



# grumble hallelujah

LEARNING TO  
LOVE YOUR LIFE  
EVEN WHEN IT  
LETS YOU DOWN

Caryn Dahlstrand Rivadeneira

.....

Reading *Grumble Hallelujah* is like having coffee with a wise, warm, honest friend when you're having a horrible day. I felt both understood and challenged in just the right combination—like Caryn has been there, like she can help me get to a better place.

**SHAUNA NIEQUIST**, author of *Cold Tangerines* and *Bittersweet*

*Grumble Hallelujah* is an authentic book about what it means to thrive in the daily-ness of life. Through its pages you'll be inspired to live with an expectant, open heart.

**MARY DEMUTH**, author of *Thin Places*

I feel indebted to Caryn Rivadeneira. Her accessible wisdom and vulnerability make us all more brave.

**SHAYNE MOORE**, author of *Global Soccer Mom*

*Grumble Hallelujah* is for those of us who sometimes wish we could trade in our lives like we might trade in an old, beat-up Chevy. It delivers the gentle, humorous, kick-in-the-pants reminder that the imperfect life we've been given—with all its dents, smells, and rumblings—is exactly the one we've been praying for all along.

**EILEEN BUTTON**, columnist and author of *The Waiting Place*

Genuine humility, refreshing honesty, and a tremendous sense of humor: a trifecta of qualities as powerful as it is rare in the communion of the saints. Blessedly, Caryn possesses this magical combination and expresses it with a well-earned gravitas in *Grumble Hallelujah*.

**CATHLEEN FALSANI**, author of *Sin Boldly* and *Dude Abides*

Caryn is honest and open about the challenges of life, and rather than try to fix it up all shiny and happy, she just sits with you on the kitchen floor and admits that life is tough. Her story has made all the difference to me as I grumble along!

**TRACEY BIANCHI**, author of *Green Mama*

Caryn has given us an honest, “no guilt” guide to letting go of fear and disappointment, to finding joy in the midst of struggles.

**KERI WYATT KENT**, author of *Breathe, Rest, and Deeper into the Word*

*Grumble Hallelujah* will challenge you to love the life God has for you, not with trite clichés or easy answers, but from a woman who displays the grace and mercy of one who is desperately seeking to live like Jesus . . . even in the grumbling.

**JENNI CATRON**, executive director, Cross Point Church, Nashville,  
[www.crosspoint.tv](http://www.crosspoint.tv)

*Grumble Hallelujah* won't magically transform your life into a perfect one, but it will transform *you*, so that you more fully embrace and appreciate the entirety of who you are, imperfections and all.

**HELEN LEE**, author of *The Missional Mom*

Caryn tugs at my heart in a way I didn't expect. She is fearlessly vulnerable, and pushes us to be too. She speaks the language of letting go, a language most women struggle to learn. If you want to change the way you live, learn a "new hallelujah" from Caryn.

**ANITA LUSTREA**, *Midday Connection* executive producer/cohost; author of *What Women Tell Me*

With many personal stories, lots of laughs and precision incision, Caryn will open your eyes and heart to the reality and the results of your grumbling. Then she leads into practical and realistic responses that will change your attitude, reactions—even your life. *Grumble hallelujah!*

**JUDY DOUGLASS**, director of women's resources, Campus Crusade for Christ

Caryn has written a stellar book. And not just because it's honest and funny and dead-on about the disappointments and triumphs of life. It's fantastic because it's what I wish someone would whisper to me on those days when I just want to be someone else for a while.

**CARLA BARNHILL**, author of *The Myth of the Perfect Mother*; cocreator, The Mommy Revolution

From the beginning of *Grumble Hallelujah*, Caryn Rivadeneira reminds us—convinces us even—that God can be found in fear; in dark and gunky corners; and in our real, exposed lives. I love this deeply joyful, deeply honest book.

**JENNIFER GRANT**, journalist; author of *Love You More*

Many of us experience heartbreaking rough patches on life's road. *Grumble Hallelujah* arrives with comfort, humor, and grace for life's unwelcome terrain.

