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Scripture is taken from the Holy Bible,
New International Version
and The New Living Bible.



experiencing
Loss & Grief

Egerton Long is an ordained Baptist Minister who has served in churches in both USA and Australia. He and his wife Betty also served among the Indigenous people in Australia for over 25 years.

Other booklets are available in this series as well as Daily Devotional material.

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Christian Literature Ministry Inc.
PO Box 386
Round Corner 2158
NSW Australia
Email: info@clm.org.au
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Egerton C. Long

EXPERIENCING GRIEF

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He was only eighteen when he tried to drive across a railway line in front of a fast moving train. His vehicle was crushed almost beyond recognition and he himself died instantly. His funeral was one of the hardest I have ever conducted. The tremendous crowd of high school friends wept openly as they sat row after row, hardly listening. The one question they repeatedly asked was 'Why – why –why? Why had this been allowed to happen?' How do you answer that cry?

His mother and grandmother were there, silent in shock. Nothing said or done seemed to get through to them. Afterwards a friend took them back to their small, lonely home, but there everything only reminded them again and again of their tragic loss.

A week or two later I received a message that they wanted to see me. They wanted to ask me a question. Sitting in their front room, I recognised that grief still had them firmly in its strong, almost overpowering grip. I waited as they looked at each other as if saying: 'You ask him.' Finally one of them said: 'Pastor, we want to know – where is our boy? Where is he now?' How do you answer that kind of question?

I had hardly known the young fellow but over the next hour or so I tried to give them words of comfort and explanation as best I could. I was

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fairly certain however, their grief being so great, that my words or thoughts could not get through. I prayed with them before I left the little home, not knowing if I had helped them in any way. Their grief was almost overwhelming.

GRIEF – THE UNWELCOME VISITOR

Grief – a well known word covering those tragic experiences that can hit us at anytime. Grief is a normal, natural response to a serious, devastating loss. It is an intense emotional suffering, sorrow, desolation, and heartbreak. *Perhaps our deepest grief comes when our life partner is taken from us.*

Any kind of loss such as the death of a child, a parent, a friend, or even a cherished pet, can each affect us deeply. A sudden change in our circumstances can cause grief. A broken relationship, the loss of a long time job, the taking away of our independence through illness or accident; all these can cause unexpected, serious grief. It may vary according to our own personality, but it can come to any of us at any time, anywhere.

The word 'grief' is based on the Latin for 'a heavy load.' Most of us have experienced the 'heavy load of grief' and have known the pressure of that load at some time in our lives. It has been called a 'tangled web of emotions' – from anger to loneliness, from helplessness to despair, from fear to bitterness, plus many other emotions, all mixed together.

Is the death of a child one of life's most difficult experiences? Why? Is it because we can only think of 'what might have been'? When birthdays come, for example, does our loss seem just as great, if not greater than ever? When other families are celebrating, does life seem unfair and does grief again sweep over us – no matter how great the passage of time may be? That is the time to remember David's words at the death of his child: *'He cannot come to me but one day I can go to him.'* 2 Samuel 12:23 Great words of faith!

ON BEING GRIEVED

Grief is deep, intense sorrow, usually caused by a sudden, major loss or shock. It can include hurt, sorrow or even guilt, all of these can stay with us for a long time. In a state of grief we sometimes blame ourselves for what has happened. People say: 'If only I had listened to him more,' or 'If only we had tried another doctor,' or 'I should never have let him/her go there'. Such statements of regret are common and can be classified as 'remorse.' One of the few examples in the Bible of extreme remorse is the case of the man who betrayed Christ – Judas Iscariot. He realised, too late, what he had done. It would be wrong however, for us to indulge in continued or deep remorse or guilt when a loved one dies. God has allowed it and we must not lay the blame on ourselves.

