

# Good Mourning

*Getting through Your Grief*

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# Preface

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As a professor of pastoral care, I am asked often to suggest a good book for someone who has suffered a significant loss. Requests come from students, ministers, colleagues, church members, family members, friends, and neighbors. Sometimes they want to read the book themselves. More often, they want someone they care about to read it. Either way, they seek assistance with getting through grief, dealing with sorrow, or a related goal having to do with the hole in someone's life produced by an experience of loss.

I attribute these frequent requests to the persistent nature of loss. Sooner or later it touches all of us. Some people experience a multitude of losses. Most of us know individuals or families for whom one loss after another has occurred. We may find ourselves saying about these persons: "How much more can they take?" or "I cannot imagine dealing with what they have." Others may experience loss with less frequency, but loss is a part of life for us all. As a result, most of us want to enlist whatever help we can for getting through our losses and helping others get through theirs.

Other factors inform requests for a good book on loss. When we sustain a loss, some of us want and need to *reflect* on what has occurred. We want to understand our experience of loss. We need to think about what has been lost. We want to think about how to push ahead and live with the absence of what we love. Perhaps we also need to do any or all of this at our own pace and on our own terms. We want to approach

dealing with loss in a way that feels like a good fit with respect to where we are, who we are, and what we deem distinctive about ourselves, our experiences, and our needs. Reading a book on loss can help.

At the same time, some of us want ways of dealing with loss that don't *necessarily* involve talking about it with others, at least not immediately or in an extended way. I have in mind here those who are reluctant to join "grief recovery" groups or to engage in "grief therapy." But I also have in mind those who are not inclined to share their painful experiences with family members, friends, close associates, or even their minister—at least not for the time being. Sometimes we need to begin a journey of getting through loss more or less alone. We want to get oriented on the highway of loss before committing to travel across its long miles, especially with a companion. A good book on loss can help with this orientation.

For some, reading a good book on loss can provide sufficient support. A book helps them gain perspective on their experiences and inspires what needs to occur in order to "get through" loss. For most of us, though, a good book on loss will be the impetus for securing additional helps and resources. These might include a support group, in-depth counseling, or intentional conversations with a minister or other caregiver. But while many of us will benefit from sharing painful experiences with others at some point, how and when this happens will vary from person to person.

We may read a book on loss in conjunction with other supports. In fact, a multifaceted approach may best provide what most of us need. Whatever approach you feel is best for you, however, I hope that this book will help you live with your loss and experience personal, relational, and spiritual growth along the way.

# Introduction

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If you are reading this book, you are probably grieving a significant loss. Perhaps your parent, spouse, child, partner, or other loved one has died or has a severe illness. Maybe your marriage or another significant relationship has ended. Possibly you have realized that conceiving a child or parenting a healthy child will not be in your future. Perhaps you have discovered that embarking on a particular vocation, ascending to the heights of your profession, or some other long-held dream is now impossible to fulfill. You might have lost a job that you loved and that gave you a deep sense of purpose. Maybe you have become aware of your declining ability to function physically, intellectually, or creatively. Or you have moved from your familiar surroundings and roots, and you now experience strange environments or routines. Perhaps you have had some other kind of loss. You find yourself living in a strange new world marked by the absence of what you loved and lost. You need support, understanding, and guidance as you try to get your bearings. You want help for finding your way through grief. This book seeks to provide some aid.

## THE NATURE OF LOSS

Each human being experiences loss uniquely. We find similarities across people's experiences, but no person's grief unfolds exactly like

another's. As in an experience of love, we encounter loss in ways that become distinctly our own. My grief is mine. Your grief is yours. Joe's grief is his own, too. Each of us will encounter grief in our own way. Still, it's tempting to try to quantify our losses or grief experiences and compare them to those of others.

