

**DISCOVERY SERIES**

# WHEN TEARS REMAIN

Loving God Through the Loss of a Child



**Luke Veldt & Jeff Olson**



*introduction*

# When Tears Remain

Loving God Through  
the Loss of a Child

**S**ome losses are unthinkable. And when they happen, they are even more unbearable than you could ever imagine.

For Luke and Jodi Veldt, the unthinkable struck in broad daylight, ripping away from them what could never be replaced. In the aftermath of a parent's worst nightmare, Luke Veldt was surprised to discover what has been discovered

by many others: "All speak of a battle, of questioning everything they've ever believed, of dissatisfaction with easy answers. All speak of a new identity, of lives suddenly and permanently transformed. All speak of things learned and gained at terrible cost."

Still, Luke felt compelled to tell his family's story of unimaginable loss. He likens himself to a "discoverer of the North Pole" who, after an unforgiving and treacherous journey "reaches his goal and finds that it has been discovered thousands of times before—yet finds his own journey no less valuable because of its commonness."

If you're a parent who has experienced the unthinkable, you will find that Luke understands the agony you're going through. He speaks your language. It is our prayer that the story of his tragic loss and what he has discovered along the way will help you put words to your own tears as your grief-stricken soul struggles to find its way. And we hope that the follow-up sections written by counselor Jeff Olson will be encouraging and helpful to you.

### *RBC Ministries*

# *contents*

## *one*

### **A Parent's Worst Nightmare .....5**

## *two*

### **Perspectives on Grief..... 17**

## *three*

### **A Hopeful Invitation .....29**

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*one*

## A Parent's Worst Nightmare

**S**unday, August 27, 2006. The sun beats down steadily but not oppressively on the streets of Pamplona. It's a lazy Sunday afternoon in Spain, the kind of day siestas were made for.

The traffic on the streets—if you can call the occasional car “traffic”—is also lazy, relaxed, and unhurried, *with one exception*. A silver van speeds down the avenue, pausing only briefly before shooting through a red light.

In the back of the van a young girl is spread out across the seat, her head cradled in her mother's arms. “I need you to breathe, Allison!” the woman says. “Keep breathing!”

But Allison *is* breathing, the deep breathing that's past sleep, the coma from which she will not wake up.

The sun shines on a lazy afternoon in Pamplona as the girl's parents speed down the road toward the end of their world.

The girl in the back of that van was our daughter Allison. That afternoon she suffered a massive brain hemorrhage, caused by a condition she had—unknown to us—from birth. A cerebral malformation such as Allison's (the surgeon explained to us later) invariably leads to hemorrhage, often fatal. Sometimes the hemorrhage is triggered by a blow to the head or by physical exercise; sometimes, as in Alli's case, it is seemingly not triggered by anything.

We had no warning. Allison was, as far as we could see, a normal, healthy 13-year-old—active and happy. She helped teach a Sunday school lesson about heaven that morning. When we came home from church, the rest of us went to our rooms upstairs to change into comfortable clothes while Allison stayed downstairs to get her little sister something to eat. Shortly after, she cried out for help. We found her slumped over the table; her words were slurred as she told us that her legs were numb, that she couldn't lift her head. Was she in pain? No. Had she eaten something? No. Perhaps a cool cloth on her forehead—but then she passed out.

We had her at the hospital within 15 minutes. A flurry of activity; an anxious wait in the hall; a conference with



*Allison was a normal, healthy 13-year-old—active and happy.*

a nurse. Allison's pupils, the nurse said, were already completely dilated when she arrived at the hospital, an ominous sign. They were taking Allison to the hospital across the street for an emergency operation; the hospitals were connected by a tunnel, and we could walk with them.

The surgeon spoke with us there. The situation couldn't be worse, he said. He frankly didn't believe an operation would help, but he would operate anyway—sometimes the bodies of the young do surprising things, so they give them every chance to perform a miracle on themselves. . . .