HOW TO RECEIVE JESUS AS YOUR SAVIOUR

If God has been speaking to you as you have read this booklet and if you are willing now to take Jesus Christ as your Saviour, here is what you should do:

Confess – tell God in your own simple words that you are a sinner, needing a Saviour. (Read Romans 3:23)

Accept – tell God that you see Jesus Christ your only Saviour and will accept Him now. (Read Romans 6:23)

Believe – that Jesus Christ has saved you because you asked Him to do so. (Read Romans 10:13)

If you have made this decision today then sign your name here and tell someone else what you have done. Join a church where you can hear God's Word preached and have fellowship with other believers.

I acknowledge myself to be a sinner in God's sight.

I accept Jesus Christ now as my Saviour.

I thank Him for saving me.

Date _____/_____/_____

Don't think you have to know all the answers.

Enlist the aid of others – church members, friends, who can sustain them, spiritually, physically and emotionally.

Don't forget them.

Remember the strong words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 1: 4: which we have already quoted - *'God comforts us in all our troubles so we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.'* (LVGB) Your words may be just what they need that day. That is how God can use you and your experience. Try it.

Anger and intense loneliness can also be part of our grieving process. We can be angry with everyone who we think might have been involved in any way – from God Himself, right down to those we think may have been even partly responsible for our tragic loss. Then there is the never-ending loneliness that only brings home to us, every moment of every day, the depth of our loss. The marks of grief go deep.

HELP FOR GRIEF

How each person handles grief may vary enormously and this can have a lasting effect on our entire lifestyle. Each of us will deal with it in his or her own way. This booklet was written with the hope it may help you when you are faced with a crisis situation, and/or grief threatens to overwhelm you and that most of all, Jesus Christ may become very real to you. As the hymn says: 'He can whisper words of comfort, which no other voice can speak.'

Remember the Bible views grief over the death of a loved one as part of the normal experiences of life but with this major difference for those who know Jesus Christ: Paul tells us clearly that we need not be 'full of sorrow as those who have no hope.' Why? Because we can see them again. Paul adds this clear statement that when Jesus comes again, He will bring with Him all those who died before that time and who had trusted in Christ as their Saviour (1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 14). What a wonderful hope we can have in Christ.

That hope can be yours if you and your loved ones know Jesus Christ personally.

WHO CAN HELP US NOW?

Often a well meaning friend may say “I know how you feel,” but really they don’t, they can’t; because we are all different. We express and feel our grief differently. The first one to turn to is Jesus Christ but He also uses human instruments to help us bear our loss. While here on earth, He personally knew what it was to grieve and to grieve deeply or to suffer loss. Upon hearing the news of the shocking murder of His cousin, John the Baptist, (Matthew 14: 12-13) He wanted to retreat and grieve over His loss. The crowds followed Him and He had to keep His grief to Himself and take care of the crowds.

When Jesus visited the grave of His friend Lazarus, He wept (John 11:35), because He saw what the death of His friend had done to the two sisters, Mary and Martha. On another occasion He wept over Jerusalem because He knew what was ahead for that city (Luke 19:41). Tears are a natural, healing release in the grieving process. Jesus experienced grief and He knew what it was to weep and He can help us when we are faced with grief.

Also remember, our God is called *‘the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort’* (2 Corinthians 1:3) and He can be very near to you in your experience of sadness or loss.

My prayer for you is this: May you prove what God can do for you in your particular situation. May His loving arms surround you. May the hope He can give be like an anchor in the storm of your grief. Most of all may Jesus Christ be very real to you as your own personal Saviour, now and for all eternity. He is waiting to hear from you, asking Him to come into your life, if He is not there already. Talk with Him now and open your heart to Him. Remember these words which He said: *‘I am standing at the door of your heart. If you will open the door I will come in.’* This is His promise. Act on it today.

HOW CAN I HELP OTHERS WHO ARE GRIEVING?

Pray regularly for them – lift them up to our Heavenly Father.

Listen to them – even if it is the same story told over and over. Don’t preach – don’t say much – just be there.

If death is the cause of their grief, remember the anniversaries of the death, also the first Christmas, birthday, special occasions.

