

CLARISSA MOLL

BEYOND

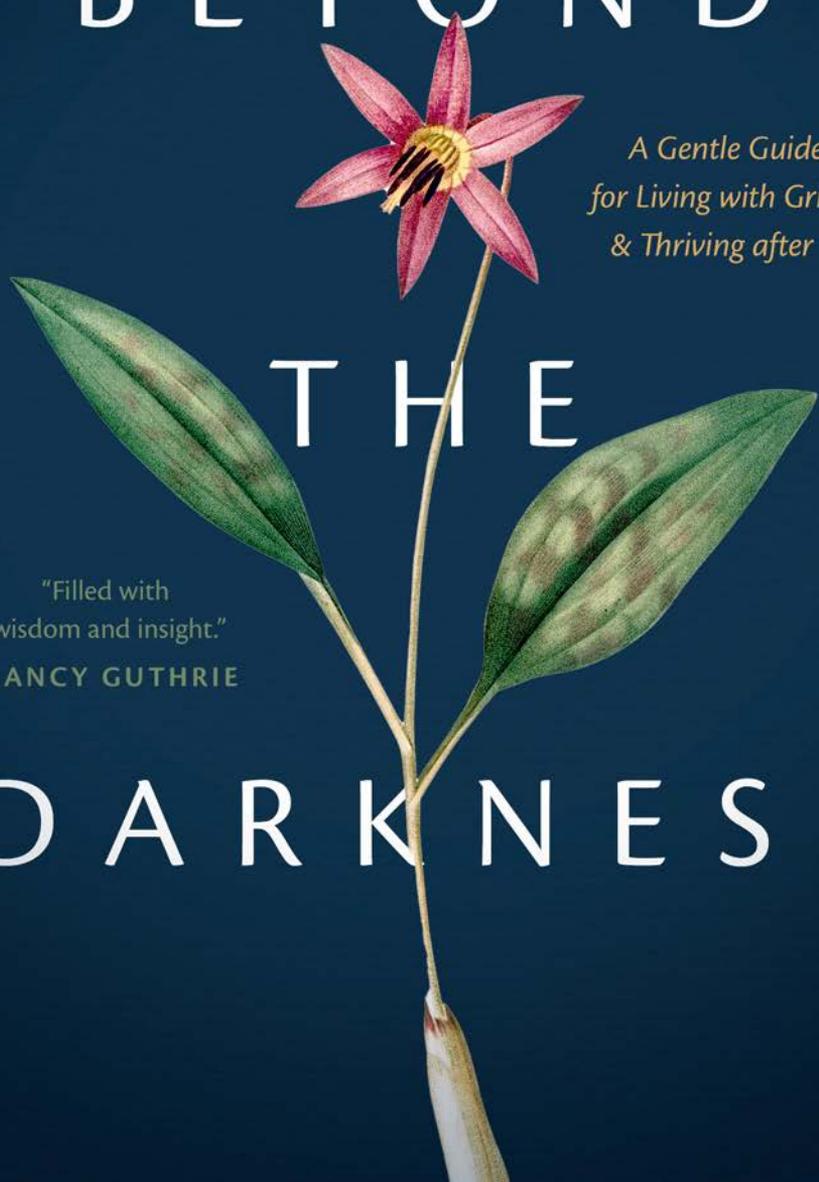
*A Gentle Guide
for Living with Grief
& Thriving after Loss*

THE

"Filled with
wisdom and insight."

NANCY GUTHRIE

DARKNESS



In *Beyond the Darkness*, Clarissa Moll comes alongside all who find themselves in the darkness of grief with a light that points forward toward healing and joy. In these pages readers will find someone who “gets it,” someone who has felt the loneliness and the fears that are part of grief, someone who knows what it is like to want the load of grief to lighten while at the same time relishing the way grief helps us to feel close to the person we love who has died. This is a book filled with wisdom and insight that will speak into the questions, the uncertainties, and the opportunities presented to us in the loss of someone we love.

NANCY GUTHRIE, author of *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*

Beyond the Darkness is a gift. It is a guidebook written for all who are confronted with a journey they never wanted to take—the loss of a loved one. In tender prose Clarissa Moll takes our hand and walks with us through the dreadful journey that is grief. She reintroduces us to our loving God, reminding us with awe that God, too, endured the grief of the death of his own Son and yet through that death has removed death’s sting forevermore. Add this book to your library. You may not need it now, but when you do, Clarissa Moll will be waiting to walk with you through your grief.

