

What You Need to Know

Nothing is more shocking, emotional, or final than the death of a loved one. Facing the death of someone you love—a child, a spouse, a parent, a close friend—is one of life's most difficult experiences.

Your head is spinning with so many thoughts, feelings, and emotions. You can't grasp that you've had your last visit, your last conversation, your last meal, and your last holiday with your loved one. Your mind is flooded with things you wish you had said or done. You want to say, "I love you," one more time, and you want to hear it said to you.

Your warehouse of memories is filled with fond and painful remembrances, and you are holding tightly to that treasured collection of fading photographs. You don't feel ready to say goodbye or to deal with the grief that's overtaken you.

This article is written to help you make sense out of what appears to make no sense and to point you towards hope even as you are experiencing the darkness of death.

Remember a few scriptural truths

When you are dealing with grief your emotions race and your thoughts are scattered. In the middle of this confusing and hard time, you need to remember a few simple truths from the Bible. God will use them to help you understand what you are experiencing and to give you hooks on which to hang your emotions.

You can't prepare for the death of a loved one. Whether death results from a sudden accident or a long illness, it always catches us unprepared. Death is so deeply emotional and stunningly final that there is nothing you can do ahead of time that will help you sail through your moment of loss. Those who knew that death was coming and those who were taken completely by surprise will go through many of the same things.

The Bible includes many poignant stories that mirror our experience. The story of the death of David's son, Absalom, gives us a picture of a grieving parent.

Absalom plotted to take David's place as king of Israel. When his rebellion was crushed, he was killed, even though David had ordered his soldiers to take him alive. David knew that Absalom's actions might lead to his death, but that didn't lessen his grief. 2 Samuel 18:33 (ESV) tells us, "And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Death shakes us to the core

David's cry is the cry of every grieving parent. Whether it is unexpected or predictable, death shakes us to the core. The pain is inescapable. Don't feel guilty or embarrassed if you feel unprepared to face it. There's no way to be ready for what you are going through. Death was not part of God's original plan. One reason death is so hard to accept and understand is that it's completely out of step with the life God planned for this world. The apostle Paul calls death our "enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26).

Death is the enemy of everything good and beautiful about life. It should make you morally sad and righteously angry. Death reminds us that we live in a world that is terribly broken; it's not functioning according to God's original design, where life was meant to give way to life, on into eternity. It's biblical to treat death as sad and unnatural. God encourages you to mourn. Death was never meant to be. When you recognize this, you will hunger for a final restoration of all things. You will long to live in a place where the last enemy—death—has been defeated.

It's normal to feel alone

You are never alone in the darkness. Death is one of the loneliest experiences of human existence. The circumstances you are dealing with are individual and unique. It's normal to feel as if no one has been through what you're experiencing. It's normal to feel all alone, even when you are surrounded with people.

But the death of a loved one is a universal experience, and a company of mourners surrounds you. Yet there is an even more powerful way in which you are not alone. Your Savior, Jesus, has taken another name, Emmanuel, or "God with us." This name reminds you that, as you came to Christ, you literally became the place where God dwells. You have a powerful Brother, Savior, Counselor, and Friend who not only stands beside you, but lives within you! His presence makes it impossible for you to be alone in this moment of pain (John 14:15-20). Good can come out of the very worst of things. Is death a bad thing? Yes. But the Bible tells us that the brightest of good things can be found in the midst of evil's darkness.

God defeated sin and death

The death of Jesus Christ is a powerful demonstration of this truth. On the hill of death outside the city, the best thing that ever happened came from the worst thing ever. What could be worse than the killing of the Messiah? What could be more unjust than the illegal execution of the one perfect person who ever lived? In the sermon he preached on the day of Pentecost, Peter said that Jesus' death was an evil thing done by evil men to the one truly good person in the whole world (Acts 2:22-36).

But this terrible moment was under God's control. God planned that this ultimate evil would accomplish ultimate good. In this dark moment, as Jesus died on the cross, God defeated sin and death—two enemies we could not defeat on our own.

