



THE 7 NEEDS OF GRIEVERS

FINDING HOPE, MEANING AND PURPOSE AFTER LOSS

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WEEK 1: UNDERSTANDING GRIEF / BEST & WORST THINGS TO SAY

What is Grief?

Grief is a natural response to any loss. It's brutal and personal. It's an intense emotion we experience after a significant loss. Grief is a multifaceted sensory experience that normally manifests itself in physical pain, numbness, hopelessness, loneliness, and deep sorrow. In a word, grief is *change*. Loss brings changes into our lives, usually ones we didn't want. Grief is the recognition of that change, but it's also the loss of a connection. At its core, grief is love; it's love for whatever we had that is now gone. Love endures forever.

The Weight of Grief

Grief is weight. The word comes from the Middle English *gref* and the Latin *gravis*, both words meaning heavy. A common adjective people use in speaking of grief is unbearable. Grief is a burden you bear, a heavy weight you learn to carry.

Bereaved

A bereaved person is one who has a relative or close friend who has recently died. The Old English word bereave means to rob. The word implies we've been robbed or stripped of someone or something, often suddenly and unexpectedly, and sometimes by force.

Don't Compare Your Grief

Don't play the grief-comparison game. The problem is if you win, you lose. Comparing grief merely based on the type of loss is a mistake that leaves people feeling less than and not deserving of the same kind of support. The worst kind of loss is your loss.

Timeline for Grief

We know there is no timeline for grief because no two people experience grief the same way, yet the simple timeline below can help us gauge necessary interventions:

Anticipatory grief - Grief that comes before the death or loss.

Acute grief: Grief right after the death or loss occurs.

Early grief: The first two years of grief.

Mature grief: Grief for the rest of our lives.

Types of Grief

Delayed - Grief we don't feel in the moment because of shock or busyness.

Disenfranchised - Any grief we judge or minimize

Ambiguous - Grief that's hard to recognize because your loved one is still alive

Anticipatory - The grief that comes before a death

Inconclusive - There is no body to grieve.

Complicated - When painful emotions don't improve with time and are very severe.

Collective and Public - When we grieve as a group an event or public figure

Traumatic - Combines trauma with bereavement or grief responses

Masked - Grief that lurks beneath the surface, disguised by coping mechanisms

Cumulative - Multiple losses during a short period of time and/or unattended grief

Secondary Loss - Other losses that accompany grief besides the primary response

What's the Distinction Between Grief and Grieving?

Grief is that overwhelming emotion that comes over us like a wave after our loss. The feeling is so intense that we want to know when it will be over. If you think the waves of grief will stop at some point, you will be sadly disappointed and think something is wrong with you when they don't. The waves will decrease in frequency and intensity over time, but they will never completely go away.

Grieving, on the other hand, is the process of change that occurs after our loss. We are faced with a problem when we lose someone or something dear to us. We now need to figure out how to live in a world without that someone or something. Grieving is a form of learning; it's learning how to carry the absence of our loved one with us and learning how to navigate our new existence on earth.

What's the Difference Between Grief and Mourning?

Grief is what's going on inside us, while mourning is what we do on the outside. The internal work of grief is ongoing, that's why I refer to it as our grief journey. Mourning, on the other hand, is an outward sign of our grief.

Rending a Garment in Grief

In biblical times it was common for Jews to mourn by tearing their clothes. It's natural to get angry when someone or something is snatched out of your life. Rending one's garments was a tangible expression of grief and anger in the face of death. For example, David tore his clothes when Saul and his beloved friend Jonathan were killed (2 Samuel 1:11-12).

Why did he do that? Because in an agrarian society, clothing was a very valuable commodity. Nothing was mass-produced. Clothes were time-intensive and expensive so most people in those days had a very limited wardrobe. People who tore their clothes were showing how upset they felt inside. By damaging one of their more important and expensive possessions, it reflected the depth of their emotional pain. This idea was magnified when people chose to put on sackcloth after tearing clothes. Sackcloth was a coarse and scratchy material and was extremely uncomfortable. As with tearing their garments, people put on sackcloth to externally display the discomfort and pain they felt inside.

Grieving with Hope

All of us will grieve at some point in life, but believers grieve slightly different than the world, because we can have hope even in our deepest times of sorrow. The Bible affirms the importance of grief and instructs Christians how to grieve. The Apostle Paul tells us believers will grieve and have their share of trials, tragedies, and difficult losses. You don't get excused because you are a follower of Jesus.

Paul says, "We want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died ... So, encourage each other with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14,18 NLT).

We often think of death as a departure, but for believers in Christ it's an arrival. Death is the doorway by which you can leave the limitations and pains of this world to enter the heavenly realm and be given the gift of eternal life. The grave is an entrance into new life. It's a door not a wall. Death is not saying a last "good-bye" but rather saying, "See you later."

We grieve differently, yet honestly and openly, because we look forward to going to heaven, seeing Jesus, and being reunited with our loved ones who have gone before us. Death isn't the worst thing that can happen to us; rather, for believers, death leads to the best possible scenario. Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain... I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Philippians 1:21,23).

Therefore, we grieve with hope. Our hope doesn't nullify our grief; rather hope puts grief into an eternal context. The biblical approach to grieving is a hopeful. It's hope in the person, resurrection, and love of Christ that allows us to find comfort even in our pain.

Grief is Like Peeling an Onion

Grief is a lot like peeling an onion, it comes off one layer at a time and you cry a lot. Just like there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there is no right way to peel away the layers. The days between a death and the funeral service are like the paper-thin outer skin of an onion that comes off easily and blows away in the wind. That's when the bereaved person is in shock and is surrounded by family and friends trying to bring comfort.

The funeral is often the climactic event in the care of the family as the bereaved have their grief witnessed. Once that superficial outer skin is removed, then the real grieving process begins in three identifiable layers: reality, reaction, and reconstruction.

Grief Can Feel Like Being Crushed by a Boulder

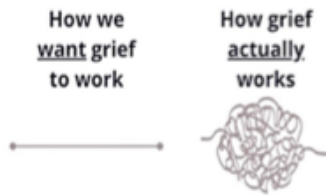
Grieving is hard work; some of the hardest work you'll ever do in life. Kay Warren shared with a group of grieving women that the loss of her son felt like a gigantic boulder that fell from the sky and crushed her to the ground, completely devastating her. Kathy, a close friend, shared with Kay that someday, that boulder would become the size of a rock she could hold in her pocket and carry with her. It will never go away entirely, but it won't always feel like it's crushing her.

Ocean Waves of Grief

Going through the grief process is like being caught in a set of big waves. Waves of anger, doubt, denial, sadness, depression, helplessness, and confusion come crashing down on us.

Grief is Messy

Grief is a tangled ball of emotions. It's messy, traumatic, confusing, and overwhelming. It can make you feel like you're going crazy and question your faith. It doesn't color within the lines. The diagram below illustrates how we want grief to work and how it actually works:



Models of grief are guidelines of what people may experience when grieving. There is no one way to grieve, and people move through a variety of stages of grief in various ways. The stages aren't meant to tuck messy emotions into a neat package.

Elisabeth Kübler Ross (“On Death and Dying”)

Five Stages of Grief (DABDA): Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance.

David Page (“The School of Grief: A Guide to Finding Hope, Meaning & Purpose After Loss”)

The Seven Needs of the Grieving:

1. To have your grief witnessed
2. To feel your feelings
3. To release your burden of guilt
4. To face your fears
5. To not get over it but to grow into it
6. To turn your pain into purpose
7. To hold onto the hope of heaven

The Best Things to Say and Not Say to Those in Grief

An Overview:

Don't Tell Somebody to Move On

“If you tell somebody to move on, you're basically rejecting that person's emotional pain, saying, “Okay, that's enough, I don't want anymore, I don't want to be a part of it.”

~ Robert Stolorow, Professor of Psychiatry at UCLA

Never tell somebody in grief to move on or get over it. When you do, you're rejecting the very thing the person needs most, a safe space to deal with their emotional pain. Asking someone to get over the person they lost, is like asking someone to no longer love the person that they lost. It isn't fair, it isn't realistic and can be downright cruel.

A Response to Well-Meaning Friends

In today's world, we often share our grief feelings on social media. Kay Warren is the co-founder of Saddleback Church, a mental health advocate, and a dear friend. She was angry at what some

people had said to her in her grief. She had a right to be angry. Her son, Matthew, died from suicide. Below is part of a Facebook post she wrote titled,

Don't Tell Me to Move On:

“As the one-year anniversary of Matthew's death approaches, I have been shocked by some subtle and not-so-subtle comments indicating that perhaps I should be ready to move on... I have to tell you – the old Rick and Kay are gone. They're never coming back. We will never be the same again.”

“Because these comments from well-meaning folks wounded me so deeply, I doubted myself and thought perhaps I really am not grieving well (whatever that means). ‘When are you coming back to the stage at Saddleback? We need you,’ someone cluelessly said to me recently. Mourners are encouraged to quickly move on, turn the corner, get back to work, think of the positive, be grateful for what is left, have another baby, and other unkind, unfeeling, obtuse, and downright cruel comments.”

“What does this say about us - other than we're terribly uncomfortable with death, with grief, with mourning, with loss – or we're so self-absorbed that we easily forget the profound suffering the loss of a child creates in the shattered parents and remaining children.”

Within seven days, her post had gone viral with 3.75 million readers and 10,000 comments. Thousands of individuals shared stories of lost family members due to illness, suicide, or a tragic accident. They recounted the insensitivity of family and friends, and their own shame and guilt about their overwhelming grief. Kay's post is a good summary of what not to say to those in grief and why.

The Problem

We live in a grief illiterate society. As a grief educator and pastor, I am on a mission to change that by teaching about grief and equipping people with the necessary tools to comfort and guide others on their unique grief journeys.

The fact is, most Americans just don't know how to grieve. Knowing the right thing to say doesn't come naturally to us. We weren't born with that skill, and nobody ever taught us, so we never learned. And since we don't know how to grieve, we don't know how to respond to others in their grief.

We don't know what to say and not say. In addition, most of us haven't had much experience with people in deep emotional pain and it's not always apparent when we're helping or hurting them. This concept can be scary, awkward, and downright perplexing. What feels right and helpful for one person may be all wrong for another. Likewise, the timing of when you say something may make all the difference. Or you might be the right person to say something to a friend or family member, but the wrong person to say it to another.

3 Tips for Responding to Those in Grief

I will be the first to admit I haven't always said the right things to those in grief but I'm learning. I invite you to learn with me. Below are three tips for talking to someone in grief followed by my top ten list of the best and worst things to say to those in grief.

Tip: #1: It's Not About You

One of the greatest opening lines from a book came from Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, when he said, "It's not about you." Rick was referring to finding your purpose in life, but I want to apply it to what to say or not say to grieving people. Many people want to talk about how the grieving person's loss affects them. When someone shares their loss, it's important to listen and not to give your loss history. You may want to say, "Oh my gosh, my mother died last year, too. Let me tell you what happened." When your loved one dies, that's the only person you want to hear about.

Now, it's completely okay to say, "Oh my gosh, I've dealt with loss myself and I really want to be here for you." That puts the attention back on them.

In responding to the loss of my daughter, I heard many people say, "Oh wow, Dave, I could never handle what you are going through." These people meant well but it was more about them than me.

Tip #2: Avoid Bright Siding and Toxic Positivity

When people are in pain, we naturally want to help soothe the pain and lighten the mood. In principle, it's a kind gesture, but in reality, it's never welcome. Be careful of bright siding and serving up toxic positivity. Bright siding is forced gratitude.

It sounds like this: "Aren't you glad they died so quickly?" "Be happy that she is at peace now." "Everything happens for a reason." Be fully present with someone in grief without trying to point out the silver lining.

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade" is a phrase meant to encourage optimism in the face of adversity. Lemons suggest sourness or difficulty in life; when applied to grief, lemons could suggest sadness. Hence, the goal for many is to turn sadness into something positive. But the way lemons are turned into lemonade is by sugarcoating them, making them seem more positive than they really are. Avoid sugarcoating someone's grief. Let them feel the sadness and pain that accompanies grief without trying to brighten things up.

Toxic positivity is positivity given in the wrong way, in the wrong dose, and at the wrong time. It sounds like this: "Cheer up!" "Buck up!" "Dig deep!" "Don't worry!" "Stop focusing on the negative!" "Try to have a better attitude!" "Remember, God never gives us more than we can bear." We often go overboard on positivity because we don't want people that we care about to feel bad. We sometimes say stupid things because we are uncomfortable in our own pain.

When you've lost a loved one, you're in a dark, raw place. Nothing anyone can say is going to cheer you up, especially conversations that begin with the words "at least." "At least she isn't suffering anymore." "At least he died doing something he loved." "At least she's in a better place."

If you're going to start off a sentence with "at least," just stop yourself. It's not going to be helpful. You're trying to force them to look at the positive when they're feeling horrible. Learn to respond and not just react by saying the first thing that comes to your mind. Self-reflection and awareness are key.

Tip #3: Listen Without Judging

Grief is a no judgment zone. There is no right way to grieve. It's an individual process. When I'm with someone who's loved one has died, I try to validate what they are feeling. Not to judge it or try to change it—just to acknowledge it fully.

Don't tell a grieving person how to feel. They may need to be vulnerable. They may need to cry for days on end. I feel honored when someone shares their pain and grief with me. The act of witnessing their vulnerability can bring the person out of isolation if the witnessing is done without judgment. It's not your job to stop their grief and pain and make them feel better. Just let them feel.

The 3 Worst Things to Say to Those in Grief

1. I know how you feel.

No, you really don't know how they feel after their loss, even if it's the same type of loss you've experienced. People think they can understand another's heartbreak, but the reality is I can't understand the loss you're going through. I can't understand your sorrow. However, I can come alongside you and be present with you in your pain.

2. At least she lived a long life.

Many people die young, so they reason that your loved one lived a long life, and therefore, you shouldn't feel that bad. Even if your mother passes away at 94 years old like mine did, it still hurts.

3. He is in a better place.

This may be true, and heaven is a wonderful place, but it's just not the right time to say it. The thought that someone's loved one is better off deceased and without them can feel cruel.

The 3 Best Things to Say to Those in Grief

1. I am so sorry for your loss.

This phrase is simple yet powerful. If you don't know what to say, just say, "John, I'm so sorry for your loss." You don't have to elaborate, just express your sadness for their loss. I don't say, "My condolences for your loss." It sounds too formal and businesslike to me.

2. That must really hurt.

This phrase sounds strange and is different from how we normally approach helping someone in grief. We want to play it down and take their minds off the pain, but they desperately need to say what hurts and have their pain understood. This statement validates their pain and shows you are empathic toward their deep sorrow.

3. I wish I had the right words; just know I care.

This phrase shows your humility and compassion. You're admitting you don't know what to say, that you don't have the right words, but that you deeply care for the person in grief.

WEEK 2: THE POWER OF WITNESSING GRIEF

Nobel Prize winner, Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, writes, “For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.” Grief requires witnessing.

Having our grief witnessed is the first of seven needs griever have in my School of Grief Model for helping those in grief. It is very powerful for a griever to have their grief witnessed. In fact, witnessing grief is the cornerstone, which the other six elements are built upon. This need is so fundamental that if you don’t get your grief witnessed, it becomes impossible to progress on your grief journey.

Hardwired to Have Our Grief Witnessed

Human beings are social and emotional beings designed by God to live in community with others. As emotional creatures, we have an innate need to have our grief witnessed by others. This need is hardwired within us, since our emotions bond us to one another, and those connections are the key to our survival.

