

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

When Your Family's Lost a Loved One

finding hope together



DAVID & NANCY GUTHRIE



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois

When Your Family's Lost a Loved One

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“After my wife and all four children drowned in a flash flood, I held onto the Guthries’ words of hope that immediately soothed my shattered soul. Like me, you will instantly connect with David and Nancy. Their honesty and empathy will validate, articulate, and resonate with your pain. Their heartfelt words in this book will give you the inspiration and godly direction you desperately long for on your journey through your valley of grief. God will indeed speak through these pages to help restore your wounded soul.”

—ROBERT ROGERS

Founder, Mighty in the Land Ministry
and author, *Into the Deep*

“I wish I’d had a copy of this book when I first got home from the jungle after losing my husband, Martin. After being held captive by the Abu Sayyaf for a year in the Philippines, he was killed in the gun battle that led to my rescue.

“God, in His incredible goodness and kindness, brought Nancy Guthrie into my life soon after my rescue. She acted as my publicist as I was thrust into the media spotlight after my return to the U.S. She took me to interviews, sat with me as they did my makeup, coached me on what was coming up—all the while encouraging me and talking with me about grief. I was listening. She had just been through much loss herself, and her words of counsel were invaluable!

“You may not be able to meet Nancy in person, but I am so glad that you can benefit from her and her husband’s wisdom through this book. Thank you, David and Nancy, for being faithful to the Lord! Thank you for sharing your lives with those of us that are hurting! We are grateful for you.”

—GRACIA BURNHAM

Author, *In the Presence of My Enemies*
and *To Fly Again: Surviving the Tailspins of Life*

“This is the first grief book you should read after the death of a family member. David and Nancy Guthrie guide you through the practical issues you need to face in the midst of your grief, while offering you hope that better days are ahead.”

—STEVE GRISSOM

Founder, GriefShare

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*We lovingly dedicate this book to our son, Matt Guthrie.
You'll never know how happy it makes us
when you walk through the door.*

*While nothing has brought us as much sorrow
as losing your brother and sister,
nothing has brought us as much joy as these
18 years being your mom and dad.
We can hardly wait to see how God is going
to use you in this world to build His kingdom.*

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Andrea Doering for suggesting we write this book, to Larry Weeden and the rest of the team at Focus on the Family for giving us the opportunity, and to John Duckworth for helping us say it a little better.

We have had such a sweet time sitting down with some of our friends and making new ones as we interviewed people for the Q&As in this book. We thank them not only for their time, but for their openness and honesty, and for their willingness to use the hurts in their lives to help others get through what they've gotten through.

As we've looked back on our own experience of getting our family through our losses, we are so grateful for the loving care we received from our church family at Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee, for the limitless love of our parents, Claude and Ella Dee Jinks and Wink and Rita Guthrie, and for the companionship of so many friends who walked through such hard days with us.

Foreword

Little did I know when I became pastor of David and Nancy Guthrie and their son, Matt, that it would be my privilege to walk with them through the long, dark, and painful valley of losing two of their children.

The journey taken by the Guthrie family was a strange combination of great joy and deep sorrow. It was also a period of significant spiritual growth. The Guthries gained a deep understanding of how God graciously uses suffering to accomplish His purposes. They also came to appreciate as never before the blessing of being deeply rooted in the Body of Christ. They were loved well by their friends, and found within the Christian community the love and support all of us desperately need as we grope in the darkness with lots of fear, sadness, and a myriad of questions.

In the midst of their loss, I saw something beautiful happen. It wasn't that they were in denial over their loss or that they didn't struggle with fears or questions. Their pain and sadness was very real. But just as real was their response of faith, their determination to trust God with their losses, and their commitment to love each other well.

I have seen the Guthries emerge from the fire of extreme trial as refined gold. Their faith is deeper. Their spirits are sweeter. Their capacity to love and serve those who suffer is greater.

Somehow they look more like Jesus on this side of the valley than they did when they began the journey.

