Then, find something new each day to thank God for that you have in life. You can thank Him for something as simple as a sunny day, oxygen to breathe, or your health. There's always something for which you can show your appreciation to God.

***2) ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: Acknowledge your feelings to God.*** God already knows what you're feeling, so this is more about you venting your feelings to Him. If you're angry, let Him know. If you don't understand, tell Him. I have found that venting to God has saved me from saying things to other people I didn't need to say. God can forgive us and

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<sup>147</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

remove our sin as far as the east is from the west, never again to remember them (Psalm 103:12). However, people may be able to forgive you, but they won't forget. We're just not programmed that way. Vent to God, but talk with others.

3) *ADMIT: Admit your dependency on Him.* Admitting you're dependent on someone else means that you're vulnerable and incapable of taking care of yourself. I struggle with admitting this because I want to believe I'm capable of dealing with anything. In reality, however, you and I *can't* deal with grief on our own. We *are* vulnerable and incapable. Grief can devastate even the "strongest" Christian that you know. However, by admitting your dependency on God, there's a sense of relief you will receive knowing you don't have to carry the burden alone.

4) *ASK: Ask for God's help in your pain.* What does this mean? How can God help us in our pain? I want to be careful here not to throw out the easy Christian-clichéd answers that sound good. Instead, I want to help you understand what this means, at least as much as we can in this life.

In 2 Corinthians 1:4-5, the Apostle Paul, who was well-acquainted with grief, wrote, "He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. For the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ."<sup>148</sup> The Greek word here for "comfort" is *parakaleo* (*par-ak-al-eh'-o*) and it means "to call

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<sup>148</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

to one's side, call for, and to encourage." It's the Holy Spirit's primary role, and He's known as the *Paraclete*, or *one who walks alongside*.<sup>149</sup>

So, how does God help *us* in our pain? First, He comes to us when we call on Him to encourage us. He does this by giving the grace we need to make it through each minute of our suffering until all our minutes have graduated to years. It can be something as beautiful as a baby born in your family or ridiculous your dog doing something funny that makes you laugh. Look for the evidence of God's grace all around you because it's there, in big and small ways. There've been many times in my life where I didn't know if I could move on, but I'm here. That's God's grace.

Secondly, God uses His Word to comfort us as we discover passages and verses that are meaningful to us, and we watch the pain of others who overcame it. Finally, when we allow it to happen, others will enter our life who have walked through similar losses to give us hope. We then have the *privilege* of sharing the same grace we have received with others who are grieving to help them. Before anything, though, we must ask for God's help.

Look for the evidence of God's grace  
all around you because it's there,  
in big and small ways.

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<sup>149</sup> Thayer, Joseph Henry. *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Henderickson, 1981.

5) *ACCEPT: Accept His will.* Beyond the shadow of a doubt, accepting God's will when we lose someone we loved is the most challenging part of this prayer. In reality, however, what other option do we have? The only choice we have is full surrender to the One who is greater than us in every way. If God is Omnipotent (*All-Powerful*), Omniscient (*All-Knowing*), and Omnipresent (*All-Present*), then nothing takes place that He doesn't allow, know about, and can see. Knowing this, I have to accept He is in complete control at every level.

At the same time, just because I accept this doesn't necessarily mean that I like it. On the contrary, there *will* be a natural resistance from my will to accept His will. However, this is where *surrender* comes into play. As with any bodies at war, when one understands the other is more powerful, they can either choose to fight and die or put up their arms in surrender.

*Caution:* Be careful not to allow your prayers to devolve into blaming sessions with God. Honesty is good, but bitterness will destroy you. As difficult as it is, there are times where you have to accept that God is in charge of every aspect of your life, and He loves and wants the best for you. Then, don't keep your prayers always focused on the *here and now*; focus your prayers on eternity where everything wrong in this life will be made right.

- ***Healthy Coping Skill #2: Talking with others***

Talking with others about your loss is important for several reasons. First, talking with others reminds you that your loved one's life was valuable, and they impacted others. Everyone needs to know their loved one's life made a difference. Secondly, talking with others keeps their

memory alive. One of the most prominent fears survivors have in grief is that people will forget their loved ones. It's very much a sobering thought when you think about it: Your loved one died, and the world didn't stop, even though your world did. Finally, talking with others will help you process your feelings and emotions and even allow others to identify issues you need to talk about in-depth.

I would encourage three primary individuals and groups of people to talk with, including counselors or psychologists, pastors, and friends/relatives. Each person will have a different function, so you need to calibrate your expectations accordingly.

***Counselor or Psychologists:*** When choosing a counselor or psychologist, I would suggest that you begin by finding someone who shares your similar faith, if possible. It's not that others won't have something valuable to offer; it's just that a counselor or psychologist of faith will be able to relate to you in a way that those not of that same faith can. Secondly, you should consider choosing an individual that specializes in bereavement counseling. They may have better tools to help process your grief quicker. Thirdly, I would strongly suggest finding someone who is a person of the same sex because men and women process things so much differently, and the perspective of the member of the same sex will be beneficial. You also want to protect yourself in the area of sexual immorality because you're vulnerable when you're grieving, and you may consider options that you wouldn't otherwise. You don't want to compound grief with bad choices or sin that would lead to guilt.



## You don't want to compound grief with bad choices or sin that would lead to guilt.

*Expectations:* Once you choose your counselor or psychologist, you can expect that they'll want to address your life as a whole, not just the grief you are currently experiencing. Many believe the early events in your life shape your response to grief. While there's an element of truth to explore, you want to make sure that they have an exit strategy and that you won't be in counseling five years down the road. You can also expect their rates to range from approximately \$75-\$150 per hour. You may only pay a co-pay anywhere from \$0-\$30 per visit if you have insurance. I recommend checking with your insurance company before scheduling for a clear understanding of what you will pay. If you don't have insurance, some providers offer a CASH ONLY provision. Ask about it before scheduling an appointment.

**Pastor:** If you regularly attend a church, the most obvious place for pastoral counseling would be your home church. If there are complications that you don't want to share with your pastor, you may want to call other churches and ask if their pastor(s) perform counseling for people outside of the church. Most won't, but some will. You'll want to be sure again to choose a pastor from a denomination or church with similar beliefs.

*Expectations:* A pastor will, most likely, approach your grief from a biblical standpoint. An excellent pastoral counselor will listen to your story and find a way to take you to Jesus and the Scriptures. Again, I would recommend meeting with a member of the same sex, when possible, or having safeguards in place where there's no opportunity for

anything improper to occur. Yes, that can happen even at a church because we're all flawed humans. Avoid even the appearance of evil. If you find yourself having displaced feelings toward your pastoral counselor, find another counselor immediately. Then, in most cases, pastors don't charge for counseling, but it's a good thing to ask about beforehand, so there's not an awkward moment at the end where the pastor is expecting payment, and you aren't sure what's happening.

***Friends/Family:*** A natural outlet for discussing your grief should be your friends and family. Notice that I said they *should* because their willingness to talk may depend on how they process grief. Numerous factors will differentiate how you, your friends, and your family will process a shared loss, including previous losses experienced, the closeness of their relationship with your deceased loved one, personality, age, beliefs, and support network.<sup>150</sup>

***Expectations:*** In general, your friends and family should be more of a sounding board than a place to receive advice and direction. Some friends and family members may be willing to talk for hours, while others may want to avoid the subject altogether. In either case, you need to establish healthy boundaries and respect the needs of others. You also need to consider *when* is the right time to speak about your loss. For instance, the year after my brother-in-law passed away, my in-laws celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary. (*My wife was a late-in-life baby.*) It was crucial for the focus of *that* day, July 7, 2020, to be about

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<sup>150</sup> DerSarkissian, Carol. "Grief: Physical Symptoms, Effects on Body, Duration of Process." *WebMD*, WebMD, 9 Nov. 2020, [www.webmd.com/balance/normal-grieving-and-stages-of-grief](https://www.webmd.com/balance/normal-grieving-and-stages-of-grief).

them. If they chose to bring up Robert's loss, that would be fine. He was their son and a significant part of their 70 years. However, everyone else respected that boundary because this day called for a celebration. It doesn't mean that we weren't thinking about Robert that day, because we were. How could we not? How could they not?

It's essential to know *when* to talk about your loss, but it's equally important to know *where* these conversations should occur. If you're reliving a funny memory, you can share that almost anywhere. Everyone should laugh! However, if it's a sad memory, you may want to do that in more of a private setting because it may evoke tears or a strong reaction from those in attendance. Again, respect boundaries.

It's essential to know *when* to talk about your loss, but it's equally as important to know *where* these conversations should take place.

***Healthy Hoping Skill #2:*** *Learn how to center your conversations on eternity.* Talking with others is essential, but *what* you talk about will take you from coping (*this life*) to hoping (*eternity*). Three ways you can move your conversations from coping to hoping are:

*1) Focus your thoughts and conversation on heaven and how your loved one is with Jesus.* Before my brother-in-law passed, my nephew recorded him speaking and, in his message, he encouraged all the family to live for Jesus so he could see them again. It was a surreal moment. However, now Robert is experiencing everything he lived for in his life. He's no

longer experiencing pain. He's not struggling with cancer or any other disease that had attacked his body, and that brings us great comfort.

2) *Read Scriptures about heaven and meditate on heaven.* Consider how beautiful heaven is and what it must be like for him to be in the presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Dr. Ray Pritchard shared the following seven truths about heaven. Heaven is:

- God's dwelling place ([Psalms 33:13](#))
- Where Christ is today ([Acts 1:11](#))
- Where Christians go when they die ([Philippians 1:21-23](#))
- The Father's house ([John 14:2](#))
- A city designed and built by God ([Hebrews 11:10](#))
- A better country ([Hebrews 11:16](#))
- Paradise ([Luke 23:43](#))<sup>151</sup>

I'd also suggest that you read [Revelation 21-22](#) for a breathtaking description of what heaven will be like. The hope of heaven is the ultimate prescription for the pain of this life.

## The hope of heaven is the ultimate prescription for the pain of this life

3) *Sing worship songs that remind you of eternity.* One of the greatest lasting memories I will have of my dad was when my sisters, Dalette and

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<sup>151</sup> Pritchard, Ray. "Heaven - What Is It Like and Where Is It?" *Biblestudytools.com*, 2020, [www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-is-heaven-like-11636670.html](http://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-is-heaven-like-11636670.html).

Jennifer, and I were standing around his ICU bed singing some of the old songs he loved about heaven. *What A Day That Will Be*, *When We All Get to Heaven*, and *Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus* are a few of those memorable classics. Here are some of the lyrics from those songs:

### **What A Day That Will Be**

What a day that will be  
When my Jesus I shall see  
When I look upon His face  
The One who saved me by His grace  
When He takes me by the hand  
And leads me to the Promised Land  
What a day, glorious day that will be<sup>152</sup>

### **When We All Get To Heaven**

When we all get to heaven  
What a day of rejoicing that will be  
When we all see Jesus  
We'll sing and shout the victory<sup>153</sup>

### **Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus**

Turn your eyes upon Jesus  
Look full in His wonderful face

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<sup>152</sup> Hill, Jim. "What a Day That Will Be Lyrics, Chords, and Sheet Music at Name That Hymn." *Lyrics, Chords, and Sheet Music (There Is Coming a Day When No Heartache Shall Come)* at Name That Hymn, 1955, [namethathymn.com/christian-hymns/what-a-day-that-will-be-lyrics.html](http://namethathymn.com/christian-hymns/what-a-day-that-will-be-lyrics.html).

<sup>153</sup> Hewitt, Eliza. "When We All Get to Heaven." *When We All Get to Heaven > Lyrics*, 1898, [library.timelesstruths.org/music/When\\_We\\_All\\_Get\\_to\\_Heaven/](http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/When_We_All_Get_to_Heaven/).

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of His glory and grace<sup>154</sup>

I can still see my dad's tears pouring down his cheeks as we sang in his final hours. At one point, he smiled and said, "There's no harmony like family." (*We're a musical family, and my dad had a beautiful singing voice.*) As we were singing, I was thinking in my mind, "What are the songs I want others to sing around me at the end of my life to remind me of heaven?" When our focus is on heaven, the earth's pressing matters will suddenly seem not as important.

**Caution:** Be careful not to be offended if other people don't want to talk about the grief you're feeling. The timing of your discussion is just as important as the content. Be aware: If people suspect a conversation may be trending in a direction that makes them uncomfortable that they'll do anything they can to escape to a place of safety in their mind.

- ***Healthy Coping Skill #3: Biblical Meditation***

When you hear the word "meditation," what's the first thing that comes to mind? Do you picture a Buddhist monk sitting quietly, chanting a mantra, or making noises in an attempt to still their minds? Do you see meditation as a way to escape your problems, a form of hypnosis, an altered state of consciousness, or the religious pursuit of "oneness?" What is "meditation?"

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<sup>154</sup> Lemmel, Helen H. "Hymn: Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus." *Hymnalnet RSS*, 1922, [www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/645](http://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/645).

Walsh and Shapiro defined meditation as a practice where individuals use various techniques to train their minds to be attentive and aware, thus achieving mental clarity and an emotionally rested state of consciousness.<sup>155</sup> That million-dollar definition means people are looking for a way to relax and destress. We could all find some practical benefit of meditation. Meditation offers the temporary positive benefits of quietness, rest, and peace. Learned breathing techniques may help you relax and reduce your stress levels. Yes, aspects of meditation are appealing, but the practice ultimately falls woefully short because its main objective is to connect the practitioner with nature.

There's nothing wrong with connecting with nature, but nature won't help you through grief. Your grief demands more, and this is where biblical meditation comes in. Secular meditation focuses your mind on this world, while biblical meditation centers on the Eternal Word of God.

***Healthy Hoping Skill #3: Make biblical meditation, reflection, and remembrance a part of your daily schedule.*** Biblical meditation differs from meditation in that the end goal of biblical meditation is to help you remain in proper alignment with God. In biblical meditation, you will find a verse or passage from the Word of God and think about what that reveals about God to His creation.

