

 Discovery Series®

LIFE AFTER LOSS

Grieving with Hope



Tim Jackson



introduction

Life After Loss

Grieving with Hope

"Good grief!" If you think about it, it is sort of an odd expression. Honestly, is there really such a thing as grief that is good?

As it turns out, there is. *Living with Loss* reveals how comfort for the soul can be found as we grieve our losses.

In the following pages, counselor and fellow-

griever, Tim Jackson, invites us to consider how leaning *into* the heartaches of life opens us up to lean *on* our Creator and each other.

My Summer of Loss

On a beautiful afternoon, while I was standing in a store at the local mall, my cell phone vibrated. It was my older brother Steve. He said just two words, "Mom's gone." My stomach hurt as my brother sobbed into the phone 700 miles away—I felt helpless and alone.

It was surreal: *I'm standing in a mall and just heard that Mom is dead. How absolutely bizarre!* I felt like I was dying inside. I hung up, somehow found the way to my car, and no sooner had I closed the door than I burst into tears. Sobs really. I don't know how long I sat there weeping.

Several days later, we gathered with family and friends to celebrate the wonderful woman we called Mother, Grandmother, and precious friend. And we began our journey of life without Mom.

Eight weeks later, I received a second call, this time from my younger brother. He told me Dad



Grief is a journey that sooner or later we all must take. It's how we take the journey that makes all the difference.

had finally lost his 6-year battle with Alzheimer's.

The tears came as I drove home. I was grieving yet grateful. Grateful for his release—that my father no longer suffered with the disease and that he was with his Savior. I called my son and shared the news. We talked about how “Pap-Pap” would have enjoyed being out with us that day. And we cried.

When I arrived home, I shared the news with the rest of my family. We talked. We cried. We prayed. And we grieved. That was 2011—my “summer of loss.”

As a counselor, I have helped many in their struggle through grief over different kinds of loss. What I've been learning on my own journey through grief, a journey I'm still taking, is that faith is indispensable. Our relationship with God influences our ability to navigate through what feels like insurmountable pain.

Grief is a journey that sooner or later we all must take. *It's how we take the journey that makes all the difference.*

Tim Jackson

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one

The Journey Through Loss

Grief is the complex and painful process of dealing with the losses we encounter throughout our lives. Implicit in God's invitation to live and enjoy relationships with others is the knowledge that we may one day grieve their loss; few areas of life are immune. Either through varying circumstances or, ultimately, our own death, eventually we lose everything. ▸

One of the basic realities of grief is that the circumstances

of our relationships—family, friend, close, estranged, loving or otherwise—impact the depth, length, and even the way we experience sorrow over what we have lost.

👉 **Loss is not limited to the death of loved ones.** *Whenever we lose a connection to anything, we grieve. Learning to deal with lesser—though not insignificant—losses throughout life can help us prepare for more difficult losses later.*

Everyone's grief is different.

While grief is a journey common to all, no one can tell you exactly how you should grieve because it is a personal path unique to everyone who walks it. And there's no single right way to grieve. However, understanding how grief works and what influences it will better prepare you for what you encounter after a loss.

Grief exposes faith.

One of the great ironies of life is that whether or not you consider yourself religious, grief reveals the element of faith in everyone. It shows where you place your trust when faced with the reality of loss—and that's faith.

The Bible reveals a pathway through times of loss that leads to higher ground. This experience, which often feels like death, is the perilous path through the "valley of the shadow" that David spoke of in Psalm 23:4. This favorite psalm reminds us, "Though I walk through the



Every griever wonders, "Will life ever be better? Will the pain ever go away? Will I make it through this?"

valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." The Good Shepherd reliably guides us through the valley of tears. He quiets our fears, comforts our hearts, and reassures us that we will make it through; though at times we may not be so sure.

