

# Healing the Deepest Grief

*THOSE WHO MOURN CAN LEARN TO HANDLE LOSS IN A HEALTHY WAY AND EMBRACE THE FUTURE WITH HOPE.*

The loss of a spouse changes a woman's life forever. Instead of being the center of another's universe, the survivor is suddenly alone.

Haunting questions soon surface: "Who am I, since I am no longer Bob's wife or Mrs. so and so?" "Who is going to take care of me?" Younger women left to rear children alone may ask, "How will I make it without Jim's financial and emotional support?"

Research studies have revealed that the death of a partner is the greatest stressor of all losses. Grief, the normal emotional response to loss, produces the utmost stress following the death of one's spouse.

The degree or intensity of grief varies with the age of both the deceased and the survivor, the number of years they were married, and whether or not the relationship was meaningful or troubled at the time of separation. The longer the couple's time together, the more intense the survivor's grief, and an unfinished troubled relationship makes the loss especially difficult for the surviving spouse.

Whether the death was expected (anticipated) or unexpected (acute) also affects the intensity of the grief response. Unexpected and violent deaths produce a more intense grief than expected and nonviolent deaths.

The grief journey is a painful journey, precipitating nights of weeping and joyless mornings, and days when many travelers wonder if they will ever feel hopeful again. It is a highway bulging with "potholes" of darkness, hopelessness and despair. But there is a path that leads to healing for those who embark

on this journey.

What is it? How do grieving spouses move from nights of weeping to mornings of joy (see Ps. 30:5) and into days filled with hope? The book of Ruth provides the perfect example of a “redemptive grief journey.” In it we read about two widows—Naomi, an older widow, and Ruth, a young widow.

**THE GRIEF RESPONSE** Naomi had it all. She was beautiful, as her name implies. She married a handsome and prosperous man, and they had two adorable sons. When famine stole into Bethlehem, Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, loaded the wagons and moved his family to Moab. There he could protect them from hunger and continue providing them with a comfortable lifestyle. Soon after settling in Moab, Elimelech died, and Naomi suddenly became a single mom with two sons to raise.

The Scriptures do not refer to Naomi’s grief following her husband’s death. Perhaps Naomi played the role of a “steel magnolia,” refusing to become vulnerable to grief’s demands for payment. Or maybe she believed she had to be strong for the boys, Mahlon and Chilion. She could have buried herself in the role of sole provider—refusing to stop long enough to feel and express her grief.

Whether she loses a spouse through death or divorce, a single mother has scant time to grieve. Even so, grief’s motto is “pay now or pay later.”

As they came of age the two sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Then tragedy visited Naomi again. Both sons died. The historic author sums up Naomi’s plight with, “and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband” (Ruth 1:5, NIV).

Being “left without” is a vibrant description of loss. Naomi was first left without her husband and then without her two sons, all within a 10-year period (see v. 4), and grief was demanding satisfaction. The reality of her aloneness turned

her thoughts toward her former home, bringing into focus the faces of friends and relatives, a community of believers in the true God, and feelings of safety, security, love and belonging—all the things needed by a grieving widow (see vv. 6-8).

Naomi was wise in allowing her heart to guide her through her grief. "With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would bring them back to the land of Judah" (v. 7). What a beautiful metaphor of leaving the past and moving toward the future!

Although neither Naomi nor Ruth were aware of it, they were being led by the Spirit toward their destiny in God's plan of redemption when they left Moab and journeyed toward Bethlehem. The Holy Spirit can lead us in many ways: through life situations such as loss or illness, emotions, the Word, prayer, discernment and prophecies.

Ruth's is one of many biblical stories that reveals how God uses circumstances to press us toward His redemptive purposes through our losses (see Rom. 5:3-4; 8:28). As a result of losing their husbands, both Naomi and Ruth played a significant role in God's redemptive plan for humankind.

Grief began to have its way with Naomi when she packed her belongings and headed home. Reality had replaced denial by the time she reminded her daughters-in-law that her sons—their husbands—were dead (see Ruth 1:8).

