

experiencing
GRIEF



— H. NORMAN
WRIGHT —

BH
PUBLISHING
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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978-0-8054-3092-9

Published by B&H Publishing Group,
Brentwood, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 152.4

Subject Heading: GRIEF \ BEREAVEMENT \ JOY AND
SORROW

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Preface



I will never forget the words, “In the next hour your son’s heart and lungs will fail.” There was such a sense of loss, helplessness, and finality. We had experienced a life of losses with him because he was disabled, but this was different. Throughout our lifetime we will experience the loss of friends and family members. Every loss brings pain and disruption of life. Death is no stranger to any of us, but the closer one is to you the greater the impact.

A common thread links us all together no matter who we are. It’s called grief—the walk through the valley of shadows. It’s a journey that is imposed upon us. It’s not one of choice. We can fight it, struggle through it, or embrace it. Unfortunately, many don’t understand it, which increases their level of discomfort.

My purpose in writing this book is to help you progress through this journey with a greater sense of comfort and hope. It may not make it easier, for grief is work—and sometimes very hard work.

I’m indebted to the hundreds of grieving people I’ve sat with over the years. It is their journey, their insights and wisdom and struggles that have taught me more about grief than my own experience.

If you’re reading this book, you’re probably somewhere on the path of grief. I hope this book helps to answer your questions, keep you on track when you tend to stumble, understand what to expect, and normalize what you are experiencing. If this occurs, then the crafting of this book has met its purpose.

Introduction



In a culture that doesn't like to acknowledge loss or talk about the impact, it's difficult to grieve. And when we add this silence to the fact that most of us have never been taught about the process and normalcy of grief, no wonder we struggle.

Perhaps you experienced what many have: you've been encouraged to have "lite" grief. "Get over it as soon as possible." "Isn't it time for you to move on with your life?" There are messages that increase the pain of grief.

If you are reading this book, you're probably experiencing grief and searching for some answers. Perhaps you sought support and assistance in this journey, but it's been difficult to discover others who can help rather than hinder. Others may have already tried to "fix you." Just remember, you don't need to be fixed. What could be needed is a greater understanding of the various faces of grief, what you can expect in the future, and what you can do to move forward.

This book was written out of a sense of need for everyone to understand the process and normalcy of grief. Many feel they're odd or different or even losing their senses. They believe, "I'm the only one to experience this." If you feel that way, you're not alone. It's just that many don't talk about their grief or can't tell you what to expect.

Let this book be your guide. Through twenty or so brief chapters, you will learn what grief is, what you can expect to experience, how to embrace your grief, and the steps to recovery. You can also realize you're not the only one to feel

this way. My hope is that through the illustrations and information, you will discover that you are normal. Take your time. Read what you need. Go back and read again. Ask a friend to read aloud to you. You may not connect the first time you read a portion or remember it. It's all right. That's your grief. It does that to us. It overshadows our abilities and changes the way we see life. It's heavy. It weighs us down and deadens our senses. And it lasts far longer than we want. But learn from it. It's a great teacher. You and I will be different because of our grief. Your walk with God may also be different—even deeper, as it was with Job.

My ears had heard of you before, but now my eyes have seen you. (Job 42:5 NCV)

As you reflect on the various Scriptures and allow the truth of the Word of God to be your companion, I pray that you will experience his comfort.

CHAPTER I

The Faces of Grief



The world is full of faces. Some familiar, some unfamiliar. Many are constant companions. They belong to those closest to us—a friend, a parent, a grandparent, a spouse, or a child. But one day a face is missing. Its presence is no longer there. There's an empty spot, but not for long. A new face emerges to take its place. It's unfamiliar and unfriendly. It's the face of grief.

Grief—what do you know about this experience? We use the word so easily. It's the state we're in when we've lost a loved one. It's an inward look. You've been called into the house of mourning. It's not a comfortable place. It's not where you want to reside, but for a time, longer than you wish, you will. Often it will hurt, confuse, upset, and frighten you. It's described as intense emotional suffering or even acute sorrow.

In grief the bottom falls out of your world; the solid footing you had yesterday is gone. It feels more like a floorboard tilting or soft pliable mud with each step you take. The stability of yesterday's emotions has given way to feelings that are so raw and fragile you think you are losing your mind. We feel alone with it, yet we're not for Jesus himself was there, "a man of sorrows, acquainted with bitterest grief" (Isa. 53:3 TLB).

Mourning is the second part of the experience. This is the process where grief is expressed. It's a natural, God-given process of recovery. It's his gift to us to help us get

through the pain. Everyone has grief, but mourning is a choice. You cannot make your grief better, make it go away, fix it, or just “get over it.”

Before you take a journey into an unknown land, you usually consult a map. Grief is a journey that moves across unknown terrain that includes valleys and mountains, the arid desert with an occasional oasis. Most of us look at a map, and we begin a cross-country trip exploring new places. Most of us don't look at a map of the grief experience, so we end up questioning the experiences, “Are these feelings normal?” “Am I normal?” Each part of this journey can only be accomplished by moving through it. It's slow, one step at a time, and you'll hit bottom. And you're not always sure where you're going to end up, or where the journey ends.

Sometimes in your grief you may feel that you're on a crooked sidewalk, just being pushed along without being able to stop, look around, get your bearings, and decide whether this is the direction you want to go. Grief brings you into the world of the unknown.

THE WORD PICTURES OF GRIEF

There are many word pictures that others have created to describe the experience of grief. Often when we read these, we say, “Yes. That's exactly the way I feel. I thought I was the only one.” You're not. This is normal grief.