We easily find ourselves engaging in such comparisons. For example, witnessing a friend sobbing at a funeral service while the rest of her family members remain more or less composed, we assume that our friend grieves more intensely than the rest of her family. We might also assume that our friend loved the deceased person more than the others did, and will miss the deceased more than they will. But these assumptions may be misguided. We all grieve in our own ways. A person who sobs may not feel any more pain than a person who appears composed. Similarly, a person who laughs as she tells stories about her loved one may hurt and grieve just as much as the person who remains quiet and appears rather stoic. People grieve differently. It's true that we can support and learn from one another by sharing our experiences. At the same time, assuming too much commonality among the bereaved leads to neglecting the uniqueness of each person's experience. This neglect does injustice to and further injures already hurting persons.

The need to avoid quantifying or comparing grief experiences also holds when considering various losses experienced by the same person. Sometimes people wonder why one experience of loss seems so different from another. Often they begin to speculate about why they are not coping as well this time, or, instead, why they are not having a harder time on this occasion, given how difficult the previous loss was for them. They compare their multiple experiences of loss, assuming that each one calls for a similar response.

But just as different people grieve differently, any one of us may respond in a different manner from one loss to another. Numerous factors influence our responses. These include what or whom we have lost, how the loss occurred, the nature of our relationship to the loss, and other variables relating to our physical, emotional, relational, economic, and spiritual states. So it's worth keeping in mind that different people grieve in different ways, but that the same people grieve in different ways too. One loss does not necessarily feel like another.

Our differences notwithstanding, these words from the poet Elizabeth Jennings capture the essence of loss for many of us.

Time does not heal,  
It makes a half-stitched scar  
That can be broken and you feel  
Grief as total as in its first hour.<sup>1</sup>

Losing someone or something significant leaves a lasting scar. Its state of healing remains uncertain. Occasionally, this scar reopens to expose a painful wound of absence that accompanies us through life. This poem recognizes that loss lasts a long time and its effects accumulate. Losses stay with us. They take hold of us and can influence how we experience life. Losses affect our relationships, hopes for the future, and the risks that we are willing to take. We can learn to live in the midst of loss with a degree of peace and acceptance, but it is very rare to “get over” a significant loss. Why? Because losses leave “half-stitched” scars that mark us emotionally, relationally, physically, and spiritually. Newly experienced losses can lance scars left by previous losses. These previous losses may prompt us to feel the rawness of present losses more severely and persistently than we would otherwise.

A friend of mine experienced the effects that previous losses can have on present ones when his cousin committed suicide. As my friend describes the experience, “One morning not long after my cousin died, as I read the Bible and prayed, out of nowhere I began weeping and big hot tears started falling on the page. It shocked me because my cousin and I were never close; he was twenty years younger. But then I realized that the tears were not just for him. His death was only the trigger. My tears were really for my father and brother and sister who had died, and whose deaths I had not mourned in a healthy way.”

Another example of how present losses can reawaken previous ones is when a person experiences the loss of a marriage through divorce after having experienced the loss of a parent years before. The grief experienced over the divorce is itself substantial. But it worsens due to the emotional residue left by the previous loss (the death of a parent) that has not yet been mourned. The scar from the loss of the parent opens because of the lost marriage, which leaves its own lasting scar. One grief counselor, Dorothy S. Becvar, has characterized the result of the cumulative scars that losses deposit. We need to learn to live “in the presence of grief.”<sup>2</sup>

Another poet, Anne Sexton, offers the image of a “dead heart” to describe what it feels like to suffer loss. For many grievers, and perhaps for you, this dead heart resides strangely inside, injured and

unpredictable. It can fashion you into a stranger, to yourself and others. I have written this book for anyone whose *own* heart feels as if it is dying. It is a book for those sporting scars in body, mind, or spirit that have formed, opened, or reopened because of loss.

The loss of someone or something significant produces predictable responses. These include feelings of sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, hopelessness, frustration, guilt or regret, exhaustion, loneliness, relief, and yearning for what we no longer have in our lives. We may also notice that loss affects how we think. Loss generates shock and disbelief, confusion, memory loss, and an inability to concentrate. Loss can impact the ability to sleep, and it can result in frequent dreams or nightmares having to do with what we have lost. Sustaining a loss can also affect how we behave. We may find it difficult to communicate with others or get along with them. Or we discover that following loss we withdraw from significant relationships, devote less energy to work or work-related matters, or spend less time on hobbies and other passions.