Since their own journey through the "valley of the shadow of death," David and Nancy have proven to be a blessing to untold thousands who are called to walk similar paths. I'm glad you have

picked up this book because I believe you will be blessed by the insights they've gained from ministering to many, many people who have faced what you are facing in your loss.

As a pastor for over 40 years, I've walked with many families through very dark seasons of grief. I've stood with them at the grave. In that time I've seen many marriages and families struggle under the weight of sorrow, some never able to recover.

I pray that will not be your experience. I pray that you will gain insights and inspiration from this book, and that your family will emerge from your loss with joy for living and love for each other.

Charles McGowan
Brentwood, Tennessee
2007

Introduction

Welcome to the book you never wanted to read—the kind of book you never imagined you’d *need* to read.

But here you are, reeling from the death of your spouse or your child or another close family member. You’re wondering if you’ll always feel as much pain as you do now, wanting people to stop talking about your loss all the time yet fearing they’ll forget, needing something to relieve the painful pressure you feel inside your chest.

Here you are needing hope. That’s what we want to give you in this book—hope that your family can be healthy and whole, even as you face the future feeling so broken.

We’re quick to tell you, however, that while we know the pain of loss, we haven’t been exactly where you are today. No one has. Every loss in a family is unique.

We’ve faced the grave twice now, burying two of our three children. Our daughter, Hope, and our son, Gabriel, were born with a rare metabolic disorder called Zellweger Syndrome, which meant their lives were very difficult and very short.

Some people tell us they can’t imagine going through what we’ve been through. But when we look around at the losses others experience, ours often feel small and insignificant in comparison.

So while we write about the losses of Hope and Gabriel throughout these chapters, it’s not because our loss represents the epitome of pain. It’s because we’re hoping you’ll find companionship in what we share—that you’ll have moments of thinking, “I felt the same way!” or “I have the same question,” or “Somebody said the same thing to me.”

In addition to hope, we want to provide you with companionship.

Sometimes it can feel like nobody gets it, nobody really understands how hard everything about life feels at this point.

Because there are so many hard things about losing a family member that we haven't had to face personally, we've included interviews with people who've experienced losses different from our own—the loss of a wife, a husband, a child through suicide, a mother, a father, a sibling—who offer incredible insights. We've also included interviews with experts in education, psychiatry, parenting, and counseling on the topics of greatest concern to grieving families.

We hope you'll discover in this book that there are others who understand what it's like to face getting your family through the loss of a loved one. We trust you'll find hope and encouragement from those who've traveled this road before you.

In the years that have followed Hope's and Gabriel's deaths, and the publication of *Holding On to Hope* and *The One Year Book of Hope* (both published by Tyndale House Publishers), we've talked to and shed tears with lots of couples and individuals about their losses. There are, after all, things that only other people who've had a similar loss can understand, aren't there? The chapters that follow reflect the content of so many of those conversations—the very real relational, practical, emotional, and spiritual issues that grieving families wrestle with. This is what we'd share with you if we met you at Starbucks to hear about your loss and to tell you about ours.

We hope you'll grab a cup of coffee and pull up a chair. We'd like to talk openly and honestly about what it's going to take to get through this.

And we'd love to hear from you. You can contact us via www.nancyguthrie.com. We'd be honored to hear how you're doing as you get your family through the loss of your loved one.

David and Nancy Guthrie

Chapter One

How Are You?

Nancy

“How are you?”

It’s the question everyone is asking you these days. You’re grateful that people care—but it sometimes seems unanswerable, doesn’t it?

“Fine” doesn’t sound quite right. You may be functioning and perhaps even feeling better, but you know you’re not “fine.”

If you were honest, your answer might be one of these:

“I’m afraid.”

“I’m disappointed.”

“I’m relieved.”

“I’m angry.”

“I’m confused.”

“I’m sad.”

That was my answer for months after our daughter, Hope, died: “I’m sad.”

I was deeply, devastatingly, pervasively sad. And I wanted those around me to give me time and space and permission to simply be sad.

