

A GUIDE TO  
DEALING WITH GRIEF

# INTRODUCTION — FROM PASTOR JOSH WALTERS

The following pages will serve as a helpful guide for you as you navigate grief. By definition, a guide is someone or something that provides direction or a course of action. It's in our moments of pain, when we experience loss, that we often find ourselves at a crossroads. We ask, "Where do I go from here? What do I do now?" We are painfully aware that life will never be the same. We struggle to have the emotional or physical energy to move forward. We don't want to think about a future without those we love most. Simply put, their passing can be paralyzing.

If you are reading this, you've likely found yourself asking similar questions. As isolating as it feels, know that you are not alone. In fact, over 10,000 people google some version of the phrase, "How to deal with my grief" every month. Our stories, seasons of life, and circumstances are all different. However, there are some needed next steps we all must take to help us move forward, and we pray this guide will help you do just that. I encourage you to print out, write on, and revisit it as often as needed to help you on your journey.

For just over a decade, my dad battled stage 4 lymphoma. The cancer would surface, he'd have chemo and radiation, it would respond positively, doctors would keep an eye on it, but within a couple years, it would resurface again. Each round of treatment reintroduced feelings of fear, anxiety, and anger, as I was forced to imagine a world without my dad. After the third round of treatment, his body lost the ability to produce white blood cells, and for the next few years, he had blood transfusions weekly, until he started having somewhat unexplainable seizures. Doctors performed a brain biopsy which was an outpatient procedure at Duke. While in recovery, he formed a blood clot that slightly shifted his brain stem, leaving him bedridden, hardly able to communicate, and incapable of doing anything for himself.

We moved my dad, mom, sister, and grandma into our home for the next few months—until my dad passed on December 22, surrounded by our family. At the time, Katie and I had 6 kids, which meant there were 12 of us living in a single-family home, all processing pain in our own ways. Even now, almost four years later, my boys still ask me to share Pipaw stories at bedtime. I've watched our kids process the loss of their hero, my mom grieve the love of her life, and my wife grieve the loss of a best friend. His passing changed our lives. There are still days where I pick up the phone to call Dad only to remember he's gone.

As a pastor, I've officiated dozens of memorial services. At each, I've gotten to know the family, sat with them in their pain, and sought God on their behalf to best care for them. But, it wasn't until Dad's passing that I experienced the pain of grief myself. I needed a road map, a plan to help me move forward. In that season, God gave me a few steps, none of which brought an end to my grief, but they did help me move forward. They have served as a dance of sorts, with specific steps, that I repeat whenever grief returns and I find myself in a place of pain.

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NOW WHAT?  
HOW DO I MOVE FORWARD?

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# CELEBRATE THE PAST

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“The Lord cares deeply when his loved ones die.” —Psalm 116:15 (NLT)

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What do you do with the things you care deeply about, the things that are prized or precious in your life? You talk about them. When you are out to dinner, you tell stories about them. You display them in your home. Their memory stirs up feelings and emotions in you.

A big part of our healing, of processing our grief, is celebrating the gift that a loved one was to our lives. In our pain, our feelings can take over. We can begin to see and experience the world through a filter of despair. In these moments, it's important that we “take our thoughts captive” – that we tell ourselves what to think about to help bring about a change in our emotions.

I'll never forget visiting a woman in hospice with a mentor of mine. The family was exhausted emotionally and physically. They'd tried to stay by her side, holding her hand, rubbing her hair, encouraging her, and singing to her, well aware that death could come at any moment. Seeing their pain, my mentor turned to the woman's husband. “Tell me about her. How long have you been married? Where did you meet?” Amidst the pain and tears, her husband said, “Oh, that's a story.” He started laughing as he told the story of how their relationship began.

Grief can feel like a dead-end road. A place of pain and loneliness. Celebrating the past introduces gratitude into our grief and ultimately reminds us that death is not the end.

Below are a few questions for you to think about and discuss. For many of you, because of the nature of the relationship and past experiences, you may struggle to find things to celebrate. If that's you, you're not alone in your anger or confusion. We encourage you to find a licensed counselor who can help you process those feelings in order to move forward.

What was your favorite thing about them?

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What is one of your favorite stories?

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What is the funniest memory you have of them?

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What were their greatest attributes? How would people describe them?

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What did they love?

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Now, the keyword or action item is to “discuss.” Often, our thoughts alone won’t move us through places of pain. There is something about the spoken word. Sharing special stories and having conversations can bring smiles to our faces and allow tears of pain to become tears of joy.

Grief was never meant to be experienced alone. Pain—and more specifically, death—is a part of all of our stories. We will all experience the realities of pain and loss. It is the single greatest unifier of people, an experience all men and women will share. But it can also be a relational isolator. It’s tempting to withdraw in your pain. There is nothing anyone can say that will make it better. No person whose presence can fill the void you feel. However, it’s crucial that we celebrate the past with friends and loved ones.