**MELINDA SCHMIDT**, *Midday Connection* cohost; coeditor, *Tending the Soul*

In this engaging, laugh-out-loud grumble-logue, Caryn walks us through her own sewer-water-in-the-basement moments. She's written a realistic, hopeful owner's manual for anyone wanting Jesus' abundant life when God holds back the goodies.

**JONALYN GRACE FINCHER**, vice president and speaker, Soulation; author of *Ruby Slippers*



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*To Rafi—*

*Thanks for sharing this life.*

*And putting up with my grumbling.*

*I love you.*



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# Introduction

CONFESSION: If you'd have told me a few years back, as I lay on the kitchen floor, a sobbing, weepy mess, that I'd be peddling advice on how to love the life you're living, I'd have laughed in your face. Or, to be more honest, I'd have thrown a shoe at it. Which is what I nearly did to my husband, Rafi, when he stumbled upon me (quite literally) on the floor that day.

Instead, when Rafi knelt down and asked, "Caryn, what's wrong?" I hissed back, "I hate my life."

As soon as those words swung back around to my own ears, I realized I didn't *quite* mean them; however, they were the best I could come up with to describe the way I felt after three years of financial devastation and family stress; three years of disappointment, hurt, loss, anger, and confusion; and three years of feeling altogether forgotten by God. Nothing in my life was as it was supposed to be—and I hated that.

But here's the thing: while I wouldn't have believed you right then, if you'd have told me that just a few moments *after* my sort of dark midafternoon-of-the-soul experience I'd have something to say about loving life, I'd have paid

attention. Because that's about the time God started working on me, touching my heart, opening my eyes, and convicting me of things that frankly I was in no mood to be convicted of.

Just when I wanted to settle into comfy self-pity and well-worn martyrdom, God started bringing things to mind: songs I loved, verses I underlined and could recite (well, *paraphrase* might be the better word), words I had scribbled in journals as an angst-filled teenager. All things that pointed back to what my attitude needed to be in those moments. In the midst of chaos and frustration. In the throes of hurt and loss. In that wilderness that my life had become. In that place where God had always been—even if it wasn't where I'd asked God to put me or ever imagined I'd be. I had to start saying "Hallelujah Anyhow," as that old song goes.

Over the days, weeks, and months that followed, I discovered that God welcomed my resigned, crabby, sigh-filled, grumbly hallelujahs. So I needed to learn to mumble it, grumble it, hiss it, or smirk it and learn to love the life God had for me even as my parents' marriage crumbled; even as my childhood home was sold and relics from my childhood—wanted only by me—piled up on shelves in my garage; even as my husband's business disintegrated; even as our financial situation devastated us; even as our medical bills piled up; even as relationships soured; even as depression shook its ugly gray cloak over my house; shoot, even as my beloved dog died. Even as I felt so alone. Even as there wasn't much to love about life, that's when and where I was to start loving it. And *rejoicing* in it. Ugh.

I just needed to know what loving my life really meant. It took awhile, but somewhere along the way I realized my former idea of loving life was all wrong. I had imagined it as some sort of puppy love. When things were going so well, when life was paying me all sorts of lovely attention, I'd sigh, sit with my head in my hands, and bat my eyes at life. Oh, how I loved it! Until it let me down. Then I fell out of love. In a hurry. My love was quite conditional.

Turns out, I had the wrong kind of love happening. The sort of love we need to feel for our lives runs deeper than mushy love letters. The love we should feel toward our lives is the same unconditional, "no matter what" love we feel toward our spouses, our kids, our siblings, our friends, our parents, and our pets.

It sounds crazy—until we realize that this love is the same because it's the love born out of gratitude that allows us to cherish and to value, to recognize worth. Just as I love my kids because they are like no one else and because God gave them to me, I need to love my life because no one else gets to live it and because God created it—ordained it!—just for me.

But for a long time, I had a lot of junk piled up (not only in my garage!) that kept me from loving this life. Which brought me here—to the writing. To figure this out.

So, if you're like me, if you've felt the loss of a life you loved or the life that was supposed to be or if you've had your own dark midafternoon of the soul and would like to know how to love your life, I hope you'll walk with me a bit here in the coming pages.

