

Flourishing Through Adversity

A Guide on Navigating Grief



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The Flourishing of Faith During Seasons of Suffering"

Introduction

When your heart is suffering, it's so easy to be confused by a loss or a terminal diagnosis. Life is hard and full of disparities between those who have and have not experienced challenges, chronic illnesses, tragedies, or the deepest kind of grief.

In the pages that follow you will come to see that God really is with you in the place of suffering. "Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity; the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve." (Earl A. Grollman (2014). *"Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love"*, p.6, Beacon Press)

Grief is a normal and natural response to losing someone important to us. It is not a narrow mountain path we choose to climb but is forced upon us by circumstances outside our control. Grief takes individuals through a range of thoughts, emotions, and personal expressions that are entirely unique to them.

We are a culture constructed on ease, convenience, and comfort and there is nothing more unsettling, disturbing, and spiritually distressing than the loss of someone close. All suffering is painful. There are no cures, and my own experience now reveals that time does not make it easier. However, my capacity to deal with loss can grow and develop if I'm willing to do the work.

When you grieve the loss of an older person, you grieve the loss of yesterdays. When you lose a child, you grieve the loss of tomorrows. And when you grieve the loss of the God you thought you knew, the suffering is intensified. When I lost my 27-year-old daughter, Whitney, to cancer, I began a long journey of grieving tomorrows and for the God of the Bible.

There is something that feels so wrong and so unjust when we lose someone close to us suddenly, prematurely, through a protracted experience of suffering, or to suicide.

This guide can't replace sitting with a well-trained and licensed professional, and I would encourage individuals experiencing grief to seek support from professionals and pastors, consider talking with friends or family, or join a grief support group.

A professional might share with you one of the most common models used to understand the grieving process is the Kubler-Ross model, which describes five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, it is essential

to note that only some experience these stages similarly, and the grief process is not always linear.

Personally, I couldn't understand why the God I had spoken about on Sundays for decades had allowed our family to be ripped apart. The grief stages were real but almost irrelevant to me because God had not answered my prayer. The God I had sacrificed my whole life to serve did something I did not expect - He chose not to take action to heal my daughter.

I am not a counselor, nor do I have the credentials to qualify me to write a formal document on grief recovery. However, the fact that I am still walking the path every day and have learned some lessons along the journey does mean I have some things to share. I also have the desire to help other people of faith maintain a spiritual connection to God. I was a pastor, a certified emotional intelligence coach, earned two master's degrees, two doctoral degrees, and spent thousands of hours coaching executives and organizations on handling traumatic situations.

My daughter's name is Whitney, and she is very much alive in the next reality, but her four-year battle with cancer, and the horrible suffering she endured as we watched helplessly, have traumatized our family. Soon after she passed, I noticed three techniques transcribed in Whitney's journals, penned as she battled her disease, that have made all the difference in my life, and they make up this guide's three sections.

There are some simple steps that helped me survive my unthinkable loss and helped me find hope again in my deepest pain. My prayer is that whether you walk through these exercises in your private time or with a group, you will come to see a God who does care. Just like God did not take away my daughter's cancer, He has not removed the profound sorrow nor taken the grief away, but by His Spirit has strengthened my capacity to cope and have hope through my sorrow.

I believe as you continue working through your grief, regardless of how recent or distant, you can find inspiration and hope, and an empowerment for daily life. This booklet will guide you through honest and authentic reflections and discussions about God, faith, and suffering. After doing the work suggested in these pages you will have the ability to embrace your pain, accept what is, and find new hope for the life ahead. Vicki Harrison, a prolific writer on the topic of grief, said, "Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."

Grief is a journey with no navigation system to help you find your way. God's Spirit, if you're open to Him, will empower you deep in your inner life and guide you on a path toward wholeness. The spiritual work ahead of you is to focus on connecting with God inside life's deepest sorrows. C.S. Lewis in his book "A Grief Observed" said, "No one ever

told me that grief felt so like fear.” Grief means that something has happened that was outside your control. My own experience has taught me that grief is an unknown territory with mystery at every turn.

