

Unequivocally the best book on grief I've ever read. This reaches far beyond a typical textbook. It is extremely practical in addressing, with insight and compassion, what I've witnessed as a pastoral practitioner for over thirty years. This quote is worth the price of the book, "Death steals a person, every facet of them; grief steals living from the survivor." I wish I had this powerful resource in my earlier years as a chaplain. Every Christian chaplain, and everyone experiencing grief, needs a copy.

Rev. Dr. Alan T. "Blues" Baker,  
*CEO ChaplainCare and Rear Admiral, Chaplain Corps, US Navy (Retired)*

This exquisite book by Kate Meyer invites the reader into a reflective, authentic intrapersonal journey that elicits insight and healing. She provides a thoughtful approach to integrating sound theology with the inevitable aspects of understanding how the mind and body can be affected by loss and bereavement. She offers depth, breadth, and substance to a topic that is often overlooked. I highly recommend this wonderful book that fosters awareness, empathy, compassion, since it is such a gift and faith offering to those who are blessed to engage with this important resource.

Dr. Catherine Mueller-Bell, LPC, PhD,  
*Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*

Grief is a long and winding road; a natural, but unpredictable journey. Meyer, demystifies grief—the greatest cost of love—and invites her readers to discover life and faith anew. She is a practical guide whose clinical wisdom facilitates restored identities, awakens hopeful living, and resists death's desire to undo the gifts of love. Be empowered to befriend your grief.

Rev. Jaco J. Hamman, PhD,  
*Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture, Vanderbilt Divinity School*

Kate Meyer has tackled a delicate topic with grace, giving the reader permission to feel grief that is free of guilt. Kate's writing style is beautiful and easy to understand. As a Christian and someone that has felt much discomfort with the comment, "They are in a better place," I appreciate Kate's candor and know that she is speaking with a loving heart to help ease that discomfort. In addition to being comforting, *Faith Doesn't Erase Grief*, is also filled with practical information about the stages of grief and healthy tools of emotional expression, just to name a few. As a therapist and executive director of a nonprofit counseling agency, I would recommend this book to anyone. Grief is a shared human experience and I think the true benefit would come from reading this book at any point in one's life.

Sarah Lewakowski, MA, LLP,  
*Executive Director, Mosaic Counseling*

Kate Meyer's compassionate, empowering new book on grief invites readers to embrace a both/and approach to the journey of healing and of finding renewed hope. In a world plagued by either/or thinking, this holistic model is deeply life-giving and will bless many with its engaging format and well-laid out, inspiring process. A true gift for believers and seekers alike.

Rev. Elizabeth Testa,  
*Women's Transformation and Leadership and Equity-Based Hospitality,  
Reformed Church of America*



Faith Doesn't  
Erase Grief



# Faith Doesn't Erase Grief

EMBRACING THE EXPERIENCE  
AND FINDING HOPE

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*Publishing books that help you heal, grow, and discover.*

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If you are feeling suicidal, thinking about hurting yourself, or are concerned that someone you know may be in danger of hurting himself or herself, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). You can also find help in locating a mental health professional by consulting with your health care provider.

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To my clients for their bravery, honesty, and vulnerability,  
and to my parents for their unfailing support

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Grief  
*does not go away*  
simply because  
**YOUR FAITH**  
*is a*  
central component  
of your life.

# Introduction

**F***aith Doesn't Erase Grief* is written first and foremost for the griever who is also a believer. Too often Christian grievers are “invited” or “encouraged” to rejoice that their loved one is in “a better place” rather than focus on their grief. Though well-intentioned, this general stance of the Church is flat wrong and inflicts damage upon all to whom it is presented. It is time for Christian grievers to be told the truth. Grief is not an indication of lapsed faith, and believing in the existence of heaven does not require grief to be pushed to the side.

I've found most Christian books about grief altogether ignore the truths found in psychology, so this book interweaves those truths with the Word of God to help readers recognize that, despite what might have been taught or preached to them, grief and faith do not have an inverse relationship. It's not either/or. Learning instead to embrace the both/and relationship empowers grievers, pastors, friends, and families to live into the natural state of grief and to do so with God's understanding.