Think about the last celebration you were a part of. Regardless of the purpose, place, or décor—people were a key part of it. Whether a wedding, a retirement, a graduation, an anniversary, a baby shower, or a birthday, there was a purpose for the gathering, and the people who showed up had stories, memories, and feelings unique to them. In our grief, it can be hard to start talking. Stories give way to tears and it’s easier to sit in silence. But both hearing and sharing stories has a way of helping us focus on the gift that our loved one was to us and to others. While grief may seem to be an emotion or experience put on us, celebrating the past is a choice we get to make. It is a response to our pain that introduces gratitude to our grief and helps us begin to move forward.

### NEXT STEPS

- >> Respond to the questions above, not just in your mind, but take the time to write out your answers.
- >> Invite some friends or loved ones to celebrate the past with you. It doesn’t have to be a formal conversation. Maybe it’s over dinner or while sitting around the house. Tee up one of the above questions for the group and see what happens.
- >> Repeat as needed. Laughter is a part of every celebration at some point. Celebrating the past can help you bring about some authentically positive emotions.

STEP  
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## GRIEVE THE PRESENT

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“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” —Psalm 34:18 (NIV)

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None of us enjoy experiencing negative emotions. The last thing we want is to stay in our grief. We’d rather look for a way to escape the pain or do anything to bring about a smile. But it is important that we allow ourselves to grieve, to cry, to be broken.

Grief is not an emotion we graduate from. You may be angry at a friend, unhappy with a job, or frustrated with a circumstance, but given some space and time, relational tension gets resolved, things get better, and work and circumstances change. Many of our emotions relating to our “present” have a way of changing over time and working themselves out. But grief never goes away. I’ve heard it said that time heals all wounds. That is a lie. God can heal all wounds; time alone just compounds the pain. That said, the deep ache of grief does not go away on this side of Heaven, though its ability to paralyze you, can.

Have you ever been pulled on a tube behind a boat? If the rope is only 10-15 feet long, every time you cross the wake, it has the potential to throw you up in the air, off the tube, and into the water. But, if the rope is 50-60 feet long, you could cross the wake, and it barely moves you physically. You’re still on the tube, wind in your hair, relatively powerless in controlling your experience, but you aren’t jarred and jerked nearly as much physically. Time’s impact on our grief is similar. The experience of grief stays with you. It’s a ride you’ll stay on for the rest of your life. However, as time passes, memories that once broke you down immediately won’t be quite as paralyzing.

But if that’s the best that the passing of time has to offer, the question then is: how do I grieve in the present? What does that look like, and how will God use it to help bring about healing?

My dad was a Marine. The brotherhood among Marines always amazed me. Anywhere, anytime, if he saw a man wearing a hat, who was in camo or dress blues, he’d strike up a conversation, encourage, and thank them. Since his passing, I’ve tried to do the same. Every time I see a Marine, I think about my dad. Recently, a Marine pulled up beside me at a stoplight. I thought, *What would dad do? He’d*

*have rolled down the window and said some Marine thing and thanked him for his service. So, I rolled down the window, motioned for him to do the same, went to say thank you for your service, and out of nowhere, I started ugly crying while trying to say, "Thank you for your service."*

I can only imagine that Marine must have been thinking, *What is wrong with this guy?* That's how grief works. One moment you are driving up the road. Then in a moment, you see, hear, think, or feel something that brings about an emotional response that is seemingly uncontrollable. In these moments, we have two options: sit in it or stuff it. We can sit in pain, allow the tears to flow, and let the emotions run their course. Or we can stuff it—dry the tears, think about something else, and move on with the day. Why is it important that we allow ourselves to grieve in the present? When you don't express grief, you delay your own healing. Or worse, you project your pain on others because hurting people hurt people.

**Do you tend to express your emotions or stuff them? Explain.**

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**When have you projected your pain on others?**

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I've had Psalm 34:18 memorized for a long time: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." But somewhere along the way, I added a word, "The Lord draws close to the brokenhearted..." I've since gone back to look at every translation to see if any of them uses the word, "draws." Nope, I added that myself. As if there were a delay or lag time, God sees us hurting, but he's got a lot going on. It's going to take him a bit to 'draw close' to us. But that's not what it says. In our brokenness, he *is* close.

How do you feel when you read, “the Lord is close to the brokenhearted”?

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Psalm 147:3 says it this way, “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

The imagery used in this text is of an open cut or wound being pressed to stop the bleeding, to ease the pain. God presses in to heal, to draw close. When we don’t allow ourselves to break down, we don’t allow him to pick us up. When we don’t allow ourselves to come undone emotionally, we don’t let him put us back together. When we don’t acknowledge the reality of our despair, we don’t allow him to bring hope.