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<sup>155</sup> Walsh, Roger, and Shauna L. Shapiro. "The Meeting of Meditative Disciplines and Western Psychology: A Mutually Enriching Dialogue." *American Psychologist*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2006, pp. 227–239., doi:10.1037/0003-066x.61.3.227.

**What makes biblical meditation biblical?** (*all Scriptures in this section will be taken from the New International Version*)<sup>156</sup>

*Biblical meditation is biblical because it's centered in the Scriptures.* Joshua was commanded in Joshua 1:8, "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." Many people use this verse and the following verse as a life verse, but you need to understand the background of grief surrounding this verse.

Think about this: In Joshua 1:8, Joshua has recently experienced the loss of his 40-year mentor, Moses. The Israelites just walked through the wilderness for 40 years, and during this time, everyone 20 years-old-or more when they started the journey died. Though we don't know the exact number of people who died, respected Bible scholars estimate that between 2 million and 2.5 million people died. Let's assume it was the lowest number of 2 million. Clarke estimated the number of Israelites that came out of the Exodus to be approximately 3,263,000.<sup>157</sup> If those numbers are close to accurate, then over 61% of the Israelite would have died during this brief time.

How many of those people were friends of Joshua? How many of them were family members? I'm not sure we can fathom the losses Joshua witnessed throughout those years. So, how did he make it through? I

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<sup>156</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>157</sup> Clarke, Adam. "Exodus 12 - Adam Clarke Commentary - Bible Commentaries." *StudyLight.org*, 2020, [www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/acc/exodus-12.html](http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/acc/exodus-12.html).



would suggest it was through biblical meditation, keeping the words of God on his lips.

Harmon wrote the following about Joshua 1:8: “The Hebrew word translated “meditate,” *Hagah* (*hâ-gâh*) implies something more than silent reflection. It means ‘to whisper or murmur’—a use that may point to the fact that reading was usually done aloud in biblical times.”<sup>158</sup> *Hagah* implies a conscious, consistent activity that uses the Word of God for verbally engaging in biblical meditation. Understanding this, you need to find Scriptures that will speak to your life’s circumstances. Then, make those verses and passages a part of your life as you recite them over and over, and commit them to memory. Why should you commit them to memory? David said that He hid God’s Word in his heart, so that he wouldn’t sin against Him (Psalm 119:11).

**Side Note:** We don’t memorize Scriptures just to have something to say, but to say the things God is saying when we don’t have the words to speak. You will NEVER go wrong when you quote and pray the Scriptures.

## You will NEVER go wrong when you quote and pray the Scriptures.

David also said this about biblical meditation in Psalm 119:97, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.” What was the law that both Joshua and David referenced? The first five books of the Old

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<sup>158</sup> Harmon, Allan. *Psalms: A Mentor Commentary, Vol. 1* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2011), 99.

Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Scholars believe David wrote Psalm 119 throughout his life. It wasn't a one-time event. As you read through it, it's easy to see the years pass before he reunites his thoughts together as one Psalm (*song*).

What are some of the losses David experienced in his life as he was writing this Psalm? He had a newborn son that died, his oldest son started an insurrection against him before being murdered, and he brought a plague on Israel when he numbered the people of Israel against God's command (*2 Samuel 24:1-9*). These are just a few of the losses he experienced, yet he dedicated his life to biblical meditation.

This idea is essential because biblical meditation is not a one-time event; it's a lifetime activity. There *will* be times when parts of the song are in the process of *being written* and times when there will be moments of silence and rest. You may think you know the lyrics well until something heads your direction, causing you to change your lyrics and tune here and there. However, any good songwriter will tell you that the best songs aren't those that are written; it's those that are re-written.

In Joshua and David's cases, biblical meditation was the one consistent force in their life that helped them move forward after their losses.

### **What does biblical meditation practically look like for you?**

Here's a pattern for practicing biblical meditation in your life:

*1) Find a peaceful place where you can be alone, without music or noise.* Remove all distractions, including your cell phone or computer. If you make room for distractions, you'll lose focus. Also, do this exercise

alone. There are times to pray and study with others, but this isn't the time.

*2) Prayerfully discern the passage or verse for the day or week that will help you focus on God and His goodness.* One place to initially find passages to meditate on are in the Gospels (*Matthew, Mark Luke, and John*), the Psalms, and Proverbs. Start with what you can understand, and then the Holy Spirit can help you grow in understanding.

*3) Slowly and quietly read the passage or verse five or more times, looking throughout for keywords and emphases.* Don't just rush through this exercise. Pay attention to every word that's written, as if you're reading the most important message you'll ever read. *Hint:* You will be!

*4) Commit the passage or verse to memory.* I've found that it's easiest to do this when I break each verse down sentence-by-sentence. Repeat the sentence a minimum of five times with your Bible and then five more times without the text. As you memorize one portion, add another. However, always quote the previous ones you learned so that you won't forget them.

*5) Quietly reflect on the Scripture.* What is the author saying to his audience? What message did God have for his people then? What is He saying to me now? Does the message He is speaking to me align with the message He gave to the people in the Bible? While it may not line up verbatim, it shouldn't be completely different.

*6) Pray the verse over your life.* How can you do this? Go phrase-by-phrase, asking God to lead you to become more like Him in every way.

As you're doing this, the Holy Spirit will show you how to need to conform to the image of Jesus.

7) *Live out what you've read.* Biblical meditation is nothing more than a cool coping strategy or transcendental meditation if it doesn't result in life change. Ask the Holy Spirit to make you like Jesus and to help you BE the Word of God.

### **What Are Some Practical Coping or Hoping Strategies?**

Coping is fine for a time, but at some point, wouldn't you rather spend your time hoping? How do you do this? Everything starts with developing a consistent prayer life. Talk with God because HOPE originates *with* and emanates *from* Him. Then, talk with others, but let allow eternity to dominate your thoughts and conversations. Finally, you need to practice biblical meditation. Your thoughts are the gatekeeper of your emotions.

**Your thoughts are the gatekeeper of your emotions.**

# 9.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO MOVE ON?  
(CAN LIFE BE GOOD AGAIN?)



I can't keep living like this. I'm ready for a change. Living in a constant state of grief has felt so overwhelming. Life's been so dark for so long, but I'm starting to see some glimpses of light. It's still the first thing on my mind in the morning and the last thing at night. I feel stuck. I feel like I take one step forward followed by two steps backward. The pains I feel aren't as sharp; it's more like a dull ache all over my body. I'm not crying all the time anymore. I still have my moments. I wish someone had told me that all the *firsts* were going to be so hard. I just want to believe that life can be *good* again.

If you find yourself making these types of statements, you're at a place I call "The In-Between." You're not where you were when your grief began, but you're not yet where you want to be either. You're in-

between the extreme daily emotions, and that shows you're making progress. However, it's time to move on to seeing life more clearly and living life more fully. (Again, you're not casually moving on from your loss or loved one.)

Let me illustrate how your journey may be going right now. If you're ever driven in the fog before, you know how challenging it can be. Numerous contributing factors can make driving in fog even more complicated, including the density of the fog, time of day, temperature, the amount of traffic on the road, and more. All of those factors dictate the speed at which you drive.

I don't know if you know this, but fog is nothing more than a cloud that touches the ground. According to the *National Geographic Society*, "for the fog to form, dust or a similar type of pollutant needs to formulate in the air, and then the water vapor condenses around these microscopic solid particles. Depending on the humidity and temperature, fog can form very suddenly and then disappear just as quickly. This type of fog is called flash fog."<sup>159</sup> In other words, there has to be an irritant in the atmosphere for the fog to form. It also has the power to show up out of nowhere and then go away. Think about the consequences of this: The singular pollutant transforms the water's purity and transparency into a giant dark barrier that hinders your direction.

Let's briefly shift gears to see how that applies to your grief. Grief is like a fog that affects your ability to see forward. It'll impede your

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<sup>159</sup> National Geographic Society. "Fog." *National Geographic Society*, 9 Oct. 2012, [www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/fog/](http://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/fog/).

movement forward, cause you to question your direction, has the potential to take you off course, and can even put you in danger of emotional collisions with unseen other drivers on your path. Why did this fog form in your mind? Because there was a singular pollutant in your atmosphere, the loss of your loved one. Where your mind seemed clear before, it's now clouded and misty, and you're not sure how to move forward. So, you slow down or come to a stop, depending upon it's a "flash fog" or an hours-long disruption.

Weather experts note that fog is typically worse in the morning because it's "the coolest time of the day when the temperature drops to the dew point temperatures and the relative humidity approaches 100%."<sup>160</sup> However, the fog often goes away with the daylight. As the sun comes up, so does the temperature, and the fog will burn off, so to speak.

From an emotional perspective, I would suggest that the fog of grief is worse in the early morning after waking up because your mind will immediately try to take you back to your loss. I know this because I've experienced this over-and-over. I call this the "Foggy Challenge." The "Foggy Challenge" is one that will set the tone for the rest of your day.

As your brain drives through this emotional fog, you need the light of clarity to shine in the dark places. You need to understand how to navigate three crucial "Foggy Challenges" to get where you want to go:

***Foggy Challenge #1: You have to be willing to let go of your grief.*** You may be thinking to yourself, "I didn't want this grief in the first place.

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<sup>160</sup> "What Is Fog?" Edited by Earth Networks, *Earth Networks*, 17 Dec. 2020, [www.earthnetworks.com/resources/weather-facts/what-is-fog/](http://www.earthnetworks.com/resources/weather-facts/what-is-fog/).

Of course, I'm ready to let it go." However, *saying* you want to let it go is much easier than actually doing it because, for many, grief becomes their new identity, somewhat a badge of courage. The hard reality is that when people look at you, they see you through the lens of what happened to you. Strangely, that continual attention can become addicting and an almost welcomed intrusion into your life if you're not careful. The very thing that has stolen a part of you is also sustaining you.

In high school, I dated a girl who was a cheerleader. I'm not sure how that happened, other than she must have had a pity-date quota to fulfill for the month. After several weeks, we ended breaking up and going in our separate ways (*veiled 80's Journey reference*). For her, I think it was a lot easier than it was for me. I don't know how she spent her nights, but I sat on the couch and listened to *Don't Let It End* by Styx hundreds of times. I was *committed* to my grief because I had to rewind my audio cassette over-and-over to the song's beginning. THAT was commitment! I joke about this, but I struggled for a long time because I refused to let go of my grief. I thought my life was over and that I would never love again. Fortunately, that was not the case, as I've been married to my best friend, Becky, since July 3, 1987.

BTW, the only reason this story is in the book in the first place was that I was listening to music as I'm writing, and this song randomly came on. Do you know what happened to me? Instantly, I was transported in my mind back to 1982, bad hair and all. It's amazing how a small trigger will take your mind back to a place you'd like to forget.



**Side Note:** A “trigger” is “a stimulus such as a smell, sound, or sight that triggers feelings of trauma.”<sup>161</sup>

Now, I understand the story of the loss of my girlfriend doesn’t begin to compare with your pain. Still, I can identify two quick experiences of my grief following my losses. First, you’re a trigger away from reliving your grief. I recently searched for my daughter’s name online to create a website. I needed a picture of her, so I took the lazy way out and Googled her images. Guess what was there? One of the first images to come up was a picture of my father. I wasn’t expecting that, and my heart instantly sank.

Secondly, the feelings and emotions of *Don’t Let It End* lasted as long as I kept playing the song. It was time to move on at some point, so I clicked on *Babe* and *Mr. Roboto* to redirect my mind. Don’t judge my music; it was just one of those days. I’m not telling you not to cry when you are triggered, but put a timeframe on how long you’re going to *feel* the pain. (BTW, *Babe* was the wrong choice; other bad memories.)

So, how can you let go of your grief?

*1) Relive a positive, funny, or memorable story about your loved one that’s appropriate in the setting when you’re around others.* Give yourself and others permission to think, laugh, and remember them in a non-threatening. As you bring a smile to everyone’s face through the

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<sup>161</sup> Good Therapy. “Trigger.” *GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog*, 2 May 2018, [shorturl.at/jCHJN](https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/shorturl.at/jCHJN).

memory you share, you'll be celebrating their life and keeping their memory alive in a significant way.

*2) Reinvest your life's time and energy, and don't allow your pain to be wasted.* The pain you feel will be there regardless, so why not channel that into something that can make a difference in our world? When my nephew committed suicide, I decided I would continue down the path of speaking in public schools on suicide. I'm working toward that end right now. I will be releasing a book on suicide in the coming months. Writing that book will be one of the most challenging and uncomfortable things I will ever do. Still, I'm determined that Matthew's death will be a source of life for thousands of others struggling with suicidal thoughts.

OK, so maybe you're not a writer, that's OK. You don't have to take on such a big project to be a difference-maker. Find one person you can invest your life in, and be an encouraging voice to them. Choose to volunteer for an agency that helps people who suffered a similar type of loss. Serve at your church in an area that was consequential to your loved one. Your input in someone's life may be far greater than you'll ever know.

*3) Reinvent your life.* Take some healthy risks that you've always wanted to take, but you were too afraid to do until now. Stop making excuses for why you can't do something, and just do it. Go on a trip you've always wanted to go on. Expand your social circle and invite in those others that may overlook. Run for Congress. PLEASE RUN FOR CONGRESS. We need more people with common sense in Washington D.C. Help a law get passed in our government. Write a poem or a song.

Cut your cable. Find the funny in the stupid mistakes you make rather than getting upset. Go to the mountains and breathe the fresh air. Go to the beach and let the sand get in between your toes. Go outside and walk down your street. Meet your neighbors. LIVE, LIVE, and then LIVE SOME MORE!

***Foggy Challenge #2: You have to see yourself being “whole” again.*** For all of us, the starting point to healing and being whole is the word “Yes.” However, when you’re grieving, the response of “no” can become the easy-out and mainstay answer in your vocabulary when people want you to hang out, eat a meal, or go to an event together. Saying “no” requires no thought, no preparation, no responsibility, no opportunity for fun, and no possibility of allowing others in to help during your grief.