RICH STEARNS, president emeritus of World Vision US and author of *The Hole in Our Gospel* and *Lead like It Matters to God*

Deeply practical and profoundly tender, this is a book that bandages the wounds of the grieving without rushing through the circumstances that put them there. Clarissa’s kindness toward her own grief will be a welcome friend to others who mourn, and particularly her insight into how to function through those first hours and days and months. This is a book that can nestle alongside casseroles, gift baskets, and potted plants for the grieving, lingering there still even when the doorstep becomes empty. An unassuming instruction manual for how to make it through the unimaginable.

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT, author of *A Curious Faith: The Questions God Asks, We Ask, and We Wish Someone Would Ask Us* and *Handle with Care: How Jesus Redeems the Power of Touch in Life and Ministry*

None of us will avoid an encounter with death—either our own or someone we love. For many of us, that encounter will be what it was to Clarissa: “a mysterious new landscape without a map.” Clarissa explored that dark landscape, saw to the light beyond, and brought back to us the map we need. She says this is a book she never wished to write, but thank God she did write it. It is a book that every Christian should read.

WARREN COLE SMITH, president of MinistryWatch.com

Clarissa Moll has earned this wisdom, trudging the hard road of sorrow. I’m grateful she has recorded her steps for the rest of us. She has found there Another walking before her. Reading her brave and luminous book can help you—yes, even you—see him walking with you, too.

JASON BYASSEE, professor at Vancouver School of Theology and longtime contributor to *Christian Century* magazine

Clarissa Moll is one of my dearest companions, and our grief stories have pulled us closer to Jesus and one another. This book has been fought for and is true and good. *Beyond the Darkness* gives us the hope we desperately need when we can’t see a thing, and I’m so thankful she bravely gave us the gift of her words.

MELISSA ZALDIVAR, host of *Cheer Her On* podcast and author

In *Beyond the Darkness*, Clarissa Moll is an insightful and tender guide, a companion who speaks wisdom with gentleness in a place no one chooses to be—a place that is the end of our known world. *Beyond the Darkness* is a balm for the soul, a life raft for those who are drowning. It offers hope and help for the grieving and for those who are walking with them. And it originates from a deep well and provides comfort—especially because it is written by someone who knows of what she speaks. I am deeply grateful for this resource, though it certainly has come at a great cost.

MARLENA GRAVES, author of *The Way Up Is Down: Becoming Yourself by Forgetting Yourself*

Clarissa Moll allows you inside her brilliant mind and tender heart to guide you out of the debilitating pain and suffocating fog of overwhelming grief. I did not want to read about death or sorrow or someone else's pain, but I could not put *Beyond the Darkness* down. I was gripped by the author's raw honesty and deep spiritual insights. Gone are the platitudes and self-help steps you have heard too many times before. This work is filled with the rich wisdom that can only be gained in the house of suffering. Her gentle advice, beautiful prose, and steadfast faith will be a balm to your broken heart.

CHUCK BENTLEY, CEO of Crown Financial Ministries and friend of Rob Moll

Clarissa Moll's book is a beautiful expression of the power of the gospel to bring comfort and hope to those who experience crushing sorrow and unimaginable loss. I have read her book and observed her life. She and her children are members of our congregation who lost a loving husband and a wonderful father in the prime of his life. Most every time I see them, there are tears in my eyes and hope in my heart. Their loss was heartbreaking. Yet their lives are heart mending and hope bringing. All of us experience sorrow and loss. All of us need the hope to which Clarissa's life and book bear eloquent testimony. It is indeed a book of hope, strength, and beauty.

S. DOUGLAS BIRDSALL, honorary chair of the Lausanne Movement

In *Beyond the Darkness*, Clarissa Moll provides a soft place to land for those grappling with the life-altering ramifications of death and grief. Moll combines thoughtful research, tender personal stories, and practical—but not prescriptive—grief support, with a resurrection-centered theology. She invites excruciating pain and stunning hope to coexist in our hearts, our homes, and our communities. *Beyond the Darkness* is a beautiful companion for anyone who finds themselves in a season where light seems elusive.

ADRIEL BOOKER, author of *Grace like Scarlett* and the forthcoming *Tethered to Hope*

Clients often wish that their therapist or counselor had gone through the grief journey themselves. Clarissa Moll's *Beyond the Darkness* is a resource born out of personal experience of grief and loss, and she offers a paradigm shift of companionship in grief instead of disenfranchisement from its difficulties. Clarissa's journey in the grief that accompanies her since the death of her husband, Rob, provides an evidence-informed lens for therapists, counselors, and clients in need of sharp and useful tools to survive and thrive in this new path. I highly recommend this resource for any and all who are living and moving in the world alongside grief.

