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GRIEVING AT CHRISTMAS

MINI BOOK

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ISBN: 9781945778636

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Most of us, regardless of religious background, see Christmas as a joyful time of year because we appreciate the higher good that this season seems to bring out in people. For example, companies that have no religious affiliations try to accentuate their benevolent activities during this period, and people make an effort to be a little kinder at Christmas. Unfortunately, there is also a downside to this festive season since December 25th is also the peak time of year for reports of depression and attempts at suicide.

I'd like to examine this problem of grief and depression at Christmastime and how to successfully deal with it when it happens. Most people have suffered loss and heartache in their lives, and the pain of these experiences is often relived at Christmas. For example, my father died suddenly of a heart attack 55 years ago (in the springtime), but I still miss him most of all on December 25th.

Both research and personal experience tell us that people who have suffered significant loss (the recent death of a loved one, loss of health or work) often find the holidays (not just Christmas, but Thanksgiving, etc.) the hardest times to get through. It seems that as the mood of the people around them goes up in anticipation of the vacation, the celebration, the

activities - their mood goes down proportionately.

Another reason for this is that we think of holidays as times of being together with family and significant others. For those who have lost someone, however, these times tend to highlight the fact that the person we love is no longer there. An individual that has lost a spouse through death or divorce, and whose family is far away may see the holidays as one more reminder of their aloneness.

Another reason for personal suffering is that high emotional times, like Christmas, tend to stir unhappy emotions along with good ones. Some people, who are able to control their feelings at other times, find it hard to contain these when emotional pressure is applied during the holidays. It seems that during the Christmas season

every movie, song, and greeting is filled with sentimentality. For those who are grieving it is difficult not to become affected when everything around you is trying to stimulate your emotions.

The bittersweet and nostalgic feelings we have at Christmas naturally direct our minds to Christmases past where we enjoyed other good things. For the person who has had an unhappy childhood or has suffered significant loss in the past, this backward focus tends to be a painful reminder of what they have lost or what they never had to begin with. Add to this the fact that these holidays are cyclical so that people suffering pain and loss have to anticipate the first Christmas without grandma or another Christmas by oneself. With time the scars do heal, but the cycle of holidays become inevitable points in the

calendar when people who are suffering are reminded of their loss and its effect on their lives.

We've been taught that grieving is normal, even healthy, but this does not remove the fact that grieving is painful. Just because something is normal doesn't mean that it is easy. Some people, because of life experiences or weakness in character, are ill equipped to process their grief. Faced with the inevitable reminder of loss that holidays like Christmas produce, many fall victim to depression or begin to see suicide as a viable option in eliminating their suffering.

GRIEF IN THE BIBLE

In the Bible, there are many stories about people who suffered loss and the grief that this caused. Even the Pharaoh of ancient

Egypt grieved like everyone else when the angel of death took his firstborn (Exodus 11:5). He wept and agonized in the same way that you or I would grieve if our firstborn was taken from us. Another example of this occurred when Jesus was born. King Herod, fearing a threat to his throne, tried to have the baby Jesus killed by massacring all children in the area under the age of two. In recounting this story the Bible says that there was great weeping and mourning by the mothers of these murdered children (Matthew 2:16-18).

We tend to read that line and fly over it because we want to get to the story about Jesus. However, these were real people who lost their children in a terrible slaughter. If we review the lives of various Bible characters we will see that dealing

with grief is nothing new, and the way that people dealt with it in the past is in perfect accord with the grieving process described in modern psychology today. Doctors may explain the process of grieving in order to help us deal with our pain and loss, but they didn't invent it. For example:

- **Eve** grieved for her murdered son. She was in silent shock and only spoke when God gave her another child who would grow to be righteous. She acknowledged that God gave her Seth to replace Abel (Genesis 4:25). This passage was included to remind us that this was very much on her mind and heart.
- **Job** displayed good control despite his terrible losses, but eventually his anger at God began to seep through. His accusation that God

had not been fair with him was similar to many who have been hurt by severe tragedy and cry out, "Why me? Why this? Why now?"

- **David**, the king, suffered great anguish at the deceit of Absalom, his favorite son. He was in major denial. Even though Absalom deceived his father, tried to take the kingdom away, and have him killed, David still wanted to save and protect him without ever acknowledging the young man's treachery (2 Samuel 18:33).
- **Jeremiah** saw and warned the people concerning the coming destruction of Jerusalem, but no one listened to him. His book of Lamentations is a long and bitter

account of his grief and tears over this event.