This book can be read from cover to cover or broken up as needed, either alone or with others in a small group setting. A

special note to pastors, group facilitators, counselors, friends, and families: remember that each griever's journey is unique to that person. It is important to allow for different stories and experiences to be shared without fear of comparison or shame. If small group work is desired, I have found it works best to gather groups based upon the same type of death (i.e., spouse, child, sibling, etc.). I also find it most effective to group new grievers separately from those beyond their first year of grief.

The goal of this book is not to erase grief, because grief is a natural part of life. Instead, the goal of this book is to show you how to embrace the fullness of your grief, including moments of faith-related doubts and anger at God, and to teach you grief does not go away simply because your faith is a central component of your life. In fact, faith very often complicates grief. This book shows a way to face those complications and to explore your faith by finally being honest about your grief. In doing so, you will learn how to live with renewed purpose, a deeper understanding of self and God, and, if desired, a continued connection with your loved one.

It can be intimidating to begin this kind of process, to intentionally confront pain. Remember that it consumes more energy to avoid pain than to confront it, and numbing the pain only delays the inevitable. Dosing your exposure to the pain is okay, but try to do so with a plan for when you will return to continue your work.

Congratulations on taking this important step of acknowledging and honoring your grief. This is your road, so you choose the pace. Honor your pace and give yourself breaks when you need them. Remember, you do not walk this road alone.



Grief,  
*in its most*  
simplified form, is  
**NOTHING**  
*more than a*  
natural reaction  
to death.

# *One*

## You Can Hate This...

**Y**ou are a Christian. You love God and try to live your life according to God's leading and what the Bible teaches. And then, your world is turned upside down by death.

In the first few days, it seems almost bearable. The support system, including your faith community, is on high alert: arranging food, sending cards, calling, and offering assistance with cleaning or children. You make it through the funeral, and when someone compliments your strength, you smile and quote Philippians 4:13. The person smiles and nods before offering, for the thousandth time, to do anything you need. Then, you return home to give your true feelings space to breathe.

As days turn to weeks, you notice it is increasingly difficult to keep up the façade. Tolerance for clichés and Bible verses about heaven is waning at a significant rate. Yet, because you couldn't come up with another believable excuse to say no, you finally agree to go to lunch with a friend. While preparing, you try to talk yourself into a positive outlook, and by the time you reach the restaurant, you're cautiously optimistic about the experience.

And then it happens. It comes when you least expect it and without any way for you to stop it: the dam breaks, and the friend seated across from you is on the receiving end.

I'm not strong, this isn't okay, and I don't care about heaven!  
I hate this. I hate everything about this!

Your friend looks at you—you know the way, head tilted with a pity smile—in stunned silence. Though there is a part of you (a small, miniscule part) that feels badly this one friend was on the receiving end of the full force of a pent-up reaction, the relief of finally speaking those words outweighs any guilt or embarrassment.

Until, that is, your friend regains the power of speech and responds with something along the lines of, “You don't really mean that. It's just the grief talking. I know when my...” You don't hear the rest of the story because you just can't dig deep enough to care about your friend's grief. Now you're stuck at a table with a full plate—who can eat?—and anger added to the mix of listening to someone else's story of their grief and perfect faith. Great.

If any part of the above resonated with you, there is something important you need to know: it is okay to hate grief. It is okay to feel far from God or not even care where God might be in all of this. You are not a bad person, and you are not a bad Christian. You are having a natural reaction.

## A Natural Reaction

Most people are quite young when they learn the hard reality that life leads to death. The truth is first taught subtly with something simple like the explanation of the seasons before it is more fully explained when a pet dies. For Christian believers, death is discussed openly each Church year in the season of Lent. Despite all this talk and education, though, there is very little preparation for what comes next



for those who continue to live after someone dies; that part is always rushed through. The trees die, but it's okay because spring will come. Jesus died, but it's okay because he rose from the dead and sent us the Holy Spirit. Your husband died, but it's okay because now he's in heaven.

Yes, trees do bloom again, Jesus did rise and send the Spirit, and your person now lives in heaven; but that is not the end of it. Those statements focus on the one who died and say nothing of you and how death impacts you.