REGINA CHOW TRAMMEL, PHD, LCSW, associate professor of social work at Azusa Pacific University, licensed psychotherapist, and coauthor of *A Counselor's Guide to Christian Mindfulness: Engaging the Mind, Body & Soul in Biblical Practices & Therapies*

In *Beyond the Darkness*, Clarissa Moll offers tremendous wisdom and hope, even as she candidly explores the many layers of loss. A wise and tender guide, Moll bravely invites us into a journey through the shadows of grief—and into the healing balm of companionship.

DR. ALISON COOK, counselor and author of *Boundaries for Your Soul*

As a sudden and unexpected widow myself, I resonate with all Clarissa has to say in her insightful book. She writes beautifully, observes carefully, and translates a dark passage of life into language we can understand and benefit from. As she courageously notes in her book's title—*Beyond the Darkness*—we do indeed come out the other side of darkness, death, and grief into light, life, and resurrection. I am so glad for that truth and thankful that Clarissa is pointing the way forward.

CAROL L. POWERS, JD, cofounder and chair of the Community Ethics Committee, Harvard Medical School Center for Bioethics

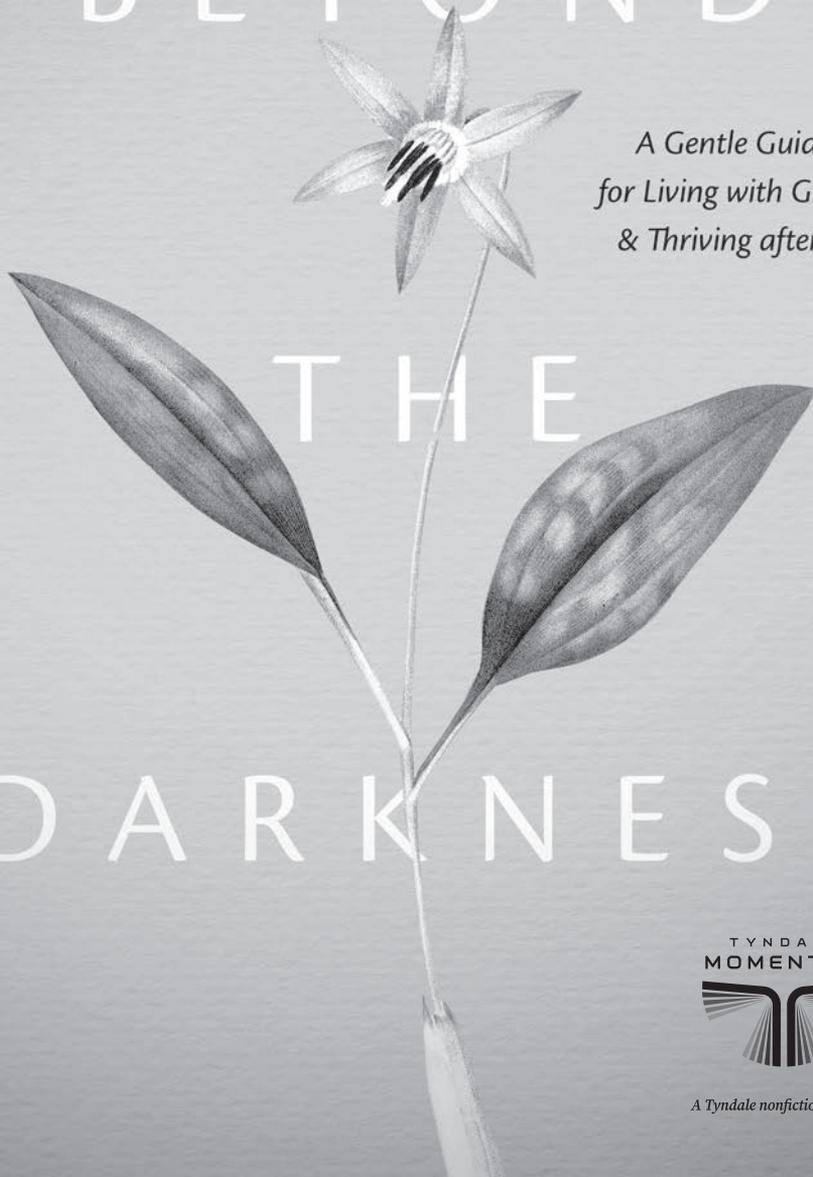
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INTRODUCTION

It is comforting to think that our tears are put in a bottle and not one of them forgotten by the one who leads us in paths of sorrow.