IT’S OKAY TO BE SAD

Our culture is very uncomfortable with sadness. Unless they’ve lost someone close, most people don’t understand how sorrowful simple aspects of daily life can be when you’re grieving.

I remember the first time I went to the grocery store after my

daughter, Hope, died. It was all I could do to get there, and I wept as I walked the aisles. Everywhere I looked I saw products I no longer needed to buy because she was gone. And it just seemed too ordinary a task; I was going back to life as usual, but without Hope. And that didn't feel right.

A few months later I went on a retreat with our choir. Standing up, I told everyone, "I haven't lost my faith. I'm not hopeless. I'm just sad. And I'm going to be sad for a while."

In those days, tears always seemed close to the surface. While I'd rarely cried before Hope, now a day rarely went by when there were no tears. There was so much pain inside that needed to find release.

Many people were afraid to say something to me about Hope, fearful it would cause me to think about her, adding to my pain. What they didn't know was that I was already thinking about her. When they spoke of her, it touched me, and my tears were a relief to me.

Recently a woman who'd lost her husband a few months earlier caught up with me after church. She told me she was crying all the time—at work, on her way home from work, and at home in the evenings. "What is wrong with me?" she asked.

"Wasn't your husband a significant part of your life?" I asked. "And wasn't his life precious and valuable?"

The answer, of course, was yes.

"Then isn't he worthy of a great sorrow?"

Before you can get on with your life, you will have to give way to grief.

For some, that may seem easy. For a while you may not *want* to feel better because the grief keeps the one you love close—even as the days and weeks seem to pull you away from the person you loved and still love.

But for others, sorrow feels like an enemy. Some people are afraid to cry—afraid that once they start, they may never be able to stop. Or they fear being unable to control when or where their tears come to the surface.

There's no need to rush ourselves through sadness or to avoid it altogether. Sorrow is not weakness, and tears do not reflect a lack of faith. God gives us the gift of tears to help us wash away the pain.

IT'S OKAY TO BE HAPPY

While sadness can be awkward, laughter can seem off-limits—or certainly inappropriate following the death of someone we love.

I remember being afraid that some people might think I was in complete denial—or worse, that I didn't really care about Hope—if I laughed out loud during her difficult life or following her death. And I remember the strange look I got from someone at a dinner the night before Gabriel's memorial service, when I asked a friend to tell a funny story and laughed heartily at it.

Sometimes we are afraid to laugh lest people think our pain has passed or that our sorrow has been a sham. But just as tears give vent to the deep sorrow we feel, laughter reveals that while grief may have a grip on us, it hasn't choked the life out of us.

Laughter takes some of the sting out of hurt. It gives us perspective and relieves the pressure. In fact, laughter actually increases the flow of endorphins, our bodies' naturally produced painkiller. It gives us a mini-vacation from our pain. And wouldn't you sometimes like to take a day off from your sorrow?

We know we've found a real friend when he or she is comfortable not only with our sadness in grief, but our laughter. And we're friends to ourselves when we allow ourselves to feel and express both.

IT'S OKAY TO HIDE

Many grieving people simply don't want to deal with others. They don't want to have awkward conversations and uncontrolled emotions. They want to be alone—to have time to think and reflect, and simply miss the person who is gone.

For some mysterious reason I've never been able to put my finger on, facing a crowd when you're grieving can be hard. Walking into church and other situations where so many people express their compassion can be emotionally overwhelming.

I remember feeling that I simply couldn't walk into the parents' orientation night at Matt's school a few months after Hope died. I feared my total identity was "that woman whose baby died," and with every acquaintance would come an emotionally draining conversation about Hope's death. Fewer people probably were thinking about me and my loss than I imagined, but the prospect of encountering so many I hadn't seen since Hope died during the summer overwhelmed me, so I stayed home.

Hiding, if only for a season, is acceptable when we're grieving. But hiding can become a habit, a way of life that robs us of healing relationships and a returning sense of normalcy.