Grief, in its most simplified form, is nothing more than a natural reaction to death. Someone you love was here and now they aren't. It is the absence of presence that is causing the deep pain you experience in all moments of the day and night. Grief is what happens during the in-between time, after someone in your world dies and before you learn to continue living in your new reality. As you learn about grief, you gain control over it; you attain the ability to shrink it and relocate it to a less primary place in your existence. As you practice grief work, the raw, persistent, and tender nature of the pain diminishes and fades to the background. In short, as you work through the remaining chapters of this book, you will progress and heal.

Grief is the greatest cost of love. It is a risk we take because we are beings created to be in relationship, because we thrive in community. So, though we know *one day* we will come face-to-face with grief, we take the risk and develop relationships based on all kinds of love.

And then that day comes. In the beginning we survive thanks to the numbness God built in us as a defense against the pain, but that numbness only lasts so long. And when it fades, and the pain

becomes real, that is when feelings of hate towards grief can begin to build.

## I Can Hate This?

If you were raised like me, then hate is a word you were told not to use. Perhaps this is because the feeling summarized in this one small word resulted in murder and selling a relative to the Egyptian slave trade. Esau hated his brother Jacob for stealing Esau's birth-right, and from that hatred Esau plotted to kill Jacob.<sup>1</sup> Then, in the next generation, Jacob's sons hated their youngest brother Joseph, a hatred born out of jealousy, to the point of throwing him in a well and selling him to the highest bidder.<sup>2</sup> In just these two examples we see that hatred can, in fact, lead to disastrous consequences.<sup>3</sup>

There certainly is wisdom in not allowing hatred to rule or drive decisions, but there is something to be said, too, for channeling it into something positive. It is good, for instance, to hate injustice and to use that hatred to propel you to speak and act for change. Maybe that is too big of an example, though; after all, we know that as Christians we are to fight against injustice; let's return, then, to grief.

In the first days and weeks, grieverers are protected from feeling the *full* weight of grief. They have enough presence of mind to tend to many of the basics, like eating and drinking and, maybe, bathing, and are often aided in other tasks by people in their community. As

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1. See Genesis 27.

2. See Genesis 37.

3. Chapter 4 will further engage this discussion.

time marches on, however, that numbness begins to fade. The full reality settles in and numbness is lost.

As a homework assignment, I once asked an adolescent child to draw a picture of grief personified. To this point in the counseling relationship, the child was able to talk in vivid detail about the death—moment by moment, in fact—but was unable to emote anything. Though younger children are the best at unabashed emotional expression, adolescents can often still call it up when given the opportunity or when pushed to the limit. This is why some parents of grieving teens might witness a tantrum the likes of which any toddler would be proud. Since this child was unable to give voice to grief emotions within talk therapy, art therapy was enlisted. The result from that single homework assignment is the best personification of grief I have found to date.

The most obvious part of the drawing was the masked figure the child called a thief: a burglar, complete with a bag on his back. The child and I discussed this figure before moving the discussion to the bag. On paper, it was simply the outline of a large bag, no bulges or details of any kind, but the implication was there. As we discussed the items hidden in the bag, the child finally felt free enough to share emotions, and it became clear the child hated that burglar, though not for the reason I anticipated. My assumption was that the burglar was death, but as the child described the contents of the bag, it was revealed the burglar was actually grief. Death steals a person, every facet of them; grief steals living from the survivor.

Grief steals different things from different people, but there are some general similarities no matter the loss or age. We'll visit these at length throughout the book, so for now here is a sampling of the

essential items that can be stolen from us: routine, safety, comfort, love, and hope.

This is why it is okay to hate grief. It slinks in the dark; it strikes when least expected; it steals from your world everything that brought you a sense of safety and familiarity. Like a thief, grief often leaves people feeling violated and distraught in a world that will never be the same, no matter what is done to make it so. Grief changes the world, it changes the body, it changes the mind, and it changes the spirit.

The changes mentioned will be discussed more in later chapters, so for now we'll focus on just two of them: world and spirit. To say the world changes with grief might feel extreme, but it is one of the first things clients report. Their world looks different and/or feels different, as if the color, taste, and smell have been drained out. Additionally, griever often report a change in other relationships because of how griever are treated.