Whitney and I had gone all in on God doing a miracle, whether He used a visitation miracle, immunotherapy, or chemotherapy, we were confident that “God would make a way, where there was no way!” Not many days after she passed, with no audible prayer possible, I wrote one out. I prayed for wisdom so that I could worship God like Wit would want me to. I prayed for integrity of heart, that I would be honest with God and others about the God who had let me down. I prayed for the tenacity not to abandon my faith and to show courage like she did every day as she battled her disease.

In those moments on the floor of a hotel room, I knew I had been given a gift: her template to help with my pain. I had found my path. It’s the path this booklet will use to guide you. I pray that you will have the courage to put into practice wisdom, integrity, and tenacity as you climb the Mt. Everest of grief, suffering, and pain in your life.

Wisdom

If grieving were only a matter of knowing the stages, learning more about this technique or that tip, or teaching us something about loss that we didn't know before, then getting through the pain would be easier. Yet, the hard work of grief is integrating one little truth at a time at a pace your heart can tolerate. For it is possible to know all the stages of grief, read the best quotes, and hear people quote Bible verses but still not allow the pain to reveal priceless wisdom.

A grieving person learns that people at work, and even some at church, go back to their busy lives shortly after the funeral. Some grieving people, me included, learn how to function in public and make everyone think things are OK. My caution is that we all must keep watch over our hearts to keep God and trusted friends with us as we do the hard work of grieving and facing life without our loved ones.

There is an excruciating anguish that comes from watching a loved one suffer and being struck with an inarticulate silence. I teach young Christians that they should not be surprised when suffering visits their family at some point during their life span. There will be cases of God's inactivity at some point during your life. Expect that God will never leave you alone and that He will comfort you by His Spirit.

History shows us that God did not stand far off and reach out to us but came and walked around inside the suffering human experience and led the way. He endured the anguish of the garden and the cross. New creation is waiting to be born in all of us and reunite us all one day into an even larger family if we are willing to die to what we want and to pray, "not my will, but yours be done."

You move me, O Lord, seeing you nailed to a cross and reviled; I am moved by the sight of your wounded body; I am moved by your sufferings and your death.

Listen to my own daughter as she grappled in her journals with God's inactivity: "There are moments in your life that change you forever. They initiate suffering that outstrips human learning, where only heavy sighs or guttural grunts reveal your pain. The harshness of the winter of the soul is much too frigid for ordinary devotion."

The cross was never a one-off event but rather Jesus stepping into the human condition and exposing what the enemy of our souls was up to—trying to convince us there was no hope. Jesus immediately provided for us a life that mirrors His—not free from suffering, but also not ending with suffering. We are given lives full of resurrection power, not so that we don't suffer, but rather so that we understand how our suffering

exposes our faith and reveals that God is making all things new. This is the power of God at work in us, now and forever.

When our lives are hit by suffering and God doesn't use His power to rescue us, our simple thinking leaves us to blame God, the devil, or ourselves. All blaming, even blaming the devil, still leaves us at a spiritual dead end. There is no heart transformation in that place, as pessimism mimics authenticity. It's so easy to default to jaded anger, endlessly searching for someone to blame. Our bad thinking about God gives us only one way to interpret what's happening when we suffer.

My growing concern for students and parents alike is that in all of our Sunday learnings we have failed to gain wisdom that can be powerfully integrated into one's life.

Wisdom is not information but rather a relationship with the God of all wisdom. James 1:5 says that when we lack wisdom in our trials, we should ask God who gives it to us.

Writing "Surrendered & Unafraid : The Flourishing of Faith During Seasons of Suffering" helped me reconstruct my personal story and its relationship to Whitney and the ending part of her earthly journey.

If you are using this booklet in a group, carry out the following exercise together and listen carefully to the words you use to reconstruct your own story of grief or the feeling you have when you sit with someone who is grieving. If you are working through the booklet as a personal growth journey, write down your thoughts and feelings.