IT'S OKAY TO ENGAGE

Some people have the opposite problem—especially those who've been nursing a loved one through a long illness. Suddenly freed from patient care, they feel a little embarrassed by their sense of relief. They're ready to talk about their loved one and their grief and experience. They're comforted by the presence of others and sharing their memories.

We were blessed during Hope's life with people to talk to—including those who brought us meals. They were often surprised when we'd invite them to bring enough food to have dinner with us.

We had incredibly precious visits during those days. Meaningless conversations were rare. Instead, we talked about life and death and prayer and faith and eternity. It was a rich time, and we enjoyed engaging with people who cared.

Going through grief gives us a unique opportunity to bond with

those we may barely have known before, if they dare to draw close to us in our pain. Conversations that go below the surface can become the foundation for new and deeper friendships that give us strength in the midst of sorrow.

IT'S OKAY TO BE WEAK

The loss of someone we love reveals our very real vulnerability to sorrow and pain. At some point or another, most of us surrender to our weakness—and it can be very uncomfortable.

We may always have been in control, on top of things; now everything in our lives seems chaotic. The house is a mess, nobody has washed the clothes or paid the bills, and we can't seem to concentrate or carry on a reasonable conversation.

Grief reduces us to—or reveals to us—our neediness and weakness. Some of us have to learn how to receive help from others when we've always been self-sufficient. Others of us discover through the process of grief our own physical, emotional, and spiritual weakness that can no longer be covered up.

While this discovery can be unsettling, it's when we are weak that we are prepared to enter into God's strength. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). In other words, our weakness positions us as nothing else does to experience joy in God and connectedness with Him.

IT'S OKAY TO BE STRONG

Some of us also discover in the midst of grief a strength we didn't know was there—in character, in mind and will, in commitment, in endurance, in faith. We have the opportunity to put God's strength on display through our weakness as He provides what we need in the midst of heartache and difficulty.

There are surely no simple answers to the question, “How are you?” when you’re grieving. We can be sad but not devoid of joy and laughter, wanting to hide but willing to engage, weak in body and mind but strong in spirit.

Getting your family through the loss of your loved one requires making room for all these things in yourself and those around you. It requires allowing for completely conflicting emotions and inclinations. It requires a great deal of grace.

“BUT HOW ARE YOU REALLY DOING?”

David

Following close on the heels of “How are you?” is its requisite follow-up query:

“No . . . how are you . . . *really*?”

For many of us men, this is the dreaded, nails-on-the-chalkboard question. To us it implies one of the following:

(a) Your first response is never actually truthful, so now we’ll press for the honest answer.

(b) You are clearly oblivious to your own feelings, and it will require somebody removing your blinders to let you see how you actually feel (and I’ve been appointed to that job).

(c) Your description of how you are is pathetic; here, we’ll give you a second chance to come up with something better.

(d) All of the above.

What is it about this line of questioning from concerned friends that can make us so uncomfortable?

I think I know what it is for me. In the midst of my own pain and confusion, I suddenly also feel responsible to others to give an account for my progress. As the words of my reply come measured through my lips, I’m wondering if my report will be acceptable.

In a sense, I wouldn't be surprised if the questioner came back with, "Sorry, wrong answer. More hopeful confidence, please. Less feeling sorry for yourself. Less anger (or more)."

Most of us guys are "doers," and in the uncharted territory of grief we wonder if we're "doing it right." In general, we have no idea if we are or not; the seemingly suspicious questions hit us more as interrogation aimed at exposing us than as loving concern.

Interestingly, many of us find it much easier to answer the question, "How is your wife?" or "How are your kids?"

Our perspective on how family members are doing seems much clearer. We're observing them, we've talked things through with them. Though we're walking through deep and turbulent waters that are probably new to all of us, our senses may be more attuned to family members' daily condition than to our own. And generally we're more comfortable talking about them than about ourselves.

Another reason it's difficult to respond to this question is that most of the potential answers seem somehow off the mark.

"Fine."

"Good."

"I've been better."

"I'm surviving."

"I'm 32.7 percent better than I was last time you asked."