We want everybody to see our grief and respond to what has happened to us. When a child is injured, let’s say they skin their knee, they look to their parents for help. That help often comes in the form of a boo-boo kiss, a light kiss on the injury to make the pain go away. Kids want their injury to be seen, their pain to be heard and validated by their mom, dad, and everybody around them, and so do we.

My friend, David Chrzan, a pastor, and adventurer, broke his femur in his right leg while riding his mountain bike in a canyon in Orange County. I visited him in his hospital room after his surgery to repair his leg.

After discussing the circumstances of his accident and prayer, I was getting ready to leave when he asked me, “Would you like to see my scar from the surgery?”

“No, that’s okay,” I replied.

He was insistent on showing me his scar as he turned on his side and lifted his hospital gown, revealing a footlong incision with stitches on the outside of his leg just below his hip.

“The surgeon inserted a couple titanium rods into my leg that will graft with the broken bone as it heals,” David explained.

“That’s cool,” I replied.

Maybe it’s a guy thing, but we like to show our scars as a badge of honor after our accidents. I was the same way with my family and friends after my motorcycle and bicycle accidents. We want to have our pain witnessed and validated by others. It’s the same way with grief; we need our pain witnessed.

David Kessler, the author of *Finding Meaning*, writes, “Each person’s grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn’t mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining.”

We begin to witness grief by acknowledging a person’s loss and letting them know they are seen. It’s saying, “I see you and hear your pain. Your grief is real. It’s genuine.” Witnessing people’s pain empowers them to feel supported and less alone. Observing grief allows grievers to focus on grieving their loss rather than grieving the loss of the support they need most.

It’s important to create space for grievers to share their painful feelings. Witnessing someone’s grief is one of the greatest gifts you can give to someone in grief. Ask about their loved one, then listen and let them talk. I feel honored when someone shares their pain and grief with me. When we see our sadness reflected in the eyes of another, we know our grief matters. We get a glimpse, maybe for the first time since our loss, that we will survive, and that a hope-filled future is possible.

Witnessing grief is about meeting people where they are and accepting them without trying to change them. We come with no agenda, judgment, or shame. Witnessing grief helps people develop a sense of comfort during the painful and negative feelings that accompany loss.

Can I Get a Witness?

This phrase is commonly used in African American churches and has a spiritual connotation: When the pastor asks, “Can I get a witness?” he’s asking the congregation for affirmation which is often met with a response of “Amen!” I’ve had the privilege of preaching in a predominantly black church and it’s inspiring to receive encouraging participation from the congregation. It made me a better preacher when they would say, “Amen” or “Go on.” The word amen means “it is true” or “so be it.”

Witnessing affirms the griever and declares their loss is true and genuine. It’s simple: When someone tells you their story about loss, your job is to witness their grief. Be present with them without thinking about yourself and what you might say next. Just listen and witness. Our world needs more witnessing. Can I get an amen?

A Unique Way of Witnessing Grief

I love how one tribe in particular witnesses’ grief when someone in their village dies. Kessler was touring Australia when he met a researcher that shared about her study of the Indigenous people’s way of life in northern Australia. On the night someone dies, everyone in the village moves a piece of furniture or something else into their yard. The next day, when the bereaved family wakes up and looks outside, they see that everything has changed since their loved one died, not just for them but for everyone in the village. This shows the grieving family that their loved one’s death matters. It’s a tangible witness as it makes the loss visible. Our world needs more furniture movers.

Witnessing Grief at a Funeral

Funerals are vital for having our grief witnessed. I never realized how meaningful a personalized funeral that accurately reflects your loved one's life could be until after my daughter's death. After meeting with families and performing hundreds of funerals, I'm convinced that a funeral ceremony done well can be the first step toward healing for a bereaved family. Funerals, memorials, and graveside services matter. Something magical happens when others gather to see, hear, feel, and witness our grief.

The funeral is the oldest and most familiar ritual in the world. Rituals unite us. Funerals are for the living, for those who remain. It's an important psychological step within the grieving process and helps bring closure. Funerals allow us to pay tribute to our loved one's life and help survivors face the reality of death. Funerals assist us in beginning the mourning process, expressing our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, and saying goodbye to our loved one. Funerals give people an opportunity to support the family by demonstrating their love and respect for the deceased.

Significance

When loss happens, the first thing we need to do is establish the significance of that event. Significance is a key concept in witnessing grief. The hardest part of grieving is finding a way to establish significance. Friends and family are not comfortable with talking about death, pain, and loss. Yet, we want people to know about our loss and respond to it in an empathetic way without trivializing it.

Doug Manning, author of *The Funeral*, gives *three levels of significance* that need to be fulfilled after loss.

First, we need to establish the significance of our loss. This is what has happened to me. The first thing we think about when someone dies is ourselves. This sounds strange, doesn't it? We think, "What's going to happen to me now?" That's not selfish; it's survival. God designed us with a tremendous capacity to survive. We need to share what happened to us because of our loved one's death.

The *second level* is the need to establish the significance of the person we have lost. We want to tell everybody about the person we lost and show photos of them: "I need to tell you who this person was, what they meant to me, and how significant they were."

The *third level* is the social significance. This is one of the major reasons for having a funeral and why funerals are so important. The funeral is a time to gather so friends can tell us how much our loved one meant to them.

Funerals provide a network of support for grieving families. Funerals have become the new family reunions. Relatives you haven't seen in years travel great distances to attend the service. On the other hand, when a family decides not to hold a funeral or service, it's a missed opportunity to have their grief witnessed, and for their friends to show their love and support.

Failing to have a memorial service can lead to an increase in unresolved grief for years to come.

I think there should be a rule that everyone in the world should have a personalized funeral service. Why? Because I believe in the dignity of every human being. God created each person in His image and therefore, every person has value. All people matter to God. Every life is worth remembering and celebrating. To deny a person a funeral is to deny them an act of dignity.

Crow Funerals

Yes, crows hold funerals for their dead, which are unique social events that can be loud and dramatic. Crows witness the grief of another fallen crow. A crow funeral can happen at any time. Farmers bear witness after shooting unwanted crows in their fields. Powerline workers see them should an unlucky bird zap itself and drop.

Occasionally, the funerals occur in a city park. All it takes is one dead crow plus one fellow crow to spot it and release an alert, harsh and urgent — Caw! Caw! Within moments, a mob of crows arrives and settles onto branches or whatever aerial perch allows good viewing of the corpse and the surrounding scene.

For a short time, the birds remain quiet and still, only to break into a chorus of shrill calls. Back and forth, silence and aggravation for about 15 to 20 minutes until nearly all at once the ink-black birds launch and disperse, leaving branches to quiver. Crows exist in community much like mammals do.

Both scripture and folklore connect crows, ravens and jays, to human life and death. God sent a raven to instruct Cain how to bury his brother, Abel. A group of crows is known as a “murder,” a label dating back to medieval times when crows feasted on slain soldiers lying in battlefields.

The Value of a Funeral

A funeral is an important way to have your grief witnessed. Jackie’s funeral was a fantastic celebration of her short life. She was so full of life and joy. I wanted everybody to know what a special little girl she was and that her life was not lived in vain but had significance.

My fondest memory of the service was having our grief witnessed by nearly a thousand people including our closest friends, family, and church. I’ll never forget that day for as long as I live. The love and support were overwhelming. Following the service, they had an impromptu reception line for our family as people came up and hugged us. Folks were unbelievably kind and compassionate toward us that day as they witnessed our grief. This demonstration of love and empathy helped carry us through the darkest time in our lives. I didn’t know if I could do the eulogy, but God gave me strength. The memorial service was lovely and marked the beginning of our healing.

Should Children Attend Funerals?

I believe funerals are valuable for children as well as adults. My son, Joshua, attended his grandfather’s funeral when he was eight years old. It was important for Joshua to be at the service. I think your child’s wishes are a helpful guideline when making your decision. It was an open casket funeral, which is rare these days, and he wanted to go forward at the end to see his grandpa in the casket. Both of my kids attended Jackie’s funeral service. Joshua was nine and Jessica was seven. I couldn’t imagine not letting them be there to say goodbye to their sister.

There is no right or wrong age to attend a funeral. Young kids can benefit from being involved in a funeral and having a chance to say farewell to their loved one. Let your child know what to expect at the funeral. Prepare them ahead of time as to what it will look like, how to dress, and what the schedule of the day will be. As I've talked with adults about this topic, many were denied attending funerals as children and wished they had been allowed to do so.

Witnessing Grief at a Wedding

My daughter, Jessica, got married recently. This was a big deal for the Page family. She is the first of our three children to do so. I asked her if she wanted me to walk her down the aisle as her father or if she wanted me to perform the wedding ceremony as a pastor and wedding officiant. "Dad, I want you to do both," she replied.

She asked seven girls to be her bridesmaids. I wondered who her maid of honor would be. She decided Jackie, her younger sister, would be her maid of honor. I got a bit teary eyed when she told me. Matt, her fiancé, hand carved a small wooden bench that held a frame with Jackie's photo in it and a bouquet of flowers. Engraved on the bench were the words, "Jacqueline Brooke Page." The bench, photo, and flowers were positioned right next to the bride where the maid of honor normally stands.

Witnessing Grief During the Holidays

It's extremely important to have your grief witnessed during the holidays. The holidays are associated with family. The most wonderful time of the year can also be the most difficult time of the year for those who grieve. It's at this time we became acutely aware of the void in our lives. How do we have Christmas without Jackie? To make matters worse, Jackie's birthday was on December 20th. She was our Christmas baby.

Church services went on, Christmas carols were still sung, and people wished everybody a Merry Christmas. But my thoughts were on Jackie, fixed more on her departure than on her arrival five years prior. Christmas was different that first year without our daughter. We hung a stocking for her, talked about her, lit a candle in her memory, and shed many tears. Sometimes, showing up for something is the best you can do. We showed up that first Christmas and that was good enough.

Talk About Your Loved One

Maybe the best way to have your grief witnessed during the holidays is to talk about your loved one. We talk about the weather, food, sports, and work. We talk about everything else... except the elephant in the room. We all know it's there. It has hurt us all. But we don't talk about the elephant in the room. I encourage you to introduce the elephant in the room.

Oh, please, say her name. Please say "Jackie" again. For if we talk about her death, perhaps we can talk about her life. Nothing brings relief like hearing a good story about your loved one.

Memorialize Your Loved One

Find a way to remember your loved one and memorialize them during the holidays. It might mean lighting a candle, writing a letter to your loved one and placing it under the tree, or creating an ornament with your loved one's picture on it and hanging it on the tree. I know someone who created a memory book of their loved one. Create a new tradition in memory of your loved one.

You can donate to a favorite charity in their honor. I do this each year for the HEART Africa ministry. You can also go online and create a tribute page for your loved one. These are all ways to express your love for your family member or friend and to have your grief witnessed.

Include the Children

Children feel confused, powerless, angry, and anxious during the holidays because of a death in the family. Kids grieve differently than adults. Our children need their grief witnessed during the holidays, as well. Be honest with them. Explain that it's okay for them to cry and for adults to cry, and that although they are feeling sad right now, they won't always feel this way. Figure out which part of the holiday tradition is most important to them. Try to involve them in memorial rituals. For example, ask them to draw or write their favorite holiday memories of the departed loved one.

Witnessing Grief During Milestones

I recently graduated from Biola University with my Doctor of Ministry degree. It was the culmination of years of research, hard work, and perseverance.

On the morning of my graduation ceremony, I couldn't help but think of Jackie and my dad. I made a video that I posted on my social media platforms expressing how sad and disappointed I was because they couldn't be there to witness my accomplishment. Although they weren't there physically, I felt their presence with me.

My success was due to their influence on my life. Jackie became my motivation to keep going when I wanted to give up. I started the program after she died to grow personally and become a more effective pastor, better able to serve those I work with in ministry. My dad supported me in all my ministry endeavors. I felt Jackie and my dad both smiling down on me from heaven as they witnessed my milestone with great pride that day.

Witnessing Grief During Birthdays and Anniversaries

It's tricky going through birthdays and anniversaries after a loss. My wife and I give two cards to each other for every birthday, one from us and one from Jackie. We also give two cards to each other on Mother's Day and Father's Day, and our wedding anniversary. I write Jackie's card like she used to write, the typical handwriting of a five-year-old. Jackie's birthday is always a special day in our family. We've had birthday cakes before, and we've lit candles in her honor.

A Witnessing Grief Exercise

I like to use an exercise I learned from Paul Denniston, founder of Grief Yoga. I have people pair off at their tables and stand face to face with their partner. The first person who shares put his hand over his heart, looks the other person square in their eye and says the other person's first name out loud, and then says, "I witness your pain and grief, and I see your healing." This was a powerful exercise. I've seen people moved to tears as a result of doing this exercise. And later they share that it was the first time they ever felt their grief witnessed.

3 Tips for Witnessing Grief in Others

Below are three tips to help witness grief in others and provide a compassionate presence.

Depend Upon God for Help

When feeling overwhelmed, remember that God is with you in your pain. Don't run away from the discomfort but take a deep breath and lean into the sadness knowing God designed your body to grieve. Tears are welcome. Words are not necessary at first. Trust God to give you the appropriate words to say when the time is right: "The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say at the moment when you need them" (Luke 12:12).

Acknowledge the Pain

When witnessing a griever in pain, realize you don't have to fix them. Rather, seek to create a compassionate space for them without taking on their pain. Let them know that God sees them in their pain and so do you. Recognize that your presence alone, along with touch, is more powerful than words. Acknowledge their pain and validate that what they're going through really hurts. Let them know they don't have to hide or rush through their grief.

Show Empathy

Let grievers share their pain from their heart without judging or embarrassing them. Encourage them to express their feelings and embrace their pain. There's no need to look for a silver lining, but instead, perhaps share a good memory or story with them about their loved one. Let them share their feelings openly and remind them you are merely there to listen. People don't need our sympathy; they need empathy. Witnessing grief is to show empathy for how those in grief feel.

It takes enormous courage for a person to have their grief witnessed and to truly be seen when they feel wounded inside, when their heart is vulnerable and hurting. It also takes courage to witness the grief of another and view their tears and pain. As you witness grief, you become an openhearted healer. You give your family member or friend an incredible gift. Even though the act can be an emotionally exhausting experience; it's worth it. They will forever be changed.

May we first seek to understand, then to be understood. This approach supports the other person in their pain. It's what we all want and need, to be understood, valued, and affirmed in our grief. We all need to have our grief witnessed by someone who cares. I witness your grief, and you witness mine.

May we seek to witness the grief of others and have our grief witnessed within a caring community because healing comes in community, not in isolation.

WEEK 3: FEEL YOUR FEELINGS

The first need we have as griever is to have our grief witnessed. The second need is to feel our feelings. God is our creator and giver of emotions. He created us to grieve and designed us to feel our feelings and express our emotions.

It's important to fully acknowledged and experience all the emotions you are feeling in your grief, even if they are painful, to truly heal and move forward. Don't avoid or suppress your feelings, but instead, allow yourself to feel them completely.

Feel all the feels is an expression that means to allow yourself to feel and have emotions, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. The emotions that we feel in grief, as raw and overwhelming as they are, reflect the depth of our love for those who have died.

They Took Our Daughter Away

Two guys from the mortuary came to our house after Jackie died. They parked the van at the bottom of our driveway and walked up to our house. It was time to take Jackie to the van. "We'll go get the gurney to carry her down to the van," one of them said.

"Guys, she's forty-two inches tall and only weighs about forty pounds. How about I just carry her down to the van instead?" I replied.

They agreed it was a good idea. I picked up her little body, carried it to the van, and laid her inside. The van drove down the road on St. Andrews Court, turned left onto Birch Way, and disappeared into the distance with our baby inside.