Losses can affect us physically, too. They can cause nausea, a sensation of emptiness inside, heart palpitations, jitteriness, dizziness, and exhaustion. In more severe cases, loss may trigger the inability to feel altogether. This is the menacing nature of loss. It can rob us of the ability to feel. In these cases, the “dead heart” numbs us to life and, with this, to love and hope. Finding yourself with this kind of heart can make you fear that it will never live again. This fear makes the struggle with grief even more severe.

Time alone will not heal grief, as Elizabeth Jennings suggests in her poem. Still, what we experience during the passing of time after a loss has much to do with our health, wholeness, and vitality. How we consider our losses, approach living with them, and what we do or refrain from doing in their aftermath matters a great deal. Our responses to loss affect the extent to which we find relief from the “totality” of our pain. We may learn to respond to loss in ways that keep our scars intact and minimize the frequency and degree to which our wounds are exposed as we travel the never-ending path of life after loss.

## **BEREAVEMENT, GRIEF, AND MOURNING**

It is useful to distinguish between three terms associated with experiences of loss: *bereavement*, *grief*, and *mourning*. Although these terms get used interchangeably, each has a distinct meaning.



*Bereavement* is the most general of these three terms. It refers to the fact that one has experienced a significant loss. When we identify someone as bereaved, we mean that she lives with the absence of what she once loved or valued. She lives on “this side” of a loss. Bereavement serves as an umbrella term that simply notes the occurrence of loss. It offers little in the way of specifics.

*Grief*, on the other hand, refers to something more specific. It describes the various painful and complex psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, behavioral, and relational responses to loss that one endures. Typical grief responses include a whole host of feelings, thoughts, behaviors, spiritual or religious questions, relational challenges, and many stressors. To say that we grieve means that a loss has occurred, but also that we are responding to that loss in noticeable ways. These responses are expected and natural. We *need* to grieve when we lose someone or something important to us. Grieving prepares us for mourning.

*Mourning* proceeds from an experience of grief. As will become clear, we need to grieve before we can mourn. I will use the term *mourning* to refer to the process by which a bereaved person gradually changes her relationship to what has been lost, so that an emotional investment in new relationships and other aspects of life may occur. Mourning describes the manner of getting through loss over time. Mourning certainly involves continued grieving, but the mourning process also involves learning how to live with a lasting void created by what we have lost.

None of us looks forward to the loss of what we love. But given the fact that these losses occur, we do well to think about how best to live with them. Even if we don’t get over losses completely, we can learn to live more at peace in their presence. The mourning process provides for this peace. But mourning does not happen by itself. It must be sought and intentionally engaged. I would even say that mourning requires active pursuit. It takes energy, effort, focus, and yes, hard work to experience good mourning.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book provides straight talk about grief—the ways people experience loss. It likewise focuses on specific strategies for moving through losses in ways that foster physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual

benefits. This process of moving through losses is called *mourning*. The book's title, *Good Mourning*, indicates that mourning is in fact good or desirable. When we sustain a significant loss, we need to mourn it. Mourning our losses is a worthy goal.

One way that we can experience “good” mourning is to mourn well. What does mourning well mean? It means at least two things. First, mourning can occur with greater or lesser “benefits.” By this I mean an outcome marked by a measure of health, wholeness, renewed faith and hope, and overall well-being that lends support for living with loss. We may mourn well or not so well, in helpful or unhelpful ways.

“Mourning well” also suggests the image of a fount or wellspring—a source of life, perhaps—that we may tap for renewal. So “mourning” invites us to look within ourselves for what we need to sustain us as we try to continue living. Part 1 pays particular attention to how, on the one hand, we may look within ourselves to grasp the effects of loss and determine what we need to move through it. On the other hand, the principal “life source” that we need to tap in mourning is God and what God promises to provide. Recall Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman as they stood beside a well of water: “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13–14). This book will encourage you to discover ways for tapping the wellspring that God provides.