Don’t tell the person concerned that they should not feel that way. It is their grief, and their pain even if we consider the cause of the grief to be unimportant.

Telephone them often and include them in social activities.

us. Read Psalm 55:22. If our pain is too deep or too intense to formulate words, just using the word 'Jesus' will suffice and let the Holy Spirit take over.

Read some of the Psalms for comfort, such as Psalm 91 or Psalm 23

Journal – writing about our deep feelings is an outlet and can be very helpful in our healing.

Don't over-medicate– we must eventually face up to our loss in order for healing to take place.

Read books by men and women who have faced and overcome similar situations.

Keep your physical body healthy with right eating and exercising.

If it is necessary, seek to forgive, otherwise the cancer of bitterness will eat away at your mind and heart.

Give your grief back to God and ask Him to use it for His glory. Remember Joseph– see how God can turn bad circumstances into good (Genesis 50:21).

Be thankful and appreciate those things and persons that are still part of your world. Sometimes we can be so locked up in our own grief that we fail to recognise that we may be pushing others away and perhaps inadvertently causing them 'sorrow upon sorrow'.

The beautiful well known words of Psalm 23 can become so meaningful to us: *'Even though I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, because you are close beside me.'* (Psalm 23:4.) Cling to these promises. You will prove them true. Write these words on your heart: *'The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.'*

THE GRIEF PROCESS

There are different opinions on the stages of grief but the stages I will focus on may be summarised in four descriptive words: **shock**, **realisation**, **acceptance** and **recovery**. Denial and anger of course are often present also. The time taken to move through each of these stages varies from person to person. But remember this: human emotions don't obey a strict timetable or formula. Some people will spend longer in one stage than another person may. It has been said 'grief is a tangled ball of emotions' – from anger to loneliness, helplessness to despair, fear to bitterness plus many other emotions, often all mixed together.

Remember this also – to express grief is not wrong. Surely if we loved the one who has left us, there will be a strong reaction within ourselves. One of the saddest but perhaps the most beautiful expressions of grief in the Bible is found in 2 Samuel 18:33. News of his son Absalom's death had just reached King David.

His words of sorrow are so moving: ‘O Absalom, my son Absalom! My son, my son, if only I had died instead of you.’ Say how you feel. Talk about the loved one who has gone on. It would be strange if you did not miss your loved one. Sometimes just talking about them can bring back happy memories and help in the grieving process.

OUR FIRST REACTION

For most of us our first reaction is **shock**. When the death of a loved one is sudden and unexpected, the remaining partner often collapses. I recall the death of my father when I was a small boy. He had been ill less than 18 hours. As we surrounded his bed, he pointed to each of us then pointed upwards, and he died. I have never forgotten watching my mother collapse in the arms of my older brother. He gently led her to a nearby bed. It was some time before she recovered and we were able to leave the hospital. The emotional reaction almost always has physical ramifications.

This brief state has been named ‘temporary anesthesia.’ It can be prolonged by a strange feeling of numbness. Usually this is not so severe if the loved one has been ill over a considerable period of time. Where the passing has been sudden, accidental or unexpected, it may continue over a much longer period.

look up and press on with Christ.

Remember, the experiences you may have had can often be a very real help to others. Paul said it so well: (2 Corinthians 1:3-4) *‘God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in trouble, with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.’* What you have learned in the situation you have been through can be passed on to others and your experience could be a great help and blessing to those still in the first stages of grief. God does not waste our experiences but wants others to see what He can do for them in their hour of need as He has done for us.

Don’t lose sight of this point: healing from the pain of any devastating loss takes time. When it is the result of homicide or suicide of a close family member or friend, healing may take even longer. In our ‘microwave’ generation we want everything instantly. This will NOT happen in the process of grief.

WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

Here are several additional suggestions which may help us through the process of grief. We must not stay forever shackled to our grief and deny ourselves and others close to us, the abundant life Jesus Christ has promised.