In the same way, God can and does bring wonderful things out of the darkest moments of our lives. Your Lord is present with you in this darkness. He has planned that even the darkest of things would result

in redemptive good for His children. He surrendered His Son to death so you could have life. And He will not abandon you now.

Death is an enemy, but this enemy will die

One day death will be put to death. The death of a loved one should remind you that God's work is not yet complete. Because of sin, death entered the world. When sin is completely defeated, death will also be defeated. The apostle Paul talks about Christ's present ministry this way: "For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Jesus died so we would no longer have to die. When He rose from the dead, death was defeated. Until Jesus returns, we still experience death, but one day life will not give way to death. Children will not mourn their parents. Parents will not mourn their children. There will be no widows or grieving friends. Yes, death is an enemy, but this enemy will die. The present reign of Christ guarantees this. One day life will give way to life for eternity.

As you weep, remember that the One who weeps with you understands your heartache. He is "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). But He does more than understand; He also acts. Jesus will not let death reign forever. On the cross He defeated death, and His resurrection is your guarantee that one day, all who believe in Him, will be resurrected to a life of glory and peace. One day He is coming again to end physical death and to usher in a new heaven and earth where there will be no dying, no tears, and no sorrow (Revelation 21:1-4).

What You Need to Do

Grieving leaves you emotionally volatile and mentally confused. It's painful in expected and unexpected ways. Death interrupts your plans and messes up your schedule.

Sometimes death brings people together and sometimes it drives them part. Death mixes the best and the worst of memories. Because death is this confusing mix of emotions and experiences, it is often hard to know exactly what to do when it has entered your door.

Here is some biblical direction:

1. Be honest about your emotions.

Being a Christian does not mean being a stoic. God doesn't want you to hide your emotions or wear a happy face mask. He wants you to come to him with complete honesty. In the Psalms, God invites us to bring our honest grief to him. Psalm 34:15 depicts God as a loving father, watching over His children and listening for their cries. Psalms 13, 22, 42, and 73 picture God's people running to Him in grief and confusion.

Don't hide your emotions; when you are struggling, run to the One who knows you completely and loves you faithfully. As Peter says, "Cast all your anxieties on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7, NIV)

2. Run to where comfort can be found.

When he was suffering, the apostle Paul said an amazing thing about the Lord. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort..." (2 Corinthians 1:3). All real, lasting comfort has its source in the Lord, because He is the Father of compassion and comfort.

Think about this. Your heavenly Father is in charge of comfort and compassion. He exercises His loving power on earth so that comfort will be available. Whenever anyone, anytime, anywhere experiences real comfort, it is because God, the source of all true comfort, has made it happen. It is never useless to cry out to Him. He has the

power to bring hope and rest to your soul in ways you could never conceive. God, in His grace, has assigned this job to Himself.

3. Don't fall into grief's traps.

Moments of sorrow are also moments of temptation. You have an enemy who wants to use this moment to tempt you to question God's goodness and love. He will tempt you to be envious of others and to become angry and bitter. The struggle of grief is not just a struggle of sorrow, but of temptation as well.

Look out for grief's traps. Watch yourself for signs of doubt, anger, envy, self-pity, bitterness. When you see these things in yourself, run to Jesus for His forgiveness, strength, and protection.

4. Open yourself up to God's helpers.

God designed life to be a community project. We need the help of others in our lives to become the people God created us to be (See Ephesians 4:1-16 and 1 Corinthians 13).

When your heart is breaking and your eyes are blinded by grief, you need the help of others more than ever. The godly friends that Jesus has put in your life can help you see things you would not see by yourself. They can help you remember God's goodness when you are tempted to forget. They will exercise faith for you when your faith is weak. When you are in despair, they will bring the comfort of Christ to you. And they will gently warn you when you are tempted to get off track.

Don't try to go through your sadness alone. God has placed helpers in your life. Look for them, and be patient with them. Since no human comforter is perfect, their comfort will not be perfect either.