You might want to view this book as demonstrating the “good” in mourning by focusing on how to mourn in ways that benefit you. This is the first connotation of “mourning well.” But the book also suggests how to tap the divine source of repair or renewal, the second connotation of “mourning well.” This wellspring of life is *your* mourning well. It will sustain you through loss.

The book's subtitle, “Getting through Your Grief,” indicates that how we approach mourning, or the “strategies” employed to get through our grief, has much to do with the benefits we discover. We foster our “mourning well” (benefits) and draw most efficiently from our “mourning well” (God as the source of life) by first considering the “what” of grief. The “what” of grief asks questions like: What makes loss so difficult? What effect does loss have on us? What helps us cope with loss in ways that lead to good mourning? Part 1 attends to these “what” questions.

But then we need to ask the “so what?” questions of mourning. These “so what?” questions include: How do I find the strength to go on? How do I begin to put my life back together? Will I ever love again? Can I ever be happy again? To answer these “so what?” questions, in part 2 we consider what mourning requires, what promotes “good” mourning, and what role faith and prayer can play in mourning well.

A focus on the “what” of grief (part 1) considers typical grief responses, so that we understand what usually happens when we suffer loss. Greater understanding will help you map your own experience. It may shed light on what to expect as you go forward. Understanding also helps you feel less troubled by your seemingly odd and unanticipated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that accompany grief. A focus on the “so what?” accompanying loss (part 2) will help you consider ways to encourage good mourning and discover answers to the kinds of questions previously cited. These mourning strategies will help you navigate your way through loss in healthier and more faithful ways.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

It may be best to wait a few months after your loss to read this book. Why? Because it usually takes a few months of grieving before we are prepared to mourn. For most people, this process takes time. Initially following a loss, we feel shocked, confused, disoriented, angry, unsettled, and a host of other feelings. These experiences demand so much from us that we have little energy left to give to matters beyond our most basic needs. In other words, for the first few days and weeks following a significant loss, we usually lack the energy, focus, and desire required for mourning. We benefit, therefore, from giving ourselves some time for “finding our bearings” or “waking back up to life.” In order to mourn well, grief needs its own time, attention, and focus.

If, however, you happen to be reading this book before the three-month mark, I would encourage you to read it again after a few more months have passed. Wherever you may be in the journey through loss, you can benefit from repetition with regard to the strategies I have suggested. It may even be helpful to reread the book every few months for the first year or two after your loss. Though this may sound like a lot of work, this repetitive reading will likely benefit you as you mourn.

Keep in mind, too, that you need not read this book in a single sitting, or two or three sittings. It may prove most beneficial to read a chapter or two at a time, sit with it for a while, and then return to read more. Or perhaps it will be most beneficial to read the same chapter or chapters more than once before moving on to the next one. There is no rush to get through the book.

## FINDING BLESSINGS IN MOURNING

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of blessings in mourning. He said: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4). Jesus recognizes the inseparable link between mourning and comfort. We find comfort to the extent that we mourn. Mourning well and the comfort that this provides is what God desires for our lives. Mourning is no easy task. In fact, there may be nothing more difficult than truly mourning a significant loss. So much in the culture around us tends to minimize our experiences of loss, and thus our need for mourning. Some people, usually well-intentioned, may urge you to “get on with life” and “get over it” just as you begin experiencing the intense pain associated with your loss. Responses like these may serve to make an already demanding journey even more difficult.

Embarking on a mourning journey requires a voyage into our deepest fears and uncertainties. It also invites us to encounter our foremost sources of trust and hope. But we often find these sources by daring first to discover and live with our fears and uncertainties. As you embark on the next phase of your own journey through loss, remember Jesus’ assurance that this journey, however lonely and treacherous, is the only path finally to comfort and blessing. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” he tells us. May this be so for you!

## PART 1

# What?—Experiencing Loss

Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. Like a moth in clothing or a worm in wood, sorrow gnaws at the human heart.

