

G R I E F

WALKING
WITH JESUS

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

BOB KELLEMEN

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31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them.* The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

This devotional is just like rain filling up a bucket. It's slow, and it builds over time. Just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Just a few drops of Scripture daily to satiate your parched soul.

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. In fact, it's the most powerful force in the entire universe.¹ It turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Bob speaks directly to you, the reader. The readings contain a mixture of reflection questions and practical suggestions. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. Grief can cast a dark cloud over your life, as truth feels cold and sadness is overwhelming. You've lost your orientation toward the One who should rule your life, and you need to turn back to him. The Word points you to Christ, who comforts you in your grief, brings hope in the midst of sadness, and charts a course through your suffering. The goal of your time in God's Word should always be worship. While the dark clouds still hover over you, Christ helps you to worship him again. The loss is painful, but the comfort and hope of your Savior is very real, as he renews your worship.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. Work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to remind yourself how Jesus brings comfort and hope in your suffering.

This devotional is *not* meant to be a comprehensive guide to coping with grief. Good volumes are already written for that purpose. Buy them and make good use of them. You'll see several resources listed at the end of the book.

That's enough for now. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

INTRODUCTION

“Man of Sorrows”

*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows
and acquainted with grief. (Isa. 53:3)*

The Gospel and Grief

Grief. It comes in all forms and fashions, because loss comes in all shapes and sizes. When we think of grief, our souls tend to focus especially on the devastating grief that accompanies death. Yet life is filled with daily *mini*-caskets—losses great and small. A critical word. A critical accident. Betrayal, rejection, a stab in the back. The terminal diagnosis. Separation and divorce. A church split. A prodigal child. Job termination. The list, sadly, goes on and on.

The gospel. We know it has *everything* to say about grace for sin. But does the gospel have *anything* to say about grace for grief? We know that Jesus came to save sinners, but does he understand and care about our suffering?

He understands. “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). Jesus intimately and intensely experienced grief, sorrow, loss, and pain.

He cares. “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4). The intensity of his sympathy made him feel your grief as his own—and then do something about it. He came to crush sin, Satan, and death so that *one day* there will never again be separation, suffering, sorrow, crying, grief, or pain (see Rev. 21:4).

The author of Hebrews, who was steeped in Old Testament passages like Isaiah 53, adds his assurance of Jesus’s compassion, care, and comfort and of the gospel’s help, hope, and healing. “For

we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15–16). Jesus is not only a man of sorrows; he cares about *your sorrow*. Jesus is not only acquainted with his own grief; he is acquainted with *your grief*.

A Grief Journey with Jesus

And not only is Jesus acquainted with your grief, he is always *with you* in your grief—he walks with you in the cool of the day, and *he journeys with you* in the ups and downs of your grief (see John 14:1–6; 16:33). Grief is not a series of stages that you complete in some stereotypical consecutive order. Grief is a very individual process—a personal journey that we take with our personal suffering Savior.

What Isaiah predicts and the author of Hebrews declares, the Gospels describe. From birth into a broken world, to death at the hands of a sinful world, and everywhere in between, the Gospels guide us on *a grief journey with Jesus*. The sorrows of Jesus appear on every page of the Gospels. Jesus lived, breathed, walked, and ministered in the midst of scenes of sorrow.

And the Jesus of the Gospels is not only the caring Shepherd—which brings us amazing comfort. He is also the sovereign King—which instills us with amazing confidence. “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession” (Heb. 4:14). We entrust ourselves to him because he sovereignly shepherds us—guiding us to the green pastures of mercy, grace, and help as we walk through our valley of the shadow of death.

When life is knocking us down, how do we hold fast? We hold fast by holding on to Jesus, who is holding us close to his heart. “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in

his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young” (Isa. 40:11).