HANNAH HURNARD, *HINDS' FEET ON HIGH PLACES*

Dear reader, this is a book I never wished to write about a life I never wished to live. When my husband, Rob, died three years ago in a tragic hiking accident at age forty-one, I found myself dropped into a mysterious new landscape without a map. I was bewildered and frightened, a young widow with four children. I could see no trails stretching before me, pointing the way. I felt entirely lost in grief.

I suspect if you hold this book in your hands, you share a similar sorrow. This is a book you never wished to read for a life you never wished to live. You have lost someone dear to you. Whether death has surprised you or you've seen it coming, grief has brought you to your knees and threatens to undo you. You struggle to keep your head above water as wave after wave of sorrow breaks over you. You feel lost, alone, isolated, unheard, abandoned in a dark forest of suffering. I want you to know that I understand. The particulars of your sorrow are

in your precious keeping. But the landscape of grief? I know this well.

Perhaps instead, you're walking beside someone dear as they discover the strange topography of death and grief. You've committed to holding space, to remaining in the face of a specter that causes others to flee. Yours is a courageous task. Your wisdom, constancy, patience, and kindness will be called upon in this season in ways you never could have imagined. You will be a living gift in the face of death.

Maybe grief feels painfully familiar. You've lived with it for a long time now. Years after your loved one's death, you carry a deep pain that seems little changed from those first days of shock or sorrow. You wonder, after so long, *How could it possibly still hurt so much?*

In one way or another, death has drawn near to you. Its nearness has made you willing to look at something we usually avoid at all costs. For many of us, our unwillingness to sit with death has made us woefully unprepared to face it. But regardless of your preparation for this moment, you're here now. Life calls you to walk with grief. There is no need for regret, for wishing you'd paid attention before. Now is the time for love and grace, for finding a way forward in the midst of suffering. Would you walk with me? Let's take this hard journey together.

It is not lost on me that this book exists precisely because my husband died. For all my satisfaction in completing a project such as this, I'd give it all up in a moment to have Rob back with me. His death has left deep scars on the landscape of my life, and I miss him every day. But on this journey of grief, I have also discovered grace. I have learned core things about who

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I am, about who God is, about what Jesus offers me. I have learned, though much afraid, that I am never alone. My Good Shepherd walks beside me. These, too, are gifts I would never wish to give up. I believe they are available to you, too.

Those who grieve are often reminded that “the LORD is close to the brokenhearted.” But what does that look like when we are lost in the darkness of agonizing sorrow? How do we train our ears to listen for the soft trickle of that Eternal Spring in a dry and weary land? How can we find grace in the grief that has befallen us? When we can’t trace God’s hand, how can we ever find a path forward?

For the Christian, Jesus’ presence in our grief changes everything. I cannot promise you that his presence will make the pain hurt less or the healing come more quickly. I cannot promise you that, this side of glory, you will ever understand why this sorrow has shadowed your path. But I can assure you that the companionship of a Savior who bears scars is the thing grieving people need more than anything else. In Jesus we find the Friend who understands.

Dear reader, I know that you want to know when this hurt will end. When the searing ache of loss will ease away. When you will find yourself again. I wish I had easy answers. In my days of loss, I’ve desperately hunted for them myself. Each time, I’ve come up empty-handed. Instead, at the end of all my searches, I have found these two truths always standing clearly in my path: Grief will walk with us all of our earthly days. Our Savior will too.

At its core, this book is about these two truths. Grief, this unwelcome companion, will accompany you on your life’s

journey. She has filled her satchel with tears—her food day and night—and she will walk beside you. She will travel with you through the valley of the shadow of death. She will join you on the mountaintops of joy. Her presence will ever remind you of all that remains broken and sorrowful in this fallen world. If you're to walk with her, I believe it behooves you to know her well.

But do not fear. The path is wide enough for another companion, the Good Shepherd of your soul. The Compassionate One whose gentle hands bear the scars of death. The beautiful Resurrected One who has been there and back again. In your darkest hours on this path of sorrow, Jesus will be present. When the landscape is made barren by grief and filled only with painful silence, the Spirit will intercede for you with words that cannot be expressed. When the path of sorrow grows treacherous, the almighty Father will carry you with strength and tenderness. In his merciful goodness, he will teach you to sing, "I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless."

