



PEACE
IN THE FACE OF
LOSS

JILL KELLY

New York Times bestselling author of *Without a Word*

Peace in the Face of Loss is essential for anyone who's grieving or walking alongside a loved one in a difficult season. Loss knows no limits—Jill's story offers us hope and peace, and guides us back to the One who can comfort us best.

JOHN C. MAXWELL

New York Times bestselling author and leadership expert

I don't think I could oversell this book to you. Jill Kelly knows what she's talking about, and the message in *Peace in the Face of Loss* resonates deeply with me because I've known my share of pain and loss. And haven't we all? Haven't you? With a perfect blend of human frailty and God's strength, Jill shows us how to move forward in faith during the inevitable hard seasons of life. What a gift she's given us in this book!

CLAYTON KING

Senior pastor, NewSpring Church; founder and president, Crossroads Summer Camps and Clayton King Ministries

Jill Kelly has known heartache beyond what many can fathom. But in her pain, she has done something very few learn to do—she has discovered how to keep her heart connected to the Comforter, lifting her face to the presence of God to find the warmth of goodness in the midst of horrific storms. No matter what kind of pain you face, Jill knows how to shine a light in the darkness, leading others to freedom and offering clarity to bring hope and healing.

CHRISTA BLACK GIFFORD

Songwriter, speaker, and author of *Heart Made Whole*

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Peace in the Face of Loss

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Edited by Karin Stock Buursma

Designed by Eva Winters

Published in association with The Christopher Ferebee Agency, www.christopherferebee.com.

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Out of respect for their privacy, the names and identifying details of some people in this book have been changed.

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ISBN 978-1-4964-2136-4

Printed in China

23	22	21	20	19	18	17
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

MORE THAN LIKELY, you have this book in your hands because either you or someone you know and love has suffered loss. You may have lost a child or a sibling, a spouse or a parent. Perhaps you're dealing with infertility, infidelity, or abuse, or you're mourning the loss of a relationship, a job, or a career path you were certain of. You may be grieving over a life that is far from what you expected it to be. Whatever the circumstances that may have converged to bring you to this unwelcome place, you are not on the outside looking in—you're hurting. At this point, you don't know what to say or do. Words fall short and your prayers seem hollow. Tears come unexpectedly and often, and you never thought it was possible to weep so much.

Perhaps you're desperate for hope and healing but cannot seem to muster up either one despite your best efforts. First and foremost, I want you to know that although we've never met and probably never will this side of heaven, I care about you. And although I might not have endured the unique losses you have or suffered the pain you've experienced, I long for the same peace and healing that you crave.

You might assume that the author of a book like this would

have a PhD in Coping with Loss. If not a degree, then certainly a deep well with some serious life experiences to draw from in order to back up the claims made. If I'm pregnant with my firstborn, I'm not searching the web for parenting advice written by someone who has never raised children. Are you tracking with me? You don't seek counsel from someone who has never experienced what you need advice about.

Let's be frank: If someone has never languished in the bottom of a pit and found her way back to the top, what makes her think she can encourage, guide, or bring hope to someone who's in the pit right now?

There's no question that I have been in the bottom of the pit, starting with my son Hunter's diagnosis of a terminal disease when he was just four months old and continuing past his death at the age of eight and a half. So here's my confession: I'm not all the way out of the pit yet.

When I was asked to write this devotional, I was humbled and grateful. It's one thing to have a book idea, draft a proposal, and then find a publisher that buys into what you think everyone needs to read. It's an even rarer honor and privilege to have a publisher approach you to write on a topic that they feel you can speak about to readers in a meaningful way. Initially, I believed that my experiences of loss would allow me to confidently communicate what I have learned and the peace I have experienced as a result.

But that's not entirely the case.