Two weeks after my dad passed away, some of our phenomenal friends, Russ and Mary, asked us to come over to their house to eat dinner and have a game night. We’re “thick and thin” friends. I always enjoy hanging out with Russ because we’ve known each other since college and have been close since 1986. Truthfully, we’ve spent a lot of time getting into trouble together, and I enjoy those moments. So, any opportunity to go over and hang out with them is going to be a GOOD time! However, when they asked, I thanked them but declined their invitation. Why? I didn’t want to laugh. Instead, I chose to stay on my couch and wallow in my pain.

Two weeks later, they had helped us with something, so as a thank you, I invited them out for Mexican food, and we laughed just like old times. It felt good. It was right. Then, on New Year’s Eve, Russ invited us to

hang out again and eat dinner at a Japanese hibachi restaurant they love. To be honest, I don't like hibachi, but I love my friends. I went again and had a great time. Doing this didn't make me whole, but it was a step in the right direction.

I shared this story because every time you have an opportunity to spend time with people you love, or even some you begrudgingly tolerate, you have a decision to make. Do you *want* to be whole? Do you really want to heal, or is it easier to retreat to your place of pain? Are you going to respond to for the rest of your life with a miserable, self-pitying “no” that isolates you from others, or will you allow “yes” to become your new mantra? Just a thought: You'll never see yourself being whole while you're sitting on your couch watching TV or lying in your bed with the blinds shut at 5 pm. Get up, get out, and get whole.

***Foggy Challenge #3: You need to understand there's no such thing as “closure” without Christ.*** The “need for closure” was a phrase coined by social psychologist Arie Kruglanski in the 1990s. Kruglanski defined the “need for closure” as “the need to achieve a sense of finality at the close of a painful or difficult episode in one's life.”<sup>162</sup> While the concept is noble and understandable as to why someone would *want* to experience it, it's shallow, empty, and misleading. The truth is, no amount of closure will ever make your loss OK, in and of itself. All it can do is make things slightly more bearable.

Consider the parents of a murder victim: Let's suppose their child's perpetrator is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to the death penalty.

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<sup>162</sup> Kruglanski, Arie. “APA Dictionary of Psychology.” *American Psychological Association*, American Psychological Association, 2020, [dictionary.apa.org/need-for-closure](https://dictionary.apa.org/need-for-closure).

Then, they physically watch the person apologize to them before their execution. Is that finality or closure enough to help them overcome their pain? Further, suppose that a five-year-old spends three months in the hospital as they're dying from leukemia. The parents and family all have the most understanding bosses who allow them to stay at the hospital 24/7. When the child passes away, is that time spent with them enough closure? Will seeing your loved one a final time in a casket be your saving grace? Being able to say goodbye does *help* on so many levels, but it won't diminish the heaviness of your future grief alone.

**Side Note:** I understand that how a person dies can make it easier than in other awful circumstances, and I'm certainly not unsympathetic to the questions and pain for those who lost loved ones suddenly and violently. It's a painful fate I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. The point I'm making is that even being able to say goodbye to your loved one even under the best of conditions stinks.

Face it: Without Jesus, death wins, the grave is the final victor, and we're the ultimate loser. Without Jesus, closure is nothing more than a series of cloud-filled, stormy days, with no hope of sunshine. This kind of closure is, at best, a sad, pathetic goodbye with no hope of a future. Closure without Christ is a life forever lived in the darkest and densest of fogs.

**Closure without Christ is a life forever lived  
in the darkest and densest of fogs.**

In Christ, however, we can experience *biblical closure*. *Biblical closure* is a term I'm labeling that recognizes that though we live in a sinful world

where death seems to reign temporarily, a day is coming when God will make all things *right* in the end when He returns (2 Peter 3:13, Romans 5:12-21). *Biblical closure* occurs because death died when Jesus rose from the grave. *Biblical closure* is God's perfect peace guarding your mind and giving you the ability to make it each day because you see Jesus as victorious over all things, in all things, and through all things. *Biblical closure* is God's way of reminding us that He's the author who gets to punctuate our lives.

## *Biblical closure* occurs because death died when Jesus rose from the grave.

The Apostle Paul wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 15:55-57, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>163</sup>

### **Finding Jesus in Your Grief**

In the late 1980's and 1990's, *Where's Waldo*, a series of six cartoon-themed books, became a cultural phenomenon. Each book's purpose was simplistic: Try to find Waldo on every page of the book among the hand-drawn masses. The search parameters were always the constant because Waldo always wore the same thing, his trademark red and white striped sweater and ski cap, and his black-rimmed glasses. As each page turned, a new search commenced. Amazingly, according to Martin Hanford, the author who sold over 43 million copies of these

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<sup>163</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

books, each Waldo picture took eight weeks to draw.<sup>164</sup> Think about that: Since almost every book was 32 pages, it took approximately 123 weeks, or nearly two-and-a-half years, to illustrate each picture in each book. Artistry requires time to accomplish a purpose and end goal. *Where's Waldo?*

A better question for your grief is, “*Where's Jesus?*” The best suggestion I've made to grieving people over the years is that they find Jesus in their loss. The concept is simplistic at face value and seems like obvious advice from someone serving in pastoral ministry. As we daily walk through life surrounded by the mass of humanity, it's easy to get caught up in the crowds and miss Jesus. However, failing to find Jesus in our grief is equivalent to placing a *Band-Aid* over a blocked artery when we need a heart surgeon to remove the plaque deposits that have accumulated over time. A *Band-Aid* approach to our grief won't *fix* us; we need to ask, “*Where's Jesus?*”

### ***An Acrostic to Help You See Jesus in Your Grief***

To help you see Jesus in your grief, I've devised an acrostic reminder that spells out the name J-E-S-U-S.

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<sup>164</sup> Fandom. “Martin Handford.” *Waldo Wiki*,  
waldo.fandom.com/wiki/Martin\_Handford#:~:text=As%20an%20artist%20Martin's%  
20Where's,to%20eight%20weeks%20to%20draw.

# J

**JEHOVAH:** First, Jesus is your Jehovah. In Exodus 3, Moses was taking care of his father-in-law's flocks in the wilderness when he saw a bush that was burning, but it wasn't burning up. As he curiously approached the bush, God spoke to him and told him to lead His people, Israel, out of the Egyptians' bondage. When Moses asked God who he should tell the Israelites sent him, God replied in Exodus 3:14: "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" I AM is translated here as *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*.

Without going through a long theological explanation that would sidetrack your journey, Jesus referred to Himself seven times as I AM (Jehovah), fulfilling Old Testament prophecies and cementing His claim to be God:

**1) I AM the Bread of Life (John 6:28-35)**

*Fulfillment:* (Exodus 16; Deuteronomy 8:3, Psalm 78:23-25)

**2) I AM the Light of the World (John 8:12-30)**

*Fulfillment:* (Exodus 13:17-22; Isaiah 42:6, Isaiah 49:6)

**3) I AM the Door or Gate (John 10:1-18)**

*Fulfillment:* (Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23,

**4) I AM the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18)**

*Fulfillment:* (Isaiah 40:11, Numbers 27:15-18, Micah 5:4)

**5) I AM the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:17-27)**

*Fulfillment:* (Genesis 1-3, Isaiah 53:10)

**6) I AM the Door or Gate (John 14:6)**

*Fulfillment:* (Exodus 26:33, Leviticus 16)

**7) I AM the True Vine (John 15:1-6)**

*Fulfillment:* (Isaiah 5:1-7, Isaiah 27:2-6)



Jesus also told Phillip in John 14:9 that “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” Then, in John 8:58, Jesus told the Jews, “Very truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I AM!”<sup>165</sup>

I gave you all of that background to boldly state that **Jesus IS Jehovah**. That’s important for your grief because, in the Old Testament, the name Jehovah has nine different designations to reveal God’s ((Jesus’) nature.<sup>166</sup> I want us to focus on two of those names, *Jehovah Rapha* and *Jehovah Shalom* because God wants to reveal Himself to you in your pain personally.

- **JEHOVAH RAPHA:** Jehovah Rapha (raw-faw’) means “the Lord who heals.”<sup>167</sup> God revealed Himself to His people in Exodus 15:26 when he said, “I am the Lord who heals you.”<sup>168</sup> Your broken life *needs* a Healer, Jesus. God spoke to the Israelites then, the same words He’s sharing to you today: I AM the Lord who heals. Invite Jesus into your pain and accept His healing for your life.

## Your broken life *needs* a Healer, Jesus.

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<sup>165</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>166</sup> Blue Letter Bible. “O.T. Names of God - Study Resources.” *Blue Letter Bible*, 2020, [www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name\\_god.cfm](http://www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name_god.cfm).

<sup>167</sup> Jehovah Rapha. “O.T. Names of God - Study Resources.” *Blue Letter Bible*, 2021, [www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name\\_god.cfm](http://www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name_god.cfm).

<sup>168</sup> *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*. Wheaton, Ill: *Tyndale House Publishers*, 2004. Print.

- **JEHOVAH SHALOM:** Jehovah Shalom (*shaw-lome*) means “the Lord is peace.”<sup>169</sup> God only showed Himself to the Israelites one as *the Lord is peace*, in Judges 6:24 to Gideon. In the previous verse, the angel told Gideon he wasn’t going to die, and so he named the place where he was *the Lord is peace*. That’s an important message for you: This loss isn’t going to kill you before your time. You *ARE* going to continue living!

**BIG POINT:** Jesus is *your* Healer (Psalm 147:3) and the One who will speak peace right where and when you need it.

Jesus is *your* Healer and the One who will speak peace right where and when you need it.

## E

**EMMANUEL:** Secondly, Jesus is your Emmanuel. In Isaiah 7:14, more than 700 years before the birth of Jesus, God had Isaiah write, “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.”<sup>170</sup> The name *Emmanuel* means “God is with us,”<sup>171</sup> and Isaiah’s prophecy

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<sup>169</sup> Jehovah Shalom. “O.T. Names of God - Study Resources.” *Blue Letter Bible*, 2021, [www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name\\_god.cfm](http://www.blueletterbible.org/study/misc/name_god.cfm).

<sup>170</sup> Edgar, S., Kinney, A. M., & Dumbarton Oaks. (2010). *The Vulgate Bible*: Douay-Rheims translation. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

<sup>171</sup> Emmanuel. *Strong's Hebrew: 6005. יְהוָה (Immanuel) -- "With Us Is God," The Name of a Child*, 2020, [biblehub.com/hebrew/6005.htm](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/6005.htm).

was fulfilled at Jesus' birth in Matthew 1:23.<sup>172</sup> Marby Sweeney stated the name *Emmanuel* is vital because it's a sign God will protect His people.<sup>173</sup> How? He comes to be "with us" where we are.

What does it mean that God is "*with us*?" I heard that growing up in church and thought to myself, "Where is He? I can't see Him." While you may not *physically* see God in a human body like ours, there are two distinct ways you will see Him if you're looking.

First, the evidence that God is with us is throughout His creation (Romans 1:20). Look, I know there are people out there who believe that two atoms were flying around in space and collided together, and now we have our world and everything in it. Really?!? How can anyone reach any conclusion other than there *is* a God who intelligently designed everything that exists?

If you want to see God, go to the ocean and watch the water roll in and out. Did two atoms do that? I don't think so. To see God, walk outside your door and look up anytime, day or night. If it's a sunny day, look at the beautiful sky and then over at the sun and know God put it there. (*Disclaimer: Don't look at the sun for too long, or you may go blind. I know a kid who did that, and it took him a few days to see again*) If it's dark, check out the moon and the other planets and stars. Take a moment

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<sup>172</sup> Typically, the spelling of "Immanuel" is found in the Old Testament and "Emmanuel" is found in the New Testament since the Old Testament is Written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. They are the same.

<sup>173</sup> Sweeney, Marby A. *Isaiah 1-39: with an Introduction to Prophetic Literature*. Eerdmans, 1996.

and glance at the trees and plants in any field that grow. That's His handiwork, too. Watch gravity at work, especially when you drop something on your toe. You can find His activity in the birth of a child, for we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). I could go on and on, but we can see the evidence of God being *with us* all around us in His creation. God is *transcendent*, which means He created and controls everything, and He's greater than His creation.

God is *transcendent*, which means  
He created and controls everything,  
and He's greater than His creation.

Secondly, we see God at work daily in our world. This theological concept is known as the *immanence of God*. *Immanence* is a million-dollar theological word that means God is actively and personally working in His creation (Jeremiah 23:23-24, Acts 17:27-28, Haggai 2:4-5). We experience God's *immanence* when we pray to Him, worship Him, express our love to Him, and listen for His voice from His Word. If you've ever felt like you were supposed to give something to someone and when you did, they cried because they were in need, that was God's *immanence*. You may have thought you were just giving something away, but you were the extension of God's *immanence* to someone else.

I remember one time when my wife and I received with two brand-new 60-inch Pioneer TV's back in 2001, as a result of some work I had done for an organization. When we got the TV's home, I was so excited. I was going to put one in my living room and the other in my bedroom. These TV's were more like giant pieces of furniture in that day. As we got them

in, something inside me (*aka, the Holy Spirit*) told me I needed to give one away to a new family that had just come to America. Of course, I knew this *couldn't* be God because I loved that TV. However, I *knew* it could only be a God-thing because I wouldn't have come up with this thought to bless someone else this way.

When we told them on Sunday at church we were giving them the TV; they began to cry. They told us, “Our TV was old, and it went out last night. We asked God to give us a new one because we didn't have the money, but we never dreamed we would get something so nice.” When I got home, I started to cry too; and not because I had given away the TV. It was humbling to know that God would use me to bless someone else. You see, God was working in my heart to be generous, and he worked in their hearts too because they were the beneficiaries of God's goodness.