5. Be thankful.

Even in the darkest of moments, you can find clear signs of God's presence and love. The apostle Paul says it this way. "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Notice the little preposition "in" in the middle of the verse. We are called to be thankful in every situation. This doesn't

mean that you will always be thankful for what you are going through, but it does mean that you can be thankful for what God is giving you to sustain you in your grief.

In your darkness, there are always little lights of God's grace and love to be found. Search for those lights. Pay attention to the good things God is doing, even in this dark moment, so your grief can be mixed with heartfelt gratitude.

6. Don't neglect your spiritual habits.

When you are overwhelmed with sadness, it can seem pointless to pray. You may feel too weak and emotionally distracted to read the Bible, be with your Christian friends, and attend public times of worship. But you need these spiritually productive habits in your life now more than ever. God has called you to do these things because they mature your heart and strengthen your soul. They remind you of who you are and who the Lord is. They reconnect you to your identity as His child and help you to remember that a time is coming when you won't have to face death ever again.

7. Celebrate eternity.

Look beyond this moment of grief to an eternity with God. When you entered into God's family, you started a journey that won't end until you are with your Lord in eternity.

The heart-breaking pains of life in a fallen world will some day end. The crushing sadness of death will end. Some day your grief will be gone and it won't return. So, as you grieve, remember what is to come and be thankful. You have a bright future that does not include sadness and death.

8. Give away the comfort you have received.

Scripture says that God comforts us, not only to bring rest to our hearts, but also so we can comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4). If you have experienced God's comfort in your time of grief, you are uniquely able to understand what a fellow griever is going through. So what you do or say will give other mourners hope and rest.

Don't hoard your comfort. Your experience has qualified you to be an active part of the army of helpers that the God of compassion sends into our broken, hurting world.

As you face the death of a loved one remember you are not alone. Jesus endured death for you so that even in the face of death you would be able to live with hope, strength, and courage. And because of what Jesus has done for you, good things can happen even in the darkest moments of life. Don't let grief rob you of life. Choose to live and experience the grace that Jesus died to give you.

Frequently-Asked Questions

Christians are called to thank God for everything; does this mean I'm not allowed to grieve?

Don't feel guilty because you are grieving. Many Christians think that glorifying God as they grieve means putting on a happy face. But this is a misunderstanding of how God wants us to handle the crushing sadness of death.

Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, captures God's perspective on our grief, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."

Christians do grieve—and we should, because death was not part of God's original plan. We know that death exists because sin has entered our world. Death should make us angry. It should make us sad.

But we do not grieve as if we have no hope. We have hope because we trust in the God who made us and the rest of the world. We trust in His love for us, we trust in His goodness, and we trust that He is in control of our lives. And we know that Jesus is working to put death to death. And we know that some day we will live in a place where there will never again be any sickness, sorrow, or death. So our sadness is mixed with rest and our sorrow is colored with hope.

Why would a loving God this to happen?

Your question is the natural question of many who face the death of a loved one. Yet one of the things that is very important to do when you are dealing with death is to resist asking questions that cannot be answered.

When you are grieving, it is tempting to think that, if you could get answers to the questions that plague you, your grief would lessen.

The questions are quite natural: “Why here?” “Why now?” “How could God let this bad thing happen to such a good person?”

Anyone who has grieved has asked questions like these. The problem is that they simply are not answerable. These things are secrets in the mind of God and therefore mysteries to us. The key to comfort and peace will not be found in figuring out God’s secret plan. Lasting comfort is not found in what you know, but Who you know.

Real comfort comes when you rest in your relationship as the child of the wisest, most powerful, most loving, most gracious, most forgiving, and most faithful Person in the universe. He has promised to never leave you (Joshua 1:5, Heb.13:5). He is committed to making even the worst moments in your life result in good (Romans 8:28-38). And He will give you everything you need to face whatever you encounter in this fallen world, even death (2 Peter 1:3).

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