- **Paul**, the Apostle, pleaded with God and continually asked Him to remove a "thorn in his flesh" that afflicted him, to no avail (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). In the end he had to accept God's purpose for his suffering.
- **Jesus** prayed to have the agony of the cross removed from Him, but received no answer. He finally accepted God's will, but not before He offered intense and emotional prayers that caused drops of blood to drip from His forehead (Luke 22:44).

All of these people experienced the universal pain of grief and loss like

everyone else, and they responded in the same cycle of shock, denial, anger, depression, bargaining and, for some, acceptance that people today go through when they grieve.

I've cited these people in the Bible who suffered grief and loss to demonstrate that their human experience more than 2000 years ago resembles our experience today when suffering illness, trials, and the death of loved ones. Our suffering as human beings is the same, and the way that God ministers to us during these times is the same as well. Our trials and tribulations never go unnoticed by God whether we are in Israel long ago or we live in modern America during the Christmas season.

God cares about our pain and sorrow, and He provides help to deal with these things whether we are suffering at the point of

impact when the loss occurs or at the reminder stations like Christmas, Thanksgiving, and other holidays. Here are some of the ways that He helps us with our grieving.

1. He Provides His Constant Love

The loss of a loved one is really the loss of love that was exchanged between that person and ourselves. Yes, we miss the person but the thing we miss the most is the love that was exchanged between ourselves and the one who is gone. We can never regain that love because the joy that we lose when someone we love leaves us, or when something we love to possess is lost to us, will never come back.

The only answer to this is to accept the fact that that this love is no longer there. Of course, this doesn't solve the problem, it

only acknowledges what the problem is. We can, however, receive God's love that never leaves and will always be the same.

For if He causes grief,
Then He will have compassion
According to His abundant
lovingkindness.
For He does not afflict willingly
Or grieve the sons of men.
- Lamentations 3:32-33

God does not send the grief or the sorrow, but allows us to suffer it when it comes. He does, however, demonstrate His love for us throughout the times of sorrow.

Paul, in Romans 8, describes various events and challenges that may have an adverse effect on us, but have no power to separate us from God's love:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

Just as it is written,

"For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- Romans 8:35-39

Notice that not even death can separate us from God's love. In other words, even the loss of our loved ones cannot take away or destroy the love that God has for us. These occasions bring grief, but none can extinguish God's love for us even when the grieving is intense. For this reason we need to recognize and draw comfort from God's continuing love in providing us with help and food and all the resources we need for our support. These are all signs of His own uninterrupted love for us during times of loss and sorrow.

2. He Comforts Us Directly

People who are grieving often say that it is like a heaviness that comes over you, or a stone that weighs on your heart. It feels like someone is pressing down on your chest and it actually hurts physically. Some describe it as an emotional wave that

overwhelms them in sorrow and depression.

Jesus said, "*blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted*" (Matthew 5:4). My question is, comforted by whom? Answer, comforted by God.

You have seen it, for You have
beheld mischief and vexation to
take it into
Your hand.
The unfortunate commits himself
to You;
You have been the helper of the
orphan.
- Psalm 10:14

In these passages, God is the direct helper and comforter of the sad and the oppressed. We like to pray in the following

way when appealing to God on behalf of others, "God, please work through your ministers to comfort and heal," or "direct the hands of the doctors," and "help the ministers say the right thing," or "work through your people, Lord." It is true that God works through people, but sometimes He works directly to comfort, support, and heal; no middleman, just God and the one who is suffering.

Jesus promised the Apostles that He would send the Comforter to not only help their memory but also to help them in difficult times, give them the right words to say when persecuted (Luke 12:12), and comfort the church in times of difficulty and change (Acts 9:31).

Of course, He gives this comfort to the Christian who trusts in His ability and willingness to deal directly with his hurts

and sorrows. I believe in God's direct ability to lift my sorrow when from one moment to the next, what seemed impossible, too difficult, so hurtful or hopeless is simply lifted from me. The situation hasn't changed and the obstacle may still be there, or the thing causing my pain or fear remains, but somehow I sense in my spirit that all is well. I still believe that God is in charge and Christ has risen from the grave, and this faith overcomes my situation to the point where winning or losing no longer matters.

Why is it that we find it so hard to believe that God will directly work within us when we continually pray to Him? Why should we be surprised that He answers this prayer? There are times when our deepest depression is suddenly lifted and we experience the peace that surpasses

understanding (Philippians 4:7). This kind of peace is not experienced as intellectual enlightenment. As a matter of fact, it surpasses human understanding; that's the point! I understand that before, I felt lost, troubled, defeated, but now I have hope. God can bring about this transformation; however, we rarely ask this of Him in our prayers.

