

## **HOW CAN I LIVE WITH MY LOSS**

If we were to take a poll of the readers of this booklet, we would find that each has a specific purpose for reading about loss. You may have recently lost someone you dearly loved. It may have been a spouse of many years, a child of only a few months, a loving father, or a trusted friend. No matter what the relationship, the separation has been painfully agonizing. Perhaps you have just learned that the cancer is back and nothing more can be done. Or you may be facing the loss of a job, a career, a home, or a business.

Each person's loss and suffering has its own unique quality. No outsider can ever fully enter into it. I don't claim to know or understand the full depth of the loss that you personally are struggling with. But I do know this: Everyone will suffer with some form of loss. No one is exempt. And no matter what the loss, it feels like a hole has been torn in your soul that cannot be mended. The difficult but necessary process of dealing with any loss is called grief.

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## **WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF LOSS?**

Most of us think of grieving over loss when we consider dealing with the death of someone we love. But if we think of loss only in terms of death, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to deal with the lesser losses, which will build up our confidence in God's faithfulness during difficult times. If we do learn to grieve appropriately over the lesser losses in life, then when the emotional tidal wave of grief over death does come (and if it hasn't already, it will), there will be an inner strength that will enable us to weather the storm.

Losses come in a variety of shapes, forms, and sizes, and with differing degrees of intensity. You may be struggling with the loss of:

- your parent
- your spouse
- your child
- your marriage
- your fertility
- your job
- your financial security
- your reputation
- your youthful vigor
- your usefulness since retirement

As we move through this sea called life, we leave behind familiar waters that we'll never sail again: the carefree days of childhood, the feel of a favorite doll, the thrill of hitting a first home run, the excitement of a first kiss, the sound of a first car, the pet we grew up with, the joy of bringing children into the world, and much more. As we leave these things behind, we grieve over their loss. It hurts to say goodbye.

We are all dealing with loss. Sooner or later, the things we hold dear are taken out of our hands. Sometimes gently. Sometimes harshly. But always painfully. It is my prayer that the following pages will help to make this journey more understandable, bearable, and even hopeful for you.

## **HOW DOES LOSS AFFECT US?**

If you start a conversation about grief with some of your friends, you will most likely be accused of being morbid, of not looking at the bright side of life. But loss often brings a pain that cannot be ignored. It often brings us face to face with ourselves, with our enemy, and with our Lord.

### **Loss exposes our vulnerability.**

We like to think that we are really in control of our lives. Death, or any other loss, shatters that illusion as violently as a bullet shatters a bottle. It forces us to face the mortality and vulnerability that we despise. If we seem to be successful in denying the impact of lesser losses in life, then death is the "final enemy" that will not be denied. Death is the "father of all losses" that will not be hushed. It demands to be reckoned with.

Personal, painful loss forces a door open into the deep parts of our soul, which we'd just as soon not even admit exists, let alone face. No one willingly wants to deal with the loneliness, vulnerability, insecurity, and unmet longings that loss causes us to face.

We believe the pain is too big a price to pay for the joy and peace that might follow. So, many of us try to avoid facing loss with the hope of controlling our pain. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." It seems so right to avoid pain in our lives, but by failing to face the pain we lose the opportunity to experience the joy that can be ours.

It reminds me of a man who came to see me for counseling. His wife and children had complained about how distant and emotionally disconnected he was. As we talked, it soon became apparent that nothing, no matter how painful or joyous, ever had any effect on him. He didn't feel passionate about anything in his life: not his wife, his kids, his job, nor his God. As I probed a little deeper and asked about any significant disappointments in his life, he related a story about the death of his father who had committed suicide when he was 8 years old. He didn't shed a tear. When I asked him how he handled the news, he dispassionately said, "That's life. You can't change it. You gut it out and get on with it." A significant part of our counseling focused on helping him grieve over his dad who had died, and his feelings of abandonment. Instead of fighting it, he began to work through his grief and pain. And his passion for life returned.

### **Loss eventually makes us better or bitter.**

We spend massive amounts of personal energy trying to avoid facing head-on the dreaded agony of losing something or someone we deeply cherish and richly enjoy. We try to buffer ourselves from the pain of loss in a multitude of ways, but often to no avail. The result of such unsuccessful avoidance is often deep anger and bitterness.