We stood there watching for what seemed like hours but was just a few minutes. We were in

shock. Tears welled up in our eyes. We felt so helpless. So hopeless. Nothing in life prepared us for a moment like this. We had experienced a catastrophic loss and knew we were in deep weeds and needed help.

I didn't know what to do, where to turn, or how to deal with my pain. I called a Christian counselor in town to begin grief therapy. She shared with me the importance of expressing my emotions. She explained that God made our bodies to feel pain and that grief was a natural part of life. She encouraged me to process the pain I was feeling inside by crying into a pillow. She gave me grief homework to do.

I remember curling up in a fetal position and crying. I cried so hard and for so long to the point where I didn't think I could cry anymore. I was cried out. For a while, my tears just wouldn't come out. My tear ducts dried up. I had never experienced such a thing. I asked the counselor about it, and she said not to worry. She assured me that the tears would flow again when they were ready. And sure enough, they did.

I remember screaming into my pillow to release the pent-up anger inside. It was ugly. I screamed at the top of my lungs. I made guttural sounds I'd never heard myself utter before. It

was like my soul was verbally vomiting and letting go of all the toxic stuff inside. I remember howling like a wolf at the universe.

I was crying so hard that I collapsed on the floor. I got up and looked in the mirror only to see my swollen eyes, tears on bright red cheeks, and drool running down my mouth. I was dehydrated, unable to stand, think, or walk. Sentences were hard to put together and didn't make sense.

Reoccurring Nightmares

I went back to the therapist for another appointment. I informed her that this grieving stuff was hard work. She smiled and said, "Yes, it is." I told her I didn't think I was doing very well. She asked what my biggest challenge was. I shared that I was having nightmares every night of the two men from the mortuary driving my daughter away in the van. Each time I dreamed about it; I would wake up in a cold sweat.

"What can I do to get rid of the nightmares?" I desperately asked.

"Try reframing the situation. Instead of picturing two men taking your daughter away, imagine two angels coming down from heaven and gently taking Jackie home," she said.

Now, that sounded good. I gave it a try. The nightmares continued. I knew I needed further help.

Jerry Sittser's Wise Counsel

As I mentioned before, Jerry came and spoke at the weekend services at our church in Auburn. After lunch, I drove him back to the Sacramento airport. On the way, he asked me how I was doing in my grief?

"Pretty well except that I keep having this recurring nightmare of watching the two men from the mortuary take my daughter away and disappearing," I replied. I shared about the advice given by the Christian therapist of picturing angels coming to take her away.

"How is that working for you?" he asked.

"It's not. I still have nightmares about it every night," I said.

"That crap didn't work for me either," Jerry said empathetically.

We burst into laughter together. I was surprised by his reply, but thankful for his honesty.

"Dave, you need to embrace the pain. You must feel the feelings to get better," he continued.

"How do you do that?" I asked.

"When the drunk driver hit our minivan, it was carnage, just awful. My four-year-old daughter died immediately from a broken neck. My wife was seriously injured but was still alive as was my mother. They both died a few minutes later. My six-year-old son had a broken femur and

almost died, but thankfully survived. My other two kids were dazed, crying, and screaming but were relatively unhurt. It took an hour before the emergency vehicle reached us,” he explained.

I was speechless as he shared the tragic details.

“You need to go back and relive the event in your mind, facing your fear and watching those two men drive away with your daughter. As crazy as it sounds, you embrace the pain. You feel the feelings all over again and let them sink in,” he said.

My first thought was, this sounds counterintuitive, but he certainly knows what he’s talking about, so why not give it a try? I chose to relive the experience again and to feel the painful emotions associated with the experience.

In my mind, I pictured the two men driving my daughter away from our home. I felt a piercing pain deep inside. I sat with my pain and let it marinate. I stayed in the moment, felt the feelings, and welcomed the pain streaming through my body.

I named my painful emotions and owned them. I felt my feelings to the core of my being despite the unpleasantness. I confronted the experience head on and felt a sense of dread over the finality that my daughter was gone for good.

After facing and embracing my pain, feeling my feelings, and expressing my emotions, the nightmares disappeared.

Feelings Matter

Author John Bradshaw in his book *Homecoming* said, “You can’t heal what you don’t feel.” He saw a relationship between feeling and healing. If we don’t name it, we can’t feel it. And if we don’t feel it, we can’t heal it.

Acknowledging and naming feelings are the first steps to dealing with them and healing them. The process of becoming friendly with your feelings fosters growth and healing from your loss. Feelings can be harsh, so it’s important to be kind to yourself in the grieving process.

Don’t Bury Your Feelings

A hundred years ago, industrialists thought they could bury toxic waste, and it would just go away. We’ve since learned that doesn’t work. Rather, the waste leaks into the water, contaminates the crops, and kills animals.

Burying grief does the same thing. It leaks into our emotional system and wreaks havoc. It distorts our perceptions of life, ruins our relationships, and keeps us stuck in our grief. My point is it’s important to feel our feelings and not to bury them.

Our culture doesn’t do a good job of teaching us how to deal with difficult emotions. It’s intriguing to identify what you were taught about feelings as a child. As a boy, I was taught, “Big boys don’t cry.” As a high school basketball player, my coach told me not to show emotion and

not to talk back to referees, even if they made a bad call. Essentially, I was taught to stuff my emotions inside, erasing any trace of them completely.

The idea that emotions are something to stuff was woven deep inside my subconscious. I decided this understanding of emotions didn't serve me well as an adult. The death of my daughter forced me to examine my beliefs about emotions and to rewrite my own narrative about my feelings.

There's No Crying in Baseball

I love the movie *A League of Their Own*. A classic line is when Tom Hanks proclaims, "There's no crying in baseball!" In real life, some people, men in particular, are told not to cry. I'm here to tell you that's terrible advice. Don't let some macho saying prevent you from crying and from experiencing your subsequent healing. Crying, whether you are a man or woman, is actually very beneficial. I've learned to cry since the passing of my daughter. The good news is it really helps.

A Fear of a Gang of Feelings

Sometimes we try not to feel what we're feeling because we have this image of a gang of feelings. If I feel sad and let that in, it'll never go away. The gang of bad feelings will overrun me. The truth is a feeling moves through us. We feel it and it goes and then we go to the next feeling. There's no gang out to get us. It's absurd to think we shouldn't feel grief right now. Let yourself feel the grief and keep going.

Emotional Suppression

Emotional suppression is an emotional management technique that tries to control uncomfortable, overwhelming thoughts and feelings. Numerous studies have shown that we can experience short-term mental and physical reactions when we suppress our emotions. Suppressing negative feelings may also have a negative impact on your long-term well being.

Clinical psychologist Victoria Tarratt suggests that "Suppressing your feelings can cause physical stress in your body and can influence blood pressure, memory, and self-esteem." Denying our emotions further strengthens them. If you suppress your feelings, you will end up bringing much more stress to your life in the long run.

People are afraid to feel their feelings because they think they will be opening Pandora's box of pain and that it will never end. This parable from Greek mythology that you don't want to open a box that could bring worse pain and suffering on you is just that, a myth. I remind grieverers that we are in Pandora's box. We are experiencing pain and suffering in the moment.

We often forget the point of the parable. What remained after Pandora's box was opened was hope. Hope was in the box along with trouble and pain. Hope is found when we feel our feelings and express our emotions—the hope that no feeling is final, you won't cry forever, and when your feelings are felt they are then released.

Express and Release Your Feelings

To express and release our feelings, we need to allow room for them to come out and be open to processing them. If we don't express our feelings and continue to suppress them, they will find their way out in other ways. Unfelt feelings don't just go away; they resurrect like a zombie in a horror movie.

Your emotions are data for your experience of life. If we ignore or repress our feelings, not only will they come out later, but we miss vital information about the origin of those feelings. I had a great deal of anger after my daughter's death. I needed to feel it, express it, and get it out. I hit things and screamed a lot. We all need to find ways to express and release our feelings.

When Forrest Gump lost Jenny, his wife and the love of his life, in the movie Forrest Gump, he began to run across the country to deal with his grief. My wife began running after Jackie died. She went on long runs to combat the pain.

The goal is to allow our feelings to be and not to resist, but instead, to move through them. Psychiatrist Carl Jung taught that whatever you resist persists. The more you resist anything in life, the more you bring it to you. Resisting feelings and avoiding potential pain brings more pain upon you. When we don't feel fully, we can't live fully. Our minds want to protect us from the pain and distress, but feelings must be felt.

Feel All the Feels

The key is to feel your feelings. I guarantee it's going to hurt, but every moment you're weeping, you're doing the work. Every moment you're hurting, you're healing. The only way out of the pain is through.

Do the Laps

Laird Hamilton is a big wave surfer—arguably the best of all- time. Big wave surfing is a discipline within surfing reserved for experienced surfers who paddle into, or are towed into, waves that are at least 20 feet high. Hamilton once shared that big wave surfers need to be in incredible shape to ride such big waves because when you wipe out, you can be under the water for minutes.

To succeed, he says, “You have to do the laps.” He's referring to a training regimen of swimming many laps in a pool to build up the stamina and strength needed to save your life when you go down riding the big waves.

It's the same way with grief, which produces its own big waves. Swimming the laps in the pool is equivalent to identifying your feelings and feeling them. It's hard work but necessary to survive.

Pay Me Now or Pay Me Later

Feelings are an emotional state or reaction; they are vibrations of energy. There is power in feeling our feelings. Feelings say, “Pay me now, or pay me later, but you will pay.” Grief will chase you down. Grief in the end will always get its way.

When you're grieving, you experience a wide variety of thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Your emotions may seem strange, but they are a true expression of where you are at the moment. Rather than denying your feelings or being victimized by them, learn to recognize, and learn from them. Trying to keep going in life suddenly didn't work anymore. I needed a different

strategy. I decided to venture out of my comfort zone and to feel my feelings and express my emotions.

Ask yourself, “What am I feeling right now about my loss today?” Allow your thoughts and feelings to surface without judgment. Look your grief in the face and say hello to your feelings. I empower grievers to discover their feeling language and voice. Grievers often teach me about grief by explaining what they are feeling and experiencing in their soul. Grievers need space and encouragement to trust and express their feelings.

Life is a series of peaks and valleys. When you are in the valley of grief, don’t fight your emotions but acknowledge your reality and feel your feelings. It’s messy and it’s uncomfortable, but if you don’t deal with your feelings, you will get stuck in your grief and in managing problematic behavior.

Feelings are your friend, connect with them. Remember that God is with you in the peaks and valleys in life and will give you the courage to feel your feelings.

Embrace the Pain

Solomon wrote, “There is ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,4).

“Pain is a gift,” according to Dr. Paul Brand, a British surgeon and author of *The Gift of Pain*: “Pain is one of God’s great gifts to us.” That’s the last thing grievers want to hear after their loss. Many people view pain as one of God’s biggest mistakes. Prior to my loss, I never viewed pain as a gift, but I do now.

Pain is a gift because it demonstrates we have a capacity to feel. Pain informs us that we are still alive. What if we couldn’t feel things in our body and soul? God created us with the ability to feel pain for a reason.

Dr. Brand’s work with leprosy patients in India revealed that pain is an indicator that lets us know something is wrong; pain has a value that becomes clearest in its absence. Leprosy is a deadly disease because it keeps the nerves from informing the brain about the pain.

Pain is a gift that none of us want and yet none of us can do without. Pain is both an essential and unavoidable part of life. A key to navigating grief and loss is learning how to respond to pain. We often seek to avoid our painful feelings or go under- ground with them and bury them.

Jesus Wept

Jesus was fully divine and fully human. He knew what it was like to feel his feelings and express his human emotions. His dear friend, Lazarus, died. Friends of the family were sitting Shiva with Lazarus’ sisters, Mary, and Martha. If the grieving person wanted to talk, then you could converse. It’s a way of saying, “I love you. I’m here for you. You’re not alone.” You might sit for hours or days: “When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the Jews with her weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33).

“‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’” they replied (John 11:34). “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). Then, the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:36). Jesus’ tears were evidence of his love for Lazarus.

The shortest verse in the Bible is one of the most freeing verses in Scripture. Those two words, “Jesus wept,” give us permission to weep in our sorrow because they reveal how Jesus modeled his grief. Grief is not a disease; it’s a natural response to loss.

Jesus ends up raising Lazarus from the dead and yet he still weeps. His power does not rule out his grief. His ability to raise the dead doesn’t rule out the pain and sorrow in his heart. He feels his feelings head on and weeps. You can have great faith in God and still weep. In fact, I believe spiritual maturity goes together with tears.

King David said, “I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears” (Psalm 6:6). If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that whatever you’re feeling in that moment is okay. It’s okay to feel anger, shock, denial, or fear. It’s okay to have no answers, no explanations, and even no words.

In some religious traditions, there is a perception that weeping and mourning means that you doubt God, so people aren’t encouraged to grieve. Please don’t ever think it’s more spiritual to hold in your tears.

I don’t know how long ago you experienced your loss or if it was just last week, but I’m so sorry for your loss. Please don’t avoid your feelings and think they will just go away. There is a high cost to holding onto your feelings. Loss brings pain and pain brings grief.

If you’ve never freely grieved, those feelings are still trapped somewhere inside. Allow yourself time to mourn and weep. If you try to hold in your tears and ignore your pain, there will be serious problems later. God gave us tears to shed in our grief, an outpouring of our inner pain. Jesus has power over life and death. He knows the beginning from the end. Jesus knew that a few minutes later, he would raise Lazarus from the dead and call him out of the tomb so that he would live again, and yet Jesus still weeps.

I think people all over the world would be well-served by watching Jesus weep. It might give them permission to weep and to fully grieve. Weeping is the language of the soul. If the Son of God needs a good cry, then maybe so do I. And maybe so do you.

The Tears of Jesus

Poet Ann Weems suffered heartbreak when her twenty-one- year-old son, Todd, was murdered. She poured her grief into writing her own version of lament psalms. Here she writes a lament about the tears of Jesus.

*Jesus wept,
and in his weeping,
he joined himself forever to those who mourn.
He stands now throughout all time, this Jesus weeping,
with his arms about the weeping ones:*

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” He stands with the mourners, for his name is God-with-us.

Jesus wept.

“Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted.” Someday. Someday God will wipe the tears from Rachel’s eyes.

*In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,
there is a deafening alleluia, rising from the souls of those who weep, and of those who weep
with those who weep.*

*If you watch, you will see the hand of God,
putting the stars back in their skies one by one.*

The Health Benefits of Tears

Crying is a phenomenon unique to humans, and is a natural response to emotions, from deep sadness and grief to extreme happiness and joy. In essence, tears are liquid emotions. Our bodies produce three kinds of tears: reflex, continuous, and emotional. Each kind has different healing roles.

Emotional tears have special health benefits and are especially relevant to us as grievers. Biochemist and tear expert, Dr. William Frey, discovered that emotional tears contain stress hormones that get flushed from your body through crying.

Crying stimulates the production of endorphins, our body’s natural painkiller and feel-good hormones. Bottom line, crying is good for you. It’s healthy and it makes us feel better. Emotional tears heal your heart. Crying is essential to resolve grief when waves of tears regularly come over us after loss. Tears help us process the loss so we can keep living with open hearts. Otherwise, we are prone to depression.

While the eyes of all mammals are moistened and soothed by tears, only human beings shed tears in response to grief and sadness. God designed your body with the capacity to cry and provides health benefits with every tear, so feel your feelings and let the tears flow to help heal your heart and soul.