While grief is unavoidable and complicated by the variety of relationships and circumstances

in life, eventually every griever wonders, "Will life ever be better? Will the pain ever go away? Will I make it through this?"



two

Grieving Well

We are created for connection. From the beginning, solitary existence was never a viable option (GENESIS 2:18). We have been designed for intimacy, closeness, community. Through meaningful attachments, our individual stories take on deeper meaning and greater significance. These become the reference points for our lives. When these connections are severed, broken, or lost, it produces an *inhuman* level of pain, and it's that pain that produces

grief. "Bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love . . . It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance but the next figure."¹

Expect confusion. C. S. Lewis described his struggle with grief this way: "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? But if a spiral, am I going up or down?"²

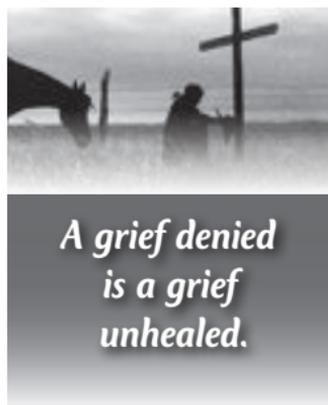
This has been true for me, and I have seen it in the lives of those I've counseled. The journey can at times be undefined and disorienting, leading griever to question their path. No one progresses through the stages of grief in the same order or at the same pace. We don't need to be alarmed when things don't make sense or seem to be recurring. If we know confusion is coming, we're better prepared to face it. The process of grieving is far from orderly. It's messy and, at times, it may feel like you're losing your mind. You're not. There is no universal pattern for grief.

Shock is normal. It is to be expected after the news of a loss.



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It's our initial defensive response that enables us to carry on under unbelievable circumstances. God designed shock to cushion and protect us, helping us survive when it would otherwise be impossible for us to function under the emotional overload of grief. Shock should be allowed to take its course. 📖



📖 *Well-meaning friends should not try to **downplay shock**, nor should **prescription drugs** be used without clear indication that the grieving person has been incapacitated.*

Don't pretend. Resist denial. Be real. Attempting to outdistance the pain of grief by "being strong" is futile. It will only impede your progress. Frederick Buechner recognized denial as a problem in his failed attempts to deal with his father's suicide. Buechner said that while steeling yourself against the harsh realities of life may protect you from some pain, that same steel can become bars that keep you from being transformed by "the holy power that life itself comes from." He goes on to emphasize the necessity of allowing that power to work in you: "You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own."³ A grief denied is a grief unhealed.

It's vital for a grieving person to acknowledge the reality of what has been lost head-on. Call it what it is. This helps stave off denial and is a big step on the journey through grief.

Be Honest About Your Feelings

God grieves too. Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost a son in a climbing accident, said that it's "through our tears we see the tears of God."⁴ When we grieve, we join God in lamenting beauty that has been broken, and we grieve in anticipation of the day when all will be restored. 📖

📖 *As difficult as it is, viewing the body of a deceased loved one helps many grievers accept the **finality of loss**. Many who never saw the body of a loved one often report struggling with denial, feeling like it could all be just one long bad dream.*

The longing for restoration, for all things to be made new (REVELATION 21:4-5), and the awareness that renewal is yet future, are at the heart of all of our grief. The world is beautiful, but we are often reminded that it is also broken. It's when we lose some of the beauty in our lives and experience this brokenness that we grieve, longing for a better world.

Feel what you feel. At some point in our struggle with grief, someone may say, "You shouldn't feel that way." Or we ourselves may attempt to stifle our emotions. But we

feel deeply because God has given us a profound emotional capacity like His own. A fellow counselor once said, "You can't heal what you can't feel." A painful loss can make us want to stifle our emotions. But feelings open us up to depth and richness in all our experiences.

After a loss, grief triggers an emotional avalanche that can sweep us off our feet and bury us under a heap of emotions we don't understand. The list of things grievers feel seems endless: shock, pain, disbelief, disorientation, disconnection, denial, anger, injustice, unfairness, fear, abandonment, loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Before the healing process can begin, we need to sort through the emotions that well up inside us.

For example, anger is not unusual, even anger toward God. This anger can stem either from feeling that God didn't do something He should have done or that He did or allowed something that resulted in our pain. [▶] I remember how angry I was when a dear friend was killed in a climbing accident a decade ago. I screamed at



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God. It made no sense that He would take my friend's life when he was faithfully serving Him. It felt cruel and terrifying. But God is big enough, strong enough, and loving enough to handle our emotions, even when we lash out in severe pain after a tragic loss.