In the following pages, you'll find practical ways to engage with grief, to meet—perhaps even befriend—this unwelcome companion. You'll uncover the lies the world has told you about your grief, and you'll meet her face-to-face, as she really is. With honesty and compassion, you will learn to turn *toward* grief instead of pushing her away. You'll learn to navigate your new life with grief as your companion, taking her places you never thought you could.

And as you do this hard yet necessary work, I hope you will discover Jesus on your path of suffering. It is my prayer that the light of his presence would direct your feet as you take

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these next steps in grief. That your sorrowing body would find repair in his gentle embrace. That your wounded spirit would be made strong by his enlivening Spirit. That your soul would find the refreshment of his living water in the parched places of your life.

CHAPTER 1

On the Path with Sorrow and Suffering: The Journey Nobody Wants to Take

*“They are good teachers; indeed, I have few better. . . . This,”
said [the Shepherd], motioning toward the first of the silent figures,
“is Sorrow. And the other is her twin sister, Suffering.”*

HANNAH HURNARD, *HINDS’ FEET ON HIGH PLACES*

When the police chaplains arrived at my campsite, I told them I needed them to wait until I had someone to hold my hands. I told them I couldn’t hear their words until I wasn’t alone. I told them they would have to say what they needed to say in a single sentence. One sentence that would somehow tell it all. Their allotted airtime. Their character limit. I knew the news was bad. I knew how little I could bear in that moment.

“Your husband was in a hiking accident today, and he fell to his death.”

Did the chaplain say Rob’s name? Was it one sentence or

two? How could a single sentence be the sum? I still parse the moment in my mind, searching for language to express the darkness that overtook my life as he spoke. I have more words now to explain the details of my husband's accident. That night remains as vivid as the night Rob and I met. Yet even three years later, I struggle to describe the weight of Rob's absence, my life without him here. The thought of losing him still takes my breath away. The grief still runs so deep.

Before the chaplains left that night, after they had repeated their sentence to my four young children, we stood outside together in the summer night. "I need to say the words," I told them. And so I repeated that single sentence, made it real by saying it aloud. Like God the Father at the dawn of creation, I spoke Rob's death into existence for myself. Not like the muddled mumbling of the dream-addled mind in sleep. But clear, simple, shaking, afraid, real. I stood in the twilight at my campsite, three thousand miles from home, and I listened as my own voice spoke the truth with which my heart will always wrestle. My precious husband was dead.

STANDING AT THE TRAILHEAD

One early morning, on our family vacation, my husband Rob left our campsite for a long hike in the backcountry of Mount Rainier National Park. Rob and his hiking partner set out on the trail that day excited and energized for the path ahead. Both loved hiking and knew how to do it well. Being in the wilderness was Rob's favorite way to recreate and connect with God. But his body returned to the trailhead late that afternoon, airlifted by a helicopter out of the wilderness, cold and lifeless.

This day, marked on the calendar as a highlight of our family trip, became the most sorrowful of our lives.

In a moment, my world changed forever. I am still dumbfounded at the swiftness of death's destructive work. Rob's death ushered me into a harsh, lonely landscape of loss. His sudden tragic passing erased my plans for the future and set my feet at the trailhead of a new, unwanted path. For the rest of my days, I would walk with grief. I would travel down a trail nobody wants to take.

I never knew deep grief until I lost Rob. I had suffered other losses but none that broke me so profoundly, none that rearranged the entire order of my life. I will admit, from the very beginning, I have been a reluctant traveler on this new path of sorrow. Left with four children to raise alone, there is not a moment I do not long for the life I lived before. Rob and I enjoyed seventeen imperfectly wonderful years of marriage. Our life together was deeply satisfying. We shared the same passions and dreams. He loved me with all his heart, and I adored him.

As Sorrow and Suffering have beckoned me forward onto this grief journey, like Much-Afraid in Hannah Hurnard's classic *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, I have cried out to Jesus, "I can't go with them. . . . I can't! I can't! O my Lord Shepherd, why do you do this to me? How can I travel in their company? It is more than I can bear."

And yet, here I am. I have survived the moment I thought would be the death of me, too. I walk a trail of sorrow I never imagined I could. I have come to embrace grief as my companion, even if every day I long for her departure. I live in the valley of the shadow of Rob's death, and yet I also choose to lift my

eyes beyond this daily darkness toward horizons that promise flourishing. I have vowed to myself, “I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD.” And I believe you can do these same things too.