Although grief is inevitable, American culture today is generally terrible at it: terrible at recognizing it, validating it, naming it, and giving it space.<sup>4</sup> Consider, for instance, current cultural norms. First, society has placed a timeline on grief. Most companies provide *three* paid days of bereavement leave to their employees when the death is of sufficient importance, as defined by human resources. Three. After those days, a griever is expected to return to work with the same focus and productivity as before. As early as three months after a death, griever have reported being asked questions such as, What's wrong? Did something happen? Why are you sad? Shouldn't you be better now? These questions are but the tip of the iceberg. By

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4. Notably, these norms primarily represent the white experience. Many cultures in this country are more open to engaging in initial grief and grief expressions.

the time twelve months and one day rolls around, people are expected, by society and close friends alike, to truly be “over it.” Being “over it” is perhaps one of the greatest misnomers in the world of grief. How does one “get over” the death of her spouse? How, by day three hundred and sixty-six, do parents “get over” the death of their child?

Another cultural norm relates to how we express grief. The Bible references tearing one’s clothes, weeping, and wearing ashes for mourning.<sup>5</sup> One need not look all that far back in even American culture to find adaptations of those practices, such as wearing black or using an armband for several months, even up to a year, to publicly indicate the wearer is grieving. Today, however, things have changed. It is not uncommon to see griever in mourning at the initial learning of death, in the early days, during the funeral or memorial service, and at the graveside. By the time those early days have passed, though, the allotment of time for acknowledging grief expression publicly runs out, and suddenly griever feel the pressure to privatize their mourning. Unfortunately, silencing grief expressions results in griever feeling isolated and shamed.

Finally, there’s the cultural norm of silence about the deceased. Those who’ve lost a person to death have a natural need to talk about the person who died. They want to speak the person’s name, to hear stories about them, even to laugh with others about memories of the person and to cry with others who miss them too. Logically, this need will surge and wane over time. Yet, when a griever attempts such conversations, often they are met with a change of subject or utter silence.

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5. Mourning is the outward expression of grief. See chapter 3 for a more complete definition.

If you are a helper—a counselor, pastor, family member, or friend—reading this book to better assist someone through their grief, listen carefully: you will not cause additional pain by empathizing or talking about the deceased if griever initiates it. If they mention the person, they're okay talking about it. You will, however, cause additional pain if you are unable to sit with their tears or if you change the subject to a topic more comfortable for you. Every single bereaved client I've worked with has said at least once how much they miss hearing their loved one's name. If you are unsure if it is okay to talk about the departed with your grieving friend, ask them; I promise, they'll be honest in their response. If it is a bad day, they'll tell you so, but that doesn't mean to never talk about their loved one, it just means not that day. Ask again the next time you're together, and stay open to what they say.

Grief changes your world, and for a while you must work every day to keep up the strong front until you're back home. But the changes grief creates in your spirit? Those cannot be controlled. Suddenly, even the place that has consistently provided community, connection with God, and support can now feel like the last place you want to be. Maybe you feel judged for feeling sad and not rejoicing because your loved one is now free of pain. Or perhaps you feel like an outcast because you are no longer a pair and people don't know how to handle singles. You might even feel like a fraud because you no longer know what you believe—about God, death, heaven, or other questions of faith. Whatever the reason, Sunday mornings are now equally challenging and exhausting. Then, in what is thought to be the safety of your home, you may find yourself experiencing doubts, feeling angry at God, or wondering why you should even bother with faith at all.

## You Are Not a Bad Christian

Throughout this book I hope to help you trust that engaging in the questions you have is okay and that hating grief and feeling distant from God is okay and doesn't mean you love God any less (although it may feel like that for a long time). Grief changed you, yes; but nothing can change who you are at your core. Grief can help you better understand who you are created to be, but it can't take that away from you. Who you are as a beloved child of God is something permanently protected from the masked burglar of grief. It might feel far away or out of reach; it might feel unimportant; it might even feel like something you'd rather never again consider, but who God created you to be and how God sees you doesn't change.

Even if you spend the first eight months telling God how angry you are. Even if it takes you three years to return to your faith community. Even if you lose the ability to pray. Even if you wrestle nightly with God. Jacob may have come out of it with a permanent limp, but he still came out of it, and he did so as a child of God.<sup>6</sup> You will too; and if you can't have faith in that right now, it's okay. I have that faith for you.

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6. See Genesis 32.