The husband that I referred to above was angry at his dad for leaving him and his mother behind. He was also angry at God for allowing his dad to take his own life. Not only did he feel emotionally abandoned, but he and his mom were left financially destitute. It isn't surprising that this man's anger was the driving force that motivated him to be successful in his profession at all costs. It was his way of pushing away the pain of a devastating loss that he didn't know how to handle.

There is, however, a better way to deal with inevitable loss. We must learn to put our pain to work for us. When the force and momentum of a painful loss is used to drive us to the God who can be with us in our most lonely moments, we will discover that there is a safe haven of rest in the midst of a painful world. People who can hear God say, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" are those who can then say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?" (Heb. 13:5-6). When we learn the meaning of this truth, we discover that even if others abandon us, betray us, or die on us, we will not only survive but also prosper.

Learning to have such faith in God will not exempt us from the sting of loss, but it will provide us with the resources we need to deal effectively with grief. It will free us to love again from hearts that, while knowing the meaning of sadness and disappointment, are yet able to remain joyfully alive.

## **WHAT IS GRIEF?**

Grief is a universal, complex, and painful process of dealing with and adjusting to loss. Even animals have been known to grieve the loss of a mate or master. It is a normal and unavoidable part of life. In God's invitation to live and enjoy relationships with others, we are also invited to grieve their loss.

Again, it is important for us to realize that grief is not reserved for those who lose a loved one in death. We grieve the loss of such unsettling things as a divorce, the failure to get a desired job promotion, turning 30, an empty nest, or getting winded climbing the stairs and realizing we're not as young as we used to be.

We especially grieve the loss of cherished relationships. The more we have invested in the relationship, whether it is with a person, organization, ideology, or even a pet, the greater will be the distress and pain of the separation. Thus, the depth of our grief is directly linked to the quality of the relationship with the individual or desired object we have lost.

Early in my life, the loss of my grandfather was very painful for me. For some people, the loss of a grandfather is not nearly as traumatic. I have talked with individuals who felt very little loss at all when their grandfather died. But because of my close relationship with my grandfather and the emotional bond that we shared, his loss was especially disturbing. He was the man who taught me how to fish, who took care of me when I was ill as a child, who gave me summer jobs to help me through college, who found my first car for me, who talked me through a breakup and return to the woman who would one day become my wife. In his passing, I lost someone of irreplaceable value. His death left me with a reason to grieve.

All losses have a way of pushing us to take personal inventory of what we are really hanging on to for a sense of personal security. Is it God? Or is it our ability to control the circumstances of our lives to make ourselves comfortable? Losses force us to look inside and see ways we handle our pain. It hurts to look inside and try to understand why we must grieve in the first place.

## **WHY DO WE GRIEVE?**

We grieve because we are living in a world plagued by sin and death. We grieve because we were never built to handle loss. That may sound simplistic, but think about it. When God initially designed Adam and Eve, He created them in His own image to finitely mirror His infinite capacities of personhood (Gen. 1:26-27). One of those divine reflections is man's innate capacity for enjoying a relationship with God and with other human beings. God saw that it was not good for Adam to live alone (Gen. 2:18). He created Eve so that the two could enjoy a relationship with each other. In that perfect garden environment there was no grief because death and loss were nonexistent. Sin had not yet polluted the world.

However, another reflection of the divine image in Adam and Eve was the capacity of choice. It was Adam's misuse of his decision-making capacity that resulted in his choice to sin and disobey God (Gen. 2:17; 3:1-11). The bitter consequence was death: separation and loss of the cherished relationship with his Creator, who was his only valid source of security. For the first time in history, Adam and Eve hid from God and from each other because of their fear of being seen: "I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Gen. 3:10). The relationship between God and man had been severed. Security was shattered. Life became threatening.

Paul referred to that first sin when he wrote, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12).

The entrance of sin into the world produced a groaning in grief. That groaning is not only in man but in all of creation. Paul wrote, "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" (Rom. 8:22-24).

The innate longing for restoration with our Creator, and the awareness that it has not yet been fully realized, is at the heart of the grief we bear. This raw nerve of our universal condition is touched every time we suffer some kind of loss. All experiences with grief put us in touch with this core grief. It's a constant reminder of our fallenness: that we don't have things under control the way we would like them to be.