WHAT HE LEFT BEHIND

The list grows long when I consider the things Rob left behind when he died. Rob left friends, colleagues, and a job in which he found purpose. He left parents and siblings and an extended family who loved him very much. He left our children and me, alone now to forge a path forward without him.

Rob’s tragic death ended his life in its prime and brought death to our family in its blossoming years. Never again would our sons enjoy Dad as coach for Little League. Never again would his voice rise in a hearty cheer above the crowd at a 4-H competition or dance recital. Our dreams of retirement and empty-nesting would never come to be.

When I returned home from his memorial services that summer, from our road trip that had ended in grief, I discovered a little bar of Irish Spring soap on the shelf in my shower. We’d left it behind when we packed for the road. It was too small to be worth bringing along. Rob never returned to use it again. Even his soap he’d left behind.

These losses do not tell the whole story, however, for Rob also left behind a legacy of words. A journalist and author, Rob made his career in writing. He wrote about business and faith, humanitarian aid and finance. And, in what has become an unexpected, exquisite gift to you and me, he wrote about dying.

Early in our marriage, Rob wrote a book called *The Art*

of Dying. His journalistic curiosity and deep faith led him to work in a funeral home. He joined a hospice organization and became a volunteer, visiting with terminally ill patients on the weekends.

In the course of writing *The Art of Dying*, Rob discovered that for the last two hundred years, dying had shifted out of public view. In recent years, most people died in nursing homes or hospitals behind closed doors. Few families, communities, and churches attended well to dying people. Few people prepared for death—their own or those they loved. For most, until they experienced the death of a close friend or family member, on-screen deaths in movies and video games—broken down into pixels and distanced by the ability to hit the off button—were the only ones they knew.

As Rob worked his shifts at the funeral home, he saw that those who grieved had similarly poor preparation. Because death was pushed into the shadows, grief was too. Nobody knew what to do, so few people did anything at all. Employers asked bereaved workers to return quickly to the job, and communities and churches continued their programming and services as usual. Rob saw hurting people regularly encouraged to pull themselves together and move on. He saw dying and grieving people struggle in a culture that simply didn't understand.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO GRIEVE WELL?

Rob's writing about death profoundly shaped our early marriage. I edited *The Art of Dying*, and over many nights through the years, Rob and I talked about dying. We discussed our end-of-life choices even though we were young; we outlined our

desires and knew each other's wishes. We compiled our end-of-life documents and bought life insurance. We were committed to being a death-literate couple.

Knowing this, many people have asked me if I was prepared for Rob's death. I always tell them yes and no. Even though his death came as a surprise, I knew what he wanted. When Rob died, I simply executed our conversations to the best of my ability. Yes, I was prepared.

And yet, there is nothing that can prepare you for the agonizing loss of a loved one. You can read a biography of Rachmaninoff and listen to hours of his symphony recordings. You can sit in scholarly seminars and engage in discussions of his works. You can know everything there is to know about his music. But as you sit before the piano, your fingers lightly

settled on the keys, you find you cannot play a single note of his Piano Concerto no. 2. Not even a bar. With all your knowledge, your fingers, your brain, and your heart do not know the score. To play, you must learn the notes. And the only way to learn is to practice—in real life.

This is how I have found my grief journey to be. Picking through the weeds, bushwhacking through the forest, hunting for signs I was headed

in the right direction. Trying to learn this new terrain of sorrow. Grief has been a painful education; I have had to learn as I go, fumbling and trembling along the way. I do not write as

As believers, we can face death and grieve with full confidence. Our lives are in the strong and tender grip of our Good Shepherd. Grief may walk with us our whole lives, but our Savior does too.

an adviser but as a fellow pilgrim, sharing what I've learned on this path of sorrow, offering you companionship.

From what I have seen, I believe you can acquire the skills to grieve well. While each loss is unique, I don't believe we need to stumble blindly along the path of sorrow. Grief brings deep darkness, but we can learn how to navigate it in ways that make our pain more bearable. As believers, we can face death and grieve with full confidence. Our lives are in the strong and tender grip of our Good Shepherd. Grief may walk with us our whole lives, but our Savior does too. Indeed, as we walk together through the valley of the shadow, he calls us beyond the darkness to resurrection hope.

SAYING THE D-WORD

Every Thursday, our smell announced our arrival before we hit the threshold of her classroom. Teenage boys tumbled out of the locker room, doused in cologne to mask their gym class body odor. Girls walked down the hall in groups, a cloud of floral shampoo fragrance surrounding them.