Think about this in your grief: Maybe you're not the one called to receive *God's immanence*; maybe you're the one called to share it with someone else. When you see God working in the world and allow him to work through you, you're an *extension* of Emmanuel.

Maybe you're not the one called to  
receive *God's immanence*; maybe you're  
the one called to share it with someone else.

**BIG POINT:** Jesus is in control of His creation, and He's working in your life daily so that you can experience his *transcendence* and *immanence*.

# S

**SHEPHERD:** Thirdly, Jesus is your Shepherd. When you see the word “shepherd,” if you’ve been around Christianity very long, your first thought probably goes back to Psalm 23 where David wrote, “1 The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, 3 he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. 6 Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”<sup>174</sup>

Psalm 23 is one of the most popular passages used in funerals. What’s interesting about that to me is that this Psalm is about life, not death. Few modern translations even use the word *death* in Psalm 23:4, unlike the King James Version, which reads: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”<sup>175</sup> Think about it: Almost everything in Psalm 23 is about life, yet we almost always associate it with death. I want you to see how two of these concepts apply to your grief.

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<sup>174</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

<sup>175</sup> *King James Bible*. Thomas Nelson, 1991.

Almost everything in Psalm 23 is about life,  
and yet we almost always associate it with death.

First, as a shepherd, David understood the shepherd's responsibility to take care of their sheep. So, for him to write that with the Lord as his Shepherd he had everything he needed was a recognition that he had a Good Shepherd. Only a good shepherd provided for all the needs of their flock. What do sheep need for survival? Food, water, shelter, and essential maintenance. Sheep don't need much. Let me ask you: What do you need to survive right now? The death of someone we love has a way of showing us that much of the things we have spent our lives trying to build are meaningless in the end. If your needs are taken care of, thank God for His provision now.

Secondly, in Psalm 23:4, David mentioned the Lord's *rod* and *staff* brought comfort to him. Shepherds used these two instruments for defense and offense in the protection of their sheep. The rod was a defensive weapon used to fight off the attacks of an enemy of their sheep and also to count the sheep. On the other hand, the staff was a long sturdy stick with a rounded end, much like what we think of in our concept of a shepherd's staff. Shepherds used their staff to protect the sheep when they were going in the wrong direction.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> "Rod, Staff - Holman Bible Dictionary -." *StudyLight.org*, 2021,  
<https://www.studylight.org/dictionaries/eng/hbd/r/rod-staff.html>.

REMEMBER: Jesus is the Good Shepherd  
who will lead you to places of provision  
and protection for every area of your life.

## U

**UNDERSTANDING:** Fourthly, Jesus is understanding. One of the most incredible comforts any of us can experience in our grief is talking with a person who understands what we're feeling. I'm not talking about a person who read about grief in a textbook and now has a piece of paper on the wall that allows them to counsel other people. Instead, I'm talking about somebody who has faced loss head-on and came out victorious on the other side. For us, our example is Jesus. No one else understands grief better because no one else has ever experienced it to the extent He did.

That sounds good, but what does this mean for you? How is Jesus understanding, and what does that look like in real life?

First, Jesus can empathize with your pain because He's "been there, done that, and got the t-shirt." Whatever your type of loss, Jesus experienced it, and now He encourages you to bring your pain to Him (1 Peter 5:6-7, Psalm 55:2). You can bring your pain to Him through open and honest dialogue about how you're feeling. The key to getting biblical understanding is speaking honestly on your part and submitting your feelings to the Truth from God's Word. Compare your feelings to God's Word and pray for God to help your feelings to come into



alignment with Truth. Ask yourself: Where did Jesus feel what I'm feeling, and how did He respond?

Secondly, Jesus will listen to you. You can tell Him anything, and He doesn't get tired of hearing from you. We all want someone to listen to us, and I like to think of myself as a good listener most of the time. There are times, I admit, that I suffer from ADHD, *Attention Deficit Husband Disorder*, where I nod my head up and down and agree, but I didn't hear what was said. All married people can identify with what I'm saying. Truthfully, I've had to develop *active listening* skills over the years since I've spent so much time counseling others. I always wanted to make sure everyone knew I was listening to them, so I made excellent eye contact, gave affirming nods, rephrased questions, deferred judgment, and gave appropriate feedback. While you may not be able to get those physical cues from your conversations with Jesus, His Word reassures us in 1 John 5:14-15 that when we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. In Psalm 34:15, David wrote, "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry."<sup>177</sup>

Thirdly, Jesus doesn't judge and label you according to your worst moment. I've had A LOT of those horrible moments when no one was around or when I'm in the other room. My wife tells me she occasionally hears me hit my mattress, and I can confirm she is correct. The truth is: I look like I have everything together publicly because I don't have to put up any facades in front privately with Him. You have to understand this isn't hypocritical in any way. God already understands my thoughts, so why not vent to Him? At the end of the prayer, I thank Him

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<sup>177</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.

for listening to and hearing me and forgiving me of my temporary “*inhumanscity*” (*humanity and insanity*). I consider these my “C.S. Lewis moments.” Seriously, it’s incredible how much this has helped me grieve to know that Jesus can handle anything, and I can say anything privately.

## S

**SAVIOR:** Finally, Jesus is your Savior in grief. When most people think of a savior, they think about a superhero in the Marvel comic book series that comes to rescue someone at the last moment or an ordinary person who does something heroic and gets recognized for their effort. The plot of every good movie demands a savior to come and make everything right at the end. Most movies are fictional, killing off main characters, and even those based on true stories take poetic license to make the story more interesting. Jesus is different. He needs no additions or cinematic dramatizations to make His story better. There’s no need for a writer’s embellishment when it comes to the Savior of the World.

There’s no need for a writer’s embellishment  
when it comes to the Savior of the World.

*Easton’s Bible Dictionary* defines “Savior” as “one who saves from any form or degree of evil. In its highest sense, the word indicates the relation sustained by our Lord to his redeemed ones.”<sup>178</sup> Yes, there were

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<sup>178</sup> Easton, M.G. *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* – “Savior.” Charles River Editors, 2018.

saviors (with a small “s”) like Moses, Joshua, Samson, and David in the Old Testament. However, they get the small “s” because they were flawed, limited human beings, and their work was limited to a specific period.

However, Jesus is the only Savior (*with a capital “S”*). That leads us to the question: If Jesus is a Savior, then from what has Jesus come to save us? Without going into a long theological discourse, the short answer is Jesus saves you from the wrath of God (Romans 5:9), from being an enemy of God (Romans 5:10), sin (Romans 6:17), and eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23, John 11:26). The work Jesus accomplished on the cross is good for every man, woman, boy, and girl of every possible demographic. The salvation Jesus offers is accessible for every person in every nation and can be experienced at any moment if you call on Him and ask for forgiveness of your sins (Romans 10:9). It requires an action on your part, but Jesus did the “work” of salvation. We’re saved when our God’s grace and our faith collide (Ephesians 2:8-9). Similarly, salvation in your grief will only happen when you call out to Jesus.

### ***A Personal “savior” Story***

In 1988, Becky and I went for the day to Crescent Beach in Florida. Crescent Beach a quiet beach located about 65 miles south of Jacksonville. I HIGHLY recommend it! (In case any members of the Chamber of Commerce are reading this, I’m open to a free vacation.) We lived in Gainesville at the time, and we’d occasionally go on a day trip to the beach, which was, and still is, my favorite outdoor activity.

This day was like every other time we had gone to the beach, except that the red flags were flying because the undertow was strong. We swam,

threw the frisbee, laid out on our blanket, and walked on the beach. As we were walking, we heard someone screaming. It was the kind of screaming that let you know someone needed help. We looked around but didn't immediately find the people yelling. Then, as we turned toward the northside of the beach and looked out approximately 300 yards, we saw two young kids struggling in the water. We looked for their parents, but no one else seemed to hear them through the commotion between music and people laughing. Unfortunately, there were no lifeguards on duty that day.

Becky and I immediately ran to our blankets and retrieved the \$.99 rafts we had purchased at the cheesy local souvenir store before we came out. We jumped into the water and swam as fast as we could to them, but the undertow kept pulling them further and further out. As we got closer, I could hear the desperation in their voices, begging us to hurry.

When we finally reached them, we used our \$.99 rafts to help buoy them and head back to the shore. I'll never forget the first words the young boy, no more than eight or nine-years-old, said to me. He said, "Mister, I'm glad you got here when you did because I couldn't keep my head above water any longer. I thought I was going to drown." He then asked, "Are you a good swimmer?" I told him, "Uh, kid, I'm all you've got."

For what seemed like an eternity, but was probably closer to ten minutes, we fought against the undertow with these kids to get them back safely on to land. Both of them thanked us and went on their way. The funny thing is: We never got their names, and we never found out who their parents were either. At that moment, we were their "savior."

When I look back on that day, I realize those kids could have easily drowned if they had just accepted their fate. They were isolated, and no one could hear them. They didn't have the strength to get back to the shore because the undertow was against them. Who knows?!? There were probably even sharks circling in the water. However, two things saved them that day: 1) They didn't stop fighting for life, and 2) They called out for help. Had they tried to "save" themselves, they undoubtedly would have died.

Have you ever felt like that before? Isolated? Drowning in an ocean of emotions? Being pulled away from the safety of your shore? I encourage you to call out to Jesus now because He will be *your* Savior! And when he does, understand Jesus doesn't only save you *from* something; He saves you *for* something. He's still working in your life. He's coming right where you are, and the Good News is, Jesus has better resources to protect you than a \$.99 raft.

Jesus doesn't only save you *from* something;  
He saves you *for* something.

**BIG POINT:** Jesus won't save you if you want to be the hero or heroine of your story. You have to call out and admit you need His help.

## **What do I Need to Do to Move On?**

Ultimately, this decision lies with you. Are you satisfied with where you are now? If so, you'll probably stay there until something else happens that makes you reassess your position. However, if you don't deal with your grief and loss now, you will later. If you wait, it's going to be much

harder in the future. Addressing multiple losses at once will further distort your perspective of life.

Here's what you need to do to move on: Take one small step today. Then, take one small step tomorrow, and repeat the same the next day. Like the shampoo bottle states: Rinse. Lather. Repeat. Baby steps.

Set reasonable expectations. Walk through the practical suggestions in the book, but more importantly, allow God's Word to saturate your mind, beliefs, and actions. Think godly thoughts!

Remember: You NEED Jehovah in every way He shows up! You NEED Emmanuel to be near you! Jesus WILL be your Shepherd! Jesus is YOUR Understanding Savior.

You CAN move on as you look for J-E-S-U-S in your grief!

# 10.

## IS THERE A BETTER WAY TO GRIEVE? (YES, THE FIVE STAGES OF HOPE)



Well, you've made it. You've reached the final chapter and gotten a lot of knowledge along the way. Information is great, as long as it leads to transformation. Unfortunately, I've read far too many cliché-riddled books that never connect their message with a real-life, how-to conclusion. Well, chapter ten is the big pay-off. Let's end strong.

In chapter three, I shared the biblical responses to *The Kübler-Ross Five Stages of Grief*. Kübler-Ross' five stages have been the gold standard for grieving people and their counselors since 1969 when Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote *On Death and Dying*. While her work is excellent, I'd suggest it's incomplete and void of future hope. My conclusion of her work is that it's centered around existence, and we all need more.

The more I've studied and researched during my grief and this book's writing, I believe there's room for an additional grief model, a Christian model that aligns with God's Word. So, I've developed what I'm calling *The Five Stages of Hope*. Each stage corresponds with a biblical Truth that will point you to Jesus and offer hope in the worst time of your life. My prayer is that God will use this model to speak hope in your life at every stage in the process.

The principles in this model come from the Book of Job in the Old Testament of the Bible. I'd encourage you to read the full corresponding chapters as you are processing each stage. For those not familiar with the Book of Job, let me give you a brief overview of Job's unimaginable losses. Job was the "greatest man among all the people of the East (Job 1:3)." In one day, Job got three "knocks on the door" that told him he had lost his wealth (oxen) and farmworkers, his sheep (wealth) and servants died in an "act of God," and his ten children died in a natural disaster. Over the coming days, weeks, and months, Job got a painful and awful skin disease, his wife becomes embittered, his best friends turned against him (blaming him for God's judgment on his life), and he felt God was angry with him. What do you do with all of that?

Remember: The story of Job is not a work of fiction, an allegory, or a parable. Job was a real person who lived and suffered losses beyond all mental or emotional comprehension. Job's story was one that touched the gamut of all emotions, from utter despair in the beginning to experiencing hope and a future. On this journey through Job's life, you'll see yourself.



**Side Note:** *The Five Stages of Hope* is based on my over 30 years of pastoral counseling of real people with real grief, studying grief in the Word of God, and over 20 years of literature research.

## **STAGE ONE: ACKNOWLEDGING**

Biblical Passage: Job 1-2

**Stage One:** Stage One of the *Five Stages of Hope* is *Acknowledging* what has happened to you. This stage begins when you find out devastating news of your loss, you feel the loss, and you rely on your faith to get you through each minute, hour, and day. Stage One is more about survival than anything else. Let's look at three *Acknowledging Principles* that will help you receive and deal with the truth of your loss.

***Acknowledging Principle #1: Finding out is where it all begins (Job 1:13-19).*** Nothing can prepare you for “the news” that your loved one has passed, even if you knew the end was near. A wave of emotions floods your mind, bringing confusion, numbness, and disbelief. I've been on both sides of the story; I've had to deliver the news to people that their loved one died, and I've received the awful news that a loved one had died. One thing I can tell you for sure, that “knock on the door” or the “phone call” is devastating, and the finality of the message is instantly life-altering.

A pastor friend of mine recently passed away following a short (long) - term illness. Throughout his battle, I was praying for him and his wife, as she was rightly overwhelmed. Devastatingly, he passed, as did both of her parents the same week. Nothing prepares you for “the news,” especially when you have multiple losses.