Before we go further, I want you to know a couple of things:



1. I'm not sitting here writing this from a place of "everything's great now!" I won't tell you just to think positively and smile more (though that can't *hurt*) and everything will work out well. Honestly, circumstances haven't really changed since my dark midafternoon of the soul—in many ways, they're actually worse. My parents didn't reconcile. Depression still lurks. Relationships suffer. Debt deepens. And, yes, that dog's still dead. So essentially, I'm still working with a lot of the same junk that got me there on the floor.

I want you to know this because I know how annoying it is for someone whose life is suddenly perfect—all situations rectified—to talk about how to love life and be shouting hallelujah all the livelong day. That's not me. But a few other important things *have* changed: my perspective; my understanding of God; my experience of his faithfulness; and my idea of what loving life looks like, what it means. And that's huge.

2. I'm no Pollyanna. I don't wake up with a song in my heart or one coming from the little baby bluebirds chirping outside my window. In sharp contrast to a friend of mine who once told me the first thing in her head every morning when she woke up is, *I love being a mom. I have a great life!* the first thing in my head every morning is, *Morning already? You've got to be kidding!* or its cousin, *Can't these kids sleep?!*

And I don't believe in Pollyanna-ish advice—or that happiness, per se, is our end goal. I agree with Charles Schultz (the *Peanuts* creator): "Happiness *is* a warm

puppy” (emphasis mine). This means it’s wonderful when it’s there, and it’s to be cherished for sure, but happiness is fleeting. It snuggles up for a while, but inevitably that happy puppy jumps right off your lap. It might even nip at you and dribble some pee on its way down.

This may sound harsh, but I don’t believe in happiness as an end goal because I’m not sure that it’s God’s end goal for us. I rarely see God working things out simply so we can be happy. I think he wants us to be *holy*, as I’m sure you’ve heard before. So sure, moments of sheer happiness exist—hence the warm-puppy thing—but life isn’t always rosy (even though he lived a perfect life, Jesus didn’t strike me as a particularly chipper guy, to be honest). And I’ve learned that I don’t really want it to be. God’s got some good stuff for us in the not-so-rosy times too.

The thing is: loving anything—a life included—is hard work. It takes perseverance and discipline—some honest looks and hard choices now and again. So what we’ll work through here isn’t jolly or easy (though I will try to make this somewhat fun). But it’s worth it—it’s what the path to loving a crazy life is all about.

3. This one’s a biggie. If your “hate my life” moment has come because you’re trapped in a life of addiction or debilitating depression (or other mental illness) or abuse or some sort of danger, or if you hate your life so much that you have considered *ending* it, you need to hold off on this particular journey for a bit. We’ll still

be here, waiting for you, but you need a specific path, one that offers help I cannot. Please make a phone call or shoot an e-mail to a professional who can help you. Then come back and we'll press on together.

And just where are we pressing on to? Well, I've broken the book into parts; each includes a chapter about something we need to get rid of (think, detox) and a couple of things we need to add (think, nourish) before we can learn to love our lives.

The first stop is oh, so cheery. We're going to grieve a bit for the life we imagined—or once had. I think it's okay to admit where we are isn't *exactly* what we had in mind. And I think God can handle that. So that's what we'll do in the next chapter.

Then we'll work on wringing out the other toxins that keep us too choked and tangled to love life—all that junk we hold on to that gets in the way of us loving our lives and keeps us from living as God intended us to—and finally we'll work on soaking in all the good stuff.

All of this is intended to help us love the lives God's given us and keep our hallelujahs going—no matter how they come out.

Sound good? All right. Let's go. Let's grumble.

A black and white photograph of a person's legs from the knees down, wearing dark trousers and light-colored rain boots with a dark polka-dot pattern. The person is captured mid-jump, with their feet just above a large, energetic splash of water on a wet, reflective surface. The background is a bright, overcast sky with soft clouds. The overall mood is joyful and carefree.

PART I

# Grumble Hallelujah





CHAPTER I

LIVE GRUMBLY

*Letting Go of the Life That Was “Supposed to Be”*

YEARS AGO, when the whole hanging chad debacle ended Al Gore’s shot at the White House, my husband and I snuggled together on our brand-new sofa in our brand-new house (well, new to us) watching the news on our brand-new TV as we did nearly every night in our pre-kid life. And we talked about how sad this was for Al Gore.