The rest was waiting. After the operation, Allison was on life support; it wasn't inconceivable that she would recover, but it was unlikely. Her older brother and sister, Nate and Amber, came to the hospital late in the afternoon to see Allison and tell her goodbye. A doctor asked us for a conference and carefully broached the subject of organ donation. And we waited.

People from our church came and waited with us. Neighbors and friends stayed with our other children. Our friends and family around the world prayed. At my parents' church in the United States, the planned service was scrapped and replaced with an hour of prayer.

A friend called from Romania that night. "She's gone," I told him.

The next few days were a blur: talking to doctors, planning the memorial service, meeting family members at the airport. Crying, praying, remembering. Trying to sleep. Consoling our kids. Wondering whether anything in the world made any sense.

Jodi and I are Christians, from Christian families. Since

we were young, our goal has been to learn about Jesus Christ, to live in a way that would reflect His presence in us, and to share our faith with others. We each have spent more than 40 years in that life—attending church, listening to sermons, studying the Bible. Before moving to Spain, we worked for 10 years as missionaries in Romania. We have watched God take care of us in all sorts of difficult circumstances.

Yet on one of those first nights after Allison's death, as we were alone in our bedroom, Jodi asked me through her tears, "Is it all true? Is any of it true? Is there a God, and is Alli with Him? Oh, it needs to be true."

I had no answer; I had been feeling exactly the same myself. Forty years of faith, distilled in this moment to a single paralyzing thought: Is any of it true? Is there really a God? Or is this the way faith began, with hurting people who invented a God they desperately needed?

My doubt caught me by surprise. There is no promise in the message of Jesus Christ that His followers are exempt from suffering; on the contrary, the Bible advises us that God's people can expect to suffer. And it's not as if I was unacquainted with death, even the death of children. I'd cried with and comforted others who had suffered that kind of loss and had my faith strengthened as I saw God's presence in their lives. So as terrible as the death of a child is,



*Forty years of faith, distilled in this moment to a single paralyzing thought: Is any of it true? Is there really a God?*

objectively speaking it should not have challenged my faith.

But there was nothing objective about the death of this child. This child was Allison, our own Allison. And losing her somehow changed everything.

## **How will we go on?**

Allison was the fourth of six children. Each of those children is priceless, each unique; why does Allison now seem to stand out from the rest? We know that she wasn't perfect, but it's hard for us now to think of any meaningful way in which she wasn't. Her life seems to us like a cut jewel, exquisite from whichever way we look at it. Perhaps it's just a trick of memory that now makes Allison seem so special. It doesn't feel like a trick, though; it feels like having your eyes opened to the plain truth. It's as if her death has cut and polished our perspective so that we can see her accurately for the first time.

Allison, more than anyone else I know, had the gift of appreciating the moment. She loved making friends, giving back rubs and foot massages, spending money, making things out of beads and glue and string, and fishing with her dad. I think Allison probably came as close as anybody could to living each day without any regrets.

Somehow, no matter where Allison was, it seemed she was always surrounded by all of her favorite people. She smiled easily and gave bone-crushing hugs. She loved to help out. If the family was watching television and I asked if someone would go to the kitchen and get their lazy father a drink, the other kids barely had time to hold their breath and try to look invisible before Alli jumped up and said, "Sure!"

Allison had an intuitive and uncommon sense of what's important. She liked to play games, but she didn't care about keeping score. She never showed any indications of trying to be the smartest person in the room, or of caring who was. When given the choice of spending 15 minutes on chores or an hour taking care of her little sister Andrea, she always chose the time with her sister.

Allison was best friend to Andrea, who has Down syndrome. "What's going to happen to Andrea when I die?" Jodi would occasionally fret, and Allison would always respond, "Don't worry about that, Mom! When I grow up, Andy can live with me!"

She was best friend to her little brother Nick and spent more time with him and Andrea than she did with her older siblings, though she was closer to their ages. (Nick was four years younger than Alli; Nate, Amber, and Anna were two, three, and five years older.)