↪ *We often want to **hold someone responsible** for our grief and pain. Sometimes it seems that God is the only one we can blame. The Psalms are full of people pouring their hearts out to God in pain, asking for answers to their deep question of "why."*

Sleeping, eating, working—just plain living—can become labored under the emotional bombardment of grief. Confusion, sometimes called "the fog of grief," is normal. Daydreaming, being unproductive at work or home, starting something and then forgetting mid-action what you were doing, and feeling like you're losing your mind are all common experiences. You're not crazy. You're grieving.

Describe what you've lost. Telling yourself, God, and others what you've lost is a practical exercise that solidifies acceptance of your loss. Many find that writing it down, either in a journal or in a letter (perhaps addressed to God) helps identify and clarify feelings that have been vague or elusive.

Job, a man who suffered multiple losses, described the loss of his children, his wealth, and his health in

terms that many have identified with: "The thing I greatly feared has come upon me, and what I dreaded has happened to me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, for trouble comes" (JOB 3:25-26). And King David, who lost his kingdom and was betrayed by his own son (2 SAMUEL 15), encouraged his few followers to "pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge" (PSALM 62:8 NIV). These two men, dealing with terrible heartache, discovered that putting words to their grief helped them begin to accept their loss.

I meet regularly with a group of men for support and encouragement. This has been a safe place for me to talk my way through my losses. Over many breakfasts, they've listened to my struggles and pain, giving me hope that I would eventually make it through my grief. They not only allowed me to be honest about my feelings, they encouraged it. Those times of sharing and honesty have been steps toward healing.

Become comfortable with your tears. It's okay to cry; in fact it's important that you do. Tears are an emotional and physical release vital to the grieving process. Internal



Tears are not a sign of weakness, they are a gift from God. Don't be afraid to express your grief honestly to God.

pressure builds and must be released. Having a good cry is healing for both body and soul.

Some well-meaning people advocate maintaining “a stiff upper lip,” saying or implying that tears show a lack of faith in the power and promises of God. But tears are not a sign of weakness, they are a gift from God. Don’t be afraid to express your grief honestly to God. It’s okay to bring the tears of your broken heart to Him. He understands.

The apostle Paul makes it clear that while followers of Jesus still grieve, we do not “grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope” (1 THESSALONIANS 4:13 NIV). Instead, we grieve *with hope*—hope[■] that is anchored in the resurrection of Jesus and that reminds us of a coming day when “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (REVELATION 21:4 NIV).

➤ **“Faith** plays a major role in grief of any kind. But not in the way some people think.” —Granger Westerberg, *Good Grief*.

But grieving with hope doesn’t lessen the emotional upheaval or the intensity of our pain. The absence of pain isn’t one of the benefits of following Jesus (JOHN 16:33). Jesus Himself experienced grief and shed tears. He was “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (ISAIAH 53:3). He openly wept at the tomb of His dear friend Lazarus (JOHN 11:35). Despite the knowledge that He would soon

raise Lazarus, Jesus shared the pain of His grieving friends over the death of a loved one.

Jesus will walk with you through your jumble of feelings. Trust Him to understand and offer the comfort that only He can provide.

Open yourself to being comforted.

"Talk is cheap." That can feel especially true when we are grieving. The attempts of friends and loved ones to comfort, though well-intended and offered in love, can feel hollow in our sorrow. But it's important that we don't allow grief to isolate or insulate us from the comfort that can be found in the presence and words of friends and family. Allowing yourself to be comforted keeps you connected to others and can, at the right time, provide needed encouragement and direction for navigating your pain.

On the night of His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (MATTHEW 26:38 NIV). He asked His disciples to stay with Him as He poured out His heart to His Father. Their presence during His time of agony was a comfort to His troubled heart. The same was true



Opening your heart to the comfort offered by God and others will, in time, help you find a renewed sense of strength and perspective.

for Job's friends who came to offer comfort in his sorrow. They simply offered their presence as they sat with him for seven days as he grieved (JOB 2:11-13).

Opening your heart to the comfort offered by God and others will, in time, help you find a renewed sense of strength and perspective.

Live with Your Loss

Accept the new normal. Loss changes us. It's unavoidable. How will you change? That depends on you. A significant loss becomes a marker in our lives. Phrases like "before the accident," "after the divorce," "before Mom got cancer," or "after Dad died," are common ways to describe the "new normal." It's the way we acknowledge the reality that life has changed; the old normal is gone and a new normal is here.

