

The background is a vibrant red with a subtle texture. In the top left corner, there is a piece of red knitted fabric and a light-colored rope. In the top right, a pinecone is partially visible. In the bottom left, there are several pinecones, some with white snow-like dust. In the bottom right, a small, green, cone-shaped Christmas tree with white and red decorations is visible.

*Dr. David*

An eBook on Grief & the Holidays

# TIPS FOR SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS

Dr. David Page



# Tips for Surviving the Holidays

## Introduction

Hi, I'm David Page, a Pastor and Grief Educator. My desire is to help you. My desire is to serve you and bring some comfort and relief to those of you who are grieving. So, if you are grieving, you are in the right place. If you're looking for hope, you're in the right place, and if you're looking for some practical tips on how to survive the holidays, you're certainly in the right place! I'm so glad you joined me.

As we enter the holidays and close out the year, everywhere we turn someone is telling us to be happy. "Happy Thanksgiving!" "Merry Christmas!" "Happy New Year!" But for those who've recently lost a loved one, the holidays can seem more like something to survive than to enjoy.

The holiday season, especially Christmas, is considered "the most wonderful time of the year," but for those who have lost a loved one, it can be the most difficult time of the year. It doesn't matter if the loss was two weeks ago or twenty years ago the holidays are tough for those in grief. We often feel a mix of sadness, sorrow, anger, and pain as we miss the ones we love. Even the best of times are painfully incomplete because we have an awareness that someone is missing.

Our Heavenly Father is referred to as the God of all comfort who comforts us in our pain, so that we can comfort others in their pain, with the same comfort we received from Him. That's what I want to do for you (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

I also hope to give you permission to grieve, especially during the Christmas season. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint, but what all of us have in common, no matter how we grieve, is the need for our grief to be witnessed. I affirm your grief. I will never try to lessen it, or reframe it, and I won't even try to point out "silver linings". I'm a big believer in facing our feelings and feeling the pain, because grief brings an enormous amount of pain, especially during the holidays.

# Tips for Surviving the Holidays

## My Story

I remember our first Christmas after my daughter passed. Our nightmare began when our five-year old, Jackie, our baby and the life of any party, was diagnosed with a brain stem tumor several years ago. She passed away in my arms six weeks later on March 4th. She took our hearts with her when she left. Spring turned into summer, summer into fall, fall into winter, and then came the dreaded holidays!

Holidays are difficult days for the bereaved. Bereavement literally means to be robbed. The holidays are a time of giving, but all I could think about was what had been taken from me. The most wonderful time of the year is also the most difficult time of the year for those who grieve. Christmas, more than any other day, is synonymous with family being together. It is at this time that 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.

At the time I was the pastor of a dynamic church in Auburn, California. Church services went on, Christmas carols were still sung, and people wished everybody a Merry Christmas. However, our thoughts were on Jackie, fixed more on her departure than on her arrival five years prior. Christmas was different that year. 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.

Now, many Christmas trees and many "Silent Nights" later, I've learned a few things about this process we call grief and surviving the holidays. I'd like to share with you some tips that might be helpful for you and your family this Christmas season.

## 10 TIPS FOR SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS

### #1: Develop a Plan

Be intentional and develop a plan in advance of Christmas. It may be as simple as going to the cemetery to sit and talk with your loved one. Observe the Christmas holiday, as you want. Everyone has their own way of dealing with grief, so just be yourself. There is no right or wrong way to do this. It's okay not to do what you've done in the past – be flexible. That first Christmas doesn't have to become a tradition for all the following years.

Our plan this year is to fly up to Sacramento, to Auburn, where Jackie is buried and to be there on her birthday, December 20th. We will put fresh flowers on the grave and talk to her there. It will be a special time to remember her and honor her on her birthday during the Christmas season.