She was best friend to her sister Amber, a friend Amber could confide in and not compete with.

She was best friend to her cousin Kendra and her friend Breanna (with whom she had contrived intricate plans about how they were going to spend the rest of their lives together). Another of Allison's stateside friends, before having heard of Allison's death, described Allison in a school assignment as one of the people who had most influenced her life. A lot of us would now say the same.

Allison was also best friend to two classmates in Pamplona. Adjusting to a new school while learning a new language was a challenge for Alli, as it was for all of our kids. But she was soon friends with all the girls in the class

and planned to invite them all for a big birthday party in February. "This will be so much fun!" said the class's most popular girls. "But don't invite *them*," they said, pointing out two classmates. "Nobody likes them."

"Of course I'll invite them," said Allison. "They're my friends like everybody else. Everyone's invited."

"Well, if they come, we're not coming."

And that's how Allison came to celebrate her thirteenth birthday with two friends and enough food for 15. That, too, is how there came to be three unpopular girls in the class for the rest of the year instead of two.

After the party, Jodi asked Allison if she felt bad about the girls who didn't come, if inviting these two friends had been worth it. "Oh, yes!" said Allison, her eyes shining.

"We had the best time ever!"

That was Allison.

She did feel bad about the friends she lost that day, and it was hard for Jodi and me to see the frustrations she faced at school in the following months. But we're so glad now that she did the right thing. We're so proud of her.

We miss her so much. It's hard to imagine how we'll be able to go on without her. 🐾

🐾 "Sometimes I think that **happiness** is over for me. I look at photos of the past and immediately comes the thought: that's when we were still happy. But I can still laugh, so I guess that isn't quite it. Perhaps what's over is happiness as the fundamental tone of my existence. Now sorrow is that. Sorrow is no longer the islands but the sea" (Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son).

Within a few days after Allison's death, we were weary, and weariness soon became our normal state. We had

a hard time sleeping at night—and an even harder time finding a reason to get out of bed in the morning. We had no energy for some of the simplest tasks and little motivation to attempt major projects.

You've heard people who suffer great loss compare the experience to a punch in the stomach or a kick in the head. You've heard it so often you don't hear it anymore. It's lost its impact; it's a cliché. Yet I can't describe our emotional state better than to say that each morning, one second after we awoke, we had the wind knocked out of us by the thought, "It wasn't a dream. Alli is gone." It is like a kick in the head. It knocks you off balance; it takes away your desire to move on.

We didn't wish we were dead, but we didn't really care if we kept on living either.

## **The Father's compassion**

Despite my newfound doubt, the first place I looked for answers to my questions and comfort for my grief was the Bible. This makes sense if you consider the Bible a supernatural book. Where better to turn in times of trial and doubt if not to the Word of God?

If, on the other hand, you think that the Bible is just one of man's many feeble attempts to search for God or to create Him after his own image, you may find it incomprehensible that I was turning to it even as I was asking myself whether any of it was true. Remember, though, that the Bible was for me the most natural place to look for answers. And I didn't want to reject it blindly any more than I wanted to accept it blindly.

I didn't really want to reject it at all. But easy answers

didn't appeal to me either. Allison was gone. What does the Bible really say about that? Are the answers it offers authentic, trustworthy? I knew that a drowning man will grasp at anything that looks like a lifeline; I wanted to be sure that the one to which I was clinging was the real thing. And so I read the Bible, more thoughtfully than ever before.

As I had been surprised by my doubt, I was surprised now by what I found in the Bible—not one surprise, but a series of surprises.

I was surprised to find how directly the authors of the Bible spoke to my own situation. These weren't detached philosophers and theologians; they were real people who struggled with real doubts and pain, as I had. I found in these men a community of fellow sufferers.

I was surprised that I had never seen that before.

I was surprised to find that I was learning more about God in my sorrow than I ever had in times of joy. "The Bible was written in tears," said A. W. Tozer, "and to tears it will reveal its best treasures."