The responses poised on the ends of our tongues seem trite, glib, depressing, unbelievable, or insulting. Or they expose a lack of self-understanding to which we'd rather not admit.

I've found it helpful to tune my ear to hear a *different* question—or actually, not a question at all. As I slogged through the insecurity of grief with my family during our loss experiences, when someone asked, "How are you . . . really?" I began to translate it to mean, "I care about you."

It's that simple: "I am bold enough to ask this question because

I know you must be hurting. I know it must be very difficult. When I try to put myself in your shoes I can hardly imagine what it must be like. So I ask how you are. I really want to know, because I care about you.”

Sure, I suspected that a few inquisitors were motivated more by an all-knowing superiority than by compassion: “I’ll get you to dig down and tell me the dirty truth whether you want to or not!” Or, “I know grief, and I can tell by your superficial response that you’re not really dealing with it yet.”

But I chose to receive even those probings as gifts of concern. At least the interrogator cared enough to ask!

Eventually, I worked out simple, honest answers like these:

“It’s very hard, but I’m doing well. Thank you so much for asking.”

“This week was difficult because _____. Thanks so much for asking.”

“Believe it or not, I’m great. Thanks for your prayers, and thanks so much for asking.”

As I tried to respond graciously to probing questions, I saw that even though the process made me somewhat uncomfortable, it proved to be a blessing to the one who asked. This is a great arrangement, because it pays dividends for everybody. As Proverbs 11:25 (ESV) says, “Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.”

Can you receive those sometimes-too-earnest inquiries that make you squirm or snarl as genuine gifts of love and concern? Can you see them as coming from friends who struggle to understand your situation and to know how they should respond?

Chances are that many people want to try to walk with you. Some want to help if they can; others just want to empathize. Receive them all as a gift from God, knowing that they care—really!

“AND HOW ARE YOU DOING AS A FAMILY?”

Nancy and David

When we think back to those early days of grief in our family, we realize that the process took a dramatically different shape for each of us.

Much of Nancy’s emotion was wrapped up in disappointment that she wouldn’t have a daughter who would look like her, talk like her, and grow up to be her friend in her old age.

David, on the other hand, felt the helplessness of a father who was unable to protect his daughter from the foreign invader—and a husband who couldn’t make everything better for his sad wife.

While our son, Matt, couldn’t articulate many of his thoughts and feelings at the time, we have to wonder: How does a sibling compete with the memory of a child who was never old enough or healthy enough to disobey or disappoint? How does he adjust to having parents who cry at the most inopportune times?

Perhaps the starting place for figuring out how your family is doing is to identify how the loss has affected each of you—to get outside your own thoughts and feelings to consider those of each family member.

That can be awkward, even intimidating. But it can also be rewarding and strengthening. You may wonder how your family will cope with the mixture of intense emotions and needs, but grief gives you an opportunity to go deeper with each other and grow closer to each other than you were before this loss. Grief does not have to drive you apart.

What will determine if you move away from each other or draw together, whether you emerge from this crisis broken, bitter, and divided or healthy, happy, and whole? It depends on whether you are willing to *identify* and *address* grief’s impact on each member of your family—or if you choose to *ignore* and *avoid* it.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS?

It can seem more comfortable to ignore and avoid how grief is affecting your family as individuals and as a unit. Part of you may wish everyone would retreat to his or her own room and emotions and coping mechanisms rather than dealing with them head-on.

As humans who don't want to hurt, we have several ways to avoid feeling the pain of grief. Maybe you recognize one or more of the following in yourself or in other members of your family.

1. *Postpone*. We think that if we ignore it, it will just go away. So we push it out of our minds and put it on the shelf. We don't talk about it, hoping it will dissipate through neglect.

2. *Somaticize*. We become obsessed with our own health or lack thereof, using physical illness as a way to avoid our emotional pain.

3. *Minimize*. Using self-talk such as, "We weren't that close, anyway," we minimize the value of our relationship to the person who has died. By telling ourselves that our loss is not unique ("We all lose our parents at some point"), we try to convince ourselves that a common loss shouldn't hurt so much.