### #2: 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. We talk about work. We talk about food. We talk about everything else ... except "the elephant in the room". We all know it is there. It has hurt us all, but we do not talk about "the elephant in the room". I encourage you to initiate the conversation and introduce "the elephant in the room," by naming your loved one. Oh, please, say her name. Oh, please, say, "Jackie," again. For if we talk about her death, perhaps we can talk about her life. Nothing brings relief and comfort like hearing a good story about your loved one.

### #3: Memorialize Your Loved One

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

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 some who created a memory book of their loved one. Create a new tradition in memory of your loved one. You can make a donation to a favorite charity in their honor. I do this each year to the HEART Africa ministry. You can also go to [www.Tributes.com](http://www.Tributes.com) and develop a tribute page for your loved one on the Internet.

### **#4: Give Yourself Permission to Cry**

Oftentimes, the bereaved worry they may cry during the holidays. Of course, you will! It's completely appropriate under the circumstances. Let it out. Crying cleanses the soul. The shortest verse in the Scriptures simply says, "Jesus wept." Jesus wept because he was sad that his dear friend, Lazarus, had died. Hey, if the Son of God needs a good cry, then maybe I do as well... especially during the holidays! It's part of God's healing process and a normal human response to loss, so have a lot of Kleenex on hand.

It is a great gift to let grieving people know that they don't have to be embarrassed if they cry around you. Let them know they are welcome to cry with you. Maybe a greater gift is to shed tears of your own over the loss of the person they love. Your tears reflect the value of the person who died and it assures them that they are not alone in missing that person.

### **#5: Give Yourself Permission to Laugh**

You may feel like it's not appropriate, maybe even disrespectful to laugh or feel good while you're grieving. Laughter does not disrespect the memory of your loved one, and it doesn't mean you've forgotten them. King Solomon said, "Laughter is good medicine for the soul." Laughter is not only healthy; it helps to reinvigorate you for the hard work of grief that lies ahead.

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

Kay Warren said, "The parallel train tracks of joy and sorrow are always running side by side throughout our lives. I used to think of life as a series of hills 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 life. Laughter is good for your soul even in the midst of your pain.

### **#6: Be Careful of "Shoulds"**

Please don't let anybody "should" on you! Never let others take your grief away from you, minimize your loss, or tell you how you should or shouldn't grieve. Avoid the "Tyranny of the Shoulds" as in: "I should send out Christmas cards, bake cookies, or go shopping." Do what is most helpful for you and your family.

### **#7: Be Kind to Yourself**

You have been wounded and are not at full strength. Take care of yourself physically. Eat healthy foods, even if you don't feel like it, and get some exercise. Walk 10 minutes down the street, and then walk back. Avoid alcohol and get some rest. Do something you enjoy doing each day.

Remember self-care is not selfish. If you know my story, I was diagnosed with leukemia in recent years. My philosophy is: "I am living with leukemia, not dying from it." My life literally depends on my self-care. Your health and well-being also depend on your self-care.

### **#8: Include the Children**

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

Children can feel confused, powerless, angry and anxious during the holidays because of a death in the family. Kids grieve differently than adults. Be honest with them. Explain that it is okay for them to cry and for adults to cry and that although they are feeling really sad right now, they won't always feel like this. See what part of the holiday tradition is most important to them. Try to involve them in memorial rituals, for example, by asking them to draw or write down their favorite holiday memories of the departed loved one.

### **#9: Ask for Help**

Realize you can't get through this alone. Gravitate to where you will get support. Allow people to help you. Now is the time to call all those friends and family members who said, "If you need anything – call me." By allowing them to help, you are giving them a gift as well.

Have you heard about our *Hope for Grief* ministry? We recently launched our grief ministry at Shepherd Church and I invite you to check out. It meets on a regular basis and offers grief events, workshops and support groups. You can't get through grief alone. Healing happens in community. We'd love to have you become part of this caring community.

### **#10: Remember You're Not Alone**

King David said, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4). Jesus said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). One of the names for Jesus associated with the holidays is "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." John said, "The Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). He still dwells among us. Jesus is with you in your grief, especially during the holidays.