God Collects Our Tears in a Bottle

King David said, “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book” (Psalm 56:8 NLT). The idea behind keeping our tears in a bottle is remembrance. While God may not have a literal bottle filled with our tears (He may), He does remember every tear that falls from our eyes. This includes every tear we shed with the passing of a loved one or a significant loss. Our tears matter to God, and He remembers them all. The fact that God remembers my sorrow and tears brings me great comfort. I hope it does the same for you.

That being said, it’s important to note that God does not merely collect tears. The tears of suffering humanity deeply move God. They call Him into action to restore that which has been lost, to rescue the brokenhearted, and to usher in a new creation. Tears are just temporary; someday, they will all be wiped away. Sadness will be turned into joy and mourning into dancing. Everything will be made new.

WEEK 4: RELEASE YOUR BURDEN OF GUILT

“Guilt is perhaps the most painful companion to death.” Elisabeth Kubler Ross

The third need of griever is to release their burden of guilt and regret. Guilt accompanies grief in nearly every loss—it certainly did in mine. Guilt is insidious, it creeps under our skin and becomes a part of us before we realize it’s happening. When linked to a bereavement, guilt is often a burden we put on ourselves rather than something that others make us feel. Regret, self-blame, and shame walk hand in hand with grief. The goal is to release the heavy burden of guilt so we can get to the pure grief, so we can fully grieve.

Tortilla Soup

After someone dies, people often experience guilt. They would have done everything differently if they had known it was their last days or if they had the clarity of hindsight. Guilt comes up when I talk to people all the time, it’s so common. It’s likely you may already see this with people you work with or even with your own friends and family.

A woman’s 90-year-old mother recently died. The daughter explained that she was tormented by guilt. It turns out that the night before her mom’s death, she had given her some tortilla soup. This batch of soup had turned out to be extra spicy. (You know how unpredictable jalapenos can be :) While both she and her mom coughed and their faces turned red when they ate the soup, they were both able to laugh about the spicy soup.

The mother died the next day, not long after eating the soup. And the daughter, an intelligent and logical woman, blames her soup for her mom’s death. Clearly, spicy soup doesn’t kill people. There are millions of people who thrive while enjoying spicy food daily and well into old age. But the daughter can’t let go of her guilt.

Guilt and Shame

Guilt:

What you did

Active

Remorse, regret for actions Discharged by amends

Shame:

Who you are

Passive

Feeling small, disgusted about oneself Discharged by talking about

Note: Shame needs secrecy to survive

A Violation of Your Belief System

Sometimes people have guilt around what they did, sometimes it’s about what they didn’t do, or how they wish they had done something differently.

Throughout our lives, we constantly reevaluate our own belief system around guilt. As children we were taught, “Thou shalt not murder.” And as a society, we certainly benefit from this code.

People should not murder. We accept this without question. And so, when an event occurs that violates a code that we accept, it's hard to let it go. When someone is punishing themselves for giving their mother tortilla soup prior to her death, she is really punishing herself for the violation of the moral code around a murder at some level.

If I asked the daughter straight out, "Do you feel like you murdered your mom?" I doubt she would answer in the affirmative. However, the guilt sinks in part because it goes against a personal, familial, and societal belief.

Clearly, in the example of the tortilla soup, the guilt is unfounded. There are cases where guilt is appropriate (if she had purposefully poisoned the soup, for example). We are going to learn how to test these theories.

Questioning the Story

When you're working with people who are experiencing guilt after the death of a loved one, your work will be to plant seeds that make them question their confabulated story. You might say, "Really, you never told him you loved him?" You try to help them question the truthfulness of their story.

In relationships, we do our best. But we've all had days we would do over if we could. We have said things we would take back. We've made mistakes. We've neglected to tell our loved one how precious they are to us. That's the nature of life. We're all human, we're all imperfect. And, perhaps most importantly, we didn't realize it was their final day. And so we second-guess ourselves. And we nurture a story based on guilt.

We Give Ourselves Superhuman Powers

Guilt is not logical, but it can serve a purpose in our minds. We want to make sense of things. The guilt gives us a sense of power when we are feeling most vulnerable and powerless. Our minds want to make sense of death.

It's more comfortable to feel guilty than helpless. We're trying to find control, order, and power when there is none. The truth is death is not orderly, it's not fair. What makes us think we have control over death?

We don't have control over life and death. But the stories we create around guilt are comforting on some level because they ascribe to us a power over the unpredictable and heartbreaking death of our loved one.

A few years ago, I was in my office in Westlake Village that I share with a good friend named Scott. Another friend named Shawn, a lawyer, and member of a Men's Bible Study I taught, stopped by the office to see Scott who was out at lunch. I was busy working and just greeted Shawn and relayed the fact that Scott wasn't around but was at lunch and wouldn't be back for at least an hour. The next week Shawn died of suicide by shooting himself. I felt guilty. I asked myself what would have happened if I had asked him how he was really doing that day and talked to him longer? What if I had invited him to stay and hang out. I realize now that we can't do a full mental health assessment on everyone who visits us. Yet, I beat myself up.

My daughter, Jackie, died of a malignant brain tumor. I had absolutely no control over her life or death after her diagnosis. It was the worst reality I ever had to face. Because I wanted to control the situation and because guilt isn't always logical, I began to think her condition was a result of something I had done in my past. Maybe God was punishing me for a sin from my past or present. Maybe I wasn't the husband or father I should have been? I realized later that if that was true then no parents would have kids because we all sin. Guilt can be brutal.

We Are Deeply Committed to Our Stories

People are deeply committed to their stories, especially those around guilt. We rarely ask ourselves, "What if that is not the truest story? What if I am wrong?"

I misplaced my car keys. I knew they were in the house. I checked everywhere. I looked in my pockets, the office, the kitchen. I searched the house up and down. I was certain they were there. They had to be in the house! Then I stopped and asked myself, "What if I am wrong?" What if the story we are telling ourselves isn't the true option?

Sure enough, the keys were in my car. This is just a small story about missing car keys. And yet, my mind dug in and was fully committed to the story. In life and death, people are really committed to their stories. You will likely find that when people share their guilt stories with you, they don't couch it with "This might sound crazy but..." They don't question its validity at all. We must transition them from a rigid, unquestionable story to making room for another option.

The Sad Reality Is, People Die

The reality is... people die.

- Unfairly
- Randomly
- Suddenly
- After a long illness
- When we do everything right (and btw, no one does everything right) • Children and others die young
- They die just as they were starting to get better
- When they have healthy habits
- When they had annual check-ups or just saw the cardiologist
- When they were dearly loved
- Despite our best efforts

We want to control the uncontrollable. We would always rather feel guilty than helpless. We want to go back and have a different outcome.

Occam's Razor as a Helpful Tool

In Jr. High science we learned about scientific theory. Occam's razor is a scientific idea that is important to consider when working with people in grief. "The simplest explanation is usually the best and truest one." Even if you didn't attend the birthday party, they would have died. Even if you hadn't shared that spicy soup, they would have died. The simplest solution is usually true.

What If?

When I work with people, I often have them write down a list of “What ifs”:

- What if I hadn’t made that spicy tortilla soup then she would still be alive
- The premise is that spicy soup kills
- That’s what we test

After they write down the theory, I have them go back to the scientific theory and think about whether it’s repeatable. I then have them question their theory and cross out the “What if” and replace it with “Even if.” For example: Even if I had given them bland soup, they still would have died.

Bargaining

Sometimes we don’t understand that when we’re talking about guilt, that we’re often actually talking about bargaining. Kubler- Ross’ idea of bargaining is the deal-making before death. “God, I will go to church more if he lives.” After death, it’s the guilt and what-ifs.

Part of the premise of this is that at a certain point, someone can be so committed to the story that you’re not finding a way in. They are really digging in. When that happens, sometimes it’s bargaining. When someone really stays in their story and is in circular thinking, it keeps them from the pain of grief.

I ask people who are holding onto a guilt or bargaining story to drop down into the pain. “I hear you think your mom’s death was caused by the soup. But what’s it like without your mom here to ever have soup with you again?” Bargaining becomes an escape from the pain. It can be a distraction from the painful reality. In bargaining, you can find temporary relief from the pain of grief.

Bargaining can help our minds move from one state of loss to another. The use of bargaining can also fill in the gaps that our strong emotions dominate and allow us to believe that we can restore chaos to the disorder.

The way you might work with people varies with their situation. Early in grief, I just plant the seed. “I really wonder if soup kills.” That story is their mind trying to buy them some more time. It might give the griever some space and time to process the pain more slowly. Sometimes you might need to stay in circular thinking. In the beginning, guilt and bargaining can keep our minds busy and protect us from the pain.

Tears in Heaven

Guilt and regret can be devastating after losing someone you love. The song, *Tears in Heaven*, by Eric Clapton may be the saddest song ever written about losing a loved one. Dealing with the loss of his four-year-old son, Conor, who fell from the 53rd floor of a building while playing tag with the housekeeper, the song helped Clapton come to terms with this tragedy and grieve the loss of his son.

The lyrics express his sadness and hopeful encounter with his son and what it would be like to see him in heaven. Clapton loved his son and expressed his desire to be a more involved parent

to his girlfriend at the time, the mother of the child, just a few days before his son's death. You can sense the uncertainty of his relationship with his son in the following lyric: "Would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven?"

"Time can bring you down, time can bend your knees. Time can break your heart, have you begging please" could be an example of bargaining as Clapton realizes that time can be hard on us if we don't get up after every fall, time can worsen our wounds.

3 Categories of Grief

I've observed that guilt falls into three main categories:

- **Present-day issues:** Some people felt guilty about having peace or joy in their life now. They felt guilty about the growth they have experienced.
- **Not being able to save them:** Many people express feelings of guilt over medical issues. They wish they had taken them to the doctor sooner. They wish they had performed CPR differently or earlier. They wish they made them have a checkup. They wish they had taken them to a different hospital. They wish they had been aware of the extent of their illness (physical or mental) sooner.
- **Doing things differently:** Most people have feelings of guilt around the way acted or didn't act in their loved one's final days. They didn't know it was their last day/week/month. If they had, there are things they wish they could change about their relationship and interactions of the last days or weeks.

We All Have Choices

You and I have choices about the kinds of people we are going to become after our loss. We have a choice as to whether we're going to become bitter or not. Why is it so easy to become bitter when we lose someone we love?

A Woman Named Naomi

There is a woman in the book of Ruth named Naomi. She loses her husband and two sons and is left with her two daughters-in-law: Ruth and Orpah. When they move to a new town, she tells the people there not to call her Naomi anymore and to call her Mara instead, which means bitter in Hebrew. (Ruth 1:20).

Job's Wife

Job's faith was greatly tested. He lost everything and was covered in boils but never became bitter. His wife, on the other hand, was consumed with bitterness. At one point, she basically said to him "Why are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Why don't you just curse God and die" (Job 2:9).

Have You Chosen to Become Bitter?

Maybe you're feeling the guilt that often accompanies loss. "If only I would've done something differently." We can become racked with guilt until it eventually seeps into our mind and body, making itself a part of our identity. Usually, we aren't even aware that this is happening. But if you are, don't let it happen. Is guilt keeping your heart from healing?

Forgiveness is the Key (Accept God's Forgiveness)

There are two kinds of guilt: false and real. If you've done something wrong, repent and ask God to forgive you. Accept God's forgiveness, forgive others, and free yourself from guilt. Apologize from your heart in prayer and let all the negative thoughts go: "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19). No relationship is perfect. We have all made mistakes. There are things you wanted to do with your loved one, or things you wish you didn't say. Thinking about all the things that could have been different can overwhelm you. Paul wrote, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Forgiveness helps us release our burden of guilt. It frees us from becoming bitter and enables us to find joy in life again.

Without Christ's forgiveness, you will live with guilt and shame. The apostle Peter wrote, "At one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received his mercy" (1 Peter 2:10 GNT). What happens when you receive God's mercy? He wipes out your sins. It's as if all your sins are written on a whiteboard and He takes a giant eraser and wipes them all away. It's called grace.

Remember What You Did Right

We all make mistakes. Healthy amounts of guilt and regret can inspire us to become better people and make us more compassionate toward others in pain. Be a light in a dark world. Allow yourself to remember what you did right. Guilt and regret are feelings that focus on what may have gone wrong. Acknowledge those feelings but remember to look at the bigger picture.

In Jackie's case, the bigger picture was that she had a great childhood, a wonderful family, many friends, a fairy tale existence, albeit was only for five years. She died a merciful death with little to no physical pain or suffering. About a thousand people came to her memorial service to show their love for her and our family.

Focus on the good memories, not the bad. Maybe we could have handled the radiation dilemma differently or maybe we should have questioned the doctors more. The bottom line is we made tremendous memories with Jackie, though short-lived. She rode on the back of my motorcycle with me in our gated community.

She loved when I sang songs to her or wrestled with her. She loved to swim in a pool, the American river, or in the ocean. She loved God, church and her friends. I had the privilege of praying with her when she accepted Christ as her Savior. These are unforgettable memories I will always cherish.

Summary

Guilt presents itself in different ways when we're grieving. It can often point to a primal wound that we have experienced in the past. Guilt keeps us from being able to be present in our grief. It's a way for us to have the illusion of control and reinforces long-held beliefs we may have about ourselves.

WEEK 5: FACE YOUR FEAR

"No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear." C.S. Lewis

A Reflection on Grief and Fear by Samantha Stein

Maybe grief doesn't just feel like fear, maybe it is fear.

Okay maybe not completely. Grief does, of course, contain great loss, the loss of someone or something or both that was tangible and real. That was important and precious and beloved. So there is a true sorrow that comes with loss. A sadness so real your body aches and you want to get outside of your own skin. A sadness that makes you scream. And makes you lie down and cry.

Are you beginning to understand that grief is not just loss. Grief is also about becoming untethered. It's about losing an identity. Losing a map and compass all at once - a way to orient our life. Our love.

This untethering is not only disorienting, but it can also be terrifying. "I'm not afraid," C.S. Lewis goes on to say, I just have "the same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning." Not afraid, he says, yet he's having trouble breathing, sitting still. Painful feelings in the pit of his stomach. This sounds like a perfect description of fear to me.

And why shouldn't he be afraid? He has just lost his wife. She was central to his world, his heart, his home. He was her husband. Now she exists no more on this earth, and he is not that person. So who is he and where the hell is home?

I would suggest that not having the answer to those two questions is terrifying. And with loss, life offers you no chance to answer it the same way you did before. Even if you've spent your whole life answering it the same way, loss and the subsequent grief force you to find a different answer.

And the fear is not just about the untethering, about not having the answer. Rather, it's because the answer to those questions isn't knowable in minute. Or day. Or month. Or sometimes even a year. And so while we figure it out, we must live in a world without orientation. Without knowing who we are or where we're going or where we live. We have no coordinates to plug into our GPS. We can only put one foot in front of the other, each day. Breathe. We can't run but we can't stand still either. We must keep walking forward, holding fear's hand. Until we arrive somewhere new.

Taking Back What's Been Stolen

Taking back what's been stolen means actively reclaiming a sense of agency and control over your life after experiencing a significant loss, essentially fighting back against the feeling that grief has taken away a vital part of you, allowing you to rebuild and find meaning and purpose even in the face of loss.

Key Points Regarding this Metaphor

- **Loss as Theft**

Bereavement comes from an Old English word that means “rob,” “deprive,” and “seize.” Grief is often described as a thief, stealing away joy, energy, and a sense of normalcy after a loved one passes away.

- **Reclaiming Power**

Taking back what's been stolen signifies a conscious effort to not let grief completely consume you, to actively engage in healing practices, and to find ways to live a fulfilling life despite the loss.