In Job 1:13-19, Job gets the worst news of his life, his children's death, and other monumental losses. Any of these losses on a single day would be horrible to process, but Job's response to the losses he suffered provides us insight and direction for what we can expect when we find out the worst news of our life. Job's response isn't a *perfect* response, but there's no such thing as a *perfect* response in grief. Let's look at the passage.

### **Job 1:13-20 (New Living Translation)**

13 One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting at the oldest brother's house, 14 a messenger arrived at Job's home with this news: "Your oxen were plowing, with the donkeys feeding beside them, 15 when the Sabeans raided us. They stole all the animals and killed all the farmhands. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

16 While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "The fire of God has fallen from heaven and burned up your sheep and all the shepherds. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

17 While he was still speaking, a third messenger arrived with this news: "Three bands of Chaldean raiders have stolen your camels and killed your servants. I am the only one who escaped to tell you."

18 While he was still speaking, another messenger arrived with this news: "Your sons and daughters were feasting in their oldest brother's home. 19 Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness and hit the house on all sides. The house collapsed, and all your children are dead. I am the only one who escaped to tell you. 20 Job stood up and

tore his robe in grief. Then he shaved his head and fell to the ground to worship.”<sup>179</sup>

Notice in the first two-loss events, we don’t see a response recorded from Job. Did he respond? I’m sure he would have because his losses would have impacted his life financially and relationally, but that was just *stuff*. Those types of losses are challenging and distressing. However, none of his previous losses could begin to compare with the excruciating pain of losing ten of his children at once.

I want you to think about how Job’s losses affected his identity. He was no longer the parent of ten living children, no longer was one of the world’s wealthiest men, and no longer highly respected. His reputation took a significant hit because people in that day believed that if bad things happened to you, it was because you sinned against God. Undoubtedly, people were wondering what Job must have done to make God so angry at him. His life was falling apart. There was no way Job’s life would, or could, ever be the same again. How do you respond to the news of such compounded losses?

*Connecting it to you:* Getting “the news” will leave you feeling disbelief, disoriented, disheartened, and discouraged. There’s no prescription for how you’ll react because the response will be different with every person. I’ve seen people collapse to the ground in extreme agony, wailing. I’ve seen some people who instantly went into shock and were numb as if life immediately stopped, and they were utterly non-responsive. I’ve seen others who got very angry and began screaming expletives at God and the world. At some level, all people have

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<sup>179</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

expressed a feeling that they don't know how they will move on. There's nothing you can do to prepare for "the news" other than to know that one day we will all get it. Job just didn't count on getting it all at once.

***Acknowledging Principle #2: Feeling your loss is essential, no matter who you are (Job 1:20-21).*** You may fail to properly mourn in your grief because you don't want to let others see you as weak or feel you have to be strong for others. As a result, your mourning gets delayed or ignored. I can't emphasize enough for you the importance of *feeling your loss* as soon as possible. Don't allow fear of what others may think or pride to rob you of starting your healing process.

I can't emphasize enough for you the importance  
of *feeling your loss* as soon as possible.

In the first two chapters of Job, we see three ways expressions of Job's mourning (external) as he *felt* his grief (internal): *First, Job got up and tore his robe.* The *Dictionary of Bible Themes* records that the tearing of clothes "was an expression of deep sorrow and heartfelt grief."<sup>180</sup> The "kriah," or tearing of clothes, was (and still is) an ancient tradition that served as a "tangible expression of grief and anger in the face of death."<sup>181</sup> A wealthy man in his position would rarely respond to any circumstance by rising up because it would imply a lack of control or status. However, by rising up and tearing his clothes, Job displayed the depth of his pain to everyone around him. The Bible doesn't record that

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<sup>180</sup> Manser, Martin H. *Zondervan Dictionary of Bible Themes: Tearing Clothes*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1999.

<sup>181</sup> Cutter, William. *The Jewish Mourner's Handbook*. Behrman House, 1992.

Job cried, but when a person would tear their clothes in grief, loud wailing would often accompany it.

The Bible doesn't record that Job cried,  
but when a person would tear their clothes in grief,  
loud wailing would often accompany it.

*Secondly, Job shaved his head as a sign of mourning and as a means of showing others that he was grieving.* He didn't try to hide his grief. He allowed the world to see his mourning. Shaving the head is somewhat similar to the reason why people wear black to a funeral. Black clothing has become a symbol of mourning in our society. When you arrive at a funeral in black clothes, people understand you're mourning. It's a visible symbol that expresses outwardly what you're feeling inwardly.

*Thirdly, Job fell to the ground in worship.* Why would he do this? Job acknowledged that God was greater than him in falling to the ground in worship, and he needed God. Notice what he said in Job 1:21: "I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord!"<sup>182</sup> That's true, but that's tough when you are in the middle of grief. When my dad passed, I shared my feelings on Facebook, and I concluded my thoughts with: "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." I had no intention of writing a book at the time, so I didn't do it for the book content. As hard as my

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<sup>182</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

dad's loss was, along with all the other losses we suffered recently, the Lord had been, and is, good to me!

*Connecting it to you:* When you get “the news,” it’s appropriate to express your mourning (external), tangibly demonstrate to others you’re grieving (internal), and to worship God. It’s very appropriate to cry or weep and express your all your emotions. Just be careful that your emotions don’t alienate the support base you need. In these moments, it’s important to spend time around family members and friends who’ll listen to and not judge you. I can’t emphasize strongly enough that you don’t need to be alone.

**Side Note:** During this time, it’s important not to turn to alcohol or drugs that would hinder you from *feeling* your loss. Even if you temporarily numb your pain, you’ll still have to deal with your feelings soon. Repressed pain becomes delayed agony.

## Repressed pain becomes delayed agony.

**Acknowledging Principle #3: “Faithing” the truth (Job 2:9-10).** The final step in *Acknowledging* is “faithing” the truth. This concept has a two-fold meaning: First, as a Christian, we *must* acknowledge the truth of what happened. Speaking the truth and living the truth isn’t optional for the believer (Ephesians 4:25). Practically, there’s no value in denying the truth because it won’t change your circumstance. Avoidance will only prolong the *Five Stages of Hope*. Your healing begins by acknowledging the truth. Secondly, leaning on your faith in Christ in your loss is the only thing that can sustain you. Truth (with a capital T)

that comes from God leads to faith, faith brings hope, and hope provides you with God's perspective and a reason for living.

## Your healing begins by acknowledging the truth.

Job's response to his losses, followed by being struck by a heinous skin disease, was remarkable. Here was a man who knew nothing about Jesus because He had not yet come, yet his faith in God was the anchor for his life. Look at how Job "faithed" the truth of his losses:

### **Job 2:8-10 (New Living Translation)**

8 Job scraped his skin with a piece of broken pottery as he sat among the ashes. 9 His wife said to him, "Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die." 10 But Job replied, "You talk like a foolish woman. Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" So in all this, Job said nothing wrong.<sup>183</sup>

Get the picture of what was taking place here: Job is sitting in ashes, which was a sign of humiliation in Job's day.<sup>184</sup> He's using a broken piece of pottery to scrape away the pus that's oozing from his wounds. His wife takes an "objective" view of his life and tells him to curse God and die. What reason does Job have to keep living? *(She was quite the encouragement, although you can understand her emotions in her grief.)*

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<sup>183</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

<sup>184</sup> Nave, Orville J. *Nave's Topical Bible*. Hendrickson, 2002.

Job's response, however, shows us how to "faith" the truth. "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" One of the problems of a 21st-century mindset in our understanding of God is that we approach God as a holy Santa Claus. "I want you to give me this and this and this, and then more stuff." Job understood that it was important to have faith in God in all things, good and bad. God blessed Job with much wealth and a beautiful family, and Job praised God. However, Job also praised God when it was all gone.

*Connecting it to you:* The truth is you've suffered an awful loss. There's no escaping that reality, no matter what you try or how hard you try to do it. So, speak honestly about your loss while leaning into your faith to help you get through it. Have faith in God when things are good, bad, or different. If you've failed in this, that's OK. Join the club. I'll personally print you a t-shirt or give you one from my drawer. I'm not perfect in this either, but I've learned how to thank and praise God at all times, not just when things are perfect in my world. Acknowledging the truth while worshipping and thanking God is vital to your survival.

### ***3 Pieces of Practical Advice During Stage One***

- **Get rest; you're going to need it.** One of the biggest challenges you will face during this time is insomnia. You may find yourself blankly staring at a TV screen or sitting alone in a dark room late at night. Neither of those things is healthy. Your body needs sleep to help sustain you. If you can't, speak to a doctor about a temporary alternative or even take over-the-counter nighttime medicine to help you sleep.



- **Eat well.** Eating well is crucial during stage one because I can almost guarantee you that you will gravitate toward an extreme behavior of overeating or eating too little. Proper nutrition fuels both your brain and your body. Dr. Eva Selhub, in the *Harvard Health Blog*, stated, “Like an expensive car, your brain functions best when it gets only premium fuel.”<sup>185</sup> Similarly, your body needs the proper mix of carbohydrates, proteins, and fats to give you the physical energy you need to navigate each day.
- **Don’t make big decisions while you’re grieving.** Making big decisions is challenging enough, let alone when we’re suffering. Be careful not to make life-altering decisions regarding employment, relationships, and finances. Doing so will only lead to significant regret later down the road. If you have a big decision to make, find a trusted friend or pastor who can help you navigate the decision with more clarity. Permit others to speak wisdom in your life.

## STAGE TWO: AIRING

Biblical Passages: Job 3, 29-42

**Stage Two:** Stage Two of the *Five Stages of Hope* is *Airing* out your grievances with God. When people suffer loss, whether they’re a Christian or not, one of the first responses is lashing out in anger toward God. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we believe that

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<sup>185</sup> Selhub, Eva. “Nutritional Psychiatry: Your Brain on Food.” *Harvard Health Blog*, 31 Mar. 2020, [www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626](http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626).

God either *allows* or *causes* all things to happen. People think: If God allows something to take place, He's uncaring, and if He causes something, then He's cruel.

For the Christian, airing out our grievances in a biblical manner can help protect us from unhealthy anger that leads to bitterness. Job airs out his grievances with God, but he did it the right way. The pattern job provides us is essential because in this, Job “said nothing wrong” (Job 2:10). As you read through some of his statements, they were straightforward. Job was hurting, and that was evident as Job 3:1 opens: “At last Job spoke, and he cursed the day of his birth.”<sup>186</sup>

**Biblical lament.** Lament is a concept found throughout the Old Testament pages yet is rarely taught in most churches. To preach such a message seemingly goes against the message of God's blessing for the believer when, in reality, a biblical lament is a tremendous blessing to the grieving believer and a source leading toward hope.

Biblical lament is “grief or sorrow expressed in complaints or cries.”<sup>187</sup> On the other hand, human complaints are usually nothing more than a griping session that turns into an angry outburst of emotion for a man to hear. A biblical lament is a prayer directed toward God, not man, and it expresses our thoughts, feelings, emotions, and gripes to seek God's intervention in our feelings. Job offers two distinct laments in Job 3 and

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<sup>186</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

<sup>187</sup> Lament. “The King James Dictionary.” *Biblestudytools.com*, 2021, [www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/king-james-dictionary/](http://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/king-james-dictionary/).

29-31. These passages give us a pattern of how we can lament biblically. The following three *Airing Your Lament Principles* will assist you in knowing how to say what you need to say in the right way.

## Biblical lament is “grief or sorrow expressed in complaints or cries.”

**Side Note:** Biblical lamenting is best to do when you’re alone because those listening in to your prayer may not fully understand. In Job’s case, his best friends used his words against him and deepened his pain. Remember: Biblical lament is for the ears of God, not man.

### ***Airing Your Lament Principle #1: It’s OK to make it emotionally rain***

In Job 3, Job’s pain is raw and real. His losses were so terrible that all he could do was wish he had never been born. Listen to the beginning of his prayer in Job 3:3 and 11: “3 Let the day of my birth be erased, and the night I was conceived. 11 Why wasn’t I born dead? Why didn’t I die as I came from the womb?”<sup>188</sup> Can Job’s words get any *darker*? Yes, read the whole chapter. As I read Job 3 over-and-over, it was uncomfortable listening to his agony. It was so personal and private. Yet, God allowed this message written on the pages of His Word. Why? To let you know that the feelings you’re experiencing now are the same as those in the Bible. Your feelings aren’t wrong, they’re real.

I can tell you there have been three times in my life where I’ve felt like this and even asked God to go ahead and take me because I hurt too

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<sup>188</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

much. In my mind, it would be easier not to be here than to stay here and have to deal with the aftermath of the pain. If you're going to get it all out there, you can't try to pray a neat, little Christian prayer. Privately pray through your pain and make it rain with real words to God that leaves nothing on the table.

### ***Airing Your Lament Principle #2: You need to mourn what your missing***

In Job 29:4-5, Job mourns what he lost. Notice what he said: “4 When I was in my prime, God’s friendship was felt in my home. 5 The Almighty was still with me, and my children were around me.”<sup>189</sup> Job expressed his mourning in the presence of his friends. He missed the closeness of the relationship he felt with God, and he misses his children. As you read through the rest of the chapter, you will see that Job was also mourning his losses within the losses. Job mourned the loss of respect, the praise of others, being financially and physically able to help those in need, and being a counselor to people who needed advice. Job lost a lot within his losses.

What are the losses you're mourning within your loss? Are there relationships you miss? Was there a job, activity, or hobby you abandoned that you miss? We all have those *sub-losses*. With my dad’s death, I miss his voice on daily phone calls. I miss talking about sports, politics, or the Bible. I miss his corny jokes that he has repeated since I was in second grade. (*I’m sure they go back further, that’s just when I could remember.*) I miss watching football together on New Year’s Day,

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<sup>189</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

coaching from the sanctuary of our couch. I could go on for pages of the *sub-losses*, the ripple effect of the losses. Sit down and make a list of those losses and bring them to the Lord. Mourn the *sub-losses* because they're a significant part of your loss.