Though, to be honest, I remember feeling less *sad* for Al and more *pity*. I pitied him in the way only someone whose life is going exactly according to plan—with many dreams fulfilled or ready to be grasped—can pity another person. It’s that horrible, smug kind of pity, which I used to feel a lot back in those easy days.

But whether it was sadness or pity, I *felt* for Al Gore because he was “a man widely believed to have been groomed for the U.S. presidency from birth.”<sup>1</sup> Meaning, his presidential aspirations weren’t simply born out of the “Boy, you could

even grow up and be president” sort of way many of us hear (with or without the “boy” part)—but that nobody actually believes will happen.

His dreams came from being the son of a “Washington insider.” Young Al was sent to the right schools, surrounded by the right people, and even kept from playing the wrong instruments. (Talk about a political-stage mom: Mrs. Gore apparently made Al quit violin because “future world leaders do not play the violin.”<sup>2</sup> Whoa, boy.)

Anyway, you see my point: Al Gore’s life was *supposed* to go a certain way. And for many years it did. I imagine that he was all smiles during his vice presidency under the popular Bill Clinton (and if we’re honest, he probably had his fingers crossed during those impeachment hearings!). Everything had lined up in his favor; his presidential destiny was right there—a tiny finger stretch away—his for the grabbing.

Then came the day—after months of lawsuits and recounts and Supreme Court hearings—when he realized he had lost his bid, lost hold of his destiny. It was then that I remember saying to my husband (and here’s the point of this little walk down election-memory lane): “Aw, man. He’s gonna need to grieve this.”

So you’d think that several years down the pike, when my own life started unraveling—when my own life became pitiful—that I’d have remembered this “gonna need to grieve” piece of wisdom I so handily offered up to Al Gore.

But I didn’t. I like to think that centuries of Swedish blood pulsing through my veins kept that from happening. It was as if every bit of my staunch ancestors’ DNA yelled

up to my brain: *Don't go there! We don't do grief! You know how we like it—bury it deep, keep it down, and just move forward! And for goodness sake, don't talk about it! Now get back to work.*

This is precisely why, even now, even when I know better, when I know that my dear beloved ancestors didn't have it exactly right, I'm so loathe to dive into this chapter. Grieving doesn't come naturally to me. If it does to you, awesome! You're already way ahead of the curve.

But I hate it. I hate entering into pain and processing it. So why do it? Why do I think grieving the life we miss or the one we wish we had is the first thing we need to do as part of our “detox” program? Why is it step one in learning to love our lives? Because grief is an essential part of the human experience, and because in our grief, God works wonders.

*Grief is an essential part of the human experience, and God works wonders through it.*

## Why Grieve

Before you go nuts and catch me on technicalities, I'm not saying that grief itself is a toxin. But unacknowledged or un-dealt-with grief totally is (in fact, I believe it leads to some of the toxins we'll work on in upcoming chapters). We need to admit when life has gone astray or even all wrong. We need to acknowledge—cry out to God!—when life disappoints, when something important gets lost, and when we hurt because of it.

And we need to give ourselves (and others) permission to grieve the loss of dreams, of the life we thought we'd have, of

roles we longed for, of relationships we thought would always exist, or whatever we desired but haven't gotten.

For a long time, I didn't think I had permission to do this. I didn't think it was right. I suppose I thought it was *sinful*. Because while we certainly understand the need to grieve the "big stuff" of life—like death or divorce or infertility—for much of the rest of it, grieving seems to run contrary to a good Christian life. It's not easy to admit we're a bit down because we're grieving a loss as "silly" as not having the family we imagined or the job we always wanted or, say, the income or lifestyle we thought we'd have.

And yet, if I'm being totally honest, I have to admit that much of the "stuff" that got me on the floor during my dark midafternoon of the soul was related to exactly that: to money, to our "reversal of fortunes." My life wasn't supposed to be about debt. About business loss or free-falling income. A person like me (raised in a well-off home, educated, and equipped with a work ethic to shame the Puritans) who was married to a man (smart as they come, with a knack for taking risks that paid off in only-in-America types of reward) wasn't supposed to live day to day, worried about mortgage payments on a modest home or how we'd get new summer clothes for the kids. A visit to the grocery store wasn't supposed to stress me out, as I wondered if my credit card would be rejected.