- **Process of Healing**

This isn't a quick fix, but rather a gradual process of integrating the loss into your life while still honoring the memories and love you had for the person that is gone.

How Do We Take Back What's Been Stolen?

- **Remembering the Positive**

A goal is to remember your loved one with more love than pain. Focus on the happy memories and positive aspects of the person lost, instead of dwelling on the negative.

- **Engaging in Meaningful Work**

Returning to hobbies or finding new pursuits that bring joy and purpose. Allow God to turn your pain into purpose.

- **Seek Out Support**

Talking to friends, family, a pastor, a therapist, or joining a grief support group to share experiences and process emotions.

- **Self-Care Practices**

Prioritizing physical and mental health through exercise, healthy eating, prayer, Bible reading, meditation and relaxation techniques.

A Key Scripture: Blessing After Devastation

“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, my great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you; and My people shall never be put to shame. Then you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel: I am the Lord your God and there is no other. My people shall never be put to shame” (Joel 2:25-27 NKJV).

When facing significant loss or hardship, I believe that God will bring healing and renewal.

Charles H. Spurgeon

LOST years can never be restored literally. Time once past is gone forever. Let no man make any mistake about this, or trifle with the present moment under any notion that the flying hour will ever wing its way back to him. As well recall the north wind, or fill again the emptied rain cloud,

or put back into their quiver the arrows of the lord of day. As well bid the river which has hastened onward to the sea, bring back its rolling floods, as imagine that the years that have once gone can ever be restored to us.

It will strike you at once that the locusts did not eat the years: the locusts ate the fruits of the years' labor, the harvests of the fields; so that the meaning of the restoration of the years must be the restoration of those fruits and of those harvests which the locusts consumed.

You cannot have back your time; but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the wasted blessings, the unripened fruits of years over which you mourned. The fruits of wasted years may yet be yours. It is a pity that they should have been locust-eaten by your folly and negligence; but if they have been so, be not hopeless concerning them.

"All things are possible to him that believeth." There is a power which is beyond all things and can work great marvels. Who can make the all-devouring locust restore his prey? No man, by wisdom or power, can recover what has been destroyed. God alone can do for you what seems impossible; and here is the promise of his grace: "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten."

By giving to his repentant people larger harvests than the land could naturally yield, God could give back to them, as it were, all they would have had if the locusts had never come; and God, by giving you larger grace in the present and in the future, can make the life which has hitherto been blighted, and eaten up with the locust, and the caterpillar, and the palmer-worm of sin, and self, and Satan, yet to be a complete, and blessed, and useful life, to his praise and glory. It is a great wonder; but Jehovah is a God of wonders, and in the kingdom of his grace miracles are common things.

Grief Feels Like Fear

Grief is an intense emotion we experience after a significant loss, like the death of a loved one, a divorce, the loss of a pet or job, or a terminal illness diagnosis. Grief is a multifaceted sensory experience that typically manifests itself in physical pain, feelings of numbness, hopelessness, loneliness, and deep sorrow.

Fear is an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. Truth be told, grief and fear often go hand in hand, as the experience of losing someone can leave you feeling vulnerable and uncertain, leading to a sense of fear about the future and potential further losses; basically, grief can trigger feelings of fear because it disrupts your sense of security and normalcy.

Key Points Regarding the Connection Between Grief and Fear

• Uncertainty

When someone dies, it creates a void in your life, leaving you questioning what's next and how to navigate life without them, which can manifest as fear of the unknown.

• Loss of Safety

A significant loss can make the world feel less safe, leading to anxieties about potential further losses or dangers.

- **Physical Sensations**

Both grief and fear share similar physical sensations like tightness in the chest, rapid heartbeat, and difficulty breathing, further intertwining the emotions.

- **Anticipatory Grief**

Even before a loss occurs, the fear of losing someone can lead to anticipatory grief, causing anxiety and worry.

The fourth need griever have is the need to face their fears. Grief feels like fear because fear, in a sense, becomes our reality. My worst nightmare came true when my daughter died.

Facing fears in grief involves actively confronting our anxieties, worries and perceived fears that arise as a natural part of the grieving process, where the loss of a loved one can trigger deep-seated fears about the future, loneliness, or even our own mortality, requiring us to acknowledge and work through these emotions to move forward.

Key Aspects of Facing Fear in Grief

- **Identify Your Fears**

Recognizing specific anxieties that surface during grief, such as fear of being alone, fear of making decisions without the deceased, or fear of the unknown future.

- **Validate Your Feelings**

Understanding that fear is a normal and expected response to loss and allowing yourself to feel these emotions without judgment.

- **Gradual Exposure**

Slowly engaging with situations that trigger fear, like visiting the deceased person's belongings or talking about them with others, to gradually desensitize yourself.

- **Healing Happens in Community**

We don't get through grief alone. Become part of a grief community at your church. Reach out to friends, family, grief support groups, a pastor or a therapist to share your fears and receive emotional validation, support and spiritual guidance.

Healthy Fear and Unhealthy Fear

Fear can be healthy and unhealthy. It is programmed into our nervous systems and gives us the survival instincts we need to keep ourselves safe from danger. Primal fears help us survive. A lion in the bush should be feared. Stoves are hot and knives are sharp.

Fear is unhealthy when it makes you more cautious than you need to be to stay safe. Fear is unhealthy when it prevents you from moving forward in your grief, therefore holding you back

from any progress or steps forward. The goal is not to necessarily eliminate fear but to integrate it.

Types of Fear Accompanied by Grief:

- Fear of a loss happening again
- Fear of being abandoned by God and loved ones • Fear of not grieving correctly
- Fear of vulnerability
- Fear of never being happy again • Fear of the unknown
- Fear of change
- Fear of death

Perfect Love Drives Out Fear

Fear is an emotion caused by the belief that something or someone poses a threat to us or our loved ones. The Devil uses unhealthy fear as a weapon to disrupt our faith. He wants us to doubt God and His plan for us. If Satan can move us to a point of unbelief, then he can cause us to distrust God.

The Bible says that fear doesn't come from God: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). It also says, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). When you're afraid, it's not from God because the essence of God is love and there is no fear in God's love.

As a pastor, I've learned the number one thing most people fear is death—either your own death or the death of a loved one. The Devil will use that fear to manipulate you. But the good news is Jesus defeated death and destroyed the Devil's work. So, now, when we grieve, we grieve with hope.

We grieve because we miss our loved ones who have gone on before us. We fully grieve but know we will see them again in heaven.

Whenever you sense fear creeping into your psyche, whether it's the fear of your own death, the death of a loved one, or some other fear—remember that unhealthy fear is not from God. Ask Him to help you face your fears and to drive out fear with His perfect love.

Facing My Fear

After Jackie died, I took two weeks off from work, which was not nearly enough time to process the pain of her loss but there was some conflict at church I needed to come back to deal with. When I returned to work, I took a short detour each day to the church, so I wouldn't pass by the radiation center where we had such a horrific experience with Jackie. Jackie's radiation treatment left a bad taste in my mouth, and I had a bad memory of the place and that day. The center had become a trigger for the pain and anger I felt regarding Jackie's brain tumor. On the day of treatment, Jackie cried for a few hours and didn't understand why she had to go through such an agonizing procedure.

After a couple of weeks of avoiding the Auburn Radiation Oncology Center, I felt ready to face my fear head on. I drove up Bell Road and came face-to-face with the radiation center. I parked

on the side of the road and walked straight to the front, staring that place down for a few minutes as I prayed to God for strength to overcome my fear.

A few minutes later, I drove the extra two blocks to work. After embracing my feelings and standing up to the fear, I never took that detour to work again.

The secret to eliminating fear in your life is to move against the fear. King David said, “Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for Thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4 KJV). If God is for us, who can be against us? When you are ready in your grief process, do the very thing you fear.

Navigating the rocky terrain of grief is a faith journey. David said, “The LORD is my light, and my salvation, whom shall I fear. The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid” (Psalm 27:1-2).

Physical Symptoms Can Accompany Grief

Grieving people feel anxious about their own health and the safety of their loved ones. Anxiety causes fear, which can then manifest physically. One week after Jackie died, my other daughter, Jessica, who was seven years old at the time, was experiencing terrible pain in her abdomen. Carrie and I thought, Oh no, not again! She would bend over in pain from stomach cramps and cry because the pain was so intense. We took her to the hospital immediately—the same one Jackie received treatment at—to determine what was wrong.

After a battery of tests, the doctor said, “Mr. and Mrs. Page, there is nothing physically wrong with your daughter. It was all in her head, which caused her to have pain in her stomach.” Jessica was having a difficult time processing the hurt and pain from losing her sister. If you swallow your emotions, your stomach keeps score. This is what Jessica was experiencing after the loss. The pain got worse at night. This was when she would normally spend time with Jackie, talking themselves to sleep every night in a bedroom they shared together. After a couple of weeks, the stomach pain went away.

What We Run from Pursues Us and What We Face Transforms Us

What we resist, persists. What we run from pursues us. What we face transforms us. The transformation is found in the rubble of our grief and pain.

It’s natural to want to run away from pain and disconnect from it. We are biologically predisposed to avoid pain. Contrary to what some people believe, intense pain from grief is not like touching a hot stove. When you’re in intense grief, it’s like the entire hot stove has fallen on you. No wonder we want to avoid those feelings.

We must honor the pace of our grief. We will continually revisit grief throughout our life. Grief lasts longer than we think. Grief never ends because our love never ends. I never got to experience Jackie’s graduation from high school. I never got to teach her how to drive. I never got to walk her down the aisle for her wedding. I never got to experience the birth of her child and my grandchild. I never dreamed we’d experience grief in such a profound way at Jessica’s

wedding as Jackie was Jessica's maid of honor. This was extremely gratifying for me but at the same time, it was incredibly painful.

As human beings, we can't take all the pain in one day. We touch the pain (hot stove) and then retreat and need a break. Respect the wisdom and timing of your grief process. I've learned that it's not my job to move people along quickly in their grief. They need to go at their own pace.

Buffaloes Run into the Storm

Grief is a storm in our lives—maybe the biggest storm we'll ever face. The only choice that we have is how we respond to the storm. And more specifically, when and how we respond to those storms.

Colorado is known for the world-famous Rocky Mountains. Many people don't realize that the state of Colorado is divided nearly in half: the western part of the state is the great Rocky Mountains and to the eastern part of the state is the great Kansas Plains. Because of this unique landscape, they have the Rocky Mountains and the Plains. Colorado is one of the only places in the world that has both buffaloes and cows.

When storms come, they nearly always come from the West and roll out towards the East. Cows can sense that a storm is coming from the West. So, a cow will try to run East to get away from the storm. The only problem is cows aren't very fast. So, the storm catches up with them rather quickly. Without knowing any better, the cows continue to try to outrun the storm. But instead of outrunning the storm, they run with the storm, maximizing the amount of pain, time, and frustration they experience. We, as human beings, do the same with the storms in our lives, including loss and grief.

What buffaloes do is unique in the animal kingdom. Buffaloes wait for the storm to cross right over the crest of the peak of the mountaintop. And as the storm rolls over the ridge, buffaloes turn and charge directly West into the storm. They run at the storm and by doing so, they run straight through it, minimizing the amount of pain, time, and frustration they experience from that storm. This is a great metaphor for all of us who have experienced loss because even though our losses are different, we all face storms.¹

We don't get to choose whether we experience storms. The only choice that we have is how we respond to the storms in our lives. Which direction are you heading?

Chasing Daylight or Running Toward the Darkness?

Poet John Donne makes a point that although east and west seem the farthest removed on a map, they eventually meet on a globe. What therefore appear as opposites come together in time if we follow one or the other long enough and far enough.

Jerry Sittser wrote, "The quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise." We have the power to choose the direction our lives will head; will we run from our loss or face it the best we are able?

WEEK 6: DON'T GET OVER IT – GROW INTO IT

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it.” Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

“Grief isn't something to get over.” Mary Lamia

“Hope does not extinguish grief,” but it can take our memories of those we have lost with us to better or different future places.” Mary Lamia

“The forces of fate that bear down on man and threaten to break him also have the capacity to ennoble him.” Elisabeth S. Lukas

Grief Isn't Something We Get Over

Grief is a tool God gives us to get through our losses and transitions in life. We tend to use the phrase “getting over something.” This mistaken notion that grief is something you work through, finish, and get over is hurting rather than helping those in grief. Feelings of grief and sadness are common for many years. In fact, sometimes they are common for a lifetime after the actual death occurred.

I haven't gotten over Jackie's loss; instead, her loss became a part of who I am. She is a large part of my story on earth and something I'm very proud of. Jackie has become part of the landscape of my life.

Grief isn't something you get over. It's not over; it's into. It's not through; it's absorbing your loved one into your life. Sittser wrote, “I did not get over the loss of my loved ones; rather, I absorbed the loss into my life, like soil receives decaying matter, until it became a part of who I am.” Jackie has become part of the fabric of my life and who I am as a person.

You begin to wear the loss of your loved one, it becomes a part of the landscape of your life. It's absorbing, wearing it, growing into it until it becomes clothes that fit better. We should carry loss in our hearts for the rest of our lives Jesus said blessed are those who mourn, he didn't say blessed are those who've overcome mourning. It's who mourn.

Maybe our own sorrows, but also other people until we realize that we belong to a community of mourning that goes back thousands of years and wraps itself around the world today. So we spend so much of our time trying to escape these things, avoid these things, and the call of discipleship is to grow into them.

The reality is you will carry your loss for the rest of your life. There is no stage called closure in grief, although our friends and family may want us to find closure because our pain makes them uncomfortable.

Your Loss Does Not Define You

Your loss does not define your identity, rather the defining factor will be how you respond to your loss. One of the lessons I learned through my daughter's death is that I can't control

everything that happens in my life. The key isn't what happens to you but how you respond to what happens to you. I believe that 10% of life is what happens to us and 90% is how we respond.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor. While a prisoner in a Nazi death camp in Auschwitz in World War II, he was stripped of everything in his possession, including his gold wedding band. As he stood there naked in front of the German guards, he realized they could take everything from him except his power to choose.

Frankl wrote, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Frankl refused to yield ultimate power to his captors and circumstances. In the same way, I decided my life was not going to be defined by my daughter's death, even though I was commonly known as "the pastor who lost his daughter" throughout the city of Auburn. Instead, my life would be defined by my response to my daughter's death.

Honestly, after two decades, I am still bewildered by my daughter's death. I don't know why she got a brain tumor, and I don't understand why she had to die. I've just decided to just keep on living after my loss and trust God to bring good out of the mess, to create beauty out of the ashes.

As God began healing my heart, I was able to come alongside others and help them with their grief. My life was not defined by her loss but strengthened by it.

God Designed Our Hearts to Grieve

God designed our hearts to grieve. It's one of its main functions and purposes. Grieving is a necessary and ongoing practice to help us live and adapt to a turbulent world filled with heartache and pain. What a tremendous gift from God to our heart, body, and soul, to allow it to fulfill its most beautiful and noble purpose.

Grieving helps us process the tragedies of the human experience and experience the comfort of God in the process. Grief, when tended to well, tends to our hearts well, which allows us to care for the hearts of others.

The Heart Enlarges

The heart doesn't break; it enlarges. The heart is elastic, like a balloon and can expand, stretch, and grow. We can increase the capacity of our souls and become more compassionate, empathetic and loving as people.

Our souls can grow larger through suffering. Loss can enlarge its capacity for anger, depression, despair, and anguish, all natural and legitimate emotions whenever we experience loss. Once enlarged, the soul is also capable of experiencing greater joy, strength, peace, and love. What we consider opposites—east and west, night and light, sorrow and joy, weakness and strength, anger and love, despair and hope, death and life—are no more mutually exclusive than winter and sunlight. The soul has the capacity to experience these opposites, even at the same time.

