

When Your Family's Lost a Loved One
Discussion Guide

Chapter 1: How Are You?

What would be your answer to the “How are you?” question? Do you welcome it? Why or why not? If you don’t welcome it, what would you prefer that people ask or tell you?

Which of the following best describes the way sorrow feels to you?

- like a friend
- like an enemy
- like a guest who’s overstayed his welcome
- like a cement overcoat
- other _____

Which of the following would you most like permission to do? Who would give you this permission?

- be happy
- be sad
- hide from the world
- engage with the world
- be weak
- be strong

How have you seen some of these ways of avoiding grief in yourself, your family members, or others you know who’ve experienced a loss?

- postponing
- somaticizing
- minimizing
- displacing
- replacing
- spiritualizing

How can you relate to Angela Robbins’s experience of God “filling in the gaps”?

Chapter 2: When People Add to Your Pain

Rank the following statements in order, from most bothersome to least, to show how you'd feel if someone said them to you today. How might your rankings be affected if the statements were made by a stranger? a good friend or close relative? someone you barely know at church? someone else who has experienced a significant loss?

- “All things work together for good, you know.”
- “He (or she) is in a better place.”
- “God must have wanted another angel.”
- “You’ll get over it.”
- “I just don’t know what to say.”

Recall how you responded to—or perhaps avoided—grieving people before you knew what this kind of loss was like. Or consider how hard it must be to come up with something meaningful to say to you. How does that help you give grace to others?

Do you think you really want your relationships to get back to normal? If so, what can you do to help make that happen?

How are unforgiveness and resentment affecting your family as you go through grief? If they were to give way to forgiveness and acceptance, what results might you look forward to?

Susan Shafer said that many people put a deadline on being done with grief. Why do we tend to do that? How can that cause problems?

Chapter 3: Soothing the Hurt

In your experience or observation, how do these ways of dealing with the pain of loss help or hurt?

- eating “comfort food”
- taking prescription antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications
- correcting thoughts like *I will never be happy again*
- sleeping more
- valuing God’s presence
- drinking alcohol
- serving others
- going on a vacation
- shopping
- staying busy

What are some statements about grief, your loss, and the future that you find going through your mind? Which might you need to correct by telling yourself the truth?

Would you say that your loss hurts more now than ever, or less than it used to? Do you think that a year from now your level of pain will be the same, worse, or lessened? Why?

Have you already experienced the pleasure of being able to help someone else because of your own loss? If so, how? If not, how do you hope to do that in the future?

Chapter 4: Keeping Your Faith in the Midst of Loss

Why might someone who’s recently lost a loved one have thoughts like the following? Which do you identify with? Which are hard for you to understand?

- *This whole experience has actually strengthened my faith.*
- *It’s hard to believe God cares anymore.*
- *I’m looking forward to heaven more than ever.*
- *I’m just going to lose people for the rest of my life, so why get excited about being a Christian?*
- *I used to be so sure about my faith; now I’m just confused.*

“Accepting the death of someone we love calls for radically trusting God’s plan. . . . This kind of faith believes that God perfectly planned the number of days He gave to your loved one, and that the number of days He gave was just right to accomplish His plan.” What do you struggle with most about this statement? What part of it is easiest to accept? Why?

“God’s grace will be delivered to you in the form and quantity and timing your circumstances require.” Why was this such a freeing discovery for the author? At what times (the middle of the night, Christmas, the anniversary of your loved one’s death) and in what places (the cemetery, at church, in bed) do you most need this grace? Which of the Bible verses quoted in this chapter might mean the most to you at those times and in those places?

Gracia Burnham found that cultivating gratitude was a key to working her way through grief. What are some things you can be grateful for in the midst of your loss?

Chapter 5: Heaven Matters

If you could ask God three questions about heaven, what would they be? Why?

What truth about heaven gives you the most comfort and hope?

Which of the following emotions have you experienced? How does this chapter suggest dealing with them?

- guilt over wanting to see your loved one in heaven more than wanting to see Jesus
- sorrow over the earthly events your loved one will miss

- annoyance at people who seem to think the promise of heaven makes grief unnecessary
- disappointment that the Bible doesn't tell us more about heaven

When a family faces a loved one's slow decline as Max Lucado did, how are family members (including the person who is dying) affected by their beliefs about heaven? How are survivors influenced by those beliefs after the person dies? Why is it important to base those beliefs on the Bible instead of on feelings or movies?

Chapter 6: Staying Together

What might prevent a grieving couple from doing the following? What happens when spouses don't do enough of these things?

- talking
- touching
- having realistic expectations of each other
- praying
- sharing
- respecting each other

If you're married, have you ever "leaned into" your spouse? Why? How did it feel? What are ways grieving couples can do this?

If you were counseling a man and woman about to marry, what three qualities would you urge them to work on to help them prepare to withstand the storm of losing a loved one? How would you convince them to do this?

How could grieving spouses demonstrate to one another each of the following qualities? What might be the result?

- love
- joy

- peace
- patience
- kindness
- goodness
- faithfulness
- gentleness
- self-control

Chapter 7: Her Grief

Do you think one gender is better at grieving than the other? Why or why not?

What would you expect to find in the following books? Do you think they'd be helpful? Why or why not?

- *How to Get Your Old Wife Back*
- *Tears Are Your Best Friend*
- *Getting Over Your Loss in 30 Days or Less*

What's the first step you'd take to do each of the following?

- make your hurt a "group project" for your family
- give your spouse more room to grieve
- make a place for your loss in your family's identity
- find out how your spouse wants you to respond when she (or he) cries

Find a partner. Take turns completing these statements for each other.

• "When possible, I'll avoid hurting the rest of my family by releasing my pain at the following times and in the following places . . ."