But could I grieve this?

So what about the other big "not supposed to be's" of my life during that period? Could I grieve the loss of picture-perfect holidays at my childhood home because of my parents' divorce? The loss of security—emotional and

financial—within my own marriage? My loneliness and lack of meaningful friendships?

I mean, no matter how hurtful my grievances are to me personally, when we consider the vast scope of world problems, they hardly top the list. Could a good Christian girl really *grieve* the supposed-to-be's of life without being a big whiner?

You might ask yourself the same sorts of questions: What about the things that bring pain in your own life? What about those dreams you once had that now seem impossible? What about the life—or lifestyle—you thought you'd be living? Does God want you to grieve these things?

*Could a good  
Christian girl  
really grieve the  
supposed-to-be's  
of life without  
being a big  
whiner?*

Left to my own devices, I'd still listen to the voices of my stoic ancestors. But I couldn't shake a pretty basic truth: God doesn't want me listening to my *ancestors*. God wants me listening to *him*. So to the Bible I went. But while I searched, I also tossed out the challenge to some friends. I asked for examples from the Bible of people who grieved over, not the big tragedies, but the more banal supposed-to-be's of life.

Turns out, my friends are smart people. They suggested everyone from the obvious Naomi and Job (who grieved losses of *everything!*) to Moses grieving not being able to enter the Promised Land to Rachel grieving a pregnancy she had been desperate to have. Some of the grief made sense, some seemed weird, but all of it made me realize how patient our God is. And the good that grief can do when placed in God's hands.

## Bible Grievors

### *God*

“Does the Lord count?” Janine asked in response to my Great Grievors of the Bible Challenge.

Um, yeah. I hadn’t thought of him as a griever, but I’d say he counts. Wouldn’t you?

So Janine wrote back: “Well, the Lord grieved over making humans in the first place, and he grieved over making Saul king.”

Righty-o! Check out these passages, with my helpful emphases:

*The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.*  
(Genesis 6:5-6, NIV, emphasis mine)

*The word of the LORD came to Samuel: “I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.” Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the LORD all that night.* (1 Samuel 15:10-11, NIV, emphasis mine)

So if God grieved, it must be okay, right? It’s an actual image-bearing thing to do, in fact. While the fall of humankind and rampant wickedness that God grieved could probably be classified as a “big thing,” when you read it from the perspective of the Creator watching everything go all wrong, it begins to look a lot like what grieving was supposed to be.

Certainly, that's what was going on with Saul. He wasn't *supposed* to turn into a king who followed his own ways instead of God's. Hence, the regret and disappointment on God's part. (Of course, what's peculiar is that our omniscient God must have seen this coming, but that's a whole other conversation.)

I wrote earlier that grieving is an essential part of the *human* experience, but clearly, it's also an essential part of the *God* experience. A process in which something mighty happens. This helps explain (at least in my mind) one of the most bizarre grief sequences in Scripture: when Jesus weeps at his friend Lazarus's death.

I say this is bizarre because for days Jesus had been saying how Lazarus wouldn't end up dead. Then he tells Martha directly that he will raise her brother from the dead. Instead of being a "not supposed to be," this was a huge God-ordained event, a supposed-to-be if there ever was one! Jesus even said that Lazarus would be raised "for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (John 11:4, NIV).

And yet, when our Jesus saw his dead friend, we know what happened (every former smart-aleck Sunday school student told to memorize their "favorite" verse can say it with me now): "Jesus wept" (John 11:35, NIV).

As bizarre as it might be, Jesus' grief just moments before miraculously raising his friend from the dead actually offers us a clue into what God-style grief can be about and how God uses grief to raise us up. We can't deny the grief-redemption or grief-resurrection connection.

Grieving, shedding tears, emptying ourselves of hurt seems to clear up room for God to work. While our grief may not



allow us to raise friends from the dead, our grieving can bring other things—like peace, mercy, and joy—back to life.