Wisdom Exercise 1:

Talking or writing about your story helps to deepen the processing of accepting what is as a part of you for the rest of your life.

- a) Finish these sentences:
 - Before _____ passed away ...
 - When I first heard I was ... and I felt ...
 - Even now when I bring it to mind, I struggle with ...
- b) Accepting Wit's death was one of the hardest things I had to do. I remember feeling angry, cheated, jealous when I saw others posting pictures of their families on social media. Pain was everywhere I turned. My first real breakthrough was saying the words out loud to a friend, "She's gone from this life." Talk or journal about where you are today with accepting your loss.
- c) Getting into the "now" this moment, means to accept what is, as it is, and place your story inside God's story. The event is over, the loss has happened, and the future for

which I hoped is changed forever. Whether you experienced a trauma, a death, or a deep loss, the event is not happening now - it is over. Discuss how recognizing and owning the loss has changed you.

Wisdom Exercise 2:

Name the season you are currently experiencing: spring, summer, fall, or winter.

- a) Describe the season, perhaps using a metaphor. Use as many adjectives as possible, like, "This feels like the most frigid winter I've ever experienced," or "I long for the spring season and the fresh rains to bring newness to my soul." Ask follow up questions to better understand the metaphor of seasons related to personal suffering.
- b) Inside seasons there are shorter lived storms that arise. Talk about your most recent storm and how it might fit into the overall season you are experiencing. Go slow enough to make the spiritual connections from the metaphor of seasons and storms and look and listen for wisdom to emerge.
- c) What have you learned about God during this season? What have you learned about yourself? What is different after your experience? Talk about the way you perceive the world and if your perception has changed. Try to describe it with detail.

Wisdom Exercise 3:

- a) The wisdom we seek now is to see others in their sorrow. Talk to someone today about their life and what specific sorrow they may have had to endure. Jot down a few thoughts from that conversation.
- b) Use the name of your loved one in an acrostic poem, either verbally in a group or in writing. This will help you to identify the positive and maybe even negative emotions that are working deep in your heart and give them a healthy outlet.

In my case, it was remembering that Whitney's brother called her Wit. As I read her journals, I saw that she wrote and searched for wisdom and demanded integrity in her writings. She continued to ask for tenacity to deal with the treatments and disease that robbed her future.

W - wisdom I - integrity T - tenacity

Integrity

There's this one book in the Bible, Psalms, that carries such integrity within it; in my view, it validates in an unsuspecting way the legitimacy of Scripture. There is such realism in the book of Psalms as you can easily feel the pain of the writers and poets in the Psalms of Complaint, which comprise one-third of the book. Now, we don't call them complaints, but use the word lament. However, at their core, the writer often complains about unmet expectations.

You will probably never find any intellectual satisfaction in understanding the sudden loss of a job, a marriage, or death of someone close to you. But these scriptures are even more priceless to me now because they tell the truth about what it feels like to be human. Here's a sample: "O Lord, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? Turn and answer me, O Lord my God! Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die. Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have defeated him!" Don't let them rejoice at my downfall. But I trust in your unfailing love." Psalm 13:1-6

Psalm 88:18 says, "You have taken away my companions and loved ones. Darkness is my closest friend." But if you've never really suffered a loss, you probably skimmed over those Bible verses—like I used to do. Unfortunately, until you're devastated by something, it's so easy to live unaware of the suffering God allows on the earth. But if you've gone through some bad stuff, the words from Psalm 88 can help you to breathe a little easier. You can hear the pain, but you can also see that the writer is in a deep covenantal relationship with God, which brings certain expectations with it. The speaker shows incredible integrity by admitting that he isn't just calling out to God in the night; the writer is so desperate that he is moved to cry out during the daytime hours too. The one praying can't understand why God is not responding.