The peace that surpasses understanding is not attained through medication, meditation, exercise, or counseling. Sometimes it happens suddenly as God reaches into our lives and personally comforts us with His presence. We don't know how or why, we simply know that the grief is gone for a moment, for a day, or for a lifetime.

And so, how does God help us with our grief and sorrow? He provides His

uninterrupted love if we are willing to see it, and His direct comfort if we are willing to accept it. Finally...

3. He Supplies Hope

The sting of grief is the finality that the event imposes on us. Whatever we've lost is not coming back. I remember as a fifteen-year-old, watching my father die of a heart attack. There was all kinds of activity during the funeral and burial, but after a few days things settled down and my mother went back to work and I returned to school. I would come home each day and watch television until my mother would arrive. I remember seeing an old rerun of the "I Love Lucy" comedy show where zany Lucy was working on an assembly line making cakes, when all of a sudden the assembly line began to speed up and she was dropping cakes and

spraying whipped cream everywhere. I could hear the studio audience laugh heartily at her antics when the thought suddenly struck me that my father was dead, but Lucy was still clowning around. At that moment, my adolescent heart had to accept that life was just going to go on without him. His death didn't change anything in anyone else's life but mine. That's when I understood that he was not coming back and I would have to go on without him. And many years later I'm still having trouble with that memory, but God supplies hope at moments like these.

God ministers to us by providing hope for the future, despite the pain of the moment. When we feel that there is no use going on, or there is nothing good in the future, or the future is not worth staying alive for,

God gives us hope. He does this by giving us a vision for the future.

Isaiah said in reference to the fall of Israel and her destruction,

"Your sun will no longer set,
Nor will your moon wane;
For you will have the Lord for an
everlasting light,
And the days of your mourning
will be over.
- Isaiah 60:20

In reference to the loss of their leader and Lord, Jesus said to the Apostles:

But because I have said these
things to you, sorrow has filled
your heart.
- John 16:6

...but your grief will be turned into
joy.

- John 16:20

In these passages, God makes two promises in providing hope to those who have lost in life and have a bleak view of the future:

1. Whatever you have lost here, He will replace it with something better. The home prepared in heaven will be worth whatever grief you have suffered on earth.
2. Wherever you go, He will be there with you. Whether you grieve in loneliness or illness or loss of position or death, God promises to remain with you and create a future for you with Himself.

You may not have a future with your father or your child or your spouse or someone else. Maybe you won't have a future with them, but He promises that you will have a future with Him. So, let us not be like the pagans who grieve and who have no hope as Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. Let us believe in God and remain faithful to Christ who gives us a hope for an eternal future with Him.

And so, since the paradox of joy and sadness does exist at Christmas, let's remember a few important ideas that can be helpful in dealing with grief during this or any period of the year:

1. Let's be sensitive to those around us who may be covering a broken heart. Christmas is a time for family and rejoicing, absolutely, but it can

also be a time when we can minister to those who are struggling as well.

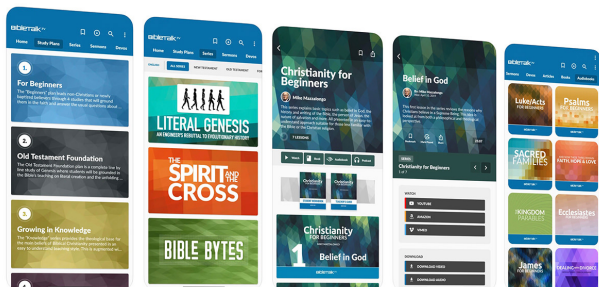
2. If you are struggling, try to stay focused on what God has done in ministering to you at this time and acknowledge His love for you. Ask for His direct comfort and intervention, and remember that you have a glorious future through Jesus Christ no matter how bleak things may seem here and now.
3. Try not to resent those who are happy just because you are not. Don't be envious of these people, pray for them and give thanks for God's kindness towards them. Realize that sooner or later we all get our turn to cry.

Of course, the most sorrowful thing about Christmas is that there are some who are quite happy to celebrate Jesus with gifts, visits, and food but will not accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and this will cause them endless grief and sorrow when He returns to judge the living and the dead. Those who believe and respond to Him with faith, expressed in repentance and baptism (Mark 16:16), have the guarantee that whatever causes grief now will be swallowed up in glory and eternal life with God. Praise be to His Name forever and ever, Amen!

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