### *Esau*

When I first saw Esau's name on a friend's reply to my query, I thought, *What? Esau? Blech. No! Can't stand that guy.*

You know, he smells like a field (which sounds lovely, but since fields don't come with baths, I'm sure is not). He has hair like a goat. I picture him with blood and guts caked under his raggedy fingernails. Esau is just gross, right? And stupid—trading Jacob his birthright for some stew? So I ignored him.

But apparently, God didn't want him ignored. Because a couple of Sundays after writing him off, my pastor preached on Esau. About his grief, no less. About his agony of being stripped of his birthright and his father's blessing. And after Pastor Bert read Esau's heart-wrenching pleas and screams ("Bless me—me too, my father!" [Genesis 27:34, NIV] and "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" [Genesis 27:38, NIV]) and after seeing this through a new lens, through my own pain and similar pleas with God, my heart changed for Esau. My heart broke for Esau, actually. When Pastor Bert described Esau's cry and pleas of "Bless me, too!" as the cry and plea of "a thousand have-nots in a world of haves,"<sup>3</sup> I was a goner for this guy. Oh, Esau.

After a lifetime of rolling my eyes at this goat-stinkin' man, I understood Esau. Totally. (I am a firstborn, after all. We have rights!) His life wasn't supposed to be about getting tricked out of his birthright—his inheritance, his home, his family, his future. But as it turned out, that's exactly what

became of it. And he “wept aloud” (a.k.a. grieved) for the life he was supposed to have.

So what does God say about this kind of grief? We don’t know exactly. But there’s no mocking it. God doesn’t seem to curse him for it—send plagues or ruin his life. In fact, quite the opposite. Because if we flip forward a few chapters to Genesis 33—after Jacob ran off to Uncle Laban’s, married Leah and Rachel, grew rich, and wrestled with God, and after Esau found his own fortune—we see a reunion between these once-bitter rivals.

I love this story. Rightfully terrified of his brother’s wrath, before heading home after probably twenty years, Jacob sends hundreds of goats, camels, cows, and donkeys as gifts to appease his brother. When they finally see each other, Jacob bows to the ground in humility. Genesis 33:4 (NIV) says, “But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept.”

Then Esau asks about the kids and tries to refuse the gifts of the animals (in one of those gracious “oh, you didn’t have to!” declines). Esau didn’t need them—he was rich himself.

Finally, after all the denials and smiles comes my favorite line. Jacob tells Esau, “If I have found favor in your eyes, accept this gift from me. For *to see your face is like seeing the face of God*, now that you have received me favorably” (v. 10, NIV, emphasis mine). Ah, yeah. Jacob experiences grace from his big brother—and sees the face of God.

Now I hate to read too much into this—and granted, many years have gone by—but don’t you think that Esau’s grief—his crying out to God, his frustrated yells of “bless me too, father!”—helped get him to this place where he could

offer grace? We don't see much of what happened between Esau and God in this story. But it seems that maybe his honest, raw response to getting gypped out of what was supposed to be his helped this broken human show the face of God to his brother.

I could go on and on, dipping deep into the stories of many of God's children who were disappointed, hurt, and grieved. But attention spans flicker, and we've got more to get to, so let me just point to two other quick places.

### *The Lamenters*

When Jeremiah (mostly likely it was him, at least) wrote Lamentations, he, along with the rest of his nation, was hav-

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ing a rough go of things, to say the least. The Lamenters' life stinks, and he's letting God know it. Throughout this poem he lambasts God for such things as walling him in, chaining him down, piercing his heart, and breaking his teeth with gravel. I'd be lamenting too.

But the part that really gets me in this book goes like this: "I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, 'My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD'" (Lamentations 3:17-18, NIV).

Here's what's so great. Not only is this guy grieving his (and Israel's) supposed to be's, but just after he writes—for God and the world to see—these devastating words of lost dreams and hope in God, he adds this:

*I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.  
I well remember them,  
and my soul is downcast within me.  
Yet this I call to mind  
and therefore I have hope:  
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness. (vv. 19-23, NIV)*

Could it be then that this writer, like Esau, got to this amazing place of recognizing God's goodness through his grief? Could it have been his searing and beautiful cries to God that ended up sweetening his bitterness and soothing his gall?