*Proverbs 25:20*

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

*Psalms 13:2*

The eager fate which carried thee  
Took the largest part of me:  
For this losing is true dying;  
This is lordly man's down-lying,  
This his slow but sure reclining,  
Star by star his world resigning.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Poems*

## What Makes Loss So Difficult?

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Why must we suffer loss? This may be one of the oldest questions that people have asked. Who among us has not imagined a world where loss never occurred? Who has not dreamed of a life where we did not have to endure when what we love leaves us or is taken away? Sometimes this question of why we face losses takes on a religious or spiritual tone. We wonder why God could not have made life so that we forgo loss and keep all that we cherish forever. The writer of Ecclesiastes provides a partial answer. He assures us that “for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (3:1, 2, 4). Joined to the rhythm of life in its various seasons, somehow loss fits with the divine realm, just like “every matter under heaven.”

But anyone who has suffered a profound loss will likely balk at the notion that accepting life’s seasons comes naturally or easily. The question of *why* life’s seasons unfold as they do, and especially why we sustain losses in the various seasons of life, remains at the forefront. We may never find sufficient answers to every question relating to why we suffer loss. But these are valid questions and we should ask them, and sometimes we find answers. At the same time, however, the Christian faith provides hope for living with unanswered questions. As we live with our questions and await answers, we benefit from a fuller understanding of the experience of loss, and especially what makes loss so difficult.

## OUR CAPACITY FOR RELATIONSHIP

When thinking about why we grieve and why loss hurts so much we need to recognize two traits that all of us share. First, we have the capacity for love, affection, and devotion to others. We form attachments or bonds to people and things. This begins at birth and continues throughout life. We form our first attachments to parents and others in our immediate family. These people constitute our first life environment and interpersonal world, conveying what the world is like. As we mature, our attachments multiply. They extend beyond the immediate family to take in the larger world. We form a wider array of connections to various people and environments. These connections continue to link us with life and the world around us. Psychologists sometimes use the terms “attachment figure” or “object” to indicate what we attach ourselves to in these ways.

The figures or objects to which we become attached throughout life include other people. These may be living or deceased, and may consist of individuals, groups, or larger communities of people. We attach ourselves to parents, children, and other family members. We also form attachments to friends, colleagues, teachers, schoolmates, neighbors, team members, and ministers and those in our faith communities. Our strongest attachments, or *primary* attachments, involve those with whom we feel most closely connected in life. Typical examples include spouses, children, parents, partners, and also our closest friends.

But we also form strong attachments with animals, and particular places, regions, and countries. We find ourselves drawn to various hobbies and activities that provide a deep sense of joy and satisfaction. Likewise, we become attached to a host of other things that bestow a sense of meaning, purpose, or identity. These include our role or status in the family, at work, or in a community, church, club, or other group to which we belong. Our vocation, job, or career also bestows meaning, purpose, and identity. So, too, do our life dreams, plans for the future, religious faith, political ideals, and whatever else that informs what we value and who we understand ourselves to be.

Regardless of its object, every attachment that we form has something in common. Each attachment provides for what we desire and need most in life. These desires and needs include love and affection, physical closeness to others, social and relational benefits, and a sense of being valued as we also find value in others. These attachments pro-

vide as well for our sense of safety and security.<sup>1</sup> They serve as the basis for feeling that life is sufficiently predictable and benevolent. They also help us understand who we are, giving us a sense of self.

When the bonds to our significant attachments are threatened or cut, we feel less safe and secure. We feel less confident in the benevolence of life and the world around us. We may even feel that we have lost a part of ourselves. An experience of loss, therefore, touches our very core. Although any significant loss generates the pain and suffering of grief, the losses causing the most severe pain involve our strongest attachments. Our most important relationships, marked by the deepest investments of affection, bring about the most intense grief. The first trait common to all of us, and a reason that we grieve what we lose, is that we inherently form attachments that provide us with what we need most in life.

### **SOONER OR LATER, WE EXPERIENCE LOSS**

A second trait common to human beings is that we suffer loss. At some point in our lives, loss visits us all. Eventually, we face separation from people or things that we are attached to. When this happens, we lose pleasure and the sense of safety, security, and meaning that we have enjoyed.