Grieving is love, and love is grieving. Grief and love are two sides of the same heart. You grieve because you love. Without love, there is no grief.

I believe because of my loss and because of your loss, we have a greater capacity for love and joy. And I believe we can accomplish things in the future that we never dreamed possible.

Growing Larger Through Loss

The death of a loved one can serve as a wake-up call to live life to the fullest. Death reminds us of how precious life is and what we could do if we had the courage to seize the day.

Experiencing loss is an opportunity for us to grow by taking responsibility of our lives and making sure we don't waste it.

Thus, it's not true that we become less through loss unless we allow it to crush us and become bitter. On the contrary, loss can make us more. One of the grief myths is that our grief gets smaller over time and that becomes the goal. The goal isn't to make our grief smaller. It's for us to become bigger and to grow around our grief.

Grief won't get smaller, but you will get bigger. As a result, you become resilient. This growth process does much more than restore you to who you once were prior to your loss. Rather, you emerge from the experience transformed into a truer expression of who you were really meant to be. I keep asking, "How can I grow through this? How can I grow in my faith? How can I be better at walking alongside others in their grief?"

Author and radio host, Joni Eareckson Tada, became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident when she was seventeen years old and has been paralyzed from the shoulders down since. One of her mantras is, "*Lean into the pain, grow from the pain.*" Our natural reaction to pain is to say, "*No, I want to get rid of the pain.*" We spend much of our time trying to avoid pain and loss and the call of discipleship is to grow into them. Growing larger through loss is a process. To grow you must lean into the pain, but don't rush the process.

Post Traumatic Growth

German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, said, "*That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.*" I believe this is generally true. We hear a lot about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) occurs more often. Studies show that some trauma survivors report positive changes and enhanced personal development after experiencing their trauma. PTG refers to any beneficial change resulting from a major life crisis or traumatic event.

That being said, PTG does not lessen grief. So, don't look at it as an end point to your pain. Rather, PTG co-exists with our distress and is something that only exists because of our distress and our attempt to cope. Like much of grief, PTG is unexpected, but can be a beautiful byproduct of pain. Many people who experience PTG adopt a new worldview with new possibilities for themselves, resulting in a rich and meaningful life.

5 Domains of Post-Traumatic Growth

The five domains of Post-Traumatic Growth are:

- Personal strength: A deeper sense of personal strength

- Appreciation for life: A greater appreciation for life in general
- Spiritual change: A shift in relating to God and the spiritual world
- Relating to others: Strengthening of close relationships
- New possibilities: Identification of new possibilities

Resilience

Most of us at some point will be struck by one or more major traumas: the sudden death of a loved one, violent crime, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, a serious automobile accident, a debilitating disease, a natural disaster or war. If you are very fortunate, then you have never encountered any of these misfortunes; but most likely you will someday. It is estimated that up to 90% of us will experience at least one serious traumatic event during our lives.

Traumatic events throw our lives into turmoil in unpredictable ways; no two people will respond to them in exactly the same manner. For some, the stress of the event can become chronic, lasting for years. They may undergo a dramatic change in outlook, becoming sullen, demoralized, withdrawn, cynical, and angry. Some will become depressed or develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Horrific, intrusive memories and nightmares will haunt them for days, months or even years, and they will feel unsafe in the world – hypervigilant – as if another serious danger lurks just around the corner. Some will take up drinking or drugs to numb their pain and dull their memories.

However, many people will find ways to meet the challenge and continue with purposeful lives. For a period after their ordeal, they may become distressed, but in time they will bounce forward and carry on. For some, it will be almost as if the trauma had never occurred. For others, the distress will persist, but they will find healthy ways to cope. Some survivors will even grow stronger and wiser because of their trauma. These survivors may report that their tragedy has helped them to appreciate life more, to become closer to family and friends, to find greater meaning, and sometimes to embark on a new mission in life.

In the words of Elisabeth S. Lukas, a protégé of the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, *“The forces of fate that bear down on man and threaten to break him also have the capacity to ennoble him.”*

Bouncing Forward

There is a common misconception that resilience is synonymous with “recovery” and the notion of bouncing back into shape. I believe this line of thinking is toxic and potentially damaging. Here’s why: Humans are fundamentally and forever changed by the challenge, change, and complexity we encounter. Neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to grow and change in response to our experiences. We do not recover, but instead, rebuild. We do not bounce back, but instead, we bounce forward.

Resilience is not about staying the same or bouncing back. It’s also not just maintaining a mentality of “this too shall pass.” But instead, about evolving and allowing ourselves to be changed for the better. Instead of seeing resilience as going back, as bouncing back, we get to understand that resilience is about harnessing the wisdom, growth, and perspective we earned amidst adversity and going forward, incorporating what we learned.

Resilience is about being able to engage in a challenge and to allow yourself to be fundamentally changed by that experience, to allow the challenge to enhance us, rather than diminish us. You become a different person, and you have the opportunity to grow and change. In exchange we receive the gifts of enhanced confidence, strength, wisdom, and courage.

Dr. Taryn Marie Stejskal, author of *The 5 Practices of Highly Resilient People*, began working with brain injury patients and found that most popular beliefs about human resilience are incorrect. Since then, for the last 20 years, she has conducted qualitative research on the power of resilience, studying the science behind why some people succeed while others fail.

Dr. Taryn Marie outlines the five critical behaviors that define successful resilience: Vulnerability, Productive Perseverance, Connection, Graciousity (Gratitude and Generosity), and Possibility. Resilient People bounce forward, take an active approach to facing challenges, and most importantly, they are made, not born.

A Reverse Bucket List (Dr. Taryn Marie Stejskal)

We know that a bucket list is a listing of pleasurable things that we want to do and experience during our time on this planet. As I've had the good fortune to be able to do some of the things on my bucket list, I've realized that I learned more from the hard times I went through than the pleasurable times.

Yet, how often do we feel ashamed about our losses, challenges or the things we're facing? Unlike our bucket list items, we're not often broadcasting our tough moments on social media. However, those moments are often the most expansive and instructive. So, I created the reverse bucket list, which invites us to look at the challenges that have come up in our lives and reflect on what these times taught us.

To better understand our reverse bucket list moments, we can ask ourselves: How has this challenge formed me for the better? How has it shaped me into the person that I am today? This allows us to cast a new light on the challenge and to begin to look at it as an experience that's part of our formation. Then we can celebrate what we learned from the reverse bucket list moments. We're not celebrating the hard things that happened, but we're celebrating what we learned.

How Long Will I Grieve?

How long will your loved one be dead? Because if they're going to be dead for a long time then you're going to grieve for a long time. But that doesn't mean you'll always grieve with pain. People are afraid that healing means forgetting their loved ones or what happened to them. It's not forgetting them but rather it's remembering them with love, talking about them, and keeping the connection with them alive. David Kessler said, "Healing is remembering your loved one with more love than pain."

Will I Ever Recover?

Regarding recovery from loss, there is a difference between a broken leg and an amputation. We can't go back to something else before. I believe there are experiences in life where there is no

recovery—if by recovery we mean we’re going to be able to go back to something we had before. When it came to my loss, I had to change my definition of recovery. If we mean complete recover and healing in this life, then I have not recovered and don’t think I ever will until I get on the other side of heaven.

Jerry Sittser writes, “Recovery is a misleading and empty expectation. We recover from broken limbs, not amputations. Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery. It will transform or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same.”

The Grief Recovery Method

Authors John James and Russell Friedman in their book, *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, define recovery as “Feeling better... claiming your circumstances instead of your circumstances claiming you and your happiness... finding new meaning for living, without fear of being hurt again... being able to enjoy fond memories without having them precipitate painful feelings of regret or remorse... acknowledging that it is perfectly all right to feel sad from time to time and to talk about those feelings no matter how those around you react ...being able to forgive others when they say or do things that you know are based on their lack of knowledge about grief... one day realizing that your ability to talk about the loss you’ve experienced is indeed normal and healthy.”

Based on the above definition, I believe I’m moving forward in my recovery. It’s taken a long time and a lot of work to get to where I am now. And yet, I still miss Jackie greatly, talk about her all the time and hold onto the hope that I will see her again in heaven. But I don’t feel guilty anymore for feeling good! Feeling good is not disrespectful to her memory.

Railroad Tracks

Does God want us to be continually sad? No. I used to think life was a series of peaks and valleys; sometimes we’re up, then we’re down. But I’ve come to realize that life is much more like a set of parallel train tracks, with joy and sorrow running inseparably throughout our days. Every day of your life, good things happen. Beauty, accomplishment, and pleasure. That’s the track of joy. But every day of your life also holds disappointment, struggles, and losses. That’s the track of sorrow. Joy and sorrow will always be present together.

Kay Warren, in her book *Choose Joy*, writes, “One of our toughest challenges in life is to learn how to live on both of those tracks at the same time. But there’s hope! Consider what it’s like to stand between two sets of train tracks and look off into the horizon. Those parallel tracks come together as we look ahead. They are no longer distinguishable as two separate tracks.

“That’s the way it will be for us too. During our lifetime, we stand on the tracks looking for signs of Jesus Christ’s return. We watch for the sights and sounds that will alert us that his appearance is very close. One day, in the brightness of his coming, we will meet him face to face. And when we do, the tracks of joy and sorrow will merge. The sorrow will disappear forever, and only the joy will remain.”

Love Never Dies

Love always survives death. Let's not give death any more power than it already has. Death can end a physical life but not our relationship with our loved one, and certainly not our love because love always survives death. It never ends.

A Hope-Filled Scripture Verse

"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us." (Philippians 3:13-14).

We can apply this passage to grief by encouraging ourselves to not dwell on the past pain of loss, but to instead focus on moving forward and finding hope in the future, even though the grieving process may still be ongoing; essentially, it's a reminder to not let past sorrow hold us back from embracing new beginnings.

What is the difference between people who thrive and people who decline over a long period of time? It's not that they don't get knocked down; it's that they get back up and bounce forward. That's true of both people I know personally and those I read about in the Bible:

- Jonah started out running from God but ended up influencing a whole metropolis.
- Thomas started out wracked by doubt but ended up taking the gospel all the way to India.
- Peter was disappointed with his inability to withstand pressure and was also disappointed with himself but ended up as a great Christian leader.
- John Mark was rejected by a high-ranking Christian leader. He (was seen as a quitter) but ended up tapped by the Spirit of God to write one of the Gospels.
- David bounced forward from several devastating failures: moral, leadership, career, and so on.

In almost every case, whether somebody bounces forward or not has to do with one question: "Does that person have hope?"

Howard Hendricks, the late great professor from Dallas Theological Seminary, once said, "*Discouragement is the anesthetic the devil uses on a person just before he reaches in and carves out his heart.*"

I think he's right.

When people lose hope, they lose their ability to dream for the future. Despair replaces joy. Fear replaces faith. Anxiety replaces prayer. Insecurity replaces confidence.

In *The Hope Quotient*, Pastor Ray Johnston writes, "Hope believes in future possibility rather than resigning to current reality."

People bounce forward when they have hope.

We grieve but not without hope. Because for a Christian, death is not the end., but rather the beginning of eternal life. This belief is based on John 11: 25-26, where Jesus says, "*I am the*

resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die.”

Darkness from grief is inevitable and unavoidable, so maybe it would be best to walk into the darkness rather than try to outrun it. Maybe it would be best to allow my experience of loss to take me on a journey wherever that may lead, and to allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I can somehow avoid it. It's your choice in terms of which way you turn.

WEEK 7: TURNING YOUR PAIN INTO PURPOSE

“God never wastes a hurt! Pain can point you to your purpose. Your greatest ministry will likely come out of your deepest pain.” Rick Warren

Finding meaning and turning your pain into purpose is the sixth need that all grievors have after loss. It doesn't happen on the first day after your loss but happens over time. Before you turn your pain into purpose, you must acknowledge, accept, and grieve your loss. Know that God can take the most painful experience in your life and use it for good.

The Power of Meaning

Loss is what happens to you; meaning is what you make happen. Meaning reflects the love we have for those we have lost. Finding meaning is often where our healing resides. Finding meaning is the key to finding purpose and joy after loss. I encourage counselors who work with grieving people to help them search for meaning in their loss.

Meaning is relative and personal. It takes time. It usually doesn't appear right away but builds up over the years. Meaning doesn't have to be grand or dramatic. You don't have to start a nonprofit company to find meaning but you do have to grieve your loss prior to finding meaning.

Meaning doesn't equal understanding why your loved one died. You may never understand the reason for your loss. I've reframed my question, changing it from “Why did my daughter die?” to “Why did I live? Why am I still here?” So, what are you still here?

How to Discern Your Purpose

Leadership author, John Maxwell, asks three questions when he wants to really get to know someone. People's answers to these questions give him great insight into their heart. I believe these three questions can help us in discerning our purpose after our loss. The questions are:

- What do you cry about?
- What do you dream about?
- What do you sing about?

The first question answers what will bring you fulfillment tomorrow. It deals with your own pain and considers a way of turning that pain into a purpose that could bless others. The last two questions speak to what touches you at a deep level today.

The answers to these questions can often help people discover their passion and purpose. We need to know our passion to discover our purpose. For me, helping grieving people after their loss is what I cry, dream, and sing about. It brings me great satisfaction and fulfillment. You will want to consider answering these three questions yourself to turn your pain into purpose.

My Mess Became My Ministry

Pain can point you to your purpose in life. Our deepest life messages come out of our deepest pain. My mess became my ministry. My misery became my message. My pain became my purpose. I didn't choose to go into grief ministry; it chose me. But I love what I do.

I get to come alongside people in their darkest hour and bring comfort and hope. Nearly every day, I talk to somebody about loss and grief in my role as a care pastor.

A few years after Jackie died, I was asked to speak at Forest Lawn Mortuaries 100-Year Anniversary. I spoke about purpose. Then, they asked if I would do funerals for them and trained me to become a certified funeral celebrant. I conducted celebrant and clergy funeral services for Forest Lawn for over five years. They also asked me to speak at their Holiday Candle Lighting Memorial Services to remember those who died. It's a service to honor a loved one's memory and celebrate all that that person did to light up their life and the lives of everyone they touched. I spoke at these events in different cities as we saw thousands of people attend who were looking for hope.

March 4th used to be the worst day of the year for me. But I decided to be intentional and to turn my pain into purpose by shooting a hundred free throws on that day to raise money for the HEART Ministry in Kenya, Africa, to save lives. I call it Hoops into Hope. I've raised over \$10,000 over the years for this significant ministry.

My life is not defined by my daughter's death but inspired by her life. Her death transformed my life. Now, instead of being tortured each year by the memory of her death, I now view it as a day of hope to help others in her honor.

Jackie loved to dance and was part of the Pamelot School of Dance in Auburn, CA. Pamelot was founded by Pam Harrold. Jackie was learning ballet, tap, and jazz. After her death, Pam created a dance scholarship in Jackie's name, which is given to one young girl dancer each year.

A year after Jackie's passing, we attended a dance recital where Pam presented a young girl with the first Jackie Page Dance Scholarship. We feel so honored that Pam and the Pamelot Family witnessed our grief, honored our little girl, and are keeping Jackie's memory alive.

I turned my pain into purpose by starting our Hope for Grief Community at Shepherd Church. It's become a central gathering for grievers. Our relationship with our loved ones has shifted from one of physical presence to one of memory—a spiritual presence.