## Conclusion

Grievors hate grief. Why? Because it is the natural reaction to death. Something terrible happened and you need time and space to react to your changed environment. Beginning with chapter three, this book will guide you into and through that space. Think of it as a friend for the journey, a journey that no one should walk alone. Before that, though, it is important to pause and consider what it means to hate grief *and* believe in God. It is important for you to know that how you are feeling and what you are experiencing does not mean your faith and love towards God is absent. In fact, it can be argued that what some view as a turning away from God often results in a deeper awareness of one's relationship with God defined by a new depth of love, appreciation, and trust.



## Pause for Whisperings

At the end of each chapter, space is provided to ponder the Spirit whisperings you experienced in this chapter. A Spirit whispering refers to those moments the Holy Spirit alerts you to something important just for you, something to spend time considering and, eventually, acting upon. Use these questions to help identify your whisperings in this chapter: What spoke to you? What challenged you? What gave you hope? What do you want to make sure you remember?

Whatever the whisperings are, take time to record them either here or in a separate journal. By the end of the book, you'll have a treasury of what you and God wrestled with and maybe even a better glimpse at who you are created to be. Fight the urge to skip this part and take some time right now. Feel free to keep your thoughts secret if you're worried someone else might find them. But capturing what the Spirit is doing is an essential part of the experience of this book. You might also include the date on each entry so you will have a record for future reference. It can be so rewarding to see how things have changed and, hopefully, how far you've come.

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Doubt  
*can be an*  
**ESSENTIAL**  
part of  
**faith.**

## *Two*

# ...And Love God

**B**efore we go any further, there is something you need to know. Maybe pick up a highlighter or some other way to mark this so you can come back to it when you doubt yourself. Right now, in your grief, it is okay not to delve into a study of the referenced passages in this book. Most references are intentionally limited to footnotes so you can choose to use the information or not. You have enough on your plate trying to navigate faith and grief. This is your journey, and if you don't have the energy to muddle through the texts, that is okay. Keep note of sections you want to return to and come back when you are able.

## God Loves

To begin, consider the solid foundation upon which everything else in this book is built: we love because God loves us.<sup>1</sup> As a believer, church or unchurched, it is likely this is something you already consider truth, or did at one point in your faith. Because of that

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1. 1 John 4:7–21.

mighty thief also known as grief, it is important to pause to assess the *ways* God loves us. How do we know?

First, God loves intimately. Yes, God created the world and everything in it, yet while doing so God paid attention to the tiniest of details. We see this illustrated in Psalm 139:1–6, shared here from The New Living Translation<sup>2</sup>:

O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home. You know everything I do. You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD. You go before me and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to understand!<sup>3</sup>

Even if it's a struggle to believe at times, God knows every aspect of us, spoken or left unsaid. God knows the things about us from which we choose to hide and still prepares the path as we take each faithful step. God's protective hand and watchful eyes are ever present no matter where this road of life might lead, even when it leads to valleys of grief. God examines hearts and words, and, no matter what is revealed, finds nothing worthy of removing that love. And we can know this because of the second characteristic of God's love: it's unconditional.

No doubt is big enough, no abandonment too lasting, no sin too egregious; not even denial of God causes God to look upon a created being with anything other than love. The lasting nature of this truth

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2. Try different translations to absorb God's Word in new ways, which can lead to spiritual growth.

3. See also verses 13–16.

is found in the person of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> As you walk through your grief, you might have moments of deep anger that you need God to hear. You might be filled with doubts that rattle the very core of your faith. You might need to take time away from God as you try to sort out what happened to the world as you know it. All these things are okay, and they are all normal; more importantly, none of them can remove God's love from you. The only way a person survives grief is to face it, and part of facing it means being brutally honest with expressing emotional truth. God's love is inescapable, no matter where we need to go with God in our darkest moments.

The psalmist who penned Psalm 139 writes about this third characteristic of God's love in the latter half; in fact, in some translations this psalm is titled *The Inescapable God*. In grief counseling a spiritual assessment is completed to help the bereaved begin to evaluate what they believe about death and what, if anything, comes after life on earth. It is normal and expected to consider, explore, and even reevaluate faith during grief. In fact, those who endure a significant loss without engaging those questions may have some work to do later. Unfortunately, related guilt may forestall or even prevent their ever engaging the loss deeply.