- "I'll tell the rest of my family that when I'm crying, I'd like them to . . ."
- "I'll show my family that my goal is healing, not staying where I am, by . . ."

Chapter 8: His Grief

How might each of the following deal with grief? Which do you identify with most? least? Why?

- Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) from the TV series *24*
- Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) from the *Spider-Man* movies
- Jesus (Jim Caviezel) as portrayed in *The Passion of the Christ*
- Coach Herman Boone (Denzel Washington) in *Remember the Titans*
- Sergeant Friday (Jack Webb) in *Dragnet*

Which of the following do you find hardest to do? How could other family members help you to work on that without expecting you to be Superman (or Wonder Woman)?

- finding a way to deal with your own grief
- staying aware of other family members' needs
- being sensitive to the impact your grief is having on the rest of the family

How are the concepts in each of the following pairs different? Why is it important to understand the differences?

- “listen” versus “fix it”
- “stay close” versus “make the other person happy”
- “be strong” versus “don’t reveal your feelings”

Does anything surprise you about the story of Rex and Connie Kennemer? Have they followed the “typical” pattern of grieving husbands and wives? What does this tell you about differences in the way men and women deal with loss?

Chapter 9: Helping Kids Cope

The authors write that children who’ve lost a loved one want four things:

- for life to be normal
- not to be the center of attention
- reasons to hope that while you may be very sad now, you’re on a path toward healing
- assurance that they will not always hurt as much as they do right now

How could a parent use the following to help give a child one or more of those four things?

- a bedtime prayer
- a party
- a camcorder
- a Bible verse

Anne Purdy says, “What looks like anger or sullenness, withdrawal, or melancholy, emotional outbursts, getting into trouble—can actually be manifestations of grief.” If you have children, how have you seen (or not seen) their grief present itself?

Katherine Koonce said, “It also helps a child for his or her parent to say, ‘I might be feeling things you’re not feeling, and you might be feeling things I’m not feeling, and that’s okay.’ Children need the permission and the skills to express their conflicting feelings.” How can an adult help a child work through conflicting feelings of grief?

Why are bedtime, a car ride, or a hike good times to talk with a boy about the loss of a family member? What’s one question you could ask or statement you could make to start such a conversation?

How does reading Rachel Robbins’s interview give you hope about the children you love who are going through grief?

Chapter 10: Birthdays, Deathdays, and Holidays

Imagine yourself in the following situations. How would you feel? How would you spend the day? What might other members of your family feel and do?

- It’s the first anniversary of your mother’s death.
- Your husband died one month ago today.
- Your daughter, who died at age 7, would have turned 18 today.

- This is the first Christmas without your sister, who always passed out the presents.
- Your wife died six years ago; the two of you would have celebrated your fiftieth anniversary today.
- Three years ago today your son was born—and died an hour later.

Do any of the author's experiences in this chapter remind you of struggles you've had in observing birthdays or deathdays? What have you found helpful or meaningful for getting through those days?

Working with a partner, brainstorm one way in which you could act on the following suggestions when the holidays come around this year.

- Start a new tradition.
- Surround yourself with comfort.
- Expect to feel sad, but be open to joy.
- Prepare yourself for healing in the coming year.

When you read that Bill Lee's family has come to feel complete, does that seem pleasant to you? Does it seem possible that this will happen for your family? Why or why not?

Chapter 11: Remembering

How do you respond to the discussion of memorializing without shrine-building? What do you think is the key to finding the right balance, and how do you know when you've found that balance?

How do you feel about the following statement? "To keep focusing intensely on your grief and on the one who has died is to refuse to open yourself up to those who are living around you, those who need you, and the future God has prepared for you."

How would you decide whether and when to do the following? Whose input would you seek on these decisions? Which ones would be hardest for you, and why?

- giving away your late husband's suits
- turning your deceased baby's nursery into a guest room
- selling your late mother's house
- taking down a wall of photos depicting your son who died in Iraq
- ceasing to wear your wedding ring after your wife died

Why did the author give her son a scrapbook every year? How could you use one or more of the following to remind surviving family members that they're important to you?

- a placemat
- a Bible
- a hat
- a song
- a photograph
- a celebration
- other _____

Chapter 12: The Grave

When you were a child, how did you tend to view death, funerals, and cemeteries? How did your perspective change as you grew up? How did it change when you lost a loved one?

Would you call yourself a grave tender, a grave avoider, or something else? Why?

Read the following Bible passages, all of which are quoted in this chapter. Which one means the most to you right now? Why? Which might mean the most to each member of your immediate family? How could you find a natural, encouraging way to share some of these verses with your family this week?

- John 14:2-3
- 2 Corinthians 5:1
- 1 Peter 1:3-4

- Romans 8:11
- Revelation 1:17-18
- 1 Corinthians 15:19-20, 32

Chapter 13: Going On

“Life will never be what it was before your loss, but it can be good. Really good.” Which of the following thoughts best describes your reaction to that statement? Could those feelings stand in the way of discovering how good life might become? Why or why not?

- *I would feel guilty feeling good again.*
- *I can't stop grieving because I can't let anyone forget the person I lost.*
- *Maybe that's true of other people, but my loss is too great.*
- *I want to believe that, but I don't know how to get there.*
- *I believe it, because I've seen it happen.*
- other _____

The authors write that grieving families need to make three difficult choices: to get up, let go, and go on. What do you think these phrases mean? Which of these choices have you already made and acted on? What enabled you to do that?

Which of the following do you need in order to make your next step, and how can the group help you in that effort?

- more time
- the prayers of others
- counseling
- more honesty with God
- to forgive someone
- gratitude for what I have
- a concrete way to honor my loved one's memory
- greater trust in God's goodness
- other _____