# Tips for Surviving the Holidays

## God is With Us

One of the names for Jesus associated with the holidays is "Emmanuel," which means "God with us." John said, "The Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). He still dwells among us. Jesus is with you in your grief, especially during the holidays.

Perhaps my favorite verse regarding God's closeness with us in our pain is from Psalm 34:18: "The LORD is close to the broken hearted and saves (delivers) those who are crushed in spirit." Jesus knows what it's like to feel pain and has the ability to help deliver and heal us in our pain.

In the song, "O Holy Night," we sing, "A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices." We feel the weariness of life and death in this world and wonder how anyone can rejoice? We are in desperate need of the hope of Christ to break through our pain, loneliness and despair. While the holidays can be a sad time for those who grieve I want to share the comfort and joy that is found in the coming of God himself to rescue us in our despair.

The life of Jesus that began in a wooden cradle culminated with his death on a wooden cross. But it was not a senseless, meaningless death. Rather, it was a death-conquering death, followed by a new resurrected life. "The Son became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death" Hebrews 2:14).

Death's power brings much sorrow in this life but this power is only temporary and will not last forever. What Christ set in motion when he defeated death at his first coming will come to its full fruition when he comes again.

This is our great hope at Christmas, that "yonder breaks a new and glorious morn." The Christ who came as a baby and died as our substitute will one day return to consummate his kingdom. And when he comes, "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Revelation 21:4).



## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

All of us who have lost loved ones grieve, especially at Christmas, but people of faith can have hope in the midst of their sorrow. The Scriptures tell us to grieve but not like those who have no hope. We all need hope like we need air. The Scriptures talk about a blessed hope. Jesus is our living hope.

Jesus overcame death and rose again to give us new life in him, and I have the hope of an afterlife, life in heaven where I will see my dear Jackie again. I can't wait. King David reiterated this when he lost his son, "He won't return to me, but I will go to him" (2 Samuel 12:23). That's the hope we all share – that we will go to our loved ones someday. I will see Jackie again, I can't wait.

And that's all I have to say about that.

### Q&A

**Q#1: Should holiday traditions that were established by the deceased be maintained?**

Only if you want to and only if you feel they are helpful. Don't let others pressure you into doing rituals that you loved one established unless you find them meaningful and want to carry on the tradition. Maybe you don't do it that first Christmas after their passing. Maybe you begin it again on the second Christmas. Maybe you never do it again and begin a new tradition on your own.

**Q#2: How can the children of a deceased parent best support the surviving parent during the holidays?**

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

Let them tell you what they need, versus you planning out their schedule while thinking you know what is best for them and what they need, because you don't. We all grieve differently. When you lose a spouse of 50 years you feel lost. I realize you are grieving too, but remember, we all grieve differently. Give them some space. Let them share with you how they are feeling and what they would like to do and not do. Sometimes we think it's best to just keep them busy, but often that may not be what they actually need.

**Q#3: How do I live the rest of my life without my son at Christmas time? Why is he not here for Christmas and why was he taken from me for all the Christmases to come?**

This is from a loving mom who lost her dear son in a tragic death. It was a catastrophic loss, and with that comes complicated grief. It hasn't been that long since the loss, so the wound is fresh.

My first thought for her is: "Be patient with yourself and be kind to yourself. Surround yourself with people who care and love you. You can't get through this alone. Healing comes from our relationship with God and others. I don't know why he was taken from you anymore than I know why my daughter was taken from me. None of us like change, especially change we have no control over. My heart goes out to you. I'm so sorry for your loss."

Grief is a normal human emotion, but it should be transitory. With that said, there is no timeline for grief. The first couple of years are especially painful. However, when it becomes chronic and debilitating, people experiencing it may need to seek mental health treatment.

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

Complicated grief disorder keeps sufferers trapped in their pain and sense of loss after the death of someone they love. With professional assistance, even the worst feelings of grief can be resolved, and its most disabling symptoms lessened.