Christians are not exempt from this grief. Paul wrote that we who have the Holy Spirit residing within are groaning internally (Rom. 8:23). The term *groaning* speaks of deep anguish and mourning. Now, this is not a constant state of morbid pain, but it is a conscious internal acknowledgment that salvation does not alleviate nor diminish the diabolical effects of sin in this life. It is a groaning that pushes us to anticipate and long for the day when sin's effects will be abolished permanently in heaven. But meanwhile, here on earth, we still struggle.

The image that Paul refers to in Romans 8:22 is that of the agony of a mother in childbirth. One of the aspects of the curse on Eve in the garden was that childbirth would be a very painful experience (Gen. 3:16). Anyone who has witnessed or participated in a birth can clearly attest to that! However, the pain of childbirth produces an overwhelming joy when that mother holds her newborn in her arms for the first time.

It is the function of painful loss to remind us that this earth should never be the focus of our hopes. We are sojourners in a foreign land and we are not yet home.

## **CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME FROM LOSS?**

On a hill in Galilee, Jesus taught His disciples, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). Blessing? Is He serious? What can possibly be good about mourning? Jesus was primarily referring to a grief that is in response to exposure to one's sinfulness. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, Paul also wrote about grieving over personal sin: "Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted."

While Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount have direct application for grief over our sinful commitment to rule our own lives apart from God, I believe there are implications for those who grieve over other losses as well.

The principle is this: Grief over any loss can have a healthy effect if it brings us to the feet of the Savior. Our sense of loss can be good for us if it puts us among the multitude of poor people who came to Jesus out of a need for comfort, rescue, and blessing (Matt. 4:23-5:1).

In Romans 5:2-5, Paul underscored the positive effects that suffering can have on us: "We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us" (NIV). We are to rejoice in suffering, not because we are gluttons for punishment, but because it is in the midst of struggle and pain that character is invited to mature. Grief over a loss, because it is profoundly complicated, calls on us to make fundamental changes in our lives--changes that will either enrich or impoverish us.

When we are confronted with a loss, many times we feel unnerved and paralyzed by the pain. It's pretty hard for us to view a painful loss as an *opportunity* for positive change. But it is. We need to face the unsettling reality that change and loss are inevitably linked, and that they are unavoidable.

Much of the struggle we face in dealing with a loss centers in the choice to change. Loss and pain will make us either bitter or better. Character is forged in the crucible of grief and loss. God calls on us to use even the painful circumstances of our lives to deepen our reliance on Him. It is against the backdrop of the darkness of painful losses that the goodness of our great God is revealed and experienced in ways we otherwise would never know.

It is important for us to understand the process we will go through (or are going through) when we experience loss. By understanding where we will be going, we will be better prepared to handle it when it does come.

## WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF DEALING WITH LOSS?

We must all learn for ourselves that grieving is a confusing and disorienting process that takes time. It is not something we get *over*, but rather it is something we get *through*. Noted author C. S. Lewis wrote about his experience with the process of grief after the death of his wife to cancer: "For in grief, nothing 'stays put.' One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats" (*A Grief Observed*, p.67).

The Bible tells us that there is a pathway through difficult times in our lives that leads to higher ground. The experience may indeed be life-threatening, or at least it feels that way. It is the perilous path of the valley of the shadow of death that David spoke of in Psalm 23:4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." David was talking about the times when God walks with us through our dark valley experiences. Grief is one of those formidable valley experiences.

In the valley of grief, where the way is treacherous and we are so unsure of ourselves, we learn to trust God. After all, what better option is there? Trust enables us to maintain perspective by walking "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7) as we go through the valley. Otherwise we will lose our way and get hopelessly lost in despair.

We need a trusted guide to lead us when we've lost sight of where we're headed. Only one Guide is reliable enough to lead us. That Guide is Jesus Christ. He really is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

I grew up in the mountains of central Pennsylvania, where I developed a deep appreciation for the outdoors. I spent a lot of time in the mountains hiking, camping, hunting, and fishing. Many times I went alone because I liked the solitude. During those excursions, I always carried a compass with me "just in case." But I really never used it. I used the topography of the land to give me my bearings. I knew where I was in relationship to the mountain ridges and valleys that I could see.