I have learned that most of God's engagement in our world is not through supernatural rescues, though we still pray and believe with those who need one. Wit's story was about enduring a non-answer to prayer and not losing faith. But several things are essential to get right. It is God who heals, not a person. The sincerity, frequency, consistency, volume, and number of people praying do not equate to getting God to do what you want. Faith in your journey is not your way to get what you want—faith carries you through when you don't get what you want. My family and I have experienced this more than ever in the past few years. If I could do only one thing differently in parenting my daughter, it would probably be to prepare her for the

possibility that God might let her down and not answer her prayers.

I would want to show more personal integrity regarding my interactions with God and one another. Orlando, Florida was the place we raised our kids; the land of make-believe. But life is not a theme park where magical things are made real. Your children will need a strong heart to handle the disappointments and rejections that will inevitably come to them, and as followers of Jesus, we have a responsibility to tell them the truth.

Wit understood this better than I did during her last few months with us. In a post on her Instagram account, she said, “Despite what some say, I don’t believe there is a formula for healing. God is mysterious. Every day is a surrender and trust.” She had the wisdom to trust God even in her disappointment, the integrity to believe in God when the sun was not shining, and the tenacity to surrender daily to Him and His plan. From Wit’s perspective, the miracle represented in her story was not walking away from cancer but through cancer.

It is an actual act of faith to continue to lament, pray, and worship the God who has allowed your pain. “Lamenting” is a rarely used religious word that means complaining to God and protesting His lack of engagement on the most critical issues impacting our lives.

The passages of lament in the Bible capture the experience of grief and inner pain, comforting the broken heart. They let you know God listens and cares. There is no declaration of victory in a lament because the potential for victory has passed, and God has missed it. Silence, sometimes, is not the only truthful response to God when it comes to deep pain; you can also complain or lament while staying truthful, intimate, and devout. Lament was not a language I had ever spoken to God before; I grew up in church thinking language like this was not only off-limits but might get you struck down by lightning.

These passages are very important for Christians who are working their way through the grieving process and integrating a loss into their unwanted new world. God’s Word is so powerful and amazing and does provide a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

The only way to get through your grief is to realize it is the literal path you are walking on. Showing integrity to ourselves and our family about our loss is important. It is a very unpleasant thing to feel powerless when it comes to seeing someone you would give your life for lose theirs.

Yet, the truth is that God is not just everywhere, He is present right here and now and working deep inside you. Your very life houses the presence of God, and since that is true, there is deep within you a desire for integrity and truth telling to emerge about the depth of your pain, suffering, and loss. God does not expect us to double down on positive talk – the moment for the miracle has passed.

Isaiah 53:3 says, “He was despised and rejected— a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.” Thank God He cares for us. Our daily lives, hour by hour, become a formation, an incarnation of the conscious presence of God in the midst of sorrow and pain. Praise God for His great care for us in this horrible season of my life and yours too. At our university I talk all the time about our graduates becoming compassionate innovators who are translating the hope of God into everyday language. What might God do with you and me, and a generation of young people who believe and pray for miracles, but also embrace suffering if the miracle doesn’t arrive? Even through our disappointment and pain, we are inviting others into authentic community during our most painful season. To God be all the glory.

Integrity Exercise 1:

There will most likely come a moment when God doesn’t answer your sincere prayer. There may be times in your life when you are crushed to the core of your soul. To find strength and a foundational hope, the resolution will have to be built upon truth and integrity.

- a) As you look back over your life since your great loss, what Bible verses are the most confusing to you? Talk about any gaps in what you thought the Bible promised and the loss you’ve experienced.
- b) In John 14:16, Jesus tells the disciples that he will pray to the Father, “and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever.” The term Comforter can also be translated as counselor—one who supports and cares. Why would Jesus send his Spirit if He didn’t think we were going to need a special empowerment to get through the trouble in this world? The Holy Spirit longs to comfort us in our distress, empowering us to better process our grief and comfort others in theirs. Talk about or journal about when, if ever, you have sensed supernatural comfort or help.