“Women don't sweat; they glow,” my high school English teacher would remark as we filed through the door and headed to our seats. An agreeable sentiment—unless you had to wear medicated deodorant. For at least one girl I knew, those words were laughable. Adolescence had hit her like a Mack truck. Women didn't just sweat. They stank. No euphemism was adequate when the medical community had to assist you in taming your odor.

Death is the ultimate stink. We've got all kinds of genteel phrases to try to mask its horrid smell. Our pets *cross the rainbow*

bridge. Our loved ones pass away or go to a better place. Become a Christian, and the phrases multiply a hundredfold. Gone to be with the Lord. Crossed the river Jordan. Entered eternal rest. At peace with God. In the arms of Jesus. Called home. All phrases that help us avoid saying the word we really mean—died.

In grief, I have clung to Jesus and to the promises I find in God's Word. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Those who have died in Christ now enjoy his promised eternal life. Jesus has prepared a home for those who love him. These promises form the bedrock of my hope.

But in a society that already doesn't know how to talk about death, these promises can easily just become euphemisms—attempts to deodorize death, take the edge off its horrid smell. They can even distract us from grieving well. That's why I'm committed to using real words about death and grief. As your first step toward grieving well, you can do it too.

You have sat at the bedside of a loved one. You have received the dreaded call in the night. The police chaplain has visited you like he visited me. You have met with Death. You know it is futile to dress up that word. *Dying. Died. Death. Dead.* We do not say these words to shock others. We use the d-word because death is real and our sorrow over it is worthy of acknowledgment. We do this because before he raised him from the dead, Jesus stood at Lazarus's grave and wept. No euphemism can soften the blow. Death hurts. Period.

A COMPANION IN SORROW

Have you discovered the painful truth that few in your life can understand your loss? Do you stand at the trailhead of your

grief journey alone? Have you realized you cannot depend on your community or church to support you in the slow work of rebuilding your life? If so, you're less alone than you think. I'm here with you.

The purpose of this book is to fill that gap, to offer you a companion on your path with grief. There is a special kinship with those who mourn, and I hope you find it in these pages. No one can understand your unique loss, but those who grieve recognize the range of emotions, the painful firsts, the hole that loss has bored into your heart and life. These things are universal to grief and therefore ties that can bind our sorrowing hearts.

In these pages, I offer myself as your companion in sorrow. Not only do I hope you feel less alone as you read this book, but I hope you find practical help and support from a fellow traveler on this path. Grief can make us feel like the world no longer understands us. If we're honest, we hardly understand ourselves anymore. Old friendships and even family relationships grow thin, and we wonder if the death of our loved one is a death for us, too. I understand one hundred percent. However, this path is more traveled than you think; there is companionship to be found here.

This book has a second purpose: to acknowledge the long-lasting, pervasive nature of grief. It's time for a paradigm shift in how we talk about bereavement. Because our culture doesn't want to look at death, we hope people will "wrap it up quickly." But grief lasts a lifetime. This world is a hurting, broken place, and even in the midst of resurrection hope, sorrow still exists. Grief, like love, lives on long after death. Until Jesus comes again, grief will walk with us. It is only when we acknowledge

this lasting nature of grief that we can learn to live with it as our companion and look for a life beyond the shadows of our sorrow.

This book's final purpose is flourishing, plain and simple. Many times since Rob died, I have had to remind myself that I have not died too. Parts of me are gone forever, yes. But blood

still courses through my veins. My heart beats a steady rhythm. I am still alive. And I do not merely want to "hang on" for the rest of my earthly days. I want to live them fully, in the same wholehearted way I did before death and grief darkened my doorstep. I want the pain of Rob's death to transform me, not cripple me.

Flourishing after the death of a loved one is a choice we each must make. We must choose to move in that direction, to pursue new purpose and growth. But as people rooted in resurrection hope, we believe new

life always is straining to grow up out of the soil of death. Like autumn flower bulbs in paper bags awaiting sunny warmth, we too are waiting to bloom from the darkness of grief.

New life after loss isn't pie-in-the-sky hopefulness. It is the product of our willingness to sit with our grief, to allow it to take up residence as a thorn in the flesh that will persistently sting us until all things are made new. We can discover flourishing not in recovery from grief but in companionship with it. In

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our weakness, God's strength transforms us. Little resurrections are possible for us every day as we await the grand fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus Christ. You can live a full and joyful life in the face of death. You can survive and thrive holding hands with both grief and God.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is organized into three distinct parts, though I acknowledge grief resists categorization. I've structured it this way so that you can hop onto the trail anywhere you need.