In the pages that follow, we will journey together with Jesus, applying the following gospel truths to our grief journey:

- Jesus is a suffering Savior who is intimately acquainted with our grief. *It’s normal to hurt.*
- Jesus is a compassionate Savior who lovingly consoles us in our grief. *It’s possible to find comfort in our hurt.*
- Jesus is a healing Savior who compassionately speaks eternal truth into our earthly wounds. *It’s possible to grieve with hope.*
- Jesus is an empowering Savior who mightily enables us to comfort others with the comfort we receive from God. *It’s supernatural to love in the midst of loss.*

In our journey, we will grieve together . . . *and* we will hope together (see 1 Thess. 4:13).

DAY 1

Shared Sorrow Is Endurable Sorrow

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was
with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)*

SINCE WE'RE TAKING a chronological grief journey through the life of Christ, you may expect us to begin in the beginning with baby Jesus. Instead, we're *beginning before the beginning*—in eternity past with the creator Christ.

In the beginning, the Word *was with* God. This doesn't mean that every once in a while God the Son just happened to hang out with God the Father. No—the word *was* in the Greek past tense means that Father and Son were continuously, always together in uninterrupted fellowship. And the Greek word *with* portrays face-to-face, soul-to-soul, intimate communion. If we time traveled back into eternity past, no matter when we arrived, we would find the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect, joyful relationship.

What does this possibly have to do with our grief? Jesus left all that—all that perfect, joyful, uninterrupted fellowship—in order to *reestablish relationship with us*. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The eternal God pitched his tent with his finite, fallen creation.

Talk about loss! Jesus chose the loss of endless face-to-face fellowship with his Father so that he could endure the rejection of his creation. Talk about grief! “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” (John 1:11).

Hebrews 2:14–15, 17 explains why Jesus would endure such loss and grief: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of

death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. . . . Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.”

Jesus did this so that he could identify with us, could destroy death and Satan, and could deliver us from the fear of death. Death is the greatest grief. Jesus left the throne of glory, was made like us in every respect, and became a merciful and faithful High Priest who cleanses us from our sins and frees us from the grip of grief.

Many years ago when I was teaching on grief, one of my parishioners shared a phrase that has stuck with me: *Shared sorrow is endurable sorrow*. We were never meant to suffer alone; we are meant to comfort and encourage one another.

John 1 and Hebrews 2 combine to teach us that. *Sorrow shared with the infinite Creator is infinitely endurable sorrow*. Jesus became flesh in order to help the frail offspring of Abraham—you and me. Jesus became flesh in order to help those who are suffering and being tempted—you and me.

Jesus became flesh so he could destroy the ultimate cause of all sorrow: sin, Satan, separation, and death.

Reflect: *Shared sorrow is endurable sorrow*. What human friends are you going to for comfort and encouragement? You were never meant to grieve alone.

Reflect: *Sorrow shared with the infinite Creator is infinitely endurable sorrow*. What would it look like, even today, for you to take your sorrow to the creator Christ—who chose to enter deeply into your grief—and seek his comfort and encouragement?

DAY 2

Entering Your Broken World

“To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:79)

JESUS LEFT THE throne of glory (see John 1:1–18) not for more glory, but for a broken world. He was born into a line of broken people, born to parents perceived to be immoral, born in a lowly manger, and born to a people living in darkness and the shadow of death. All our beautiful, bucolic nativity scenes belie the fact that the narrative of Christ’s birth is a narrative of suffering, shame, loss, and grief.

The Bible is real and raw. The Gospels convey that reality of a fallen world from beginning to end. Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus includes Abraham, who was willing to give his wife to another man in order to protect himself. It includes Judah and Tamar—a father-in-law who slept with his daughter-in-law. It includes Rahab the prostitute. It includes murderous, lustful David and the wife of his adultery. It includes Solomon—the man of seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Even these figures who were celebrated as heroes committed serious, shameful sins—making the reality of a fallen world all the more painfully obvious. Not even our role models can escape being tainted by shame!

Then there’s the (false) shame that Joseph and Mary endured. “Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly” (Matt. 1:19). And there’s the King of Kings being born in a manger because there was no room for his family in the inn (see Luke 2:7). His lowly lineage and birth were the cause of mocking and unbelief. “Coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom

and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son?" (Matt. 13:54–55). Jesus was born to a nobody in Nowheresville.