No, what God revealed to me in the midst of writing this book was different from what I had envisioned. As I reflected on my profound and painful losses, I expected to remember the pain and to a certain degree feel it all over again, but I assumed

that this time it wouldn't be as raw and fresh because the emotional bleeding had stopped and the wound had healed. But instead, as I reflected and remembered, I realized that some of the residual pain is still there and I don't always have the peace I've been asked to write about.

I don't have all the answers. Therefore, I'm not writing this book because I have successfully completed my grieving process and now live in perfect peace. Instead, through my journey of loss, I have discovered that the people who have helped me the most are those who have walked beside me, cried with me, and pointed me back to God. That is exactly what I hope to do for you. Because while finding peace in the midst of heartbreak and loss sounds impossible, Scripture tells us that "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

While encouraging words might carry us through a day or two, what we really crave is peace that surpasses all understanding—the kind of perfect peace that's rock solid, sustaining, and uplifting, no matter what happens around us or within us. I want what is impossible for me to obtain in and of my own strength.

If that's what you desire, I invite you to join me as we, together, seek and find peace through and from the Author and Prince of Peace. He is our starting point because, simply put, we cannot know true healing, abiding hope, joy, and peace unless we know Him. Everything—and I mean *everything*—we need in this moment and for the rest of our days upon this earth is found in Christ.

Maybe that is exactly what you didn't want to hear. At this point in your life, you may feel that God has let you down, and as a result you're done with faith and all that goes along

with it. If that's you, please, don't put this book down. Don't walk away. God is capable of handling whatever you throw at Him; nothing you do or don't do will negatively impact His outrageous love for you. He knows you better than you know yourself, and He's big enough to handle all your anger, rejection, and bitterness.

He's not finished with you yet. Will you consider giving Him another chance, another opportunity to meet you right where you are in the midst of your loss? We are all a work in progress. We need Him and each other, so let's do this together. Let's trust God, one day at a time, one prayer at a time, all in His perfect timing.



In this book you will find forty devotions that touch on different aspects of loss. You'll learn a lot about my story but will hear from some other people as well. Each devotion begins with a Bible verse or quote and ends with a "path to peace" statement that summarizes the chapter and conveys a word of truth for you to ponder and apply to your life. You'll also find Scripture in each chapter to encourage you as you continue your journey through loss.

Let's choose to trust God one devotion at a time.

And when we both reach the last line of this book, I believe we will be different people than we were when we first started this journey. I'm praying for you and trusting God to bring the life-changing peace to your life that only He can provide.

*With hope . . . and peace,
Fill*

*Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is
the LORD's purpose that prevails.*

PROVERBS 19:21

HE WAS THE PROTÉGÉ SON. A chip off the old block, the heir to a celebrated football legacy—and the culmination of a father's hopes and dreams. Before our only son, Hunter, was born, his life had been scripted, written upon his father's heart like a playbook for the next generation. Like father, like son; he would grow up with the spiritual grit to be a courageous, honorable, and determined young man. He would be gifted—an all-star athlete (a quarterback, of course) and a tough competitor who would wear the number twelve just like his dad. He would work hard, doing more than what was expected of him and never giving up despite the setbacks that would come his way.

He would get up before the crack of dawn to go fishing

and hunting with his dad. Their relationship would be the envy of every father and son as he would grow in wisdom and pay close attention to each piece of advice he was given, jumping at every chance to make the Kelly family proud. These were just some of the scenes we had already written into the life script for Hunter James Kelly.

I will never forget the joy and pride radiating from my husband, Jim's, face when our son was born. I had found out during a routine sonogram that we were having a boy and decided that I would surprise Jim rather than tell him before the baby was born. My water broke on Jim's birthday—Valentine's Day, February 14, 1997. The son Jim had always wanted was born on his birthday, signaling a perfect beginning to a perfect story. Or so we thought . . .