Generally speaking, Western Christianity does not support questioning God, let alone speaking doubts. Guilt builds because some people find it easier to walk the road alone than risk being shamed for their thoughts; that guilt can grow as the person remembers God's love is inescapable. This is opposite of what God desires. God did not inspire Psalm 139 to frighten believers into silence or shame followers into fake faith. Rather, regardless of where we need to go, regardless of the questions and doubts that need to be

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4. See Romans 8:31–39 for Paul's words on this subject.

expressed, God is there, loving us through it all. Doubt can be an essential part of faith, questions can be what leads to deeper acceptance, and unrest can be turned to peace. Rather than hiding in shame, be bold in approaching God with the fullness of grief, and be comforted in the love that is always waiting for you.

Finally, God's love is abiding, meaning it will remain, continue, and stay regardless of any human action or inaction.<sup>5</sup> God's love remains, even when your world implodes. When you cannot imagine enduring for one more day, God's love stays with you. In your doubts. In your anger. In moments or seasons of unbelief. God's love stays with you.

In summary, God's love is intimate, unconditional, inescapable, and abiding. As we move forward, hold onto that truth and return to it when someone attempts to shame you for your grief. Cling to it, feel your feet on it, and protect it from those who try to destroy it. It is your promise through Christ, and it cannot be taken from you.

## We Love

We love because God first loved us, and we now know the ways in which God extends love. How, then, do we use that information to guide the love we extend to God? The short answer is to look at how God loves and emulate it. Of course, we fall short of loving God intimately, unconditionally, inescapably, and abidingly. Some might even say it is impossible. Fortunately, we have the Spirit as our guide, and we have the Word as our teacher.

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5.1 John 4:16.

Jesus' entire life is an example of what it means to love God. Jesus loves God, so he abides in God through prayer. Jesus loves God, so he invests in the lives of others to shelter them, feed them, uplift them, and introduce them to God. Jesus loves God, so he speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves. These are examples from which we can learn to love God.

"That's all well and good," I can hear you saying, "but my person died. I can't think about any of that right now." You are right; "grief brain" is real, and you don't need anything so complex. Thankfully, because of how God loves us, we have a clear answer in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally this passage is understood as a directive on how to love others, and there is merit in that. But grief is a time in life when it is necessary to focus on yourself, when self-love is greatly needed. First, then, think of these words as a directive on how to love yourself in this season of life.<sup>7</sup> How can you be patient with yourself? In what ways do you need to extend forgiveness to yourself for something you have said or done since your person died? You may need to use these each day, especially early in grief. Second, know that there will

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6. If this passage is a grief trigger for you because it was used at your wedding, or for any other reason, take a few moments to let your reactions pour out. We are going to stick with this passage for a bit, so give yourself permission to take this section at your own pace. If you need to, skip to the next section of this chapter but come back. The work is difficult, but I believe the result will be a powerful aid for your journey.

7. See appendix 1 for a more detailed practice of self-love guided by 1 Corinthians 13.

be stretches of time during which some of this will be difficult or all but laughable to you. Rejoicing in the truth? Not being irritable or resentful? Those emotions are Grief 101. Love yourself *despite* feeling irritable or resentful. Love yourself *despite* your powerful ability to feel hopeless.

Of all the things grief steals, the ability to feel love, either from God or towards God, is perhaps the greatest loss. Use these words from 1 Corinthians 13 as the antidote. Be patient with God in this process, especially as you cry out for answers or relief. As you work to extend kindness to yourself, try to do the same for God. Notice the word *try*: there will be moments and days when kindness towards God is the furthest thing from your emotional reality. That is okay. Try. If you don't feel it, don't force it, but do try again another time. Remember, there is room for the inability to love God in grief. God's love cannot be shaken and will not change.

I spent several summers during college working in camp ministry. God shaped, challenged, and grew my faith as much as the campers'. In fact, I had several faith-shifting conversations and encounters during those years. One of the most impactful happened on the deck of the pool at Camp Manitoqua in Frankfort, IL, when talking with a fellow counselor about my inability to pray. Inability to pray remains a challenge for me at times, and I don't recall what prompted it at that time in my life. But I will always remember what this wise sister in Christ said to me: *"It is clear how much you love God by how worried you are about your inability to express that love."*

That was a faith-changing moment for me. She reminded me that talking with God is one way we show our love to God, but not the only way. She showed me that worry about my inability to do so was also an expression of love because I was being honest about the



longing of my heart. The same can be said to griever's filled with shame and added grief at their inability to feel God's presence or to pray. We show love to God when we lament our limitations honestly. You love God best when you want the disconnection to end or long to again feel God's presence.