Integrity Exercise 2:

- a) When it comes to processing our sorrow, we also have to think about the good times we spent with our loved one - times of beauty, rewards, and joy. Talk about or journal about some of your fondest memories. Be as detailed in the story as possible and don’t worry about how long it takes to tell the story in great detail.
- b) Select at least one or two of the following questions to explore and search for ways to be completely honest about what you are experiencing right now.
 1. What are some of the emotions you’ve been feeling the last few days about your loss?

2. How has your life changed since you experienced the loss?
3. What challenges have you faced since the loss that seem to be the hardest?
4. What are some of the positive memories you can share?
5. How have your relationships with God and or with others changed since your loved one passed away? Have you felt more or less connected to others?
6. Have you found any sources of comfort or support during this difficult time?
7. What advice would you give to others who are grieving the loss of a loved one?
What has worked for you in terms of coping with grief?

Integrity Exercise 3:

- a) Record in your journal or share with the group the things you are planning to do to connect with God in the coming months.
- b) Is it difficult for you to tell the truth about the doubts and uncertainty you are experiencing about your faith? If so, why do you think it's so challenging?
- c) Take a blank page in your journal and write a personal lament to God or simply complete the following sentence, and then add your own thoughts and feelings.

"God, I was disappointed when You did not..."

Tenacity

The Theory of Chronic Sorrow appears first in the Journal of Nursing Scholarship. The findings indicate that pervasive sadness is common when feelings are associated with a significant loss and should be labeled as chronic sorrow. Chronic sorrow is activated by the presence of absence. The blend of one's experiences, trigger events, and ability to manage this pain elicit chronic sorrow. The importance of this is to know that chronic sorrow is a normal response to loss. In other words, part of being human is learning how to cope with the ongoing absence of your loved one.

In a Journal of Nursing Scholarship report, researchers found that 86 percent of caregivers to those with chronic illnesses and bereaved family members demonstrated characteristics of having chronic sorrow. In bereavement situations, the disparity that triggers chronic sorrow is not the presence of a person with a chronic condition. Rather, it is the disparity from the ideal created by the absence of a person who was central in the life of the bereaved. Stated another way, for bereaved individuals, it is the presence of the absence that triggers chronic sorrow.

The chronic sorrow experience for bereaved people is most frequently triggered by confrontation with disparity associated with memories of a past reality, often associated with anniversary events, and with recognized variances from social norms. People outside the grief circle more easily understand the despondency we feel around holidays and birthdays. However, other important days that are ordinary to everyone else can create imaginary anniversaries in the mind of the person with chronic sorrow. The triggering comes from the absence of a person, not necessarily a specific memory or event of the past. Around other people, especially those who have never suffered a great loss, I sometimes get the feeling that they are thinking, "Why are you not over this by now?" I understand their point of view because I used to see the world through those glasses. Yet, persistent periods of recurring sadness are a normal response to a great absence in your life.

Grief experts generally agree that there is no set timeline for the grieving process and that everyone experiences grief differently. However, there is something I rarely heard anyone give me permission to do, and that was compartmentalize my pain. Let me explain.

I was a pastor at the time of Wit's loss and spent large portions of my week listening, praying, and helping people through their own pain. I had no option but to go to work every day, but within a few weeks, although people were generally considerate of my

situation, they were back to their own lives. My pain was still acute, and I could go to tears rather quickly, but I also had a job to do.

Honestly, I felt guilty having to shut off my emotions to function in my job, but it's how I coped. I will explain it like this. It was like I had tinted windows on my SUV, and I was still the same person on the inside, but I did not let everyone that was around me see all the way into my grief and my inner most pain. Here are some personal steps that I ended up taking that might help you as well:

1. Accepting the loss for what it was. Unfair, unjust, and just not right. It was a complete mystery, and I was not good with it, but I was powerless to change it. I journaled and ultimately wrote a book about my loss, but I accepted that my life was forever changed. It's important to recognize and validate the emotions that come with grief, such as sadness, anger, guilt, and confusion.
2. Create time and pick a space to grieve. Grieving is a process, and it takes time. It's important to give yourself permission to experience your emotions and take the time you need to heal.
3. Lean on family and friends and don't isolate.
4. Spend time reading the Bible. I could hardly pray out loud. I could not listen to worship music for several years when I was alone. But I found I could read and write and think.