Our Grief Community seeks to keep that memory alive and to honor our loved ones by sharing lessons we've learned and are still learning from them. I enjoy organizing and teaching at this unique event. I train staff members and volunteers to help others with grief. We talk about our loved ones. This is a safe place to do that. It's a time to remember the past, live in the present, and trust that the future is going to be good because God is good. Attending our grief community lets everyone know they are not alone in their grief.

The biggest hurt in my life was the death of my youngest daughter, Jackie, who died from a brain tumor when she was 5 years old. My heart was broken in a way I never imagined possible. This was a turning point that changed the course of my life as I took my first steps on a lifelong grief journey. Yet, out of the darkness, my deepest life purpose would emerge from the rubble of my pain.

Nearly every day I talk to somebody about loss and grief in my role as a Care Pastor at Shepherd Church. I didn't choose this ministry, it chose me. But I love what I do. I get to come alongside people in their darkest hour and bring comfort and hope. My mess has become my ministry. My pain has become my purpose. What pain in your life can you help someone else through?

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals to us love of God: His willingness to die in our place for and to take our sin upon himself is mind-blowing. His pain truly was our gain.

An interesting reality of suffering is that our personal pain also speaks to those around us. Our pain becomes God's MEGAPHONE to a hurting and watching world.

The world gravitates to a young girl who has hope and peace in the midst of her own cancer diagnosis as she visits other kids with cancer in the hospital and gives out JoyJars she created. Erik Rees, her father, started NEGU to honor his daughter, 12-year-old Jesse Rees who died of cancer. Their mission is to encourage every kid fighting cancer to never ever give up. The Jesse Rees Foundation gave out over 425,000 JoyJars and raised over 32 million dollars in their first 10 years to help kids fight cancer.

Bystanders are astounded over a mom named Candy Lightner who endured the death of her 13-year-old daughter, Cari, who was hit by a drunk driver while walking and yet Candy turned around to help others avoid such pain by starting MADD (Mother's Against Drunk Drivers).

Mental health sufferers were inspired and encouraged by Kay Warren, who out of her own pain over the loss of her son Matthew, who suffered himself from mental health issues and who died from suicide, started a Mental Health Community at Saddleback called Hope for Mental Health. Kay recently started a ministry called, "Hope for Brighter Tomorrows," the Christian nonprofit that sponsors the BREATHE Retreat.

I thought we also need a community for those who grieve because grief never dies because our love never dies, so in an effort to create space for the bereaved at Shepherd, and to honor my daughter Jackie, I recently started our new Hope for Grief Community.

Our pain gives us a platform. The question becomes then, what am I saying to the world in the midst of my pain? His character and grace do not change when suffering comes. As I trust God, even in my heartache, I let my life speak of a hope that extends well beyond what we can see or touch.

When the megaphone of pain sounds in our lives and in the lives of our unbelieving friends please let's not respond with a superficial triumphalism or wallow in pessimism.

If unbelievers, who are experiencing their own pain are going to seek out a Christ-follower for help, it will not be because we appear to live lives that are free from trials but because we are honest about our own pain and sufferings.

We will not attempt to have an answer for every question since we know that only God knows certain things, but we will affirm that even in the mystery of his purposes we know the security

of His love and we will seek to introduce others to our God who entered our sorrows and our sufferings. As our pain shouts to a hurting world, may our lives always sing of the fact that God is good even when our circumstances are not.

Redemptive Suffering

Redemptive suffering is the practice of taking our pain and allowing God to transform it into a way to help others. Suffering has great value if it is consecrated to God for the sake of serving others. Redemptive suffering is using your pain to help other people in their pain. It unleashes the love of Jesus and brings comfort to a hurting world. This is the key to turning pain into purpose.

Paul said, “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 receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 NIV).

God is the Father of Compassion

The Greek word translated as compassion means “deep feeling about someone’s pain or misfortune.” That’s how God the Father feels about you. He’s also “the God of All Comfort.” When our hearts are breaking, when we are overwhelmed with grief, God’s comfort becomes a healing ointment to our souls. He comforts us with the truth of His love, presence, and amazing grace.

Doesn’t Waste Your Pain

God doesn’t want to waste your hurt; he wants to recycle your pain to help others. He will recycle your pain for someone else’s gain. God comforts us for a specific reason, “So that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” Our Heavenly Father wants us to do something in response to the comfort He has given to us. God expects us to use our pain to help others.

God uses our pain to make us more sensitive to other people’s pain. Pain makes you more empathetic to those who are experiencing the same kind of pain you are. Rather than focusing on your pain, you can channel it to help others in their pain.

God Wants to Redeem Your Suffering

Who is better qualified to minister to a parent grieving the loss of a child than another parent who has experienced such grief? Who is better qualified to help someone with an addiction than someone who has battled addiction? Who is better qualified to walk with someone through a cancer diagnosis than someone who has fought cancer?

Think of your greatest loss, the most painful situation you’ve ever faced. God doesn’t want you to waste that hurt; rather, He wants to redeem your suffering and use you to serve others.

The Model of Jesus

The cross of Jesus Christ reveals the love of God for humanity and his willingness to die in our place to take our sins upon himself. His pain truly was our gain. He turned the greatest adversity the world has ever known into the greatest advantage. Jesus’ death on the cross gives meaning to suffering. He “did not come to suppress suffering all at once, nor to explain it, nor to justify it.

He came to assume it and to transform it. We can only understand the meaning of suffering by recognizing God's great love, as he gave up His only Son so that we could be forgiven and have eternal life.

The Art of Kintsugi

Kintsugi is a Japanese philosophy, art, and practice that treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise. Broken pottery is repaired using a lacquer containing gold powder. Instead of attempting to hide the repair, Kintsugi illuminates it. This art form is driven by a deep desire to restore and rebuild, giving new life to something precious that had been broken.

It's a great metaphor for healing from loss; God's restoration process. The result is a mended heart, which pays honor to our Redeemer, history, and story. What was broken has now been restored into something valuable and beautiful.

God is in the process of redeeming our stories. Redemption looks to the future but does not erase the past. Jesus bears the scars on his hands on his resurrected body. God promises to redeem our lives by mending what is broken, healing what is sick, and righting what is wrong.

This incredible story of redemption is based on the work of Jesus, who came into this world to make us new, which he accomplished through his life, death on a cross, and resurrection.

Jackie Power

One of the most thrilling experiences in my life came one ordinary morning. Jackie's tumor was progressing each day. Malignant brain tumors normally grow quickly and spread into other brain tissue. When a tumor grows into or presses on an area of the brain, it may stop that part of the brain from working the way it should. Brain tumors are like roots of a tree. They can grow vertically or horizontally; in whatever direction they choose. Jackie was losing her motor skills.

She went from running everywhere to walking and then to crawling. She was at a point where she couldn't even crawl anymore. She lost her ability to speak but was able to make sounds, like grunts. We developed a communication system with her so that when she wanted to go somewhere in the house, she would make a certain sound, we'd pick her up, and she would point to where she wanted to go.

On this occasion, I picked her up and she pointed toward the kitchen. I carried her to the kitchen, and she motioned for me to set her down on the kitchen counter. I figured she wanted something to eat so I picked her up and carried her toward the fridge.

She motioned for me to set her down on the counter. I realized she wasn't hungry. She used to climb up on the counter, ask me to back up, and then take a flying leap into my arms. To me, Jackie was The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County. She reached a point where she was leaping nearly four feet across the kitchen into my arms.

I couldn't believe what happened next.

She tried to stand, using every ounce of strength and every fiber in her little body. Looking like a fawn attempting to stand for the first time, her little legs wobbled as she willed her way into a crouched position, finally standing completely upright.

Before the tumor, I would stand a foot away from the counter and she would hold up her right hand and motion for me to move back. Each time she gave the signal, I would take one step back, increasing the length of her jump.

I wanted to ask, “You’re not really going to jump, are you? You can’t jump. You don’t have enough strength in your body to pull it off,” but I didn’t say a word. I kept my thoughts to myself.

I moved in close about six inches from the counter. “If you want to jump, Daddy will catch you,” I said. Jackie raised her little right hand and motioned for me to move back further, away from the counter.

I was awestruck and dumbfounded.

I started to well up with tears, but I didn’t want her to see me cry. I stepped back six inches. Normally, I would have stepped back a foot, but I wanted to be close enough in case she just fell straight down from the edge of the counter. She motioned again for me to move back further. I worried that if I took another step back, she would land on the floor and suffer an injury.

However, she believed it was possible. In fact, she looked so confident and that look convinced me to do it her way. I stepped back six more inches. She motioned a third time to move back further. Now, we were moving from the unimaginable to the absurd. I couldn’t hide the tears at this point. I again took one small step back.

Without any warning, she jumped off the counter. In reality, she just fell straightforward. I was close enough to lean forward and catch her in my arms. I hugged her for all it was worth. I kissed her little head and held her up in the air.

“Jackie, Daddy’s so proud of you. That was amazing,” I said with joy. She had the biggest smile on her face as we laughed together.

Standing up and jumping off that kitchen counter was the most courageous act I have ever witnessed. It was inconceivable that she was able to pull it off. I’ll never forget that moment. It became a watershed moment, a turning point in my life. I realized that we are all capable of so much more than we think.

Jackie’s strength amid hardship gave me a motivation to “go for it” in life. She is my hero, inspiration, and the wind beneath my wings.

As I reflect on that moment, the phrase, “Jackie Power,” echoes in my mind. Despite everything, she had an unstoppable power in her soul. She willed herself to stand and jump. She believed it was possible and she made it happen.

For me, Jackie Power represents the power I have within myself that comes from God. She was a life force and awakened me to God's power. It's another way of saying, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 NKJV).

God gave Jackie the strength to jump off that counter one last time. Whenever I think I don't have enough strength, I call upon my Jackie Power. Her example of courage inspires me to overcome any fear, challenge, or obstacle I face.

We all have Jackie Power if we tap into it and believe in the possibilities. Are you aware of the God-given life force you have within you?

My Jackie Power started with weightlifting. I was lifting some heavy weights on the bench press with a goal of doing six repetitions. On the sixth rep, my arms started to shake, and I didn't think I could get the bar up. I pictured Jackie in my mind struggling to stand on the counter and finally stranding erect. The thought gave me a shot of adrenaline as I pushed the bar all the way up.

I felt led to go back to school and get an MBA degree. I was now in my forties. The idea of studying and writing two papers a week for a couple of years was daunting. I enrolled in the MBA program at the Ken Blanchard School of Business at Grand Canyon University. It was a grueling program that stretched me to the limit. Three months in, I felt overwhelmed and wanted to quit. As I was about to throw in the towel, I thought of Jackie, her tenacity and courage, and I powered through.

I enrolled in a doctorate program at Biola University in my early fifties. The final project was to write a 250-page dissertation. I didn't think I could do it, but I remembered Jackie's act of courage. I completed the dissertation and graduated recently with my doctorate. I had always wanted to write a book, and I finally finished it. I'm doing so much more than I had ever imagined was possible.

Five years ago I was diagnosed with leukemia. I was shocked and scared. I have CLL, chronic lymphocytic leukemia, a terminal blood cancer. I once again thought of Jackie and my perspective changed. I began to tell myself, "I am living with leukemia, not dying with leukemia."

What a gift Jackie gave me the day she jumped off the kitchen counter. I am now willing to venture outside my comfort zone, attempt big projects, and achieve things I never dreamed possible.

All of this because of a little girl with a brain tumor who wouldn't give up. She fought for every moment of fun. Her accomplishments may seem tiny to you, but they're on a grand scale to me.

Practical Ways to Turn Your Pain Into Purpose

From a Christian perspective, transforming pain into purpose involves leaning on your faith, allowing yourself to grieve freely and openly while trusting that God is with you, and actively seeking ways to serve others, channeling your pain into positive actions that honor the memory of your lost loved one and reflect God's love in the world.

Key Points to Remember

- Acknowledge your pain and grieve openly:

The Bible encourages acknowledging your grief and bringing it to God in prayer, recognizing that even God himself understands sorrow. Don't try to rush through the pain; allow yourself to feel it and process your emotions fully.

- Find comfort in scripture:

Verses like Matthew 5:4 (“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted”) remind us that God is present in our pain and will provide solace.

- Seek community support:

Lean on your church community for prayer, support, and shared experiences of grief.

- Reflect on your loved one's life:

Think about their passions, values, and what they were most proud of achieving.

- Identify areas of alignment:

Consider how your skills and interests can be used to support a cause that resonates with your loss.

- Start small:

Begin with manageable actions like donating to a charity, attending a related event, or reaching out to others who might be experiencing similar grief.

- Reflect on God's purpose in suffering:

While difficult, consider how your pain can be used to grow closer to God, develop empathy for others, and become a vessel for His love.

- Turn pain into service:

Once you feel ready, find ways to serve others who are experiencing loss, using your own experiences to comfort and support them.

Examples of How to Turn Pain into Purpose

- Volunteer at a grief support group:

Share your story and offer emotional support to others going through similar loss.

- Donate to a cause close to the deceased's heart:

Honor their memory by contributing to a charity they were passionate about.

- Share your faith with others:

Speak openly about how your faith has helped you through your grief, offering hope and encouragement to those around you.

- Practice acts of kindness:

Perform random acts of kindness in the name of the person you lost, spreading positivity in their memory.

Examples of Turning Pain into Purpose

- If your loved one was passionate about environmental issues:

Volunteer for a tree planting organization, advocate for clean energy policies, or start a community garden.

- If your loved one was a dedicated educator:

Volunteer to tutor children, donate to a school supply drive, or create a scholarship fund in their name.

- If your loved one battled a specific illness:

Raise awareness about the disease, donate to research, or support patient advocacy groups.

Important Points to Remember:

- Be patient with yourself: Healing takes time, and there will be ups and downs.
- Don't pressure yourself to find the “perfect” purpose: Even small acts of kindness can make a difference.
- Honor your loved one's memory: Find ways to keep their legacy alive through your actions.

Important Considerations:

- Allow time to heal: Don't pressure yourself to “get over” your loss quickly.
- Seek professional help if needed: If you are struggling to cope with grief, consider seeking guidance from a pastor, therapist or counselor.

In our next session, you will learn about the final need grievers have: the hope of heaven and our reunion with our loved ones.

WEEK 8: THE HOPE OF HEAVEN

“We may speak about a place where there are no tears, no death, no fear, no night; but those are just the benefits of heaven. The beauty of heaven is seeing God.” - Max Lucado

Most Americans Believe in an Afterlife

A recent study found nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults say they believe in heaven. Two-thirds of U.S. adults believe that deceased people are reunited with loved ones in heaven. And yet there are many people who do not believe in an afterlife. Some believe in oblivion after death, while others believe an individual is reborn into this world and begins the life cycle over again, likely with no memory of what they have done in the past.

Why is a Belief in the Afterlife Significant When Dealing with Grief?

A belief in the afterlife is significant in dealing with grief because it provides a sense of meaning and comfort by reassuring us that death is not the end. It affirms the promise that we will be reunited with our loved ones in an eternal space, which can alleviate feelings of loss and separation, potentially easing the pain of bereavement; essentially, it helps people make sense of the loss and cope with the reality of death by offering hope for a future connection with the deceased.

Heaven is a Wonderful Place

Heaven is a wonderful place. Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3 NKJV).

The Seventh Need of Grievers

The seventh and final need of grievers is the need for an afterlife and being reunited with our loved ones. Heaven is the ultimate hope for every believer, to “dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Psalm 23:6). In our grief, we need to hold onto the hope of heaven.