***Airing Your Lament Principle #3: Your misery will lead to mercy.***

For the first 37 chapters of Job, we listen to the words and thoughts of man. Job starts the grief conversation, but then his friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, add to it and make Job miserable in the process. A fourth person, Elihu, a younger contemporary of Job, joined in the conversation to condemn him, as well. They *logically* explained to Job why he had brought these disasters on himself. The best thing to say about Job's friends is that they waited a week before they started talking. However, their words only multiplied Job's misery. Listen to what Job thought of their "help."

The best thing to say about Job's friends is that they waited a week before they started talking.

**Job 16:2-6 (New Living Translation)**

2 "I have heard all this before. What miserable comforters you are! 3 Won't you ever stop blowing hot air? What makes you keep on talking? 4 I could say the same things if you were in my place. I could spout off criticism and shake my head at you. 5 But if it were me, I would encourage you. I would try to take away your grief. 6 Instead, I suffer if I defend myself, and I suffer no less if I refuse to speak."<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

*Connecting it to you:* In the middle of Job’s misery, the mercy of God shows up when He speaks to Job, beginning in chapter 38. Feeling like God is in grief is the epitome of despair. There’s no specific evidence in the Book of Job that tells us how long his grief went on before God spoke, but the first 37 chapters, most likely, covered several months. Know that in your lament, it may be some time before God responds clearly in a way you understand. I love the way Glenn Packiam said it: “Lament is not our final prayer. It is a prayer in the *meantime*.”<sup>191</sup>

CAUTION: I want to caution you that you will have some friends who think you should grieve differently. They may want you to grieve quicker or may even points out flaws in *how* you’re grieving.

**Side Notes:** If you’ve been reading the story of Job in the included passages, you see in Job 1-2 that God did allow these losses to come in Job’s life. Could God have protected Job? Yes. Why didn’t He then? We don’t know. At the risk of sounding like a cliché-machine, there are some answers we won’t know on this side of heaven. Transparently, one of the struggles I’ve had is why God allows young children to die of cancer and innocent people to die of murder. It doesn’t seem fair, and it’s not. The only conclusion that doesn’t explain what happened, but it’s true is that we live in a fallen world and some things just happen because evil is present in the world.

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<sup>191</sup> Packiam, Glenn. “Five Things to Know About Lament.” *N.T. Wright Online*, 3 Apr. 2020, [www.ntwrightonline.org/five-things-to-know-about-lament/](http://www.ntwrightonline.org/five-things-to-know-about-lament/).

Remember: Jesus warned His disciples that the thief, Satan, has come “to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10). When you see a school shooting that needlessly claims the lives of innocent victims, that’s just pure evil. Also, the crucifixion of Jesus was pure evil.

Another consideration is that sometimes individuals make decisions or mistakes that can end life prematurely. When my nephew Matthew committed suicide, he made a permanent decision that had nothing to do with God. A high school friend of mine who died in a car accident made a decision that led to their death when they were drinking and driving. Please understand, I’m not unsympathetic. It’s just an unfortunate reality. That wasn’t God’s will or God’s fault.

### ***3 Pieces of Practical Advice During Stage Two***

**Exercise daily.** Exercise is an excellent way to reduce stress, especially cardio. Walk or run outside daily, if you can. If not, run inside on a treadmill. Join a health club and make it a part of your daily routine. Lift weights. If you can’t afford a health club, get a few dumbbells or exercise bands and spend 10-15 minutes daily lifting. As you’re working out, make sure you challenge yourself and breathe properly. As you breathe, picture yourself expelling your frustration. As you run, put on worship music. If you can’t run, then walk. Stop making excuses for you can’t do it, and start exercising. You’ll feel better for doing it!

**Create a Lament Journal.** As you’re lamenting, it’s valuable to write down your thoughts because it helps you see what you’re saying, both now and in the future. To do this, date each entry and write down your main thought for the day. What are you thanking God for? What Scripture are you meditating on? What hurts right now? What are you

asking God to do? Then, include any additional thoughts that are significant in your time of prayer. Go back and re-read your thoughts at the end of each week to remind yourself that you made it through. Journaling is significant because that it allows you to see how God has brought you through.

**Prepare yourself for the *firsts*.** *Firsts* are those moments that come around for the first time since your loved one passed. For example, when my dad passed on November 9<sup>th</sup>, we almost immediately had the first Thanksgiving and first Christmas without him. I then had the *first* New Year's Day without watching or talking with him about the football games. Those moments were far more impactful for me than I thought they would be, as my mind wandered, and my stomach was uneasy. Other *firsts* you'll face will be the first anniversary of their death (*sometimes that's even monthly*), their first missed birthday, their first missed anniversary if you were married, and more. The *firsts* can also include any other important rituals, like vacations, shared hobbies, and shared events.

### **STAGE THREE: ACCEPTING**

Biblical Passages: Job 38-42

***Stage Three:*** Stage Three of the *Five Stages of Hope* is *Accepting* God's decision. You'll note that "accepting" in the *Five Stages of Hope* comes much sooner than in the Kübler-Ross Model, where it lands in Stage Five. Why is this the case? In the Kübler-Ross Model, emotions control the grieving process. A person's ability to move on depends on what *they* can do. In the *Five Stage of Hope*, I account for the Holy Spirit's working, the power of God's Word to help us biblically process



our emotions, and the power of biblical lament. It doesn't mean we won't hurt, but, as Christians, we can begin the healing process sooner.

In accepting God's decision, it doesn't mean that you'll like its' *finality* or ever even understand it. You ultimately submit yourself to believe that your only hope is to trust that God is in control and He wants the best for you. Here are three *Acceptance Principles* to help get you to that place where you don't only say it; you believe it.

***Accepting Principle #1: You must first hear from God before you can begin to accept your loss.***

If you want to hear from God, you have to be silent at some point. My friend, Russ, teaches this regarding prayer, "It's impossible to transmit and receive at the same time." Think about this in terms of using a walkie-talkie: If you're always talking, no one else will ever get through to you at any point. The same is true of our prayer life. Many times, we talk ourselves into an extended period of grief.

*What if God is silent when I'm praying?* There's a term in counseling called "*therapeutic silence*." According to Pallipedia, therapeutic silence allows patients and family members to:

- think about what has been said and assimilate information
- identify and experience feelings
- integrate their intellectual knowledge and emotional needs
- formulate and ask questions<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Pallepedia. "What Is Therapeutic Silence - Meaning and Definition." *Pallipedia*, 2021, [shorturl.at/ipxO7](https://shorturl.at/ipxO7).

There are times when a therapist is intentionally silent to allow you to process what you're thinking and feeling. Isn't it possible that there are times when God is allowing you to stop and reflect on your loss? Could we be missing the beautiful time of reflection because we refuse to be silent?

At the same time, if you spend your prayer time telling God why you're upset, what opportunity will you have to hear from Him? You need a time of what I am terming "*counselee silence*," where you need to be silent and listen. I'm not saying that you're going to hear an audible voice, although God CAN do whatever He wants. Instead, you're probably going to feel a gentle nudge inside that gives you direction. How can you know if it's God? If what your feeling is confirmed in His Word, points you and others to get closer to Jesus, and gives God glory, then it's God. Satan will NEVER glorify God.

IMPORTANT: Job didn't hear from God until he finished his words (Job 31), and he stopped listening to all the influences around him (Job 37).

**Job didn't hear from God until he finished his words (Job 31), and he stopped listening to all the influences around him (Job 37).**

The easy way out for you is to find someone who'll say what you want to hear, but very often, what we want to hear isn't what *God* is saying. So how can you *hear* from God? Hearing from God always starts in His

Word. I've known many people who prioritize man's words over the words of God, but the result is that man's words always break down at some level. However, God's Word is unchangeable, so start there. Hearing from God is the first step to accepting.

***Accepting Principle #2: You must listen to God before you can begin to accept your loss.***

I just wrote that we need to *hear* from God, so why am I saying we need to *listen* to Him now? There's a big difference between hearing and listening. Hearing from God encourages us that we're not alone, but listening to God reminds us that He's in control. You can hear from God but not be changed. His message can go in one ear and out the other. Hearing tells us what to do, but listening convinces us to just do it.

As Job 38 opens, God responds to Job in a whirlwind (Job 38:1). A whirlwind is similar to a tornado, only a little smaller.<sup>193</sup> The whirlwind is significant because God used whirlwinds to accomplish His purpose in the Old Testament to take Elijah up to heaven (2 Kings 2:1-11) and He appeared to Ezekiel in a whirlwind (Ezekiel 1:4). Psalm 77:8 and Nahum 1:8 also refer to God's presence being like a whirlwind. Isaiah and Jeremiah also speak of God coming being like a whirlwind (Isaiah 66:15, Jeremiah 4:13; 23:19).

*Why did God use a whirlwind to speak to Job?* I ask you: Is there a better way to get someone's attention and make them focus on what matters? I've been in tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes, and every storm

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<sup>193</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Whirlwind." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 2021, [www.britannica.com/science/whirlwind](http://www.britannica.com/science/whirlwind).

I've been in has gotten my full attention. Whether sitting in a closet waiting for the "all clear" signal or running outside because you don't know if your house will collapse, everything stops. When a whirlwind or a tornado is coming toward you, the amount of money you have in your 401k matters less than surviving the storm. God got Job's attention, and He reminded Job of the fragility of life.

When a whirlwind or a tornado is coming  
toward you, the amount of money  
you have in your 401k matters less  
than surviving the storm.

Think about how your loss instantly grabbed your attention. Nothing else needed to happen for you to stop and remember what's truly important. You were listening with both ears. Money, houses, jobs; none of that matters at that moment. As you're grieving, stop, hear, and listen to what God is saying. Don't miss God's work in your life because you're not listening to what God is saying.

What did God tell Job in Job 38 that we also need to know? Here are a few highlights:

- I laid the foundations of the earth (v. 4)
- I set the boundaries of the sea (v. 8)
- I commanded light to appear (v. 12-13)
- I know the origin of light and darkness (v. 19)
- I control light, rain, snow, dew, and ice (v. 29)
- I provide water and food for the animals (v. 39-41)

What was God's answer to Job? Job, you don't see your solution or the answers I've (*God*) built-into the universe right now, but I have EVERYTHING under control. Can you do that? (*God goes on in chapter 39 in presenting His response to Job, so read it all.*) God's answer to Job is a good reminder for us that He knows everything, both what is seen and unseen. The image we have of life is incomplete, at best. Even when we listen to and trust God, we will never see the entire picture on earth.

IMPORTANT: At this point, notice God only answered Job, not the other four who were speaking. The others weren't the ones that were grieving, so God prioritized Job.

***Accepting Principle #3: Biblical acceptance is less about what I can do and ALL about what God has already done.***

Though few will admit it, all people have a *Savior Complex*, to a degree. For those who don't know, the *Savior Complex* is a psychological term that reflects "a person who feels responsible for saving or helping others, even if that provision of service is detrimental to one or both of those people, over time."<sup>194</sup> In our case, the person who needs *saving* is us, and we're the ones who try to *save* us. Let me explain what I mean.

What's usually your first thought when you encounter a problem? Mine is, "What do I need to do to fix this?" Your wording may be a little different, but the idea is there. However, some things just can't be fixed. The thought that overcoming grief depends on you or me is far too overwhelming. There's, literally, nothing we can do to make things

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<sup>194</sup> Staughton, John. "Messiah Complex: What Exactly Is Savior Complex?" *Science ABC*, 23 Apr. 2020, [www.scienceabc.com/social-science/what-is-a-savior-complex.html](http://www.scienceabc.com/social-science/what-is-a-savior-complex.html).

right again. At this point, we need to understand that we're incapable of anything outside of God. Think about it: If God decided to remove oxygen from our atmosphere, none of us would survive. If God chose to remove the Law of Gravity from Earth, we'd all float away into space toward our death. Scientists have uselessly explored this concept and how it would impact our physical bodies. Let me help understand what would happen: We'd ALL die. End of story. Nothing left to study. There's no need to conduct further research. We're ALL 100% dependent on God for life, whether we know it or not.

We're ALL 100% dependent on God for life,  
whether we know it or not.

Job finally had this revelation after having questioned God for almost the entirety of his story. After God responded to him in chapters 38-39, Job's response in Job 40: 4-5 was, "I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will cover my mouth with my hand. I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say."<sup>195</sup> Wow! God left Job speechless because he saw the infinite nature and character of God.

Let me ask you: What do we gain by spending the majority of our story questioning God? The more Job questioned Him, the more depressed he became. The more Job listened to the answers from others who thought they knew the truth, the worse he felt. I'm not saying that you shouldn't ask God or others to help in your search for answers, but let those answers bring you to a closer knowledge and relationship with God. If

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<sup>195</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: *Tyndale House Publishers*, 2004. Print.

they're not, you need to reassess who you are allowing to speak in your life.

I can tell you from experience: Continual questioning of God will become an act of self-pity. It gives me a reason to be depressed, to think that God is against me. Eventually, the things you think about will become your beliefs, and those beliefs will then become the seeds of action for your life.

Eventually, the things you think about will become your beliefs, and those beliefs will then become the seeds of action for your life.

In Job 38, God showed Job all He had done in creating the heavens and the earth. In Job 39, God detailed the animal kingdom's actions and reminded Job that He is the one who governs it all. Then He asks Job in Job 40:2, "Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?"<sup>196</sup> How do you argue with the One who knows, not only all the answers but also the reason behind their working?

God has already done all these things, and more, that we can't fathom. At this point, Accepting is a faith decision that submits to the Truth that God knows best. Can you allow yourself to believe that God sees the bigger picture and has a bigger plan? Choosing to submit to this knowledge isn't easy. Everything in me fights against the outcome, but

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<sup>196</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: *Tyndale House Publishers*, 2004. Print.

my struggle doesn't change my reality. The moment you fully submit to God's will rather than yours, it will liberate you from the prison of pain.