Zechariah summarizes well the broken world that Jesus entered. This child, who will be called the Most High, was born among the lowliest, "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79).

Daily we live in darkness—the darkness of yet another church split; the darkness of an adult child who announces that he or she has renounced the faith. Daily we walk through our own shadow of death—the shadow of pending layoffs, of a looming health crisis, of the revelation of a spouse caught with pornography . . .

But Jesus, who is the Light of the World, has entered our darkened world in order to shine on us and "to guide our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1:79). The Bible doesn't pretend, and neither does Jesus. If you forget everything else, remember that *Jesus understands brokenness*.

The Bible never asks you to deny your loss or suppress your grief, and neither does Jesus. Remember, *it's normal to grieve*.

At the same time, the Bible never leaves us without hope, and neither does Jesus. In the midst of our suffering, Jesus offers us light (an eternal perspective on our grief and loss) and peace (shalom and wholeness in the midst of shame and despair). Remember, *it's possible to hope and heal*.

Reflect: *Jesus understands brokenness.* How does the brokenness of Jesus's world touch the brokenness of your soul?

Reflect: *It's normal to hurt and grieve.* The Bible and Jesus give you permission to grieve. What would it read like for you to express your grief over your valley of the shadow of death?

Reflect: *It's possible to hope and heal.* What would it be like for you today to receive Christ's eternal perspective and daily peace in the midst of your feelings of shame and despair?

DAY 3

Grief Sandwiched by Glory

“For my eyes have seen your salvation.” (Luke 2:30)

“A sword will pierce through your own soul.” (Luke 2:35)

She began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38)

GRIEF IS A journey. But you and I know that it's not a straight line from one point to another. The messy, mixed-up journey of grief that zigs and zags from hills to valleys, from valleys to hills, is not a nice, neat process.

Mary and Joseph experienced this trek during the early weeks of Jesus's life. Their lives had already been turned upside down—a skeleton-in-the-closet lineage; pregnancy before marriage; a birth in a lowly manger—when they brought their child to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

First they encounter a holy man named Simeon. Imagine the peace they feel when Simeon speaks *glory* to them. Taking Jesus into his arms, Simeon blesses God. “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:29–32). No wonder Mary and Joseph “marveled at what was said about him” (Luke 2:33).

But the glory was not to last long.

Now the grief: “Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed’” (Luke 2:34–35).

Some blessing! I've been to and administered scores of baby dedications. Never have I heard a "blessing" like this. "Your child's life and ministry will be like a sword piercing through your soul!"

One moment they experience the sigh of relief and rest—their son is the Savior! The very next moment Mary and Joseph experience pain and agony. Mary surely remembered these words as she grieved during the crucifixion of her precious Son.

Sometimes there's hardly time to feel. Life shifts and quakes too quickly beneath our trembling feet. That was true for Mary and Joseph, as they went on to receive the second blessing—grief sandwiched by glory.

Anna, an eighty-four-year-old prophetess, had waited decade after decade for the redemption of Israel. Her wait ended in God's perfect, sovereign timing. "Coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). Finally, redemption! After decades of waiting alone as a childless widow in worshipful fasting and praying, Anna's redemption drew near.

It's vital for us to enter grief candidly and biblically. Yet it's equally vital that we recognize that where sin and suffering abound, *grace and hope superabound*. The narrative of Simeon and Anna illustrates this biblical "sandwiching" of glory—grief—glory. We grieve not as the hopeless ones but as the ones who know the Hope of the world.

Reflect: What are some of the hills and valleys, ups and downs, of your grief journey? Where was God in your valley? Where was he in your glory—your times of hope?

Act: In our grief, it's sometimes difficult to believe that where suffering abounds, Christ's hope superabounds. Craft a prayer of hope—or at least a prayer that you would cling to Christ, who is your Hope, in the midst of your pain.