A Living Hope

1 Peter 1:3 says believers have a “living hope.” The Greek word for “hope” means “an eager, confident expectation.” Unlike the empty, dead hope of this world, this “living hope” is energizing, alive, and active in the soul of the believer. We live with great expectation. Our living hope originates from a living, resurrected Savior. Peter’s living hope is Jesus Christ.

Grieving with Hope

All of us will grieve at some point in life, but Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 that believers should grieve slightly differently than the world, because we have this living hope. There is a joy that can be found even in the midst of great sorrow – knowing that if we know Christ, this separation is only temporary. We will be reunited, and therefore, as believers we don't grieve as the world grieves. Instead, we grieve as those who have something real to look forward to.

Both 1 Peter 1:3 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13 speak about the hope of Christians in the resurrection of Jesus, but they focus on different aspects: 1 Peter 1:3 highlights the living hope that believers have in Christ, which is anchored in the promise of eternal inheritance in heaven, while 1

Thessalonians 4:13 emphasizes the comfort and reassurance of this hope for believers who have lost loved ones.

The Blessed Hope

In the Bible, "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) refers to the anticipation of being taken to heaven at the second coming of Jesus Christ, essentially signifying the future inheritance and eternal life believers will experience in heaven, making it the core of their hope for the future; it is considered a "blessed" hope because it signifies a complete and joyful reunion with God in a perfect place.

A Glimpse of Heaven

Jackie loved animals and always wanted a hamster as a pet. My wife and I are not fans of the rodent, especially living in our home. But Jackie was going to die soon, so I said, "What the heck?" Sometimes, that's just what you need to say.

Carrie assigned me the task of going to the pet store with Jackie to let her pick out a hamster. It turned out to be the greatest job I ever had. I don't think I've ever seen Jackie more excited. We drove to a large pet store in Roseville, and she carefully examined all the hamsters, picking up most of them. She finally chose one baby brown and white dwarf hamster. It was a girl. She named her Emily.

Jackie held Emily on our drive home from the pet store. It was a sunny day. The sunroof on my Volvo was open and the sun was shining down on us. Out of the blue, Jackie turned and looked at me quizzically.

"Daddy, when I get to heaven, will I see Jesus right away?" she asked.

"Yes, you will, sweetie," I replied. I assured her that she would indeed see Jesus immediately.

She smiled. A few seconds later, she asked, "When I get to heaven, will I get to see Grandpa?"

Her grandpa, my dad, had passed away a year earlier. She really loved him, and it was the first time Jackie ever lost someone she loved. I assured her that she would get to see Grandpa in heaven and be reunited with him.

Then, she paused for a moment, turned and looked at me while holding Emily in her right hand, and asked, "Daddy, can I take Emily with me to heaven?"

The first two questions were easy. This one was a bit more difficult to answer.

I thought for a moment. I knew the correct theological answer, but I responded, "Yes, Jackie, you can take Emily with you to heaven; we can arrange that." She grinned from ear to ear.

I thought to myself, What's going on here? So, I looked over at her and asked, "Sweetie, you don't really think you're going to die, do you?"

She looked at me, smiled, and said, “Silly daddy, we are all going to die someday.”

Wow.

Her answer took my breath away. God was giving Jackie a glimpse of heaven. She had a spiritual sixth sense that she was going to be arriving in heaven soon. She would be leaving our home, which she dearly loved, to go to her ultimate eternal home in heaven, and she was okay with that.

I will never forget that conversation as long as I live. Over the years, I have reflected on this brief conversation more than any conversation I have ever had with anyone. Her response still fascinates me and brings me great comfort.

Looking back, I believe God was preparing my baby girl for what she was about to face by giving her some glimpses of what heaven would be like. As her transition day approached when she would pass from this life to the next, instead of being afraid, Jackie was ready to go to heaven, meet Jesus, and be reunited with her grandpa.

For only being five years old, Jackie had a deep curiosity about heaven. She asked Carrie if angels were going to accompany her to heaven. “Absolutely,” Carrie said. Again, God was preparing Jackie for her journey to eternity.

God Put Eternity into Every Human Heart

Have you ever felt like there is something else after death? C.S. Lewis said, “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.”

The band, Switchfoot, echoed this thought in a song called Meant to Live: “We want more than this world’s got to offer We want more than the wars of our fathers And everything inside screams for second life We were meant to live for so much more.”

The wise King Solomon wrote that God has “set eternity in the human heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And with this awareness of eternity comes a hope that we can one day find a fulfillment that is not afforded by the vanities in this world.

“In the human heart” is talking about our mind, soul, and spirit. I believe we are spiritual beings, first and foremost, that live in physical bodies.

Our spirit is eternal while our bodies on this earth are temporal. Yet we will receive new bodies in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:1-5). Solomon says God places eternity into our heart and soul. The word “eternity” is the Hebrew word *olam*, referring to an eternal longing within the human heart. I believe this longing is twofold. It’s a longing to know God and it’s a longing to spend eternity with God in heaven.

A Longing to Know God

This longing to know God is expressed by St. Augustine in his Confessions, “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”

Animals don't have a longing to know God or for heaven. Humans possess an innate knowledge that there is something more to life than what we can see and experience in the here and now. Psalm 42:1-2 says, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1-2). Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Jesus knows how burdened we can get in this life and offers an open invitation to anyone who is laboring under a heavy toll and seeks rest for their soul. Who better to carry our load of grief than Jesus? He can carry what you are not able to carry.

In Revelation 7 we have a bit of insight into Heaven: "Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:16-17 NIV).

Someday we will never hunger or thirst again, physically or spiritually. Deep inside every man there is a thirst for God. John tells us that God will lead them to springs of living water. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that the water he gives will be a gushing fountain of endless life, and that those who drink it will never thirst again. The woman asks Jesus to give her the water, so she wouldn't have to return to the well.

Over the Rainbow - A Longing for Heaven

Our longing for heaven is exemplified in a song, voted the song of the century, none other than Over the Rainbow, which was sung by Judy Garland in the movie The Wizard of Oz. The lyrics were written by Yip Harburg, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants. His real name is Isidore Hochberg.

What you may not know is that the first verse of the original tune was omitted from the movie. The popular version starts with the chorus. Songs don't normally start with the chorus, but this one does. Here are the lyrics to the original song that you've probably never heard before:

Over the Rainbow (Original Version)

"When all the world is a hopeless jumble,
And the raindrops tumble, all around,
Heaven opens a magic lane.
When all the clouds darken up the sky way,
There's a rainbow highway to be found.
Leading from your windowpane to a place behind the sun,
Just a step beyond the rain.

Then the song goes into the chorus:

"Somewhere over the rainbow, Way up high
There's a land that I heard of Once in a lullaby.
Somewhere over the rainbow, Skies are blue
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true."

The song is about hope. It's called Over the Rainbow. God created rainbows as a sign of hope. This song speaks of a yearning for another place, a better place; but there is a sadness in the realization that this place isn't situated on earth. Somewhere over the rainbow is a great description of heaven, a place where our dreams really do come true.

Heaven is Our Home

I always wanted to get a dog—a big dog! But there were always problems. Either our home was too small, or the kids were too young. The main problem, however, was the lack of enthusiasm on the part of my wife because from her perspective, she had one slobbering shedding beast, and she didn't need another one.

Now, I realize what I'm about to say is going to offend some of you but here goes: Small dogs are not real dogs. Small dogs don't bark; they yelp. They don't eat; they nibble. They don't lick you; they just sniff you. I wanted a real dog, a man's best friend kind of dog.

And then came Ari. Ari is a pure breed Siberian Husky, black and white with blue eyes. Ari was a gorgeous dog we got from a family in Santa Clarita. My daughter, Jessica, picked her out of the litter. So, we gave her a name and cleared out a place in our house where she would live. Before Ari was born, she had been claimed and named and a place had been prepared for her.

Sound familiar? Before you were born, you were named by God; you had been claimed by God, and a place had been prepared for you. And while you're here, another place is being prepared for you. That's what the breeder did with Ari. We had to wait six weeks before we could take possession of Ari because the breeder wanted to wean her and train her a little bit.

God is weaning us from earthly affections and is training us for our new home. He has prepared a place for us. At some point, we'll do what Ari did. Ari traveled from her home in Santa Clarita ultimately to our home. We, too, will go to from this earth to our home in heaven. We don't know our departure date and we don't know our flight number, but you can bet your puppy chow that it won't be long until you see your master's face!

This is the promise Paul gave us in Philippians 3:20-21: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."

Paul says our true citizenship is in heaven. One translation says, "Our homeland is in heaven." There truly is no place like home when heaven is your home. Every believer has a divinely implanted awareness that our souls live forever. This world is not our home; we are only passing through this life on earth.

Songwriter Bob Sobo wrote, "My trust is not in earthly things to satisfy my soul; my hope is set in Christ my king and heaven is my home." (Song: *Heaven is My Home*).

Jesus Overcomes Death Through His Resurrection

Jesus promised, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25- 26). The Bible links sin with death. It says, “The sting of death is sin” (1 Corinthians 15:56) and “through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

Death stalks the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. Death is no respecter of persons. Its shadow haunts us day and night. We never know when the moment of death will come for us.

In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have the answer to the great question of the ages originally posed by Job: “If a man dies, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). The Bible teaches that because Christ lives, we also shall live. The greatest truth we will ever hear is that Jesus Christ died and rose again, and that you, too, will die but can rise again into newness of life.

The only hope we have for dealing with death is the resurrection of Jesus and it’s the only hope we need. The Bible teaches the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not a spiritual resurrection, as some would have us believe. Jesus’ physical body was raised by God from the dead, and someday, we will see him.

Since Jesus died and rose again, death cannot separate us from the love of God. Paul said, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38- 39).

When Jesus died, death was destroyed. Satan, the one who holds the power of death, will someday also be destroyed. Death and sin no longer have mastery. This is why Paul says, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The death of Christ means victory for those who believe in Him. Eternal life and immortality come to all those who believe in him.

The Reality of Heaven

To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). The moment we take our last breath on earth, we take our first in heaven. Heaven is a wonderful place but there are several misconceptions about what heaven is like. You won’t become an angel, and neither will your lost loved one. You won’t have wings. You’re not going to be a little chubby cherub, wearing a white robe and floating on clouds.

Below are Four Realities about Heaven:

1). Heaven is where God lives.

The Bible calls heaven “the dwelling place of God.” Billy Graham said, “The most thrilling thing about heaven is that Jesus Christ will be there. I will see Him face to face. Jesus Christ will meet us at the end of life’s journey.”

2). Heaven is where God rules.

Jesus calls heaven “the Kingdom of God,” so heaven isn’t just where God lives; it’s also where

he rules. The Psalmist wrote, “Lord, I look up to you, up to heaven, where you rule” (Psalm 123:1 GNT).

3). Heaven is a literal place.

Heaven isn’t a state of mind or a state of being. The Scripture says there will be streets, trees, water, and homes in heaven. Some Scripture passages allude to the fact that animals are there. You’ll have your physical body, renewed through your resurrection. And there will be a real place for your real body to live. Jesus said, “There are many rooms in my Father’s house. I wouldn’t tell you this unless it was true. I am going there to prepare a place for each of you” (John 14:2 CEV).

4). Heaven is designed for his followers.

God didn’t design heaven for Himself. Jesus said, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you” (Matthew 25:34). Heaven is a place God designed for His family, and heaven is an expression of His love. People aren’t meant to live on earth forever. You and I were made for heaven!

Hebrews 13:14 says, “For this world is not our home; we are looking forward to our everlasting home in heaven” (Hebrews 13:14 TLB). The Apostle Paul wrote, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9 NLT).

Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

The absence of our loved one has allowed us to tap into a new depth of love, one we didn’t know even existed until their loss. I believe yearning, an intense longing for what we lost, is the most dominant feeling after a loss, more than the typical emotions associated with grief.

This absence is a depth of love we couldn’t access while they were still alive. It’s a love built on the void they left in the world when they passed. In the gap between what I couldn’t ever imagine, and my present reality lies a type of love I met for the first time in my grief. It’s a void I couldn’t have imagined before she passed.

When Jackie died, her absence became its own presence. It represented all that is gone, all that I loved, and all that I missed. I hate the reality it represents but I also love the reality it represents, that my love for her is so great that she is still here, even though she is no longer physically here. I grab hold of her absence and cling to it as tightly as possible. I visit our memories, knowing they hold both the deepest joy and deepest pain.

With Jackie’s absence, I learned something I couldn’t know while she was still living. I learned just how deeply I was capable of missing her. I learned how much pain her void in my life caused me. And I learned how willing I am to lean into that pain to keep her close. I still feel connected with her, still talk to her, and in my prayers, I ask God to give her a hug for me.

I marvel at the depth of my love because of her loss. But deep down in my soul, I want to see her again and have the pain cease.

Reunited with Our Loved Ones

The hope of heaven and being reunited with my daughter is a thrilling certainty that will completely satisfy the yearning I have in my heart to see her again. The hope of being reunited with our loved ones brings tremendous comfort to those of us on earth who have lost a loved one.

King David lost his newborn son to illness but said with confidence: “He will not return to me but (one day) I will go to him” (2 Samuel 12:23). Jackie will not come back here to earth, but I am confident I will one day go and be reunited with her in heaven. We will recognize our loved ones in heaven, even though my daughter was only five years old when she passed.

Someday soon, I will be reunited with all those in my family who are already there, including my daughter. And when that happens, we will fellowship around our Father’s throne, finally meeting him face-to-face. And the family of God, our brothers, and sisters in Christ, will be there. What an emotional reunion it will be! Our yearnings will be satisfied.

Poem: “Heaven” by Jessica Page

My oldest daughter, Jessica, wrote a poem about heaven and Jackie when she was 12 years old, five years after Jackie passed. The poem is simply called Heaven.

Heaven

By Jessica Page

Mommy, what’s wrong with me?

My head hurts so bad.

You take me to the doctor’s and tell me that I’m sick.

Why do you and Daddy look so sad?

I don’t want any more radiation, Mommy. Please get me out of this place.

I want to talk to you, but my mouth won’t move. All I can do is watch your crying face. Mommy,

I can laugh and smile again! Guess who I can see?

Jesus is calling me towards Heaven.

You always said it is such a great place to be.

Mommy, I’m getting closer now.

I’m walking through big golden gates.

Stop crying for me Mommy cause I will see you again.

And I will be happy up here as I wait.

Leaping into the Arms of God

Jackie loved announcing to the neighborhood that Daddy was home and then jumping into my arms. She enjoyed climbing onto the kitchen counter and asking me to back up so she could take a flying leap into my arms.

At the end of her battle with cancer, she was able to stand one last time and jump into my arms. In the same way she jumped into my arms as her earthly father, I picture her jumping into her Heavenly Father’s waiting arms.

My baby is now in heaven, safe in the arms of God.

The Apostle John said, “I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them’” (Revelation 21:3). God is always with us. God became human in Jesus and is called our Immanuel, which means, “God with us.” Jesus came to earth to heal the brokenhearted.

Our comfort comes in knowing we are not alone. God is fully present with us in our pain and loss. He wraps His arms around us and whispers in our ears, “I love you.”

A New Day is Dawning

Irish poet Thomas Moore said, “Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal.”

The first followers of Jesus spoke about a day in the future when God would restore everything—you, me, everything in heaven and on earth. (Acts 3:21). The resurrection of Jesus conquered our greatest enemy, death itself, and points to a day when all those in Christ will be raised again to live forever with him in heaven and be united with the people we love.

On that day, the Apostle said, “He (God) will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. Look, I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:4). God is making everything new, including you.

May you hold onto the hope of heaven and realize God is sitting Shiva with you, fully present, grieving your loss. But also restoring everything. And in that, we find hope.

THE END



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