### ***3 Pieces of Practical Advice During Stage Three***

**Create a thankfulness journal.** As you move from the *Airing* to the *Accepting* stage, you should shift the type of journaling you do. Developing an attitude of thankfulness is essential for remembering that *God is for you and not against you* (Romans 8:31). Rehearsing God's goodness in your life will help lower physical stress levels, gain perspective and peace regarding what's real, and help you become more self-aware. Journal one blessing you are grateful for in your life each day and connect it with a meaningful Scripture. As you pray, thank God each day for that blessing.

**Creatively honor your loved one's memory.** No person wants the world to forget their loved one, and you have the power to something to honor their memory in such a way that it will live on for generations to come. Creatively think of ways to honor them. When you think of them, what's the first thing that comes to mind? What did they love to do? Who were the people they connected with the most? What is a lasting way to honor their memory? A friend of mine from high school recently passed away, and his family set up a scholarship in his memory at the local community college. Plant a tree. Pay for a water well for a poor village in an impoverished country. Raise money for a good cause by running a marathon in their memory. There are thousands of creative ways to honor you loved one's memory and impact others.

**Tell their story.** People will be hesitant to talk about your loved one if they think it will only end in pain for you. So, you can be the one to start



a positive conversation about your loved one. The way your loved one passed may provide you an avenue for sharing their story. For example, I've determined one way I'm going to honor my nephew's life by going to schools and churches and speaking about suicide. Others *NEED* to hear his story. Matthew's life *WILL* help save others in the future. How can your loved one's story make a difference for someone else? People are listening. I recently received a Facebook message from a friend who told me they read my Facebook post about my dad after he passed. She remembers the comment he made when he said, "I'm trying to hurry up and die so you guys can get out of here." She told me his faith inspired her. Sharing your story doesn't have to be put in a book to impact others.

#### **STAGE FOUR: ADVANCING**

Biblical Passage: Job 42:7-11

**Stage Five:** Stage Four of the *Five Stages of Hope* is *Advancing* toward your *revised* future. If *Accepting* is all you have to look forward to, then what's the point of living? I've read hundreds of articles on acceptance related to the *Five Stages of Grief*, and they left me wondering, "What are the next steps beyond existence?" You need a reason to get out of bed every morning and believe your life still has a purpose. God doesn't want your life to be merely an *endurance* of existence; but rather an *experience* of fulfillment. Your existence *will* require endurance, especially initially, but life will get better in the future! Just different.

**God doesn't want your life to be  
merely an *endurance* of existence;  
but rather an *experience* of fulfillment.**

Notice: I wrote you're *Advancing* toward a future that's *revised*. Your loved one's death was the unexpected and unwelcomed revision that impacts every area of your life. For Job, losing everything except his relationship with God and his wife was a major life revision he never counted on. However, God wasn't through with Job, and he's not through with you! Here are three *Advancing Principles* to help prepare for your future.

***Advancing Principle #1: Advancing requires you to release (forgive) those who have hurt you.*** As we advance in Job's story, God speaks one last time. This time, however, He speaks to Job's friends, setting the record straight in Job 42 and gives Job the opportunity to release his friends for their role in his grief. Look at how God concluded His words:

**Job 42:7-9**

7 After the Lord had finished speaking to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "I am angry with you and your two friends, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has. 8 So take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer on your behalf. I will not treat you as you deserve, for you have not spoken accurately about me, as my servant Job has. 9 So Eliphaz the

Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite did as the Lord commanded them, and the Lord accepted Job's prayer."<sup>197</sup>

It would have been very easy for Job at this point to pray that God would destroy his "frenemies." Didn't Job have enough to deal with without adding this awful human component? Job was vindicated. They were wrong. He could have taken satisfaction in their misery, but what good would that have done?

As I'm typing this, I understand there are countless *end of life* scenarios those reading this book will have experienced. Some of your loved ones died what would be considered a *natural* death related to an illness or disease. On the other hand, some of your loved ones died an intentional violent death or a negligent death from someone who was drinking and driving, texting, a doctor's wrong decision, or another negligent action perhaps perpetrated by them that cost your loved one their life. Maybe your loved one contributed to their own deaths through bad habits or addictions. From experience, I understand your anger, shock, and more. I also know everyone is in a different stage in their recovery, so I want to be careful not to make a one-size-fits-all statement regarding where you're at now. Please know that what I'm about to say isn't trite.

You need to release those who have hurt you for *your* mental, physical and spiritual health. A recent study from the Mood Disorders Adult Consultation Clinic at Johns Hopkins Hospital found: "The act of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for your health, lowering the risk of heart attack; improving cholesterol levels and sleep; and reducing pain,

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<sup>197</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

blood pressure, and levels of anxiety, depression, and stress.”<sup>198</sup> They also found that the benefits become greater as you age.

You need to release those who have hurt you  
for *your* mental, physical and spiritual health.

Releasing (forgiving) those who have hurt you *doesn't* mean:

- You approve of what they did
- You're going to let them into your life
- You can forget about what they did

Releasing (forgiving) those who have hurt you means:

- You're going to pray for them (*not for God to kill them*)
- Your mind isn't going to continuously rehearse your anger
- Every time your anger starts to come up, you'll redirect your mind and thank God for His forgiveness in your life

***Advancing Principle #2: Advancing requires you to look forward.*** Job had a choice in how his life was going to finish. Had he chosen to hold on to his justified bitterness against his lousy friends, his life would not have had the same ending. Job's miracle of restoration took place *after* he released those who had hurt him. Look at it in Job 42:10: “10 When

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<sup>198</sup> Johns Hopkins. “Forgiveness: Your Health Depends on It.” *Johns Hopkins Medicine*, 2021, [www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it#:~:text=The%20good%20news%3A%20Studies%20have,of%20anxiety%2C%20depression%20and%20stress](http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it#:~:text=The%20good%20news%3A%20Studies%20have,of%20anxiety%2C%20depression%20and%20stress).

Job prayed for his friends, the Lord restored his fortunes. In fact, the Lord gave him twice as much as before!”<sup>199</sup>

## Job’s miracle of restoration took place *after* he released those who had hurt him.

When my daughter, Julianna, started driving, she continuously looked in the rearview mirror to make sure someone behind her wasn’t going to hit her. I saw her doing it one day and told her, “Honey, if you spend all your time driving by looking in the rearview mirror, you’re going to hit someone in front of you.” Common sense. The same holds true for you. You can’t spend all your time and energy focused on the past. Find the beauty of each day and each relationship and live life to the fullest. When it’s time to revisit the past, do it in a way that helps connect your loved one’s memory with where you are today and where you’re going tomorrow.

What are some of the goals you have for the future? What do you want to do that you’ve always said you would do, but never had the time? What relationships do you need to spend more time investing in? What would your loved one want you to do? Ask questions and do activities that cause you to look forward.

***Advancing Principle #3: Advancing requires you regularly find ways to celebrate God’s faithfulness and blessing.*** As we near the end of Job’s story, in Job 42:11, Job has a huge celebration where” all his brothers, sisters, and former friends came and feasted with him in his home. And

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<sup>199</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

they consoled him and comforted him because of all the trials the Lord had brought against him. And each of them brought him a gift of money and a gold ring.” As I read this, it reminded me of a meal we ate after my dad passed away. The entire family got together at my nephew's house and grilled out all kinds of different meats, remembering my dad through stories we will pass on for generations in our family. Honestly, it hurt so bad that he wasn't there, but it was so right having everyone together to celebrate his life. It's a tradition we will continue to celebrate.

What was Job's family celebrating? Restoration. Look at the incredible picture of restoration in Job 42:12-13: “12 So the Lord blessed Job in the second half of his life even more than in the beginning. For now he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 teams of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. 13 He also gave Job seven more sons and three more daughters.”

How much money was represented by his animals? Without going through a long explanation of how many acres are required for each animal to graze and each animal's value, Job was conservatively worth the equivalent of \$56 million today. Remember: Job had virtually NOTHING during the time of his loss, but somehow in the middle of his story that we don't see, he continued to work because God didn't cause 22,000 animals to randomly show up on his property one day. Job had to start all over, and God blessed his work.

Beyond his financial prosperity, God blessed Job with ten more children. Now, Job didn't just *replace* one child with another; that's impossible! Instead, some of the joys he lost when his ten children died

got restored when God blessed him with additional children. He had new and very different experiences with them. I'm sure he had an even greater immediate appreciation for the blessing of his kids. Job was blessed with a different perspective that, I'm sure, caused him to appreciate each differently. The celebration going on at Job's house focused on the faithfulness and blessings of God.

### ***3 Pieces of Practical Advice During Stage Four***

**Build spiritual disciplines into your life.** When things start to feel “good” again, you need to be sure you continue engaging in activities that will make you more like Jesus. I would encourage you to read Richard Foster's *A Celebration of Discipline*, where he broke down the spiritual disciplines into three groups: Inward, Outward, and Corporate. Foster addressed the twelve disciplines of meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. The purpose of his book is to lead you toward spiritual balance. It's important to note, however, that if you're not careful, *doing* the disciplines can become a god when we prioritize *doing* above being. God cares more about the person you are becoming more than what you do.

*Doing the disciplines can become  
a “god” if we prioritize doing above being.*

**Become a grief mentor for someone else.** When you've reached this stage, you've got a lot you can share with others. There are people who need to hear your story so they can believe there's a pathway toward hope for them. Some of the places you can connect with people who

need you include your local church, a grief recovery ministry or grief support groups, individuals and families in your neighborhood, or even family members or friends. One specific ministry I'd recommend is Grief Share. (<https://www.griefshare.org/findagroup>).

**Write out a personal life plan for the future.** If you're going to advance, you need a place you plan to go to measure how far you've gone. The process of putting one together is much easier than it sounds, so let me breakdown the steps you can use to make it happen:

- **Step #1:** Write out your personal life mission statement. Your mission statement is the reason why you exist. A mission statement should be short enough to be remembered but long enough to explain why you are the planet.
- **Step #2:** Write a two-paragraph assessment statement of where you currently are in life.
- **Step #3:** List five goals you want to accomplish in the next year.
- **Step #4:** Under each goal, create action steps that explain what needs to happen to get you where you want to go.
- **Step #5:** Do it! Stop talking about the plan and live it out daily, asking yourself, "Is what I'm doing right now helping me get closer to my goals?"
- **Step #6:** Be willing to adjust your plan along the way as it becomes necessary.

## **STAGE FIVE: ANTICIPATING**

Biblical Passages: Job 42:16-17



**Stage Five:** Stage Five of the *Five Stages of Hope* is *Anticipating* heaven and eternity. To be completely transparent, *heaven* is the reason why I'm writing this book. I remember growing up in church and singing songs about heaven and hearing my dad and others preach about heaven. A funny thing happened along the way, though, and you don't hear much about heaven in church anymore. Please understand: I'm not the old guy out on his front lawn in shorts with black socks pulled up to my knees, yelling for the kids to get off my lawn. I'm also not the guy longing for the "good old days." I wonder how *good* some of those days were anyway. No, I'm a man on a mission to know, share, and see Jesus. My entire life revolves around *Anticipating*.

There are many things we don't know about the story of Job. We don't get to see how it finished. We see the highlights of over a century in Job 42:16-17: "16 Job lived 140 years after that, living to see four generations of his children and grandchildren. 17 Then he died, an old man who had lived a long, full life." Did you get that? Job lived 140 MORE years after this happened. Wow, who wouldn't sign you up for that lifetime?

Still, we don't know how everything else in his life played out. We have no record of how his grief impacted him moving forward. Common sense tells us that there were many days he would remember the children he lost. We don't even know if Job had more losses along the way. With him living another 140 years, I think it's reasonable to assume he had some losses. The one thing we're sure of is that Job lived a long, FULL, life, and so can you.

When God shows up in your life, He gives you a reason for *Anticipating* the future. When God reveals who He is, He reminds you that *His* plans are eternal; they're infinite, not limited by time or space. When you see God through *THAT* lens, He lets you know there's a better future and gives you *REAL HOPE* that one day you'll be reunited with your loved one in a place where death, sickness, and pain will not be found.

Stage Five in the *Five Stages of Hope* is the *reason* we have hope. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope."<sup>200</sup> This word from God was very important for the church at Thessalonica who was poor and persecuted. Men and women were killed for their faith. What solution did Paul offer them? Heaven.

You and I need a fresh, heavenly perspective on life. To get this, let's look at three *Anticipating Principles* to focus your thoughts and develop a hunger for heaven.

***Anticipating Principle #1: Anticipating requires faith in what we can't see right now.*** Job didn't have the same hope that we have when he was living because he didn't have the full revelation of God's Word. While Old Testament passages detailed how those believers anticipated heaven in some form (Ecclesiastes 3, Psalm 17:15, 27:4, and 63:3), their understanding was incomplete. Even so, people like Abraham were "looking forward to a city with eternal foundations, a city designed and

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<sup>200</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

built by God.”<sup>201</sup> THAT was faith. We have the words of Jesus telling us about heaven (John 14:1-3) and the Revelation of John (Revelation 21-22) that clearly tells us of a new heaven and a new earth and that God will restore Eden. Faith from our point isn’t nearly as difficult as it was for Old Testament Jews. We have the full revelation of Jesus, and they only had God’s progressive revelation where He revealed Himself to them in stages.

Still, believing in heaven *does* require faith because we haven’t experienced it before. The author of Hebrews said this about *faith* in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Biblical faith requires you to accept something you can’t see, which can only happen because God did something. How can we be confident heaven is real? Because the earth is real. While many scientists have offered Creation theories, none of those theories has ever been or will be proven. The **ONLY** answer can be God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). If God created the heavens and the earth, and His Word is True (which it is), the only logical conclusion we can reach is heaven is real. Therefore, by faith, I accept the reality and hope of heaven.

On a personal note: I’ve witnessed people glowing and speaking of heaven as they crossed over from this life into the next, but I haven’t had that experience. As such, I can’t experientially tell you that heaven is real, but I’ve seen heaven in action through Creation, miracles, and the love of God.

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<sup>201</sup> Holy Bible: New Living Translation. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004. Print.