And I was surprised to realize how many wrong assumptions about God I had to unlearn.

One of my first surprises in the days after Alli's death came from Psalm 103, a psalm of King David. David knew what it was like to be in the pit. He not only lost three of his children, he also shouldered the burden of



*As I had been surprised by my doubt, I was surprised now by what I found in the Bible ...*

knowing that he was at least partly responsible for each of their deaths. Here, halfway through Psalm 103, David describes God's love:

...as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;  
as far as the east is from the west,  
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

For he knows how we were made;  
he remembers that we are dust (vv. 11-14).

When I had read this psalm in the past, I had always noticed two illustrations here for the infinite nature of God's love: the distance between heaven and earth and the distance from east to west. Now, though, it occurred to me that the next line of the psalm—"As a father has compassion for his children"—is not the start of a new paragraph or idea but is, in fact, the third in the series of images. As the last item on the list, it's the most important, the one the others lead up to; it's the most familiar and yet the most dramatic expression of God's limitless love.

*"As a father has compassion for his children."* As I read this, I was struck by the implication that God shares my grief. My thoughts about Allison are His thoughts. He loves her, too, even more than I do. He gave her special personality to her; having given her life, He now mourns her death.

God is in this with me. He is not aloof, detached, controlling everything from afar, untouched by His own

decisions. He doesn't say, "You've got to suffer—never mind why." He is deeply involved, personally affected. "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones," another psalm tells us (116:15).

*And he knows how I feel right now.* God knows what it's like for a father to see his child die. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus cried from the cross, and His Father heard and did nothing. I've heard a lot of sermons that emphasize the price Jesus paid on the cross, totally separated from and abandoned by God; I don't know that I've heard any that focus on what it cost the Father to turn from His Son.

*How could He do it? I wondered. How could He hear His child cry for help and not respond?* The words of John 3:16, a verse I've known by heart since I was 3 years old, now spoke to me in a new way: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . ." I had never before understood so clearly what God's love for the world cost Him. "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 JOHN 4:9-10).

*As high as the heavens above the earth, as far as east from west, as profound as a father's love for his children.*

It took the death of my daughter for me to begin to understand the love of God.

This insight into God's compassion didn't answer all my questions. I found it to be a comfort, though; and looking back now, it seems to me that the comfort I received was far more meaningful than any answer could have been.

Because at that point in our grief, we didn't really want answers. We wanted Allison back. Answers, even if I could get them, would not dispel my grief; answers are a poor substitute for a daughter.



*You don't get over the loss of a child—ever. Nor would I want to.*

It wasn't an answer we were lacking, but a presence, a person. And you can't replace a person with a doctrine. So the presence of God, while not the presence we were craving, was the right sort of response. It was more a hug than a word of wisdom. And as in the case of all of those struck with grief, a hug was what we needed most.

Every day I struggled to deal with a world without Allison. As I struggled, I began to read Psalm 103 daily. And each day—or nearly so—I noticed something that I had never seen there before. None of the things I learned proved the existence of God or fully explain the problem of suffering. None of the things I learned dispelled my sorrow. I didn't learn how to get over the loss of Allison or how to move on to lead a normal life. Sorrow is my normal life now. You don't get over the loss of a child—ever. Nor would I want to. My grief reminds me that Allison was important, and losing her an irreplaceable loss.

Still, the more I read and reflected over what I read, the more I learned about God and about life—not just despite my loss, but because of it. And in time, the things I learned helped me to get from one day to another.



two

## Perspectives on Grief

**T**he loss of someone we love is one of the most heart-wrenching experiences we can go through. The loss of a child, however, is the single most crushing blow a parent can ever suffer. And as Luke Veldt's story shows, when it's *your* child, everything changes! The world around you carries on, but the emptiness of a world without your son or daughter, with all its attendant sorrow and unanswered questions, engulfs the life you once knew.