4. *Displace*. Rather than giving energy to our grief, we give it to blame, to righting a wrong, to making someone pay.

5. *Replace*. Many grieving people channel their energy into causes such as passing a law, starting a foundation, or pushing for research. A cause can be an excellent outlet for honoring someone who has died, but pouring energy into a cause before the work of grief is done can derail that important process.

6. *Spiritualize*. While we rest and rely on the promises of Scripture to bring us comfort in our grief, the truth of heaven does not take away the pain of loss.

Do you see yourself or other members of your family avoiding grief through any of these avenues? Grief is not to be avoided or ignored. It is not something you *get over* so you can *go on*; it is something you *get through*.

To help your family get through it, ignoring and avoiding won't work. You'll need to identify and address what each person in your family is thinking, feeling, and experiencing.

TO EACH HIS OWN

It hurts when others ignore or dismiss your pain. But it can also be annoying when others want to examine and meddle in it. It's frustrating when they seem to suggest that you aren't grieving the "right" way, or on the "right" timetable.

What feels good is when those closest to us seek to understand our pain and even share it. This is what helps a family in grief grow close—as family members feel that others respect their individual losses as well as their individual expressions of grief.

It can be hard to find the energy to identify and understand what others in your family are feeling and experiencing when you feel overwhelmed by your own pain. But considering the pain of others is what draws out compassion and helps us to give each other space and grace.

Consider how various losses affect different family members in differing ways.

LOSS OF A CHILD

As a *parent*, you may be agonizing over the loss of your dreams for your child—what your child might have experienced and accomplished. You may be struggling with guilt over lost opportunities, missed cues, harsh words. While your spouse grieves, too, you may wonder why he or she seems so much sadder than you do—or doesn't seem sad at all. You may feel frustrated by his or her unwillingness to talk about your child—or to stop talking about your child. You may find yourself gripped by fear over losing another child, and tending to overprotect your other children.

Those surviving *children*, meanwhile, may feel lost—unsure of where they fit into your family structure without that brother or sister. They may suffer “survivor guilt” and feel compelled to please you. They could fear the future as they see their parents, who used to be in control, struggle to cope with everyday matters. They might even fear that they will die themselves.

Grandparents are sometimes the forgotten mourners. Our society underestimates the impact of the death of a grandchild. But grandparents not only lose a beloved grandchild; they also experience the pain of watching their child grieve the loss. And parents never stop wanting to protect their child from pain.

LOSS OF A SPOUSE

If you're the *husband* or *wife* who's lost your mate, you may be feeling a sense of desperation about the future—wondering how you'll get a meal on the table, pay the bills, make decisions on your own, endure the loneliness. You may have mixed feelings about whether or not you'll marry again; perhaps you can't stand the idea of spending the rest of your life alone, but it seems so hard to think about someone taking the place of your late spouse. You may find yourself leaning on one of your children for support, trying to turn him or her into a confidant. Perhaps you feel angry at your spouse for not seeking medical care earlier, angry with a doctor who misdiagnosed or mistreated, or angry with God.

Your *children* may be afraid of losing you, too. They may wonder who's going to teach them how to throw a ball, how to bake a cake, or what it means to be a man or woman. They may feel frustrated over being different from those at school who have a mom and dad, desperate to be “normal” like everybody else. They may long for “how it used to be” in the daily routines of your family.

As the *parent* of a child who has lost his or her spouse, you

may find yourself feeling the load of increased responsibility for your grandchildren or the surviving spouse. Perhaps you want to help, but fear interfering. You may want to make everything better, and are frustrated that you can't. You may hurt over the pain you see in your grandchildren's eyes, and fear the long-term effects of this loss.

LOSS OF YOUR PARENT

As an adult *child*, you may be surprised by the intensity of your grief over losing your parent, not having anticipated what it would feel like for mom or dad to be there no longer as a resource. It may make you far more aware of your own mortality, an uncomfortable reality. You may face conflict with your siblings over an inheritance, or conflicting emotions if your relationship with your parent was strained or unresolved.