Shortly after we brought Hunter home from the hospital, he became very irritable and started to have difficulty eating. More serious issues surfaced, leading us through a whirlwind of doctors' visits that resulted in a barrage of tests to try to determine exactly what was wrong. Finally, when Hunter was four months old, a neurologist diagnosed him with a fatal genetic disease called Krabbe leukodystrophy. (If you are interested in learning more about Hunter's incredible life, please visit the Hunter's Hope Foundation website at <http://www.huntershope.org>.)

Words are pathetically powerless to describe the devastation you feel when you're told that your child will most likely not live to see his second birthday. It is impossible to express the avalanche of anguish that buries you when the

doctor explains that there is no cure or treatment for the disease that is killing your infant son.

In an instant, any vestige of faith you have is overwhelmed by sheer dread. Swallowed by the darkness of a disease diagnosis, you feel powerless and helpless, devastated and desperate for hope.

Hunter never experienced or accomplished any of the things his father had dreamed he would. He never threw a pass into the end zone for the winning touchdown. He never sat in a ground blind while turkey hunting with his dad or did any of the fun, simple things that young, healthy, growing boys do. And although he lived far beyond what the doctors had predicted, Hunter's life was filled with suffering.

Yet, in the midst of his suffering—the suffering that went against all the plans we had for our son's life—we began to understand that God had a greater purpose for Hunter's life and for our family. We saw glimpses of it as our girls developed remarkable compassion from loving their brother and as we experienced the solidarity and love of "Team Hunter"—our amazing team of family, friends, medical staff, and therapists who helped with the daily care of our boy. We saw a piece of it through the lives touched by the Hunter's Hope Foundation and most of all as we loved Hunter himself. It took time and a tremendous amount of trust and tears, but we learned to let go of our plans in order to grab hold of God's hand. Rather than continue to try to write our own script the way we thought it should be written, we learned to trust God, the Giver of life and Author of every story.



Can we get real with each other right now? You and I both want life to be fair. We want our lives to go a certain way—our way. We think the American Dream is a reasonable goal, so we spend ourselves in its pursuit. We strive to obtain what we want but then find ourselves empty and longing for more. We think we know what is best when in reality it's impossible to see the big picture from our vantage point.

And when life doesn't pan out or conform to our preconceived notions, or when it falls short of our plans and hands us a loss we didn't expect—the fallout is often devastating.

If you're reading this book, you have experienced loss—and I know that loss can feel like your dreams have been crushed and life is a mess. But what if what you need is the exact opposite of what you think you need? What if the very thing that causes you the greatest pain ends up being the greatest blessing?

The Bible reminds us that God's plans are far greater than our own:

He is the Rock, his works are perfect,
and all his ways are just.
A faithful God who does no wrong,
upright and just is he.

DEUTERONOMY 32:4

When we hold on to the truth that God's ways are perfect, it can change the way we react to loss. We can pray instead of plan. We can trust God and accept what is instead of trying so hard to change everything and everyone. We can even entertain the radical idea that the very loss we're going through right now might be the catalyst to immeasurable blessing. We can let go and let God do what only He can do.

Peace in the face of loss comes when we
let go of our plans and **embrace God's**
perfect purposes.





In him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

COLOSSIANS 1:16-17

I'LL BE HONEST WITH YOU: After watching my son suffer for eight and a half years, then struggling through his death and the suffocating grief and depression that followed, I felt like both shoes had dropped at the same time. I assumed that I had fulfilled my life quota of tears and heartbreak. No one should have to bury a child, right? But people do, and I did. That experience wrecked me. I am not the same person I was before I endured that loss—nor should I be. If you have experienced the death of a child, you know what I'm talking about. You will never be the same. Ever.

But the other shoe actually dropped when my husband, Jim, was diagnosed with oral cancer—known medically as squamous cell carcinoma of the upper jaw. He would go on to have his upper left jaw surgically removed. Upon full recovery and healing, a clean scan revealed the results we

had all been praying for: “no cancer.” Then, almost a year after his surgery, the cancer returned with a vengeance, requiring the most aggressive chemotherapy and radiation regimen. Even now as I type this, I’m waiting to hear the results of his most recent MRI and other scans. He’s been cancer-free for close to two years now (praise God!), but once you’ve had cancer, these types of scans become routine. Unfortunately, Jim’s been in a lot of pain lately, more than usual, so there’s greater concern and fear.