A grieving father said:

Grief is like a wave. It comes rolling in from a far-off place. I could no more push it back than if I were standing in the water at the beach. I could not fight the wave. It moved over me and under me and broke against me, but I could never stop it. It yielded to my presence and in so yielding arrived at its destination. It worked around me. The harder I fought it, the more exhausted I became. So it is with grief. If I tried to fight it, it would vanquish me. If I pushed

it down it would stick in my soul and emerge as something else: depression, bitterness, exhaustion. If I yielded to the waves and let it carry me, however, it would take me to a new place.¹

And so it is with grief. It takes you to the tops of the waves, and then they break, and you struggle in the froth of emotion. It also brings memories. It will expose who we really are inside. Waves run out of energy. As they move closer to the shore, their power is spent, and they slowly bubble up to the edge of the sand. The more we stand and fight and rail against the waves, the more exhausted we become. It's an exercise in futility. The more you accept it, hold out your arms to it, and even embrace it, the more you will recover. We need to take a step that for many of us is difficult—yield. Yield to your grief. Let it do its work in your life and mourn.²

When you enter into grief, you enter into the valley of shadows. There is nothing heroic or noble about grief. It is painful. It is work. It is a lingering process. But it is necessary for all kinds of losses. It has been labeled everything from intense mental anguish to acute sorrow to deep remorse. As some have said, "It's a feeling of heaviness. I have this overwhelming oppressive weight which I can't shed."

A multitude of emotion is involved in the grief process—emotions that seem out of control and often appear in conflict with one another. With each loss comes bitterness, emptiness, apathy, love, anger, guilt, sadness, fear, self-pity, and helplessness. These feelings have been described in this way:

These feelings usher in the emotional freeze that covers solid ground with ice, making movement in any direction seem precarious and dangerous. Growth is hidden, progress seems blocked, and one bleakly speculates that just because the crocuses made it through the snow last year is no reason to

believe they can do it again this year. It's not a pretty picture.³

We will talk about these feelings again.

Perhaps this description of land in the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma in the 1930s is descriptive of your life at this time:

A day went by and the wind increased, steady, unbroken by gusts. The dust from the roads fluffed up and spread out and fell on the weeds beside the fields. . . . Little by little the sky was darkened by the mixing dust, and the wind felt over the earth, loosened the dust, and carried it away. The wind grew stronger. . . . The corn threshed in the wind and made a dry, rushing sound. The finest dust did not settle back to earth now, but disappeared into the darkening sky.

The wind grew stronger, whisked under stones, carried up straws and old leaves, and even little clods, marking its course as it sailed across the fields. The air and the sky darkened and through them the sun shone redly, and there was a raw sting in the air. During the night the wind raced faster over the land, dug cunningly among the rootlets of corn, and the corn fought the wind with its weakened leaves until the roots were freed by the prying wind and then each stalk settled wearily sideways toward the earth and pointed the direction of the wind.

The dawn came, but no day. In the gray sky a red sun appeared, a dim red circle gave a little light, like dusk; and as that day advanced, the dusk slipped back toward darkness, and the wind cried and whimpered over the fallen corn.

Men and women huddled in their houses, and they tied handkerchiefs over their noses when they went out, and wore goggles to protect their eyes.

When the night came again it was a black night, for the stars could not pierce the dust to get down, and the window lights could not even spread beyond their own yards. Now the dust was evenly mixed with the air, an emulsion of dust and air. Houses were shut tight, and cloth wedged around doors and windows, but the dust came so thinly that it could not be seen in the air, and it settled like pollen on the chairs and tables, on the dishes.⁴

An upheaval not only alters the landscape but often deforests the landscape, leading to further devastation. The same thing can happen when tragedy strikes the small, forty-acre farm that is our life.

Steinbeck's description of the Dust Bowl is what the weather of the heart is sometimes like for someone who has endured a great loss. A steady wind blows over you, opposes you, oppresses you. The wind grows stronger, whisking away what little soil surrounds the few rootlets of spiritual life you have left. With the wind comes stinging reminders of how different your life is from everyone else's. Other people talk together, shop together, dine together, laugh together. And the taken-for-granted normalness of their lives stings your face so raw you can't bear it. Your bloodshot eyes burn from the wind-blown grit. Your tears wash away the grit, but not the burn.

You lie in bed at night, staring at the ceiling. Your thoughts are incoherent pieces of a puzzle you have grown weary of, yet can't get rid of. The headache won't go away. Or the guilt. Or the regret. You're out of tears, out of prayers. You've waited in silence, wept in silence, wondered in silence. You wonder if anyone is up there, beyond the ceiling, if

anyone was *ever* up there, or if it has all been just so much pious talk and positive thinking, reinforced by the peer pressure of your religious friends.

Outside the sky is darkened. The night is black. Light from heaven, once as sparkling as a star-studded sky, cannot pierce the airborne dust. What little light you have within you doesn't spread very far, either.

Through the night the wind continues. The night is long and it seems the dawn will never come. Finally the dawn comes, but no day. A gray sky veils the sun. And God, who once seemed so radiant, now seems a dim red circle that gives little light.

Eventually the wind subsides, the dust settles, and it is safe to go outside again. What then? How do we reclaim the Dust Bowl that our life has become? Where do we even start?⁵

Has this description been your experience? For many in grief it has. Perhaps you are wanting to reclaim the Dust Bowl of your life. The first step to accomplish this is understanding your grief now, in the future, and the fact that what you are experiencing is normal.