**Q#4: How does one balance the joy of the Christmas season with the pain related to grief from death of a loved one or even the breakup of a serious relationship?**

Kay Warren said: "I used to think life was like a series of highs and lows, but now I believe life is more like a set of parallel train tracks, with happiness and sorrow running side-by-side."

Happiness and sorrow are a part of our existence. Regardless of the pain, God's joy can be present even during the Christmas season. Remember Jesus was described as a "Man of sorrows," and yet he had great joy as well.

I think we see this balance of joy and pain in the first Christmas. The first Christmas does not ignore our pain. When we open the pages of Scripture, we find that all was not merry and bright. The new glimpses of joy that do emerge fall against the backdrop of misery and disorder. Herod was slaughtering babies throughout the land. There was great pain and sorrow. Those first rays of brightness shone in a land of deep darkness. And yet the angel said to the shepherds and to all of us today, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

**Q#5: Will my life ever be good again?**

After writing his classic book on grief, *A Grace Disguised*, Jerry Sittser found that one question kept surfacing in the hundreds of letters and emails he received in response to his book – "Will my life ever be good again?"

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

People want to know if life has any joy in store for them in the future after suffering a devastating loss. I wondered the exact same thing immediately after losing Jackie because the loss was so excruciating and overwhelming.

Out of desperation, I called Jerry Sittser at Whitworth College and asked if he would come speak at the church I pastored. It was totally for selfish reasons – to help me recover from my grief. Jerry came and helped me with my loss. He became a model to me of someone who had suffered great loss (he lost his wife, mom, and daughter when a drunk driver hit their minivan) and yet he still had joy in his life.

Jerry loved God, his family (what remained), other people and life. He had a smile on his face and a bounce in his step. I wanted to be like Jerry.

I figured if he could do it, then so could I. I thought that if God could transform Jerry, then maybe he could transform me too. I think we all need models, people to look up to, who have gone where we want to go.

Helen Steiner Rice said: "Comfort comes from knowing that people have made the same journey. And solace comes from understanding how others have learned to sing again." God helped me sing again.

We never get over the loss of a loved one. Rather, they become a part of us. They remain in our hearts forever.

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

With that said, I have found that life can be good again, really good! Life will never be the same again. Things are different now - but good! I have a new joy. By experiencing such deep sorrow, I can now experience an even deeper joy. I have a smile back on my face and a newfound passion to help others who grieve experience joy in their lives as well.

### RITUALS

#### HAND OVER HEART

Please put your hand over your heart. We are going to observe a few seconds of silence in honor of our loved one this Christmas. This helps to center ourselves and helps us focus.

#### CANDLE LIGHTING

The flame of the candle symbolizes our remembrance. As we light our own candle in memory of our loved one, let us do so with gratitude that they lived and that we shared their life for a season. Now, when you light the candle, I want you to say their name out loud. Keep you candle lit as we share a responsive reading together.

#### POEM: WE REMEMBER THEM

*Gates of Prayer, a Jewish Prayerbook*

In the rising of the sun and its going down,

WE REMEMBER THEM.

In the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring,

WE REMEMBER THEM.



## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer,  
WE REMEMBER THEM.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn,  
WE REMEMBER THEM.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends  
WE REMEMBER THEM.

When we are lost and sick at heart,  
WE REMEMBER THEM.

When we have joys we yearn to share,  
WE REMEMBER THEM.

As long as we live, they too shall live,  
For they are now a part of us as

WE REMEMBER THEM.

Now, look into the flame of your candle, and close your eyes. With your eyes closed, blow out your candle. You will see the flame still glows behind your closed eyes. And so it is with our memories.

### PRAYER OF BLESSING

And now, may the Lord bless you and keep you,

May the Lord make His face shine upon you,

And be gracious to you,

## Tips for Surviving the Holidays

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you,  
And give you peace.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

God bless you. Grieve well. Thank you so much for joining me. I hope this teaching has been a blessing to you. I love you! I'm sorry for your loss. Merry Christmas!

Grieve well to live well.

Warmly,

Dr. Dave

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