Acknowledging that the loss has really happened is essential to healthy grieving. When a spouse dies many hesitate to use the word "dead," but acceptance of one's loss requires that the surviving spouse refer to the deceased as having died rather than "having gone away" or "being in heaven" or "having passed."

The reality is that death brings permanent separation in this life. This reality must be accepted for grief to receive its

dues. The knowledge that our loved one is in heaven and that we will be reunited with him enables us to grieve in hope rather than without hope. This hope does not give us permission to deny grief its natural process, but it does ease the pain of acceptance (see 1 Thess. 4:13-14).

Through the eyes of her grief, Naomi perceived her future to be pretty bleak. Hopelessness often accompanies grieving. She said, "I am too old to have another husband" (Ruth 1:12).

We have no reason to believe that Naomi was an old lady, but grief can cause one to feel older than her years and take away all hope of things getting better. It can also take away a woman's hope that another relationship is possible.

Hopelessness is the primary symptom of depression, a normal emotional response to significant loss. Other symptoms are fatigue, loss of appetite, loss of interest in pleasures formerly enjoyed, insomnia, feelings of worthlessness, diminished concentration. If a mourner remains intensely depressed for more than a few weeks or begins having recurring suicidal thoughts, she should seek professional help, since counseling and medication are usually needed for recovery.

Then Naomi's grief spews out in anger, bitterness, doubt and suspicion toward the God she loved and served. "No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me! The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me" (vv. 13,20).

Do I hear a gasp? Who of you will dare admit that you are angry with God for taking your husband and leaving you all alone, that you have questioned His motives or doubted His love for you because He has refused to tell you why?

God already knows your thoughts. Why not get honest with the all-knowing One, confessing your anger and disappointment so the two of you can be friends while you travel through the wilderness of grief? Don't hesitate to bare your soul to

Jesus, who knows how you feel.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16).

The Lord Jesus revealed His humanness and grief at Lazarus’ grave. He was so touched by Mary’s and Martha’s grief that He raised their brother from the dead. The prophet Isaiah referred to Him as a “man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Is. 53:3, KJV).

**THE PATH TO HEALING** Naomi instinctively followed good grief guidelines. The first was to talk about her pain. She became vulnerable and honest with her family and friends regarding her thoughts and emotions. They formed her support group, and she felt safe with them.

Every grieving widow needs empathic people who will listen while she cries and talks, faithfully pray for her, refrain from judging when she spills her true feelings and thoughts, and resist advising her about appropriate and inappropriate grief, allowing her to grieve in her own way.

If I had been her therapist, I would have asked Naomi also to journal her feelings and thoughts. Getting these out in the open by recording them keeps us from burying or repressing our pain. The openness can protect us from a “denied or delayed grief” that frequently emerges disguised in physical or psychosomatic symptoms or illnesses.

Journaling also serves to map our grief journey. Mourners become encouraged when they recognize their progress and tend to develop a more positive attitude, which helps to alleviate depression.

Naomi clung to her memories of the good times with her husband and sons when she said, “I went away full” (Ruth 1:20, NIV). Death cannot take away our memories. Sooner or later, we must let go of our lost loved ones and reconnect with them through our memories.

Instead of trying to forget the good times, we should remember them often. Photograph albums are great for this. And talking about the deceased during gatherings of friends and family can resurrect the fun and laughter of former days and help mourners discover a new connection with their loved ones.

Those who are “left” should dismiss any guilt feelings about having fun times with family and friends. Survivor’s guilt can cause spouses to feel as if it isn’t fair to their departed loved ones to laugh and anticipate an exciting new life. But to experience healing in your grief journey, you must give yourself permission to let go of the way things were and embrace your new life without your partner.