In a sense, my faith in heaven is much like my faith in electricity and the wind. When I go over to flip a light switch, there's nothing tangible I can see that proves to me that electricity exists, and yet it does. The same illustration applies to wind. I can't see it, but I can feel its' impact. Therefore, I know wind exists. If you struggle with faith, understand Jesus' disciples did too in Luke 17:5-7. All you need is mustard seed faith to experience heaven.

***Anticipating Principle #2: Anticipating recognizes that we can never live our best life on Earth.*** One of *Anticipating's* challenges is our limitations of comprehending God's glory and heaven's beauty because we spend our lives trying to build a *slice of heaven* on Earth. Almost all activities we do on Earth are for Earth. We go to school to get a degree to get a job to pay our bills and buy bigger and nicer things. Our best life starts with a six-figure salary with two Mercedes in the driveway of our five-bedroom, four-bathroom home. Look, I'm not saying we shouldn't work and try to build a blessed life. Use your blessings and wealth to impact the lives of others in meaningful and eternal ways. Here's a reminder: All of this *stuff* will eventually go away, and your physical body will break down. If you're over the age of 50, you already know what I'm speaking the truth.

**Almost all activities we do on Earth  
are for Earth.**

*Anticipating* tells you to store up treasures in heaven, rather than to spend all your resources here (Matthew 6:19-20). *Anticipating* tells you to make daily eternal deposits into the lives of others through the use

of your time, treasure, and talents. *Anticipating* tells you to consider how each moment and each decision affects eternity. *Anticipating* tells you to make pleasing God your highest aim (2 Corinthians 5:9). *Anticipating* tells you to love people like Jesus did, regardless of what they can do for you. *Anticipating* tells you to give to those in need (1 John 3:17, Luke 12:33-34). *Anticipating* tells you to pray for heaven to come to Earth. *Anticipating* tells you to make seeing Jesus the central focus of your life in this life and the next.

Your best life will NEVER be here, so don't live with that end in mind. Here are the keys your best life now:

- Live for Jesus
- Love like Jesus
- Look forward to being in His eternal presence but experience His presence on Earth in the meantime
- Long for heaven

Your best life will NEVER be here,  
so don't live with that end in mind.

***Anticipating Principle #3: Anticipating reminds us of a reunion that's coming soon.*** Our HOPE is that we haven't seen our loved one for the last time. Heaven is waiting with the hope and promise of a family reunion unlike anything ever experienced on Earth. I don't know if your Aunt Bertha's fried chicken will be in heaven at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, but if you have an Aunt Bertha who knew Jesus, you'll see her again.

*Ate Logo*: I've been honored to spend a lot of time in Brazil over the years on various mission outreaches. Along the way, I've learned a lot of Brazilian Portuguese. The language is beautiful. One of the first things I learned was how to say *goodbye* to someone. The most common word they use is *tchau* (*pronounced chow*) and it holds the connotation that "I'm in a hurry, but I'm going to be polite and say bye." A more formal way to say goodbye is *adeus* (*pronounced ah'-dayos*) and it means that "you won't see that person again for a very long time, if ever again." A less common way to say goodbye that I prefer to use is *ate logo* (*pronounced ay'-chee logo*) which means "see you later." I like to use *ate logo* because it gives the promise of seeing someone again.

For the believer, your loved one's funeral or memorial wasn't a final goodbye; it was "see you later." One of the thoughts that gave me immense comfort when my dad passed away was that when he closed his eyes for the final time on this side of life and opened them in eternity, his parents and brother were waiting for him. Dad often spoke about how much he missed his brother. He's not missing him any longer. All the conversations they had not had since January 11, 1974, were able to be had again on November 9, 2020, and beyond. I don't know when my date on this earth will come up, but I know that right after Jesus, I'll be looking for my dad!

As you think of your loved one, let the *Anticipating* of heaven bring you comfort as you are one step closer to heaven every day. What will it be like to see Jesus? What loved ones are you looking forward to seeing? What other people do you want to see? The Apostle Paul? King David? What will you say? How will you spend your first day in heaven? Let this

sink in: Day one in heaven is the first day of the rest of your eternal life. Eternal life never ends. You WILL see your loved one again!

## Day one in heaven is the first day of the rest of your eternal life.

### *3 Pieces of Practical Advice During Stage Five*

**Read about heaven.** The first way to develop a heavenly mindset is to read about heaven. Start your reading in the Bible in Revelation 21-22 or John 14. Do a search of the word “heaven” on [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) and you should see approximately 622 verses on heaven. Go through one verse each day and read a Bible commentary that will help to explain each verse. You can also read books about heaven, especially if they’re centered in the Scriptures. There are numerous mystical and experiential books about heaven out there about people who say they died and went to heaven. Be sure to read the book reviews and find out all information you can about the author. Make sure it’s Christian.

**Pray for heaven.** Before any of you think I’ve lost it, I understand heaven doesn’t need our prayers. Everything is perfect there! Our prayer is that we will daily catch a glimpse of heaven to sustain us here on Earth. Research the prayers of Jesus and pray like Him. His prayers were all heavenward-focused.

Here are some specific things to pray for regarding heaven:

- **Pray God’s Kingdom will come to Earth.** Jesus always prayed for Kingdom of God to come to Earth. When a person accepts to Jesus as their Savior, God’s Kingdom has come to Earth.
- **Pray with a longing to see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.** The driving force of eternity for me is to see Jesus, the One who gave His life for me. When you pray with a longing to see the Trinity, your words are speaking and establishing a heavenly focus.
- **Pray with a desire to see your loved one again.** Know this is a prayer for you, not them. They’re 100% whole and well. They’re experiencing life in a totally different dimension than we can understand because heaven is perfect. This prayer isn’t selfish; you WANT to see them again, and so do I! You’re looking forward to an eternal reunion that will never again be broken.

**Worship with a focus on heaven.** Worship is going to be a primary activity in heaven. Revelation 5:11-12 gives us insight into what worship will look like in heaven: “11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”<sup>202</sup>

If worship of Jesus is a primary activity of heaven, it should be a primary focus in our lives too! One of my favorite songs of all-time is “*Heaven*” by Michael English. The lyrics capture the heart of heaven as it’s

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<sup>202</sup> *Holy Bible: New International Version*. Zondervan, 2015.



described throughout the Bible. I'd encourage you to listen to the song as you read the lyrics. Google it or look it up on YouTube.

### **Verse One**

Love without measure  
Space without time  
Life with no crying  
Will one day be mine  
Hearts never breaking  
Hands that don't fight  
Days that don't end with  
The darkness of night

The lamb and the lion  
Will walk side by side  
In a world where freedom, abides

### **Chorus**

Windows of glory, swing open wide  
Shower down blessings  
And shine down a light  
On my soul  
I do believe  
Oh, can't you see  
That's what, heaven will be like  
That's what, heaven will be

### **Verse Two**

Friends that don't leave you  
Smiles that don't fade  
Nobody's hurtin', no one's afraid  
No hungry children

Loved ones don't die  
No sad farewells  
There'll be no more goodbyes

### **Bridge**

All the burdens and longings  
We bring to this place  
Disappear in the moment  
We look at the love on His face<sup>203</sup>

Every time I listen to this song, I get tears in my eyes. It makes me LONG for heaven. Heaven has gotten all the more real for me in the past year-and-a-half. I *WANT* to see Jesus! I *WANT* to see my family and friends!

Another song that refocuses my attention on heaven is probably the most-recognized Christian song of this past generation; *I Can Only Imagine* by Mercy Me (1999). This song is different in that it asks the listener to wonder what heaven will be like for you. Check out the lyrics:

### **VERSE ONE**

I can only imagine  
What it will be like  
When I walk by your side  
I can only imagine  
What my eyes would see  
When your face is before me  
I can only imagine, I can only imagine, yeah

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<sup>203</sup> English, Michael. "Michael English – Heaven." *Genius*, 1 Jan. 1991, [genius.com/Michael-english-heaven-lyrics](https://genius.com/Michael-english-heaven-lyrics).

## CHORUS

Surrounded by your glory  
What will my heart feel  
Will I dance for you Jesus  
Or in awe of You be still  
Will I stand in your presence  
To my knees will I fall  
Will I sing hallelujah  
Will I be able to speak at all  
I can only imagine, I can only imagine

## VERSE TWO

I can only imagine  
When that day comes  
And I find myself  
Standing in the sun  
I can only imagine  
When all I will do, is forever, forever worship you  
I can only imagine<sup>204</sup>

Make heaven your highest goal and priority.

## Can the Five Stages of Hope Help Me Move On?

The answer to this is both simple and complex. The *Five Stages of Hope* give you a clear pathway for you to move on, but I don't want to minimize the process. You've entered a process that will continue for a lifetime, and you'll feel like you're on an emotional rollercoaster. There

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<sup>204</sup> Millard, Bart. *Google Search*, Google, 1999, [shorturl.at/bftxI](http://shorturl.at/bftxI).

will be days where everything feels good, and other days when you feel like the bottom has dropped out from underneath you. This is grief, but it will get easier as you do the *right* things.

Job was given the *Gift of Grief*. By that, I mean Job's grief brought a lot of clarity as to how he would live the rest of his life. His losses shook him to the core and caused him to question everything he believed. I want to encourage you that God showed up for Job and brought Him the answers he needed, not necessarily the neat solutions he wanted.

To move on, I want to ask you to consider looking at your grief differently. What has grief clarified in your life? I know you see life as being more fragile right now, but now that you know that, how can you live differently and better appreciate those around you? What were your priorities before your loss and what are they now? What needs to change still?

Use the *Gift of Grief* in your life to draw closer to God and those closest to you. Each day another chance to move on in valuing life and those you love. Make the most of the life you have remaining and live with hope! Remember: God's not finished writing your story.

**Remember: God's not finished  
writing your story.**

# Conclusion

## WRAPPING IT ALL UP

Writing this book has been the most challenging but one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I *feel* your pain because it's my pain too. I've cried the tears you're crying. I *miss* my dad, Robert, and Matthew every day. Every time I walk by a picture of my dad, I look at it and say, "I miss you, dad." The pain of physical separation is real and can't be solved by any words from any author. We *need* more!

Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:19, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." In other words, if this is all there is, then life is meaningless. The good news is: This *isn't* all there is. There's more! There will come a day, whether by rapture or by death, that we will see Jesus and be reunited with those we love. God has collected every tear you've ever cried in a bottle (Psalm 56:8) and there *is* coming a day when there will be no more pain (Revelation 21:4).

The truths I've shared in this book *aren't* mine; they belong to God and are anchored in His Word. *HE's* the author of *The Grieving Guide* and the *Five Stages of Hope*. He's the One who can sustain you. Take comfort in God's Word!

Your grief WILL NOT define your life; God's Word over you will!

# About the Author

## GETTING TO KNOW KEVIN HARRISON

Dr. Kevin Harrison, the President and CEO of West Coast Bible College & Seminary ([www.westcoastbible.org](http://www.westcoastbible.org)), has spent over 35 years in church ministry, serving congregations in Texas, Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana. He has extensive disaster relief leadership experience following the 9/11 attacks (2001), Hurricane Katrina (2005), the Haiti earthquake (2010), and the West, Texas fertilizer plant (2013).

He helped lead a national fine arts program through a period of growth from 15,000 to 50,000 students. He also served as the lead administrator for The Gathering Waco at Baylor's McLane Stadium in 2015, where over 30,000 people came together from all backgrounds. It's still the largest gathering of Christians in the history of Central Texas.

In 2006, Dr. Harrison founded WCBCS, a 100% online Bible college and seminary, where he's partnered with an incredible team to train thousands of leaders on six continents. In 2017, for his efforts, he was awarded an Outstanding Contribution to Education award from the Accreditation Services for International Colleges (ASIC) in the UK.

Kevin holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Luther Rice Seminary, a Master of Business Administration from LSU-Shreveport, and a Bachelor of Science from Southwestern A/G University. He's a member of both *Sigma Alpha Pi* and *Sigma Iota Epsilon* honor societies that recognize leadership, success, and management.

Kevin's been married to his best friend, Becky Neel Harrison, since 1987. Becky is a graduate of Mississippi State University (Meridian) with a Bachelor of Business and Industry and a Master of Education from Southwestern A/G University.

Together they have two daughters, Mikaela (96) and Julianna (01). Mikaela ([www.projectfitmik.com](http://www.projectfitmik.com)), a 2019 honors graduate of Texas Christian University, is married to Ronnie Baker ([www.ronniebaker.us](http://www.ronniebaker.us)), a world-class Nike sprinter in the 60m and 100m. Julianna is a graduate of the Paul Mitchell School in Arlington, a licensed cosmetologist, and currently is a student at Arlington Baptist University, where she plays volleyball.

They also have an amazing dog, Chevy Colorado! He's probably the most incredible dog who has ever lived, and that's not an exaggeration.

# ABOUT THE BOOK

In less than a year-and-a-half, Kevin Harrison has walked through the losses of his dad (heart), brother-in-law (cancer), and nephew (suicide). For over 35 years, he's served as a pastor and counselor to thousands of grieving families and individuals. He's been in their homes, spent thousands of hours in hospital rooms sharing their last moments on earth, and performed more than 200 funerals while attending over 400 more. Kevin understands grief because he's lived it and helped others walk through theirs. Now, he's sharing his personal grief experiences and biblical insights to help those searching for answers.

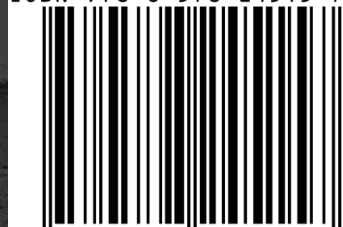
**Why do we need another book on grief?** Google's 2020 'Year in Search' revealed that the number one most asked question of 2020 was, "Why?" People are asking *why* questions during this global pandemic, one of the most vulnerable times in human history. *The Grieving Guide* provides practical and biblical answers to questions where it can and helps you process your grief when there are no answers.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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