You may also be hurting for your *children*, who no longer have the unconditional love of a grandparent.

Perhaps you feel resentment that your *spouse* doesn't seem to get how much this loss hurts—or seems unwilling to help you care for the widow or widower who's now alone and needy.

As we articulate our understanding of how a loss has affected other family members, without evaluating or criticizing or ridiculing, we love each other well. Identifying our issues, feelings, and thinking patterns provides the foundation for addressing them.

HOW YOU'RE DOING

The answer to the question, "How are we doing as a family?" has less to do with how much hurt you're feeling and more to do with how well you're caring for each other.

Asking yourselves questions like these can help:

- How are we doing in listening to and validating each other's fears and concerns?
- How well are we doing in comforting?
- How well are we doing in lovingly confronting unhealthy coping and harmful thinking?
- How well are we doing in not insisting everyone else grieve in the same way and on the same timetable?

So . . .

How are you doing as a family?

You're hurting.

You're adjusting.

You're trying to find a new normal.

You're going through one of the hardest things a family ever has to go through.

So don't be in a hurry. Don't expect so much from yourself and each other. Give each other a lot of grace. Do everything you can to make your family a safe place to address your grief rather than avoid it.

And rest in the confidence that God is doing His part in bringing your family to a place of healing and wholeness. "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6).

God Fills In the Gaps

Q&A with Angela Robbins

After Angela's husband, Wes, died of a heart attack while playing softball with his family in the front yard on Father's Day, his absence left a huge hole—a gap she thought could never be filled.

In those early days after Wes died, what were your greatest fears and challenges?

I wondered, *Am I up to the task of raising my kids on my own? How will my kids make it without a dad? How can I go on? How will I live after this terrible thing? Will we ever experience joy again?* It all looked impossible.

I remember when we were about three months into being without Wes, we got in the car after church to go eat lunch. The kids were arguing and I was in complete despair. We were in such chaos. I pulled over on the side of the road and got out and slammed the door and stood in front of the car and said to God, “What were You thinking? Do you see our life? How is any good going to come of this? I don’t get it.”

After a while I got back in the car and told the kids, “I’m really struggling without Dad. Sometimes I’m going to get angry with God because I still don’t understand and I don’t know if I ever will. But I know two things—He’s big enough for my anger and I know He is going to take care of us. I know that no matter how bad it gets, we’re going to be okay.”

What was that first year like for you?

The first year was all about just getting through all the firsts—the first kids’ birthdays without their dad, the first

Christmas, the first anniversary without Wes. We didn't do any of it very well. We stayed out of town in a hotel that first Christmas because being at the house without Wes was too painful. We did birthdays different. We tried to celebrate—but there was always the gut feeling . . . *It is never going to be the same. It will never be as much as it could have been if Wes was still here.* He was the one who brought the fun element to everything.

All family events were hard. Going to church was hard. Sporting events for my kids were so difficult. Any time you go out in public you feel like you have a neon sign over your head that says, THE FAMILY WITHOUT A DAD, THE BROKEN FAMILY. You feel like the spotlight is on you and that you look pitiful.

But as hard as the first year was, the second year was probably my hardest year. At that point, the reality set in: This is how it's going to be from now on.

I realized I depended on Wes so much for every part of my life and for so much of my identity. I remember bringing that up to my counselor, asking, “When am I going to be just Angela Robbins?” My counselor told me it would take my brain at least three years to change over into thinking of myself as just one person and not as half of a couple and it was absolutely true. I wore my wedding ring for almost three years. I wasn't ready to take it off. It made me feel like I was still married, and that felt good. It felt safe.

When did things begin to get better?

The turnaround for me began when I finally decided I would meet with another widow. I thought nobody could be in a worse situation than me. But once I sat down with another widow and she told me what she and her kids

were going through, I realized I wasn't the only one with a difficult life. That brought me comfort. I introduced my kids to this family because I wanted them to see that they were not the only ones experiencing what it is like to lose a dad.