*Everything changes.*

Parents who suffer the death of a child, regardless

of age or circumstances, often find themselves feeling completely lost and fragile. Nothing makes sense anymore. And help doesn't seem to be coming anytime soon. The following thoughts are an attempt to help grieving parents begin to find their bearings in this wilderness of grief.

## **Be patient with yourself.**

Grieving doesn't end after the funeral. The death of a loved one triggers the start of an unwanted and slow-going journey. In today's fast-paced world, you may sense pressure (from yourself or others) to hurry up, to get through your mourning and put on a happy face. But burying your child stirs up a swarm of unsettling thoughts and feelings that you can't rush through—nor should you even try. 🐦

🐦 *Not even faith in Jesus Christ and His reassuring victory over death (1 Cor. 15:54) will stop grief. The hope of seeing their child again in a future "tomorrow" can give grieving parents the courage to face the horror of loss, but it doesn't remove the painful absence of their child today.*

## **You are not losing it.**

Losing someone you love can make you feel like you're going crazy. It's a messy and fragmented process. Your jumbled thoughts and feelings bounce all over the place, especially during those early months and years.

One moment you may feel fairly stable, like you're holding it together. You may even find yourself cracking a smile or enjoying a cup of coffee. But then the smallest thing—something you see or hear or smell, or maybe nothing in particular at all—can unleash an avalanche of

emotions that pulls you under and leaves you gasping for air.

Your mind and emotions may wander in many directions. And there may be many hours and days when you won't have a clue if you are coming or going, let alone what state you're going to be in from one minute to the next. But you're *not* going mad. You're going through the throes of grief.

## **Grief has many aspects.**

*Shock* and *disbelief*—this is the experience of many in the first weeks and months after their loss. Once the initial blow of losing your child passes, you may find yourself shaking your head and wondering, "No! There must be some mistake." Or, "Is this really happening?"

These feelings of disbelief eventually yield to the awful realization that death plays for keeps. As reality snaps its fingers, you may awaken to gut-wrenching *sorrow* that permeates every fiber of your being. Overwhelming surges of *sadness* strike out of nowhere and at the most unexpected times. Just about anything grieving parents do or see or hear or touch can take them back to the pain of their child's absence, triggering another outburst that leaves them emotionally depleted. Pain-filled days dissolve into tear-filled, sleepless nights spent missing and remembering your child. The



*As reality snaps its fingers, you may awaken to gut-wrenching sorrow that permeates every fiber of your being.*

lingering question is no longer, "Is this really happening?" It is more like "How will I make it through?"

👉 "It's the **neverness** that is so painful. Never again to be here with us—never to sit with us at the table, never to travel with us, never to laugh with us, never to cry with us, never to embrace us as he leaves for school, never to see his brothers and sister marry. All the rest of our lives must live without him" (Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son).

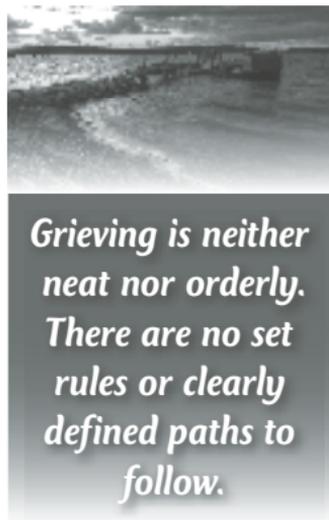
It's not uncommon for grieving parents to go through profound seasons of *guilt* or *regret* for something they did or didn't do. Hours and days might be spent second-guessing or blaming yourself: "If only I had done something different the day of the accident"; or, "I should have insisted that the doctors try this treatment." Moments when you were impatient or preoccupied can also hijack your memories. Guilt over missed opportunities with your child can hold your soul hostage and haunt your waking thoughts as well as your dreams.

Some grieving parents may feel *anxious* and become increasingly protective with their remaining children. They may find themselves hovering over their kids or insisting on knowing where they are on a minute-to-minute basis.