Call out to God – He has promised to sustain

ACCEPTANCE

The third stage, **acceptance**, comes gradually but is the next step in realising the tremendous change that has occurred. For believers in Jesus Christ, it frequently means a quiet yielding to God's will with the knowledge His will is always best. Again our Lord knows what that step means – after all, He said, *'Not my will, but yours be done.'* Through the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in believers, we can receive the grace and strength to say those words ourselves. Acceptance and our next word recovery are very closely linked.

Sometimes our acceptance means we start looking around and try to discover what God has planned for us. It may mean new ways and means of serving others. All this can take time and we may want to move slowly but sooner or later, new doors will open and we'll discover God's will as we walk along life's road with Him.

RECOVERY

A year, two years may pass, then one day we look back and discover how far the Lord has led us. We see more clearly His hand in all that has taken place. We feel we can ask Him now for new ways to serve Him. There are those who we can help as we have been helped. There are others who need comfort. Out of our own experience we can tell them what Jesus Christ can mean in their lives. Soon doors open everywhere and we

This state of shock can occur in many other situations. The services of a long-term employee are suddenly and unexpectedly terminated. He cleans out his desk and shuffles to his car but hardly knows what he is doing. Several days may pass before the reality of it all registers. Many other similar circumstances can cause severe, temporary shock.

THE MINISTRY OF FRIENDS

It is most important during this stage of grief for friends and loved ones to be with and alongside the person concerned. I have often said at funerals that while it is comforting to see so many friends present, it's even more important for those same friends to be in touch with the widow or the family in the days and weeks ahead. Sympathy cards can help but the personal presence of a caring friend can mean even more. Often a good listener is the greatest help of all. This holds good no matter what grief.

Sometimes death of the loved one may take a long time to fully register. Setting the meal table can be a sharp reminder that the loved one has died. The empty chair can bring a moving moment of sadness. Opening your front door and finding the house empty, with no voice responding to your entry, can very easily bring on a wave of grief. Remember, all healing takes time.

SAYING GOOD-BYE

The second stage is **'realisation'**. Sooner or later, there comes the understanding that our loved one has left us and will not return. It is time to recognise this fact. In this aspect of grief, it is sometimes helpful for the remaining loved one to take part in the arrangements for the funeral of the one who has departed. This may or may not help bring home the finality of their loss. Don't avoid the word 'death' it could also help with the realisation that the loved one has gone from us.

At first, there may have been denial –'It can't be true.' Anger may have entered into our grief also. 'Why should this happen to me? Why has God allowed it? Isn't He supposed to be a God of love?'

DEALING WITH THEIR BELONGINGS

Sometimes a wife, parent or partner refuses to face the new situation and insists on keeping the loved one's image or sense of his or her presence alive. A young man was killed in an accident. His parents kept his room for many years just as he had left it the day he died. A wife refused to give away any of her husband's clothes or personal belongings, simply because they were his. In such cases, people refuse to acknowledge the fact of death and the separation involved. They stay pre-occupied with a past phase of life.

On the other hand there is no hard and fast timetable for disposing the loved one's belongings. Some families immediately clear out everything belonging to the deceased. Others do it only after several weeks or even months. There are of course those few special, personal possessions of the loved one who died which we want to keep. Family members may want to choose some of these to help remember their father, mother or other relative. But basically, most of the things our loved one used can be used again to help others. Why not allow this to happen?

Giving away the majority of the things the loved one left behind can often help to bring closure that frees the remaining loved one to move on in life. It may help in realising the finality of the separation and can often greatly help with the simple act of saying good-bye. Goodbyes are not easy. Yet for the believers in Jesus Christ, it does not mean: 'I will never see them again.' The loved one has gone on ahead and by the grace of God we will see them again.

Their going is similar to the information screens at any airport – one says the plane (our loved one) has departed but in the airport of the destination the board says: 'It (our loved one) has arrived.' What a wonderful hope for a believer in Jesus Christ! This hope is possible for everyone who truly has accepted Christ as Saviour and is seeking to live for Him.