I thought I was dependent on the Lord before I lost Wes, but I didn't have a clue. Once I was stripped of the security blanket of my husband, I realized that I had never really learned what it means to depend on the Lord.

For a while I couldn't read my Bible, but then the Lord opened up the Scripture to me, and it came alive to me like never before. I began to seek an intimate relationship with the Lord like never before. I got to a place where I felt really clean before Him and was able to share things with Him that I never had before, like, "I'm lonely. I'm weary. There are times when I can't see the horizon and I need You to help me."

In what way did the Scripture come alive to you?

Honestly, at first I hated that verse, "He will be a father to the fatherless and a husband to the husbandless." I told Him I didn't like it: "I don't want that verse to apply to me." I didn't want Him to be my husband or a father to my children. I wanted Wes to be my husband and a father to my children. But that really was the answer.

So I began to pray, "Okay, Lord, You said You'd be the husband to the husbandless. I'm asking You to be that to me tonight. I'm asking You to fill every empty place in me. You know what that is. In Your own supernatural way would You minister to me tonight and equip me with the strength to get up in the morning and be what I need to be?"

There were scriptures I took as, *This is what I'm going to live on*. Like, "You are my rock and shield. I trust in

You.” I would walk up and down the hallway in my house and say those psalms out loud, saying to God, “You are everything we need.”

My kids began to pick up on it, and the tone around my home began to change. My kids began to see and celebrate how God was taking care of us. We’d be driving around trying to find a parking place and one would open up, and we’d say, “Jesus must have done that for us!”

One time in Target I needed something on the top shelf that I couldn’t reach, and I thought, *This is so my life, here we go again. If I had a husband he could get that.* Just then another customer asked if he could help me. I realized immediately that God had filled the gap.

When you have so many gaps, they’re real noticeable when He fills them. Even the tiniest detail means so much. He has done that so many times. It became so evident to us. We’d say, “That is so cool what God did!” It was someone being kind to us, but we saw it as God filling in the gaps.

In what ways would you say God has used the loss of Wes for good in your life?

So many ways. I remember one Sunday morning about two years into our journey, we were standing in church singing an old, great hymn. Worship songs have such a new meaning when you lose someone who is dear to you.

At that point, the Lord was just beginning to show us that He could fill our hearts. Worship was becoming a whole new avenue to express that for us. We were standing there singing and we wanted to shout. We couldn’t sing the words loud enough or with enough passion. And my 12-year-old daughter said, “Look around. Nobody is feeling it like us. We’re so lucky that it means this much.”

What a blessing to realize you have a connection with Jesus you've never had before—because you've been able to share in His sufferings.

How do you deal with your kids' need for a dad and your own loneliness?

It is hard because you get a lot of pressure from your friends to pursue a new relationship with a man. To them, that is the fix to all your struggles.

But I've seen so many widows rush into another relationship and give up the opportunity to nurture an intimate relationship with Jesus. I tell new widows, "Do your best to pursue Jesus. Give yourself time to allow Him to fill every place. If you become a workaholic or shopaholic or go from relationship to relationship, you are filling your life with everything but Him."

I also know that if there is going to be another person in my life, it isn't for just me but for four people—and that's a tall order to fill. I do believe that the Lord will raise up someone for me, but in His time, and I have to trust that. There have been many times in the last eight years—especially as my kids are teenagers—that I think, *Lord, when will You send them a dad?* It's really more about them than me because I see how hard it is for them to go through those years without a significant male.

These are the times I go back to God and say, "I'm asking You once again to fill the gaps. I trust You with my life and with my kids' lives. I need to know You are actively involved in filling the gaps for my children."

What can you say today that you thought you'd never be able to say?

I can say that I really never dreamed that the Lord

wanted to bless us so much. I never dreamed He could create in us the capacity to have this much joy.

And I can say that if the Lord does not bring about another partner for me this side of heaven, I believe I still will have the most full life. I don't believe that at the end of my life I'll say I missed out.

I believe I've learned how to be content in whatever my situation because I've seen that He really can be enough. And not just enough, but way more than enough.