When I moved to Michigan, however, I encountered something quite alarming. On my first hunting trip into the wilds, I got lost in a swamp. I was scared for a few hours, until I found my way out. Unlike my Pennsylvania home, southern Michigan has no mountains. I had always oriented myself by the mountains before, but now I was at the mercy of my compass. I have since learned to rely on my compass and maps. They go with me every time I'm out. They keep me headed in the right direction, even when I can't see where I'm going.

In the valley of grief, the only way to keep moving in the right direction is to trust the compass and map that God has given us to follow. At times it may seem that the Bible is too antiquated to be of much value. But the compass of God's indwelling Spirit and the map of the Bible always point us in the right direction. If we will but follow them and keep moving persistently and patiently, we will get through the valley.

For most people, the process of mourning means going through a series of stages. If we are to work through our grief, we must be willing to walk through the stages that usually mark the pathway. However, there is a caution to be noted. It is incorrect to think of the stages as particular behaviors that occur for a period of time and then disappear as if resolved. Nor is one stage more valuable than another. The process of grief is far from orderly. There will be much overlap in the stages of grief. Don't be alarmed. Expect it.

Some form of the following stages of grief are to be expected:

- shock
- denial
- anger
- bargaining
- depression

- submission
- reinvestment

Not everyone progresses through these stages of grief in the same order nor at the same speed. But we all move through stages of dealing with our loss, and as we do we follow a well-traveled path. Many have preceded us and many will follow.

To undertake this trek, we must rely on God's ability to help us. We don't have to make this journey alone. He is with us, and He wants to give us the help we need to face the pain and loneliness that lie ahead.

All grief is unique because each life is unique. It usually takes 1 to 2 years for a person to work through a significant loss of a child or spouse. The same is true for a divorce. The loss of one's home, job, or health, or even menopause or a midlife crisis--all of these require a significant amount of time. So we must not be surprised at a slower recovery from loss than we might have anticipated.

Don't rush the process. God is committed to completing His good work in you in His time: "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). Be patient with the process in yourself and in others. Deep wounds of the soul often require more time to heal than wounds to the body. But healing will come. We don't control the process, and that leaves us feeling very dependent. But that dependence is on a good God whose love will never let us go.

Let's look at four stages of grief that we must go through if we are to successfully live with our loss.

## **STAGE 1: ACCEPT THE REALITY OF THE LOSS**

**What has been lost.** It is critically important for the grieving person to begin by fully acknowledging the reality of who or what has been lost. This initial stage of shock may last several days or weeks after one suffers a loss.

A young wife hears the disappointing news that she will never be able to conceive a child. She will deeply mourn the loss of her potential for childbearing every time she sees a pregnant woman or a newborn baby. This is especially true during the first days and weeks after being informed of her loss. Part of her process of healing will be for her to accept these feelings as normal and realize the source of her sadness.

In dealing with death, we must face the truth that the person we loved is gone. Even when the death is expected, as during an extended illness, there is always a sense that "this really isn't happening; it's all a bad dream." The loss of a loved one is a traumatic assault against the human soul, just as being severely wounded is a traumatic assault against the human body.

Shock is to be expected at the news of a loss. It is the initial defense that God provides to enable us to carry on under unbelievable circumstances. It cushions us, protects us, and helps us survive when it would otherwise be impossible for us to function under the emotional overload of grief. It should not be grabbed away by well-meaning friends or eased by drugs. It should be allowed to take its course.

Loss must be faced head-on. Viewing the body of a loved one helps us accept the loss. As difficult as that is, it keeps us from denying the fact of our loss. It becomes a painful starting point for us, even in our grief, to begin rebuilding our shattered world.

Denial is the opposite of accepting the loss. It is the refusal to believe that a loss has been suffered. When a loved one dies, we powerfully resist facing the "never-again-ness" of the loss. Some parents deny by keeping the child's room as it was when he or she died. A wife leaves her husband's clothes hanging in the closet and his toothbrush on the sink. These behaviors are not unusual. But they become denial if they persist for several years.

**What cannot be lost.** In the initial stages of mourning, rational explanations are usually worthless. The soul is in too much pain to think rationally. As believers in Christ face their loss, it helps them to remember what they cannot lose.

*God's Understanding.* The honest cries for help and strength from our hurting souls are heard by a God who understands our hurt. Yes, He is touched with our grief. He knows the loss of relationship caused by sin. He felt the sting of death as He was separated from His Son Jesus while He hung on the cross (Matt. 27:46). He feels the pain of separation from a mankind He created to enjoy.