Richard Dershimer describes this as "gaining perspective on the loss, the time when the pain is softened and replaced by a sweet sadness . . . The acute sense of loss changes at this time from a moment-to-moment preoccupation . . . to an episodic sadness evoked by special circumstances."⁵

Four months after my dad died, I spent the afternoon hunting, an activity my dad and I enjoyed together.

As I sat alone in the woods, I was overcome with emotion and began weeping uncontrollably. *I'm losing it*, I thought.

What's the matter with me? Then I realized: *Dad isn't here to share this, and he would have really loved it.* That's my new normal. Although I'm moving on with my life, I'm never far from the pain of lost loved ones. Sometimes it catches up with me when I least expect it, and it reminds me of how much I miss them.

Stay connected. Feelings of alienation, aloneness, and abandonment are common during the period of adjustment to the new normal.

It's natural to want to isolate yourself while you wait for the pain to subside. The new widow or widower realizes for the first time how lonely it is to attend school, church, and even family functions as a single person again. No spouse plans on parenting solo. But when death claims a mate, the financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual well being of the family suddenly all fall on the shoulders of the parent who is struggling simply to stay afloat, let alone care for a family.

The best antidote for the isolation of grief is to stay connected. It won't be easy. You will feel vulnerable. But



When you stumble and fall on your journey through grief—and you will, we all do—having someone who knows where you are and who can reach out and help you up is life giving.

going it alone never works. When you stumble and fall on your journey through grief—and you will, we all do—having someone who knows where you are and who can reach out and help you up is life giving.

For some, grief groups can be helpful. Connecting with others who have suffered loss allows one to gain insight, understanding, and comfort from others who may be further down the path of grief. The realization that you're part of a healing community has restored new hope to many.

For those who are struggling to make progress in their journey of grief, or for those who don't have a supportive community or are dealing with complex forms of grief, the intensive care of a counselor may be needed. Don't be afraid to seek help. The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us, "Two are better than one . . . if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up" (4:9-10 NIV).¹⁴

▶ Allowing others to help shoulder your burden of grief gives them the joy of ministering to you (cf. GALATIANS 6:2).

Give yourself the freedom to enjoy life again. Yes, life will be forever different without your loved one, but different does not have to mean bad. Moving on with your life will be difficult and may bring conflicting emotions. But you are not betraying your loved one if you laugh again, go out to



You are not betraying your loved one if you laugh again, go out to dinner with friends, take a vacation, or even love again.

dinner with friends, take a vacation, or even love again. Your loved one would not want your life to stop; they would want you to enjoy life. Life will be played in a minor key for a while, but happiness often catches us by surprise. When it does, let yourself soak it in.

The first time you laugh again may feel awkward. But it's a sign that enjoyment of life is reemerging. Sorting through my parents' home with my brothers, our wives, and our children

was a bittersweet experience. What would have been overwhelming and depressing for any one of us was instead therapeutic for all of us. We laughed, we cried, and we told stories as we sorted through their 61 years of life together. Life, while different, was still good and should be celebrated and shared.

Reinvest in Love

Enjoy living today. Willingness to once again connect with others is the best indicator that you are grieving well and moving forward. Resistance to investing in relationships indicates that we're too afraid of the risk

of losing someone else. No one looks forward to the pain of loss, but faith in the One who will never abandon us will help us love again. All relationships carry with them the possibility of pain and loss. John Branter writes, "Only people who avoid love can avoid grief. The point is to learn from [grief] and remain vulnerable to love."¹⁴

↪ **The risk of relationship** stems from our uncertainty of what tomorrow holds. James spoke of this basic anxiety of life. "You do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away" (JAMES 3:14).

The summer after my parents died, my son married a lovely woman. It was a joyous occasion, yet we were all aware of how much Mom and Dad would have loved celebrating with us. Two birch trees graced the venue to honor my parents—my son and his bride's idea. They are now planted in our backyard to remind us that life goes on, is good, and to be shared.

Share your comfort with others. Dealing with grief equips us to reach out more compassionately and wisely to others who need the same comfort we received.