When he remembers the pain of his life, he's still sad—he tells us so—but he is “not consumed.” Aaah. Out of his grief comes one of the great treasures of Scripture: “Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning.”

The Lamenter offers us a lovely contrast to some other famous “wanderers” of the Bible. When the Lamenter's forefathers and foremothers grumbled and grieved in the desert after God miraculously delivered them from the Egyptians, they didn't give him even a smidgen of glory. The wandering Israelites refused to acknowledge God's goodness and faithfulness in their hardship. Unlike them, the Lamenter gives us words—glorious language—to express our frustrations in a way that still honors and recognizes our great God.

*The Grumbler*

The Lamenters got me thinking about something that had troubled me every time I considered the “godliness” of grief. One of my all-time, hands-down favorite passages is this:

*Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,  
I will be joyful in God my Savior.  
(Habakkuk 3:17-18, NIV)*

I mean, seriously, how great is that?

I first underlined this word-gem in my Bible twenty-plus years ago. (So, okay, my nonbudding fig tree first represented the lack of boyfriends in my life. Feel free to roll your eyes.) Since then, however, I’ve reread it a zillion times. The images fly from the page, don’t they? Our noses almost itch in the dry, barren vineyard; our eyes blink at the hay bits flitting around the empty stalls. Certainly, the troubling truth of the passage smacks us right upside the head: even when life doesn’t turn out how it’s supposed to be, we need to rejoice.

As much as I love this passage, it troubled me because it seemed to contradict all that I wanted to be true about grief. But after reading and praying about the Esau and Lamentations passages, I realized I needed to read backward, to see what came before it. Duh.

And wouldn't you know it? My favorite passage, this beautiful bit, comes at the end of a book with a structure like this: Habakkuk complains; God answers. Habakkuk complains again; God answers again. Only *then* does our man H get it. But even *then*, Habakkuk grumbles his hallelujah. You just know he does.

There seems to be something to this grief thing. Not only does God do it, but God uses it to clear our heads and make room for him. I've been knee-deep in the Old Testament for this, but check out what James—in the New Testament—has to say about this: “Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:9-10, NIV).

*God uses grief  
to clear our  
heads and make  
room for him.*

Huh.\*

In his book *In Memoriam*, Henri Nouwen says this about the disciples' extended period of grief after Jesus ascended: “This long period of mourning was necessary before they were able to receive the Spirit. Only after this long and painful grief were they able to receive the great consolation that their Lord had promised them. For it was only after they had given up clinging to their Lord that his Spirit could descend into their hearts.”<sup>4</sup>

Go figure. This is just what James says. And this is exactly what we see lived out in Esau, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk—not

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\*What would it look like if we took James seriously and prayed this way? To help us find out, I've written a “Grumble Hallelujah” prayer and placed it at the end of every chapter. I invite you to personalize each one and make it your own. I hope, like me, you experience God's peace as you speak honestly about your disappointments and hopefully about his plans for your life.

to mention Sarai, Naomi, Job, and many others. They grieved, mourned, and wailed—and were lifted up. They experienced long and painful grief and were able to receive consolation from God. Being lifted up and consoled by our God are two keys to loving our lives.

Who doesn't want that? I know I do. So does this mean we need to grieve and mourn and wail every little disappointment of life? I don't think so, but let's move on to the next chapter and see if we can't figure something out.

OKAY, GOD:

*I didn't want life to be this way. This isn't how it was supposed to be. At all. And I'm kind of mad that you have the power to change this—to make it right—but you haven't stepped in to make things different, better. But because I love you and I know you love me, I'm going to try to trust that you'll help me make sense of this disappointment. Thank you for walking with me. And for the many good things that are in my imperfect life.*

*Anyhow, God, Hallelujah.*

*Amen.*

## Getting to Hallelujah

*Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. How “Christian” do you think it is to grieve disappointments in life? Why do you think that way?
2. What are the things—disappointments or hurts—about your life that have made you think, *This is not how it's supposed to be?*

3. What are some of the things you've grieved in your life?
4. How have you seen God at work in that grief? How have you felt him lift you up?
5. What are some ways you have grieved or ways you need to grieve?