*God's Love.* During our walk through the valley of grief, we can cling to this simple yet profoundly secure truth-- "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." It keeps us going when nothing else can. Scripture passages we memorized earlier become the bulwark against the total collapse of our world.

The tangible expression of the depth of God's love for mankind is seen in the incarnation and sacrifice of His Son: "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Whatever we encounter in the valley of our grief, we will be able to handle because nothing we can even imagine can separate us from His unfailing love (Ps. 46; Rom. 8:35-39). When it seems that we have lost everything else, we can know that we have not lost God's love.

*God's Presence.* Comfort also comes from knowing that even when we can't feel Him, we know He's there with us in the dark valley of our pain. The rod and staff of Psalm 23:4 symbolize the Lord's loving presence and protection while we negotiate the treacherous valley of grief. God won't necessarily explain our suffering and grief to our satisfaction. Rather, He shares our suffering through His suffering Son.

Our Lord is a faithful and merciful High Priest (Heb. 2:17) who has tasted death for everyone (2:9). He is the One who said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (13:5). His faithfulness to His promise to be there for us is the bedrock of our security in an unstable world shattered by grief. "If God is for us, who [or what] can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31).

Ask the Lord to help you accept the reality of your loss and to rejoice in what you cannot lose. He understands and shares your grief. His love and His presence is with you as you walk through the valley.

## **STAGE 2: LET YOURSELF FEEL THE LOSS**

Christians sometimes have the idea that grieving over loss shows a lack of faith. That simply isn't true. Paul expected us to grieve over the loss of loved ones. The difference between us and those who don't know Christ, however, is that we do not "sorrow as others who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). What makes grieving *with* hope any different than grieving *without* hope? Hope gives us a glimpse into the eternal perspective of God and reminds us that something better is yet to come. But one thing is sure, hope does not lessen the emotional upheaval nor the intensity of our pain.

**Grief is universal.** All who grieve will feel sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, and numbness. Thinking will be confused and may be preoccupied with death. Sleeplessness may occur, along with loss of appetite, social withdrawal, absent-mindedness, looking for the deceased, crying, carrying objects that remind the person of the deceased, and staying away from places that are reminders of the loss. Do not be alarmed if some of these things happen. It's a healthy part of the grieving process because it helps us express our emotions.

**It's okay to cry.** Some Christians feel they must maintain a stiff upper lip while traversing the valley of grief. They think that somehow the pain of a loss has to be less for a believer. Otherwise what advantage is there to being a Christian? "After all," they say, "God's reputation is at stake. We must uphold His name by not showing our pain." So they deny their pain and refuse to cry.

There are many advantages to being a Christian, but absence of pain is not one of them. Believers are called to be people of godly integrity who honestly face the realities of living in a sin-stained world, in sin-infected bodies, and in sin-marred relationships. Experiencing pain is one of those harsh realities. If anything, the Christian's pain is intensified because he knows better than anyone else how different things might have been if it were not for sin. He also knows how different things someday will be. It is that hope of a better day that makes the bitter tears of today bearable.

**Jesus experienced grief too.** Our Lord Himself was known as "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is. 53:3). He wept at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35). Those observing Him were not seeing an act of weakness but an appropriate expression of intense grief over the loss of a friend He deeply loved (v.36). He was willing to enter into the pain of His friends--even though He knew that He would restore Lazarus to them in a few moments.

Jesus also grieved over the resistance of His people to His calls for repentance (Matt. 23:37). He experienced the intense anguish of anticipated loss of relationship with His Father as He wept in prayer in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44). He described His grief this way: "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death" (Matt. 26:38). Grief indicates a person's aliveness and involvement, not his immaturity and weakness. It is the living who grieve, not the dead.

**Expect a variety of feelings.** Denial, distraction, and numbness will probably occur in the initial hours and days of mourning. Normally, the worst is over in 2 to 3 months. If these feelings continue for an extended period of time and inhibit normal functioning in life, they indicate that the person is stuck in one of the unfinished stages of grief. That person may need professional help to begin moving again.

If there are no outward signs of grieving, however, and the person keeps all the emotions inside, that is equally unhealthy. Sooner or later the person's defenses will collapse, usually resulting in some form of depression.

Feelings of anger and guilt often torment the mourner. "Why me? Life is unfair. I don't deserve this. Is God punishing me? If only I had not gone that night, the accident would have never occurred." God's love and His power are doubted.