Naomi arrived in Bethlehem “as the barley harvest was beginning” (Ruth 1:22). This description is a beautiful metaphor of a new beginning, since barley is harvested in the spring. After receiving a celebrity’s welcome (1:19) and baring her grieving soul (1:20), she appeared to settle into a “new normal” only to be roused into action by her faithful daughter-in-law (see Ruth 2-3).

While gleaning in Boaz’s barley fields, Ruth found favor with this man of standing. When Ruth told Naomi about it, she replied, with hope glimmering, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers”(Ruth 2:20).

With Naomi’s help, Boaz ultimately redeemed both Ruth and Naomi from their pitiful plight as widows (see 4:9-10). Ruth’s redemption included a beautiful love story. Boaz, smitten with Ruth at first sight, arranged to buy his kinsman’s land and wife. Ruth’s first son, Obed, the father of Jesse, the father

of David, placed Ruth right at the core of the lineage of Jesus Christ, our Kinsman-Redeemer.

When we are in deep distress because of the loss of a spouse, we long for answers to the haunting question of “why.” Faith leads us to believe God when our circumstances cry out that He means us harm (see Jer. 29:11).

Naomi did not know that the loss of her husband and sons would give her an integral role in God’s redemptive purposes. She did not know that while working out a plan for her and Ruth’s survival she was also putting pieces of our redemption into place.

Healthy grieving requires both a present and a future perspective. Eventually, we must accept the present reality of our loss, understand that grief is the normal emotional response, give ourselves permission to go with its flow and believe that God will redeem us through our pain (see Rom. 5:3-5; 8:28).

At the same time, we fix our gaze toward the future and a reunion with our loved ones. In eternity our Kinsman-Redeemer will wipe every tear from our eyes, and “There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:4). As we look toward another time and another place, grief will give way to hope, and although life will never be the same, it can still be good.

## **HEALTHY GRIEF RESPONSES**

Following are some responses to grief that mourners and researchers have found helpful for persons experiencing significant loss:

**Give shock and denial appropriate time.** Mourners must not allow others to pressure them into moving out of this stage too quickly.

**Believe the loss has really happened.** Accepting the loss calls on the bereaved to own and deal with their pain.

**Allow yourself to experience the pain of loss.** Early and full grieving is recommended. Talk and weep with those who will not pass judgment about your feelings, thoughts and behaviors during the mourning process.

**Keep a diary of your feelings and thoughts related to the loss.**

**Practice spiritual disciplines when able.** Pray alone and with others. Read the Word. Attend worship services as soon after loss as possible.

**Forgive self and deceased.** Survivors must forgive the deceased for real or perceived offenses or abuse. If they were the perpetrators of offenses, abuse or neglect, survivors must seek and receive God's forgiveness and then forgive themselves.

**Gradually adjust to environments associated with the lost relationship.**

**Let go of the relationship as it was.** Build a new relationship with the deceased through memories. Memory "trips" and photo albums can help.

**Let go of life as it was with the deceased.** Life changes significantly with the death of a spouse, child or parent. Reality requires that mourners recognize that life as they knew it with their loved one will never be the same again.

**Embrace new life without the deceased.** Once mourners intentionally let go of the past with the deceased, it becomes easier to embrace the future without them. Survivors must give themselves permission to move on without the deceased.

**Integrate the experience into your life by allowing God to use it for His glory and to change you in the process.** The loss of

a loved one brings pain and change. We can emerge from the experience bitter or better. God's purposes for us in trials of any kind are to (1) strengthen our faith in Him; (2) make us more like His Son; (3) allow life to become more meaningful; and (4) give us a greater appreciation of the hope we have in Christ (see Rom 5:3-4). Mourners can emerge from a winter of grief into the glorious spring of a hope-filled life.

**Mourners must take care of themselves throughout the grief process.** Solicit the help and support of others. Eat well. Seek needed medical and professional help. Get proper sleep and exercise. Avoid making big decisions too early.

**Mourners must eventually join the human race again.** Remain or get actively involved with others.

**Embrace the hope we have in Christ.** Remember: "Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning" (Ps 30:5, NIV).

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