Grief is difficult enough by its very nature. Do not make things worse for yourself by complicating what it means to love God/retain faith/stay connected. The act of picking up this book was an act of love. You are already doing it.

## God Validates Grief and Teaches Ways to Grieve

There is a meme circulating around social media that, in part, says something like this: "He cried. He knew Lazarus was dead before he got the news. But still, he cried. He knew Lazarus would be alive again in moments. But still, he cried." Clients have recounted terrible stories of how they were maligned for crying over the death of their loved one. If that has happened or is happening to you, know this: there is nothing biblical about telling you not to cry or otherwise express your grief, and there is nothing biblical in encouraging you to shift your focus from loss to heaven. There is also nothing *pastoral* about those things. In fact, God is quite clear in the Word about supporting the act of grief.

It is legitimate to struggle to love and look for God amid your grief, but if you want to see biblical evidence that hating grief doesn't mean you don't love God, then take a few moments to explore two different teachings on the act of grieving.

When it comes to Bible trivia, "What is the shortest verse in the Bible?" and "Who is Lazarus?" are questions easily answered.

Without turning to John 11, most people answer, “Jesus wept” and “the man Jesus raised from the dead” or “Mary and Martha’s brother,” and those answers are correct. Beyond that, though, the full passage is overlooked. We tend to jump immediately to Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and that this miracle points to him as the Messiah. When we do this, we miss the gifts tucked into the middle of the story.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus’ reaction to Martha is the first gift God gives. Martha hears that Jesus is on his way and runs to meet him, and the first thing she does is express her frustration that Jesus did not come earlier to heal her brother. We cannot be certain, of course, of the emotion she expressed. Given the context and the words, though, it seems frustration is a fair starting point. Anger or exasperation are just two other possibilities. The point is that Martha knew Jesus well enough not to hold back the truth of what she felt towards him in that moment. God’s next gift to grievers is found in Jesus’ response. Jesus did not scold Martha or shame her for wishing her brother alive. He did ask her beliefs about resurrection yet did not shame her. Jesus said many different things to Martha in that moment but never reacted negatively to her expression of grief.

Further in, there’s another gift of insight from a Jewish tradition surrounding death. Lazarus had been buried four days, and Mary remained surrounded by people comforting her. It is likely the crowd included several fellow believers, and not one of them told Mary to stop crying. No one asked why she did not go out to meet Jesus and waited until Martha returned to get her. Instead, the passage says many people stayed by her side, offered her comfort, and expressed their own grief.

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8. See John 11:17–36.

Mary does go to see Jesus when he asks for her, and she too expresses her disappointment in Jesus not preventing Lazarus' death. Here again Jesus does not react with shame or scolding. God's character and knowledge of each individual is revealed in Jesus' treatment of Mary. Jesus engaged Martha in dialogue, but knowing Mary's needs were different, he changes his approach. He observes her tears and the tears of the others who followed her to him and does not speak. Jesus is moved by what he observes; it breaks loose his own grief. He weeps.

Scholars debate the cause of Jesus' weeping: whether he is grieving his friend's death or the pain of people dear to him. I believe it is both. Jesus cries because his friend died *and* because people he loves are mourning that same death. In those two simple words, "Jesus wept," believers are given one of the greatest teachings scripture has to offer on grief. No one knows better than Jesus the great defeat of death that's to come, and even still he does not skip his grief.

The next time a fellow believer shames you for feeling pain at your loss, quiets your disappointment in God, or tries to rush you through your grief to focus on heaven, remember the gifts hidden in the middle of John 11. You are invited to go to Jesus and tell him what you feel, without censure. You are safe to weep or wail or be morose and can be assured Jesus will see the struggle in you and join you. He will join you because you are in pain, and he will join you because he too is in pain over the loss of your person. Jesus will not rush you to focus on life eternal and the resurrection; he will sit with you in shared pain.