Doubts, confusion, and ambivalence are all natural reactions to difficult times of struggle. Job expressed his anger at God (Job 10:1-22). Asaph described his feelings of grief and anger with God when he saw injustices between the prosperity of the wicked and the struggles of the righteous: "Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You" (Ps. 73:21-22). Even in this turmoil that was so unsettling, Asaph was comforted by the fact that God was for him and could handle his anger and doubts: "Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. . . . But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all Your works" (Ps. 73:23-26,28).

Don't be afraid to express your grief honestly to God. It's okay to cry. He understands. Jesus wept and experienced grief. He will walk with you through your jumble of feelings. Trust Him for the comfort that only He can give.

### **STAGE 3: LEARN TO LIVE WITH THE LOSS**

Facing a loss, whether it is a death or some other traumatic event, brings maturity. Grief provides the opportunity for a person to discover what his character is really like and to reconsider what's really important in life. No one is ever the same after experiencing a significant loss.

Richard Dershimer, in his helpful book *Counseling the Bereaved*, describes this stage as a time of "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" (p.22).

Entering the valley of adjustment usually puts us in touch with our deep longing for security and permanence in relationships. We don't ever want anyone to leave us. Abandonment is our number one fear. Separation and loss through death, divorce, children leaving home, or job relocation calls on us to adjust. Three primary tasks will be necessary.

**Accept your new situation.** We demonstrate our acceptance of the new, though unsolicited, change in life by our willingness to move on without the other person's help or companionship. Setting some short-term goals is an important part of adjustment. Returning to work, attending social events, starting a hobby are examples. It's also good to get back into the routine tasks of daily living such as cleaning the house, doing the dishes, mowing the lawn, caring for the children. If necessary, ask others for help.

God's promise of His continuous presence to Joshua prior to entering the treacherous land of Canaan has been a comfort to many who grieve: "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:9). Acceptance means making decisions and moving on. Life is not over. It will always be different, but it still can be good because of the goodness of the God we serve (Ps. 118:1,5-8).

**Actively participate in life again.** The virtue of perseverance is best learned in the crucible of suffering and grief (Rom. 5:2-5). Perseverance is the commitment to keep moving in the direction our divine compass indicates, even when we can't see where we're heading. What we really believe is demonstrated in the tough times. Those who persevere bear the scars of past wounds. Yet they emerge intact, with a clearer perspective on trusting God when all else fails. They can say with Job, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

**Maintain your friendships.** Feelings of alienation, aloneness, and abandonment are prevalent during this period of adjustment. The new widow or widower realizes for the first time how lonely it is to attend a church that is focused on married couples and families. No parent plans on parenting solo. But when death claims a mate, the financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of the family suddenly falls on the shoulders of the surviving spouse who is struggling to stay afloat, let alone care for a family.

The best antidote for alienation is to begin to reinvest in relationships with hurting people. The qualities of empathy and compassion are born out of our own painful encounters with loss. Those who look at others through tears of grief have a perspective the dry-eyed cannot see, and they are uniquely qualified to minister to others in pain.

## **STAGE 4: REINVEST IN LOVE**

The return of the desire to love again is the best indicator that the stages of grief have been completed well. Refusal to love again is an indication that we're afraid of losing someone else. No one enjoys the pain of loss. But a deepening faith in the One who will never abandon us will enable us to risk loving again.

Trusting in God's enduring love is the only thing that will sustain us in the tough times of grief. John Brantner writes, "Only people who avoid love can avoid grief. The point is to learn from it and remain vulnerable to love."

It is in this final stage of grief that mourners are able to regard their loss as a growth-promoting experience that has made them better people in the process. It changes their whole outlook on life. This deepening awareness of the fragility of life and their place in it gives birth to a richer appreciation for the beauty and importance of life.

**Share your comfort with others.** One purpose of dealing with grief is to invest in the lives of others who need the same comfort that comforted us in our grief (2 Cor. 1:3-7; Gal. 6:2). That is true to our calling as people who are

created in the image of God: to love God and to love others (John 13:34-35; 15:11-13; Gal. 5:13-14; 1 John 4:7-21). Grief reminds us that this world is not our home; that we are just passing through.

Nicholas Wolterstorff writes, "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" (*Lament for a Son*, p.92).