Overall, grief enduring is a unique process that can look different for everyone. It's important to be patient and compassionate with yourself as you navigate this new way of living.

When my understanding of the American God of protection and prosperity was crushed, I found myself sitting alone in silence. No longer in the felt presence of God but alone with my memories. It's in that place—the suffering place, the alone place, the there-are-only-memories-left place—that you begin to realize the memories are the blessing that come out of the suffering. The memories and flashbacks to the good times now gone are not a curse but a grace. The grace of God is very close. In that place, you want to know that God is right here, right now, even though He seems a million miles away during this winter season. My memory testifies that He's not. He is with you every step of the way.

Finding a more authentic biblical version of God was so much more solidifying and empowering when I realized the Bible was full of stories of people who had life and loss hit them in the face. Joseph was beaten, sold into slavery, lied about, and never had one piece of good news for a couple of decades. The three Hebrew children who did right ended up in a fire. God's chosen people who ended up praying to a wall and they

name it “wailing!” Literally, during every time frame mentioned in the Bible suffering was present. Suffering, pain, loss and brokenness are all a part of the human condition, and there’s no escaping it. Jesus came to give us life in the midst of suffering and life eternal.

Although grief has shattered the image I once held onto about the God who responded to complete faith and devotion, the reality is that there is a side to God we only come to know through deep pain and trouble. It is unfortunate that human religion has muddled things up by only using the mind to connect with God. It’s like we try to understand God—who is Spirit and in everything and everyone around us—with just our educated thoughts.

I have come to see that inside our pain and anguish is a comforting God who is not expecting anything but an openness to be together. Those who have suffered losses know that although nothing has changed for anyone else, everything has changed for them.

The things they once care about suddenly seem shallow and unimportant. People will still be running, living life at the speed you once lived, but now that you can see through veils of superficiality and ambition, you realize that you’ll have to let them go on. You are experiencing the world at a different pace now.

Grief forces us into a reorientation to life, to purpose, and to God. It’s like waking up out of a zombie-like state of blind ego ambition, unconsciousness, or unawareness, and coming to know that God is offering His presence here and now to the deepest parts of your soul. Sometimes being still while everyone else around you is running is exactly what your soul needs. As Psalm 46:10 says, “Be still, and know that I am God.” As horrible as the pain can feel, it is an invitation to yield to this forced stoppage of life, admit powerlessness, and embrace the stillness as a gift.

Tenacity Exercise 1:

- a) Describe for the group or write out one private paragraph describing exactly where you are with God in this moment.
- b) Define the word tenacity and what you think it means for you going forward.

Tenacity Exercise 2:

- a) Take your time and go through the following statements and select the one or two that seem to bolster your tenacity.
- b) Do the same exercise but select the statement that troubles you the most and talk or journal about why it doesn’t sit well with you.

1. Submit yourself peacefully to the will of God and bear your sufferings with as much joy as possible.
2. The hardest thing about suffering is the not knowing how long it will last or how great it will be.
3. Abandon your heart to God even if it means a crucifixion.
4. Learn to suffer with humility and peace.
5. Carry the cross of suffering like an invitation to knowing Him deeper.
6. There are no mile-markers or road signs on the way of suffering.
7. Spiritual transformation rarely happens in the light but more frequently takes place in the darkness.
8. Never be angry about what people say about you. Seek to satisfy God because people will never be satisfied. Their talking indicates their desire to get out of their own suffering. You will only find comfort in union with God.
9. Suffering is best born in silent worship.
10. Don't waste the pain of suffering.

Tenacity Exercise 3:

- a) Discuss as a group one of the following projects to do together or use your journal to select which one feels like you should do.
 - a. Write a letter to God about your loss and include other important parts of your journey.
 - b. Plant something in the ground as a memory to your loved one.
 - c. Take someone to coffee with the sole purpose of sharing with them your best memories of your loved one.