Remember my breakdown in the woods? I had taken the risk of enjoying something—travelling to Kansas and hunting with a new friend. I had a wonderful time. However, I also felt the bitter sting of my dad's absence. Sharing the story with my friend back at camp that



The comfort that God gives us in our sorrow and grief isn't for us alone. It's meant to be shared.

evening stirred both the joy of living and the anguish of loss. As we drove home the next day, we talked about hunting, life, and loss. His only son, his hunting buddy, had died 20 years earlier of heart failure, leaving a young wife behind. Our conversation was comforting for both of us as we talked about our loves, our losses, our pains, and how they fit into our story of faith in Jesus.

The comfort that God gives us in our sorrow and grief isn't for us alone. It's meant to be shared. Paul made that abundantly clear when he wrote to the Corinthians: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God" (2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-4 NIV).

➤ *Viewing our own grief as something that enables us to help others is not a perspective that comes quickly in the grief process, nor should it be forced. **Time is one of the necessary components** of every part of grief.*

Empathy and compassion are born of painful encounters with loss. When we see others through the

tears of our own grief, we have a different perspective that uniquely qualifies us to minister compassionately to those who are in pain. 🐦

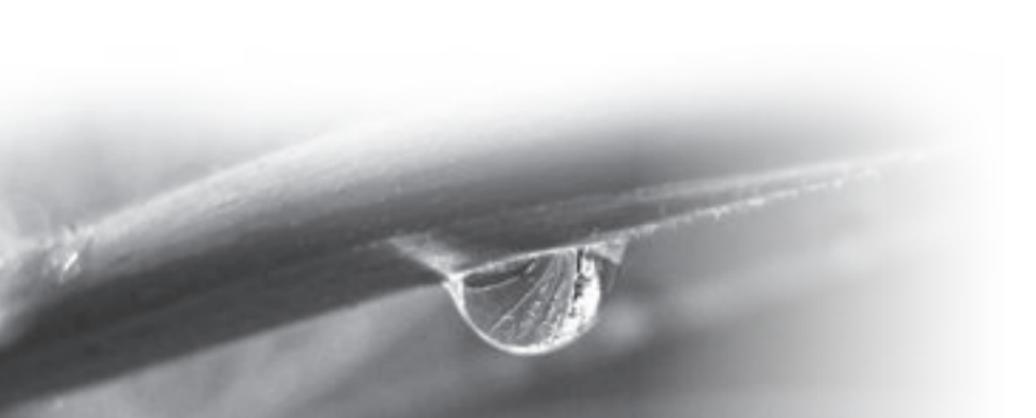
¹ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 58-59.

² *Ibid.*, 67.

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982), 46.

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 80.

⁵ Richard Dershimer, *Counseling the Bereaved* (UK: PPI Publishers), 22.



three

Lament and Faith: Reassurance of Hope in Sorrow

Death was nonexistent in the original world. Adam and Eve's choice to go their own way severed their life-giving relationship with God, shattering their security and resulting in a death sentence for all humanity.

The apostle Paul referred to Adam and Eve's sin when he wrote, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (ROMANS 5:12).

We grieve because we live in a world plagued by sin and death. The infection of sin produces *groaning in grief* that grips our hearts and permeates all of creation:

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope (ROMANS 8:22-24).

It's this *inward groaning* for restoration that is at the core of our struggle with grief.

In the initial stages of mourning, rational explanations are uncaring and unconvincing. The soul is in too much pain to think rationally. However, believers in Christ who struggle honestly with loss must remember God's promises—promises that provide desperately needed hope for the journey through grief.

What Can Never Be Lost?

God's unshakable love. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so" are simple lyrics that reflect profound spiritual truth—simple, yet not simplistic. That basic truth has kept me and many others moving through grief when nothing else could. The deepest expression of God's enduring love for us was the incarnation, sacrifice,

and resurrection of Jesus (ROMANS 5:8). Whatever loss has forced us into our valley of grief, we can find confidence and strength in His unfailing love (PSALM 46; ROMANS 8:35-39).

God's reassuring presence. Comfort comes from knowing that, though we are surrounded by death and the pain of loss has pierced our hearts, we are not alone. The rod and staff of Psalm 23:4 are the symbols of God's presence and protection as we negotiate the treacherous valley of grief. Rarely is a satisfying explanation for our suffering and grief given. Rather, God shares our suffering through His suffering Son who is our faithful and merciful High Priest (HEBREWS 2:9,17) who never abandons us (ROMANS 8:31; HEBREWS 13:5).