During one of my pastoral care and counseling classes in seminary, we were charged with writing a funeral service. I remember how intimidated I was seeing that assignment in the syllabus, and I also remember how much I ended up enjoying the project. When it

came time to perform though, I was at a loss for where to begin, and my paper was nowhere to be found. Since I am the second of three ordained ministers in my immediate family—my brother, then me, then my dad—I reached out to my brother for help. I don't remember all he advised, but to this day there is one passage of scripture I use for every funeral: 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. I liked the passage as a chaplain and have come to appreciate it even more as a bereavement counselor.

The temptation for pastors preaching this text at a funeral, or in general, is to skip to the closing verses that describe resurrection. But doing so misses the boat. We can't skip straight to the end because doing so invalidates a very real human experience. Grief is a natural reaction, a God-given reaction, and you are allowed to experience it without being rushed out of it. In this passage God uses Paul to validate grief by naming it and sharing one way to deal with it.

Paul opens the passage: "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."<sup>9</sup> Thank you, Paul! He might be wordy, but when you sift through, golden nuggets appear. First, be informed, he says. This is important, and it's somehow being missed by the Thessalonians. Paul writes on many better known topics in his letters, yet of all the topics, grief made the cut. Next, notice how Paul specifically names grief as the intended focus for his readers. In naming grief specifically, Paul validates its existence and normalizes the experience to his hearers then and to his readers now. On a large stage to captive ears, Paul shares his heart on the reality of grief. Don't rush past this; you might want it in the future.

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9. 1 Thessalonians 4:13.

Paul continues by encouraging believers to grieve *with hope*. There are times we all feel hopeless, particularly in early grief. But with time and effort these usually grow fewer and farther between. Even still, there are people who do grieve without hope. I've met them. To grieve without hope is to face the journey of grief utterly alone and without any navigation aids. Removing hope from grief is like locking a bereaved person in a room and removing all contact with the outside world. It is suffocating. To grieve *with hope*, though, is very different.

Hope is difficult to define. For me, it falls under the category of "you know it when you feel it," but Merriam-Webster has this to say: "to desire with expectation of obtainment or fulfillment"; "to cherish a desire with anticipation: to want something to happen or be true." Paul goes on to say hope comes from the promised reunion with those who have died that awaits all believers. It is that hope that's at risk of being lost, and that's why it's so important to remember the first verse of the passage.

Note that God desires us to have hope mixed in with our grief, not hope that *replaces* grief. Paul does not write that he wants readers to be informed so that they can hope *instead of* grieve. No, he wants his readers to be informed so that they can grieve *with* hope. The hope of Jesus one day returning to join with him those who have died with those on earth does not remove the reality of current grief. That hope changes grief, but it does not remove it.

Practically speaking, then, what does grief imbued with this hope look like? It is the tiny pinprick of light, far off in the distance, that you see as you stare down your grief journey. One tiny pinprick that does not lessen your current darkness but does remind you that, eventually, light will shine again. Grief imbued with hope is felt the first time you laugh after your person's death. You feel yourself laugh

and you wonder at the sound of it. You know it will be a long time before you laugh again, but you laughed, and just knowing that gives you the strength to continue.

There is comfort in the longing to be “okay” again. It is sensing a peace deep within that is waiting to spread throughout your being. You don't yet feel the peace, but knowing the desire for it is within you settles and empowers you to keep moving forward. It is recognizing that tomorrow may be better than today. Do not accept the pressure of choosing hope over grief; instead, grieve and allow hope to sustain you.

## Conclusion

God loves you intimately and unconditionally in a way that is both inescapable and abiding. On the days you cannot summon love for God, God's love for you is unchanged, and in simply wishing you could connect with God, you are loving God.

God created you with the ability to grieve and will stay in that grief with you. God can take your hatred of grief; in fact, God welcomes it because God understands it. Fellow Christians will try to rush you, but remember you do not need to listen to that word. You have the Word on your side.

## Pause for Whisperings

After you record any new Spirit whisperings you encountered in this chapter, or if you are unsure where to begin, reflect on these questions: How is your grief imbued with hope? Do you have even a tiny pinprick of light? Maybe you can sense a stillness deep in your soul. Spend a few moments considering how you see hope sustaining you in your grief.

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