We usually think of loss foremost in terms of the death of a loved person. For most people this is the definitive form of loss that causes the most severe pain. But keep in mind that we experience loss in all sorts of ways throughout life. Our loss may have nothing to do with a physical death, and yet it feels as if a death has occurred. We benefit from enlarging our perception of loss by considering the various ways that it occurs. Whether a loss has to do with significant persons or other things that we cherish and value, it can inflict untold pain. Understanding the extensive nature of loss helps us to recognize various types of losses as they come our way. Recognizing them, we may better anticipate and prepare for the struggles that they bring.

### **WHAT IF WE DID NOT EXPERIENCE LOSS?**

What if we did not suffer losses in life? Has this question ever occurred to you? Most of us have imagined a life without loss, where we did not



have to endure the absence of what we love. We may imagine this kind of life just as we experience a significant loss ourselves, or as we prepare for one. As a young child, I wondered why my beloved dog could not just live forever. In college, when my maternal grandfather died rather suddenly, I had the same feeling. I remember thinking, "Wouldn't life be best if we never had to say 'goodbye' to our loved ones? Why does it have to be like this?" I now realize that in both cases I was wrestling with the loss of what I loved before I was ready to let it go. You may have had similar experiences. Perhaps you feel this way now and are pondering questions like these.

We may tell ourselves that these questions indicate an immature way of thinking. After all, as we grow up we expect to acquire greater understanding and insight about all sorts of matters by learning to think "rationally" and "realistically." As we discover early in life, adulthood requires acceptance of what is real, unpleasant though it may be. We learn that although imagination and fantasy have their place in childhood, grown-ups need to leave these behind for the "reality" of life. We may assume, therefore, that imagining a life without loss is futile if not downright silly.

Several years ago, a member of a congregation I served as pastor revealed that she lived with this assumption. A year after her husband's death, she sometimes found herself daydreaming that he was alive and with her forever. She would return home from an afternoon of various tasks and momentarily expect to see her husband sitting in his familiar chair. She wanted him back. She longed for life to be as it used to be. One day at the church, she recalled a recent occasion of this daydreaming. Telling me about it, she paused for an instant and said to herself, "Oh, grow up!" She added, "I'm such a baby." Nothing about her experience was immature or unusual. I tried to encourage her to believe this. I told her that most of us engage in this kind of wishful thinking after a loss. But she was embarrassed to discover in my presence that she was longing for her husband. She had learned that this sort of thinking belonged in the realm of fantasy. It was childish and unacceptable.

When we suffer losses, it is common to move back and forth from reality to fantasy, from rational thought to imagination. We often blur the lines between them. Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff recounts an experience like this as it related to the death of his twenty-five-year-old son, Eric, in a hiking accident. As Wolterstorff describes his loss,

“Imagination and thought are out of phase. Sometimes it’s as if he’s not dead, just away. I see him. Then thought intervenes and says, ‘Remember, he’s dead now.’ For twenty-five years I have been imagining what he’s doing. That keeps on going. In me now there is this strange flux of spontaneously picturing him and then painfully reminding myself.”<sup>2</sup>

As we learn more about grief and mourning, we discover the value in responses like Wolterstorff’s and the one my former parishioner experienced. Far from being immature, silly, or otherwise inappropriate, responses like these play a protective role. When we live with both reality and fantasy, moving back and forth between what we know to be real and what we imagine or wish for, we allow ourselves to experience the real in “partial” terms. To live only partly in reality, especially in the first moments, days, and weeks after a loss, allows us some control over the degree of pain that we feel. Straddling the line between fantasy and reality allows the pain of grief to creep in slowly and in smaller doses that we may be more able to tolerate and accept. One way to prevent pain from overwhelming us is to imagine a different, less painful situation or world. Better yet, as I will suggest, we may benefit from traveling to that “unreal” world on occasion for a break from the pain of loss.

This kind of imagining offers another benefit. It prompts us to remind ourselves of what would be at stake if we did *not* experience loss. A life without loss would require a life without love. In order to escape the pain of loss, we would have to cease making an emotional investment in people and a whole host of things that matter to us and bring great joy. We would then cease to love. Living without loss would require never running the risk of loss because we opted to have nothing to lose. This would prove to be no life at all.