Don't be surprised if you have days when you fall into a pit of *depression*. These can be very dark times when it seems like you will never smile or laugh again, let alone begin to pick up the shattered pieces of the life you once knew. As Luke Veldt and his wife experienced it, "We didn't wish we were dead, but we didn't really care if we kept on living either."

Expect to have times when you feel so *angry* that all you want to do is rant and rail. Don't be shocked if you find yourself directing your rage at doctors or blaming medical help for not doing enough. You may despise the illness or the person or the war that snatched your son or daughter away. You may become irritated with family members and friends who don't seem to care about the agony you are going through. You may feel annoyed with other parents who still have their children. You may even find yourself mad at your own child for "leaving" you.

Serious *questions about God* are likely to surface in those who are overcome with grief. You may have poured your heart out to heaven to save your child. Why did God let this happen? Does He really care? One Christian parent lamented, "God raised His son from the dead. Why won't He raise mine?" As was the case for Luke and Jodi Veldt, you may even have instances where you find yourself wondering, "Is there really a God?"



## **Grief has no rules.**

Grieving is neither neat nor orderly. There are no set rules or clearly defined paths to follow. Different aspects of grief fade in and out with no discernible pattern. And there is no way of knowing how many times you will experience any particular aspect or so-called "stage" of grief.

Just because you've felt or wrestled with something once *doesn't* mean you will never do so again. Most experience several recurring feelings and questions as they grieve, sometimes as if it were for the first time. So don't be alarmed if you do. As C. S. Lewis discovered out of his own grief experience, "In grief nothing 'stays put.' One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats" (*A Grief Observed*).

## It's okay to grieve.

It may be difficult for some people of faith to give themselves permission to grieve deeply if they have been exposed to the idea that sadness and faith don't mix. If you have been told, or made to think, that tears reveal a lack of faith, please take to heart these words from the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes: there is "a time for everything," including "a time to weep" and "a time to mourn" (3:1,4).<sup>▾</sup>

▾ Perhaps one of the ways that **Solomon**, the author of *Ecclesiastes*, learned that there is a time for tears was by watching his own father mourn the loss of a son. **David experienced the depths of grief** after hearing the news of Absalom's death: "The king covered his face and cried aloud, 'O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!'" (2 SAM. 19:4).

In the New Testament, Jesus tied faith and tears together when He publicly declared, "Blessed are those who mourn" (MATT. 5:4). He went on to personally demonstrate that tears and faith are compatible when He wept at the tomb of His friend Lazarus (JOHN 11:35).

Years later, the apostle Paul wrote that even though we as Christians do not grieve like those who have no hope of a reunion when Jesus returns (1 THESS. 4:13-17), we still grieve the loss of those we love.

Weeping for your child and missing him or her in countless ways is normal. It's common to replay those last hours and moments before he or she drew a final breath. It's normal to feel like you are drowning in a sea of emotions, to be worn out by questions that seem to have no good answers. Nor is it unusual to feel like your prayers are falling on deaf ears or to wonder if life could ever be good again. You're *not* doing something wrong. You're *not* being unspiritual. You are reeling from a devastating blow and desperately trying to figure out what it means to go on living in a world without your son or daughter.

## **Feel and share your grief.**

No matter what aspect of grief wells up inside you, it's important to give yourself permission to feel it. Don't sanitize what you're going through with pat answers. Don't let yourself or someone else talk you out of what you are feeling or the experiences you are having. Let the feelings and thoughts come—raw and unfiltered—and try to express them. As one parent learned, "If I pushed it down it would stick in my soul and emerge as something else: depression, bitterness, exhaustion" (Gregory Floyd, *Grief Unveiled*).

And don't keep your grief completely to yourself when someone shows you genuine concern. Though there will be many times when you will grieve alone in the privacy

of your own thoughts, you also need to open up and share your grief with others who will listen.