But I’m not the only one who seems to have more than my quota of sorrow. There’s my dear friend Nicole. To this very day, I still wrestle with God because of her death. She was a momma to twin boys, Trevor and Tyler, and we met because Trevor has the same disease that my son, Hunter, had. Nicole was the strong Wonder Woman type. She was also fun, gracious, kind, and gentle—but when it came to taking care of her boys, especially Trevor, she was a force to be reckoned with. I had (and still have) tremendous admiration, love, and respect for her.

I got word one day from a mutual friend that Nicole had been diagnosed with breast cancer. I was shocked; we all were. Isn’t taking care of a terminally ill child enough heartbreak to bear? Nicole fought hard and long, but eventually the cancer spread. My first thought after I heard that Nicole died was *Who’s going to take care of Trevor?* Yes, Nicole’s husband is an amazing and capable father, but there’s nothing like a mother’s care. Why didn’t God heal Hunter and Nicole?

It’s not only diseases that cause us to ask *Why?* We ask

when we hear about another mass shooting or terrorist attack, or when we watch or read the news about another child abuse case or fatal car accident. Why does God let this happen?

If there ever was a person whom we might assume had the right to ask why, it was Job. My uncle Mark introduced me to Job soon after we found out that Hunter was dying. Mark would come over to the house often, and every time he came he brought his Bible, his smile, and so much Jesus joy that it was contagious. He read me the story of Job, which is exactly what I needed to hear during that season in my life. (It's still one of my favorites.)

The book of Job is difficult to read, even for the seasoned Bible student. Job's story is shocking and heartbreaking because it's a true story about a man suffering more loss than anyone I have ever met. First, Job lost his wealth. He was the Bill Gates of his day, the wealthiest man around, and in an instant he lost everything—oxen, donkeys, sheep, servants, camels. All of it.

The losses didn't end there. Soon after Job received word that his possessions had been taken,

yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!"

JOB 1:18-19

All his sons and daughters died. All of them. Not one was spared. Can you even imagine? I don't know about you, but in that moment, I would have wished I had died with the children. How do you survive?

Job's response after hearing about the death of his children wrecks me even more:

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

“Naked I came from my mother's womb,
and naked I will depart.
The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away;
may the name of the LORD be praised.”

JOB 1:20-21

As if Job hadn't encountered enough pain, after the loss of his children he continued to suffer physically through painful sores from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. Job lost his wealth, his health, and his children.

When Job finally broke and questioned God, it wasn't because of his losses but because of his inability to understand *why* God would allow him to suffer the way he did. And in the end, God never sat down with Job and explained why. Instead of giving Job answers, God asked Job a flurry of questions, starting with “Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?” (Job 38:4). God revealed more of

Himself—His majesty, His sovereignty, His power, His care for creation—and that was more than enough for Job.



If you understood why you suffered the losses you have, would it take away the loss itself? No. Would your heart be free of pain? No, because knowledge alone doesn't heal. Your heart would still ache. Though it may be hard to grasp, what healed Job's anguish is what heals ours: more of God. In the end, what mends our brokenness is love, which is simply more of God, since the Bible proclaims that "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Broken hearts are not mended by theology, church, friends, family, time, or even answers to the *why* of our suffering and losses. Hearts are made whole by love—because real, unconditional love never fails. And it's this kind of love alone that enables us to trust a Creator who does not explain Himself to His creation. Because if we know He loves us, it's enough that He knows the answers.

Peace in the face of loss comes when we boldly ask God the hard "why" questions and **humbly trust Him with the answers.**