Any long journey requires preparation, and the path of sorrow is no different. Before they ever hit the trail, experienced hikers spend hours poring over maps, discerning elevation, and looking for potential pitfalls. They identify spots for rest and sources of water. Part 1 offers you a similar kind of orientation. As you begin your grief journey, I will help you identify roadblocks, pitfalls, and dangers on the path that lies before you. You will learn the boundaries of the trail and hidden sources of nourishment. Most of all, you will take the time to meet and listen to your new companion, grief. If you find yourself dismayed by grief or by your family's or friends' response to it, I encourage you to start here. I think you'll find some helpful guidance for orienting yourself to your sorrow.

Once hikers have their trail mapped out, it's time to assemble their gear. Travelers into the backcountry regularly pack "ten essentials." These are their survival items like a map, compass, and fire starter. You'll find part 2 is full of survival essentials, practical insights for those of us who have acknowledged grief as our companion. If you are up to your neck in acute grief, skip

right to here. You'll feel heard and known in these chapters, and you'll gather tools to help you keep going when it feels like the trail is too dark to see. You will become equipped to survive the hardest stretches of your journey with sorrow and suffering.

Finally, as time passes after our loved one's death, many of us discover that the journey of grief appears to have no end. Fatigue and discouragement can set in. You might question whether life can shine again brightly with hope like it did before your loss. Part 3 acknowledges the continuing nature of our grief and casts a vision for a Christian community that supports the long-term needs of the bereaved. If you are further along in your grief journey, you may want to start here. Part 3 will offer you inspiration as you see your grief placed in the context of a faith community and in the light of gospel hope. Infused by the Spirit's comfort and power, you can do this hard thing.

THE SOAP HE LEFT BEHIND

Do you remember that little bit of Irish Spring soap I told you Rob left behind? When I first realized this was his last bar of soap, I treated it like a museum artifact. I carefully moved the little nub out of the water's spray and placed it on a shelf in the shower where it rested beside his razor. It was just a scrap, really. But I didn't have the heart to use it; it had been in my shower since before he died. That soap felt so intimate: his body was the last it cleaned.

That little bit of soap held all my fears in it. I feared the waters of sorrow wearing me away into something small. I feared that with time my life would change shape so dramatically that no trace of Rob would be left behind. I feared the

using up, the replacing with something new. Preserve or use up. It's all-or-nothing thinking, I know. Fear does that to my heart and mind.

But then I remembered there's a third way. (Isn't there always, if we look for it?) When I was a girl, my mother used to take the diminishing soap bar in the shower and place it atop a new bar—an attempt to waste nothing, no doubt a Depression-era trick she'd learned from her mother. The two bars sat against each other when wet, and as they dried, the two would harden into one. The two soaps developed a strong bond, unable to be separated, even with the wearing down of subsequent use.

Inspired by that long-ago memory, I placed Rob's little soap atop a new one in my shower. His old, small Irish Spring now rested against my new lavender bar—a picture of my grief for his death bonded forever with the new life I'll live without him.

My soap bonding isn't just a sentimental ritual. It's a picture of the way we can live our lives in the face of loss. We can find new life, bonded forever with those we have loved, even as we must face the slow fade of their lives from ours. Our lives, stronger, because they connected so deeply to those we have lost.

Life—like soap—is made for using, not for saving. Our lives, though marred by sorrow and colored by grief, are made for flourishing, not death. We were made for use, for work and prayer and praise, not in isolation from grief but in the midst of it. In the hands of the Good Shepherd, pain can be transformed into purpose, life redeemed from the pit of despair. Even our grief need not be wasted.

On her own journey to the High Places, little Much-Afraid finally consented to her new companions, Sorrow and Suffering.

She mused, “Others have gone this way before me . . . and they could even sing about it afterwards.” The Shepherd promised Much-Afraid that her companions would take her where she needed to go. Grief would be her guide on the path to the High Places. As we walk together, I trust the same will be true for you. Let’s point our feet forward, then, to the path before us.

FOR YOUR OWN REFLECTION

1. Before your loved one died, what experiences did you have with death?
2. What cultural practices have made it hard for you to acknowledge your loss?
3. Can grieving begin before a person’s death? If so, how could that be helpful?
4. Have you talked with your loved ones about your own death? Why or why not?
5. How does it make you feel to hear the phrase “Grief is your companion”?