Talk with other parents who have experienced the unbearable loss of a child. Seek them out. Read their books. Interact with them on their blogs. You will likely find some of your greatest understanding and comfort in the company and words of those whose hearts pound with the agony of losing a child of their own. ▶

▶ **Keeping a journal** can be another way to express your grief. One parent who found journaling helpful says, “I learned that I needed a safe place to put my insane thoughts—all of the curses, the questions, the doubts, the anger, the pain.”

## Tell others what you need.

According to Jesus, those who grieve “will be comforted” (MATT. 5:4). Telling others what you need in your sorrow creates a bridge between your mourning and their care and consolation.

This is what Jesus did the night death stared Him in the face. After spilling His heart out to His heavenly Father, Jesus shared with His disciples the grief that was tearing Him up: “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” He then told them what He needed. “Stay here and keep watch with me” (26:38). Jesus knew what was about to happen. A mob, led by one of His closest followers, was on its way, and He was going to be arrested, tortured, and killed. On this night, Jesus *needed* His friends to stay with Him. Apparently the comfort of their presence and vigilance would make what was coming next more bearable.

Grieving parents can do the same. In the midst of your sorrow, start asking yourself what you need. And as you feel comfortable, make your needs known to those around you. Whether that is simply having someone quietly sit with you or listen to you vent, give you a hug, or help you run an errand, allow others the opportunity to target their care for you.

No one can fix you or make the pain of your child's absence go away. But as you open up and let others (even those who may sometimes unknowingly make insensitive comments) reach out and love you in the way *you* need, you can begin to discover that what is shareable slowly becomes more bearable.

## **Your grief is your grief.**

Mourning naturally follows loss, but there is no textbook way to grieve. Grief is "intensely personal." Every parent mourns the loss of a child in different ways and at different paces.

Some struggle with anger or guilt more than others. Some immediately talk about their deceased child or the agony they are going through. Others are more private and take longer to open up. Faith in God remains solid for some and shaky for others. Visiting the gravesite is comforting for some and unbearable for others. Some will find it difficult to sleep. For



*Every parent  
mourns the loss  
of a child in  
different ways  
and at different  
paces.*

others, sleep may be their only comfort. Some will lose their appetite. Others won't experience any disruption in their eating patterns. For some parents, the first year is the most intense. For others, it's the second.

At a time when a couple needs each other the most, tensions over differences in grieving can drive them apart. One can mistakenly think the other is calloused and not feeling the same depth of loss. This is why it's important to share and accept each other's personal manner of grief. Parents who have a hard time putting words to their grief or communicating with each other may need to seek the assistance of a counselor or other grieving couples who are further down the path of grief. ▸

▸ *The death of a child can create new **marital problems** or magnify tensions that previously existed. If problems worsen or if communication completely breaks down and you find yourself or your spouse pulling away, seek marriage counseling and learn that it's possible to weather the storm in ways that bring you together.*

## **Early grief is different from later grief.**

Most parents discover that there are differences between the early grief they encounter in the first year or so and the grief that will accompany them throughout the rest of their days. The pain of early grief is sharp and intense. Some have said, "It feels like you've been run over by a bus." Emotions erupt often and without warning. And some of life's biggest questions won't stop screaming for answers.

Early grief feels like a kick in the teeth. Later grief is more like a glancing blow. Early grief crushes the heart.

Later grief is gentler. In early grief, memories tend to elicit mostly sadness and tears. In later grief, memories may bring more smiles and laughter. As one grieving mother described it: "It is fair to say that we staggered, struggled, and almost drowned the first year. Our feet were on the ground in two years, but it was six years before I could laugh with the happy memories of Lee [her daughter]" (Elizabeth Brown, *Surviving the Loss of a Child*).

Grief changes over time, but it does not go away. Parents don't "get over" the loss of their child. They don't stop thinking about or talking about (and sometimes to) their son or daughter. In many ways, they will always be grieving and missing their child, but not like in those early months and years. Tears and questions still remain, but their fierceness and frequency diminishes.