But death does not have the final say. A great day is coming when God will forever vanquish all loss. In Revelation 21:4 it says, "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." That will be a glorious day of restoration when our relationship with God and our relationships with others who have died in Christ will be perfectly restored. Never again will we have to say goodbye. That is the hope of every believer who grieves over loss.

**Enjoy living today.** Until that great day of renewal arrives, allow yourself the freedom to enjoy life again. You are not betraying your loved one if you laugh. Not all is gloom and doom. The joy of the Lord is not something we control or manufacture. It is the byproduct of the pursuit of God through obedient living and is produced by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25). Although life may be in a minor key for a while, joy will catch us by surprise. When it does, enjoy it. Begin filling your spiritual photo album with snapshots of joyful times. The Spirit gives you these to keep you going when the days are bleak.

Remembering what or whom you have lost will always cause a twinge of pain. It will at times even move you to tears again. But that won't be all. It will also increase your appreciation for life and your zeal for Christ's return that would not have been possible had you not walked through the life-changing valley of grief.

## **HOW TO HELP THE GRIEVING**

Sometimes well-meaning Christians unwittingly trample on a mourner's pain by glibly quoting Romans 8:28, or by saying things like, "Well, he's much better off now that he's with the Lord" or "We know that God has all things under control." These kinds of responses cut off the grieving person's feelings and encourage denial of the pain he is feeling. They can even be viewed by the one grieving as being very insensitive attempts to minimize the value of his or her loss.

Most of us are uncomfortable with the mourner's feelings. We spend most of our life insulating ourselves from pain. When confronted with someone's raw grief, we try to keep our own pain to a minimum. We often attempt to distract the mourner from grief to avoid our own discomfort. But anything that allows an individual to avoid or suppress the legitimate pain of his loss will prolong the process of mourning. This kind of "comfort" does more harm than good.

The church seems just as uncomfortable with grief as the rest of society. But the church should be different because of the hope of restoration we all share in Christ. The church should encourage its people to deal with grief in a way that accepts the painful reality of loss and encourages deeper dependence on Christ. Tears are an indication of one's humanness, not an indication of weakness or lack of faith.

How we negotiate the steep and sometimes perilous terrain of our own grief will greatly impact our ability to help others who are grieving. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, the apostle Paul identified those who have been comforted by God as the ones who are qualified to comfort others.

The principle Paul talked about in Romans 12:15, "weep with those who weep," was exemplified by Jesus when He visited Mary and Martha after the death of their brother Lazarus. When He saw Mary's anguish and pain, "He groaned in the spirit and was troubled" (John 11:33). He was overwhelmed with their grief. He felt the sting of both His own loss and theirs. It was not only His power to raise Lazarus from the dead that deeply touched the mourners, but it was the power of His presence with them and His love for them. Imagine it! God weeping with you over the loss of a loved one.

As emissaries of the gospel of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20), we have been entrusted with the privileged opportunity of being the presence of Christ with those who are grieving. Words are inadequate to express what the individual griever needs. It is the shoulder to cry on, the willingness to listen, and the commitment to sit in silence that communicate the most.

We all feel uncomfortable with situations where we can do nothing. Those who are grieving know that you can't change what has happened. What they want to know is, "Will you walk with me along this painful path that I must travel?"

They feel abandoned over the loss of their loved one. The last thing they need is to feel abandoned by others around them. They need true friends who will listen not only with their ears but with their hearts--those who will reach out with the love and comfort of Christ.

Practical support in little things is also needed. Things like taking in a meal, changing oil in the car, cleaning the house, or providing a night out to dinner, babysitting, financial management, and continued prayer support are essential for recovery from a devastating loss.

## **REMEMBERING**

I went trout fishing with my dad and younger brother this past year. We fished in a stream where my grandfather and I first fished together 30 years ago. He's buried in a little country cemetery on a hill overlooking that stream. I had never been to the grave. Dad asked if I wanted to stop. I said yes. My tears surprised me. I didn't expect them. After all, it had been 14 years. I should have been over my grief. Yet, that day I came to realize that we are never very far from the pain of those we have lost. It also made me aware of how much God in His infinite wisdom had chosen to use my grandfather to touch my life with his life in profoundly enriching ways, instilling in me a hunger for his God. I have never been the same. I'll never get over that. I never should.