Family, friends, work, and the worries of the day demand a lot of your time and attention in the “present,” and it’s tempting to give yourself to all of the stuff outside of you. However, what you’re experiencing inside is the most important in this season. Allowing yourself to grieve in the present will let God do the work that only he can do to help you begin to move forward. Grieving in the present looks like expressing the pain within you in your own way.

### NEXT STEPS

- >> Take some time to respond to the questions above.
  
- >> Give yourself space to grieve the next time you need to. When a memory gives way to emotion, and you find yourself tender, close your door, go sit in the car, do whatever is needed to find some space where you can cry, scream or pray. Just don’t stuff the emotion.
  
- >> Invite God into these moments. In the same way a hurting child calls out for a parent, cry out to God. Trust him at his word and take him up on his promise. Remind yourself that he is close and ask him to comfort you.

STEP  
3

## HAVE HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.” —1 Thessalonians 4:13 (NIV)

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In the midst of our pain, we have hope. We grieve as people with hope. The Bible tells us that God gave us his spirit as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. In the same way, I believe he gives us people in our lives to love deeply, so that when they pass, we are forced to face the reality of our eternal future. For some people, their eternity is left to question. When in reality, the good news about Jesus is that our eternity can be secure. The finished work of Jesus on the cross has guaranteed what is to come.

**In the midst of your grief, do you have hope? Explain.**

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John 11:25 says, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.”

There is life after death. Try to imagine a place so glorious, so beautiful, and so perfect that 1 Corinthians 2:9 describes it this way, “No eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” —the things God has prepared for those who love him.

I’ve heard it said that most people don’t think about Heaven until they’ve made a deposit in it. Once a loved one moves on to eternity, it serves as an invitation to think and feel differently about our future. We are asked to hold in our hands, two opposing realities: the deep pain of grief, and the hope of Heaven. In having hope for the future, we remember that this world is not our home. There will come a day when our pain will be no more, and we will experience the fullness of life that we’ve always longed for.

**What comes to mind when you think about Heaven?**

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If you find yourself questioning your eternal home, you can have hope for your future. Romans 10:9 gives us a simple invitation: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Again, there is power in the spoken word. Say it out loud, “Jesus is Lord.” Tell God that you believe Jesus died on the cross for your sin and rose from the grave, conquering sin and death, and you will be saved.

What does that actually mean though? Why should that give me hope? The word “sin” literally means to miss the mark. The Bible tells us that all of us have sinned and missed the mark (Romans 3:23). No one is good enough or holy enough in God’s eyes. The Bible also tells us that what we have earned because of our sin is death (Romans 6:23). Now, if you are reading this, you are alive. So here is the question: if we have all sinned and, as a result, earned death, do you think the Bible is talking about physical death or spiritual death? Some sins could lead to physical death, but the answer is spiritual death, which means being spiritually separated from God, both in this life and for eternity.

But Jesus came to pay the price for our sin. The Bible says that “He who knew no sin, became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) Jesus took our sin upon himself. He paid the price for our sin. He did away with our guilt and shame. He came to set us free from sin and death. So when you say that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. You can have a relationship with God because of the price Jesus paid. The Bible tells us that there is no other name under Heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). By putting your faith in Jesus, you can have hope for the future, confidence that death is not the end of your story, but the gateway to your eternal home.

**Have you declared with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? Do you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead?**

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Life is never going to be the same. The loss of our loved ones creates pain that will never go away on this side of Heaven. But, life will be good again. As we shift our focus from today's grief to the hope of tomorrow, we'll be reminded that death is not the end of the story. There is life after death, and it is found in Jesus! Because of that, we can have hope.

## NEXT STEPS

- >> Take time to answer the questions above.
- >> Grab a Post-it note or create a daily calendar invite. Do something to confront yourself with this question daily: "Have I thought about Heaven today?" Imagining, visualizing the promise of eternity will give you hope for tomorrow amidst the grief of today.
- >> Consider finding comfort in community, whether by participating in [GriefShare](https://seacoast.org/griefshare) (seacoast.org/griefshare), seeing a counselor, or confiding in a friend. You are not alone. Processing with others not only reminds you of that, but helps you move forward.

We all grieve differently, and the intensity of our grief, whether perceived as too little or too much or too long or too short, does not mean that something is wrong with us or those around us. We just all feel differently and express emotion differently.

If you find yourself feeling stuck, paralyzed in your grief, questioning: What do I do now? I invite you to learn this dance. Repeat these steps over and over so that grief can be a place that you visit instead of a home where you've taken up residence.

Psalm 23:4 says it this way, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Though alive, you may feel like death in the loneliness, the isolation, the deep despair. Do not stay in the valley. Keep taking steps to walk through it. God is with you.