## **Grief can enlarge the soul.**

We never get over the death of someone we love. It's never okay that they are gone. It's a hole in our heart that we slowly learn to live with, no matter how painful it is. But somewhere along the way, grief can turn into a lifelong "companion" that, as one mourning parent discovered, "has the capacity to *enlarge* the soul" (Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*).

With loss comes the surprising opportunity to discover new levels of concern for the suffering of others. It takes time, but you can emerge from your great loss a more caring and compassionate person with a capacity for the kind of gentle, yet powerful self-giving love Jesus taught and radically lived out. 🐦

‣ The death of **Dave Branon's daughter** led him to write *Beyond the Valley* and to speak openly about his grief and loss. "This is not the ministry that I would have ever chosen, but it's the one I've been given."

Grieving also makes room for us to more clearly see that our heavenly Father grieves too. Nicholas Wolterstorff, whose son died in a climbing accident, came to the realization that "instead of explaining our suffering, God shares it." And as Luke Veldt discovered, our Creator God is a Father who knows firsthand what it's like to experience the death of a child. Out of His great love and desire to save and restore mankind, He willingly did the unthinkable and turned His face away as His Son suffered and died alone screaming, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (MATT. 27:46).

In the shadow of the cross, you can begin to see that you are never alone in your pain. Your loss is God's loss too. And at any moment you can open up to your Father in heaven and pour out all that is going on inside of you—the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly—seeking to be comforted in return.

At times your cries will be met with absolute silence, or at least no discernible answer. Other times with an answer that soothes and reminds you again that "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" is still, and always has been, *with* you and *for* you in your loss (2 COR. 1:3-4).



*three*

## A Hopeful Invitation

**W**hen death takes those we love, it seems like joy is lost forever. But time patiently teaches our grieving hearts that it's okay to allow joy to reenter our lives. While there are moments when sadness will still overwhelm happiness, it's possible for joy and sorrow of the deepest kind to exist side by side within our heart.

*And so can hope!*

A few years after losing his 5-year-old son, one grieving

father observed, "The pain of losing someone we love is real, at times almost unbearable. But the hope is just as real, and ultimately more real" (Gregory Floyd, *Grief Unveiled*). The hope this grieving parent spoke of is the hope of God's new day. It is the hope of a reunion and the happiest of endings, which is really a new beginning.

Even though the tears of loss stay with us today and into our earthly future, the Bible assures us that we are part of a larger story where it's not always going to be that way. The New Testament boldly declares that when Jesus returns, all who have died and belong to Him will be raised to life again (1 COR. 15:20-23). Jesus' return will also trigger a time of new beginnings when the New Jerusalem will come down from heaven and join with the earth—creating a new heaven and a new earth (REV. 21:1-2). Then God is going to "wipe every tear" from the eyes of His people, and "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (21:4).

Centuries before Jesus walked the earth, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel received a vision of God's new



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day. The prophet's vision included an elaborate tour of the temple area in the New Jerusalem, given to him by a man "whose appearance was like bronze." Recalling his vision, Ezekiel wrote:

The man brought me back to the entrance of the temple, and I saw water coming out from under the threshold of the temple toward the east....He asked me, "Son of man, do you see this?" Then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, "This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh. Swarms of living creatures will live wherever the river flows. There will be large numbers of fish, because this water flows there and makes the salt water fresh; so where the river flows everything will live. Fishermen will stand along the shore; from En Gedi to En Eglaim there will be places for spreading nets. The fish will be of many kinds—like the fish of the Mediterranean Sea" (EZEK. 47:1, 6-10).

Reflecting on Ezekiel's vision of new beginnings when even the deadest of waters will come back to life, Luke Veldt ends his book *Written in Tears* with this hopeful invitation:

"You can look for me fishing there, with Allison. There will be lots of friends and family with us, and

we will all be in the presence of our Father, our guide. You are welcome to join us. There will be plenty of room, plenty of fish, and plenty of time. It would give us great joy to see you there."



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