What Can Be Found?

Renewed dependence on God. "Faith is a footbridge that you don't know will hold you up over the chasm until you're forced to walk out on to it."⁶ Followers of Christ who journey through grief and loss, often *in time* look back and thank God for a level of intimacy with Him that was previously unknown. Despite the lingering pain of loss, they have a more trusting relationship with God, for which they are deeply grateful.

Since the death of my parents, I'm closer to God than I've ever been before. I'm closer to Jesus who has made resurrection life possible for all who have trusted Him,

whether dead or alive (JOHN 11:25-26). I'm certainly more aware of how fragile and fleeting life really is and how deeply dependent I am on God. That knowledge renews my focus on what really matters in life.

Rediscovered purpose in life. For some, the journey through grief becomes a door to a new direction. Parents who know the pain of losing a child can sometimes find new purpose in reaching out to other grieving parents. Dave Branon, who lost a teenage daughter in a car accident over a decade ago, says, "This is not the ministry that I would have ever chosen, but it's the one I have been given." Dave's experience led him to write a book, *Beyond the Valley*, and to speak openly about his journey through grief and loss. His journey has helped many grieving parents along the way. 📖

📖 *Those further down the road often find ways to **give back**. Suffering and loss of many kinds—divorce, death, abortion—have enabled people to help each other cope with their own pain.*

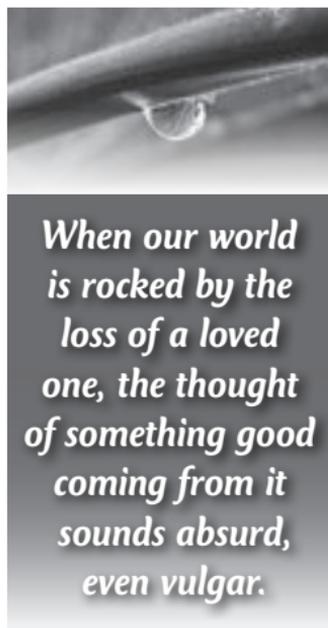
I have spent countless hours counseling people who were grieving over a variety of losses. What I've found is that God uses my experiences of loss to connect more deeply with my clients in their losses. Whatever your loss, God may give you opportunities to share your story and encourage others on their journey.

Good from Loss?

When our world is rocked by the loss of a loved one, the thought of something good coming from it sounds absurd, even vulgar. But on a hill in Galilee, Jesus taught His followers that “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (MATTHEW 5:4). Our hope in sorrow is this: Grief over any loss can have a good effect if it brings us to the feet of the Savior, if it puts us among the multitudes who came to Jesus needing comfort and rescue because we believe that He is our only hope (4:23–5:1).

The unsettling reality is that loss and change are inevitably linked. Loss changes things forever. However, we are not passive players in that change; we get to decide how it shapes us, whether it makes us bitter or better. The crucible of grief and loss forges character. God wants to use even the most painful of circumstances to deepen our reliance on Him (ROMANS 5:2-5). His goodness is revealed against the dark backdrop of painful losses in ways we otherwise may never have known.

Nicholas Wolterstorff describes it well:



To believe in Christ's rising and death's dying is also to live with the power and the challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love. If sympathy for the world's wounds is not enlarged by our anguish, if love for those around us is not expanded, if gratitude for what is good does not flame up, if insight is not deepened, if commitment to what is important is not strengthened, if aching for a new day is not intensified, if hope is weakened, and faith diminished, if from the experience of death comes nothing good, then death has won.⁷

Death doesn't have the final say. Yes, it's the last enemy to be destroyed (1 CORINTHIANS 15:26), but Jesus, our hope, has crushed death in His resurrection (15:54-57). Therefore we have and can offer hope and comfort, looking forward to the day when we'll never say goodbye again.

Until that day arrives, *grieving with hope—hope of resurrection*—frees us to enjoy life again. Remembering our loss will always cause pain and may at times move us to tears again (as writing this did for me). But the life-changing valley of grief also increases our appreciation for life and our anticipation of Christ's return.

⁶ Wolterstorff, 76.

⁷ Ibid., 92.



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