

HEALTHY
GRIEVING FOR
THE LOSSES
OF LIFE

can
you
just
sit
with
me?

NATASHA SMITH



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Say That Again

Perhaps grief is a true reflection of hell, where the ache of losing God and all good, including the good of community, will be endless. Be that as it may, a most painful part of the pain of grief is the sense that no one, however sympathetic and supportive in intention, can share what we are feeling, and it would be a betrayal of our love for the lost one to pretend otherwise. So, we grieve alone, and the agony is unbelievable.

J. I. PACKER

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On November 22, 1998, I flailed around my dorm room unable to keep my footing as waves of confusion, shock, and anger crashed against the ship of my mind. Disbelief submerged me as I exhaled, unable to catch my breath. “Angie died this morning.”

Those words rang out like a piercing megaphone in my ear, and in a shaky voice, I murmured, “Wait, what happened now?”

“Angie died this morning.” I dropped the phone to the floor, tears racing down my face. Dazed and confused, my tears turned to sobs, and sobs turned to wails. Unable to hear my thoughts, it felt as if my brain shut down.

After a moment, my vision cleared. My eyes burned as I stared into space. “This can’t be true; she’s only thirty-two. I prayed for

God to heal her, and he promised,” I stammered. “I had plans. We had plans.” I hoped to see my sister a few days before Thanksgiving break. But it was too late.

This is grief.



In 2004, when I started my career, I dreamed of climbing the corporate ladder. As a first-generation university graduate, I felt my future was as bright and certain as the rising sun. I wanted to shatter every glass ceiling placed on every African American woman.

But in 2015, I chose to leave my career as an engineer in the pharmaceutical industry to homeschool our children. I remember bouts of sadness during the first five years. Each day away from the office felt like walking in slow motion through quicksand. Homeschooling challenged me to the core, mentally and spiritually. I battled the call to homeschool alongside my desire to climb the corporate ladder. I traded suits and heels for jeans, joggers, and leggings. Nearly every day, I felt like a failure and “less than.” Crying often, depression took over my heart as daily I felt like someone else. The me I knew myself to be disappeared. My identity shifted, and it grieved me, this identity crisis.

This is grief.



I remember my seven-month prenatal visit and routine checkup in the fall of 2001. At seven months, a baby measures about fourteen inches long and weighs between two and four pounds. The baby’s hearing is fully developed. The baby changes position frequently and responds to stimuli, including sound, pain, and light. The checkup started with a routine blood pressure check and my weight. Shirt lifted, pants tucked at the waist, cold jelly applied, the technician positioned herself to check the baby’s heartbeat.

Seconds ticked by.

A minute passed.

She squirted additional jelly, then repositioned the heartbeat monitor. But nothing came from the speakers.

Deathly quiet.

Concern etched itself on the nurse's face. "I'll be right back," she said.

I swallowed and told myself not to cry. *What is wrong?*

She reentered the room. "The doctor ordered you to the ER for an internal ultrasound," she said. "Sometimes baby likes to hide, so we want to get a better look."

I felt nauseous over her sense of false hope. But I still prayed and believed. Maybe the equipment was misread or malfunctioned, right?

Once in the ER, I submitted to the internal exam, trying to tamp down my fears. It felt like an eternity, after the internal exam, and the ultrasound. Though I prayed, dread leadened me.

The doctor entered the room, concern on his face. "I'm so sorry to have to say this to you, but your baby is dead."

It felt as if my spirit left my body, and I looked at what unfolded like a TV drama. Thoughts, images, and words flashed and raced in my mind. How did this happen? What changed so drastically from last month? Is this really happening?

The doctor interrupted my thoughts. "Because you are so far along, we will need to induce and deliver the baby."

Like salt on a fresh wound, his words stung. A glimmer of light shone from a lamp in the corner of the delivery room while each labor pain sent wave upon wave of grief.

The nurses suggested heavy medication to ease the pain. "There's no need for you going through unnecessary pain at this point," one said.

I agreed. My body was numbed from the physical pain while my mind reeled over the hope I held in my heart. Maybe God would perform a miracle before the baby was expelled from my body. I knew he could.

After hours of hopeless labor, I delivered a dead baby. The room was dark, still, silent, and cold. The nurse carefully handed him to me. I embraced his little body in my arms and stared at him. Ten fingers, ten toes. Tears drenched my face.

After a while, the nurse took away the baby. For days, I spoke only in tears. Staying on the maternity floor of the hospital, baby sounds surrounded me. Once home from the hospital, my body played a terrible trick on me as my milk came in, reminding me of the baby I didn't get to bring home. And the death of this baby reminded me of multiple miscarriages before this death.

This is grief.



In 2020 we faced a global pandemic shutdown, confined to our homes. The news assaulted me continuously. I scrolled Facebook and read about the death of Ahmaud Arbery in February, the death of Breonna Taylor in March, and the death of George Floyd in May.

These events shook the low-hanging fruit of deeply held hurts in the African American community. Everything that could be shaken felt shaken by police violence. Instead of empathy and compassion for the loss of three lives, people met my hurt and pain with voices of defense, deflection, and clichés like “Just get over it” or “Keep the past in the past.” Friends and media entities labeled victims as hostiles.

Riots, politics, racial divide, the climate, and culture felt like a pressure cooker that could explode at any moment. My heart felt dark, heavy, with a thick tension. Vile, unthinkable language spewed from great and small—even from respected leaders in the church. Some showed a shadow of love from one side of their lips and vile, uncaring words from the other side. Their words did not mix.

“We all get the same start in life.”

“You got Obama for president; you should be happy.”

“Those people.”

“Vote the ‘right’ way.”

“I have black friends; I’m not racist.”

I heard many loud voices shouting opinions, but internally I asked, “Can you just listen? Can you just sit with me?”

Sadly, I learned during that dark time that sticks and stones still break bones, but words hurt even more.

Hope felt stripped within the walls of many churches. What we heard on the news, we also heard within the four walls of the church. We needed hope, yet we felt hopeless. Conversations void of Jesus fell on itching ears to proclaim the news of the best presidential candidate rather than the good news of Jesus Christ. My heart felt as if it could burst. It felt like death, but no one we knew died. The atmosphere charged forward with hate and heaviness like water poured into a paper towel bound to break at some point.

We learned that when someone said, “All lives matter,” *all* did not include the lives of people of color.

I sensed some of my white counterparts cared for me and my family as people. But if pressed they might say something like, “You’re one of the good ones, so we like you.” I wondered, *If they saw my nephew on the street, how would they view or treat him?* Along with my grief, I felt the added pressure to get over it quickly. Folks would say things like “It’s just how it is,” “Get over it,” or “It’s time to move on.” Unspoken deep-seated ideologies surfaced instead of life-giving words. Fear and doubt promoted trust in man above God. And any words spoken about the pain and hurt of people of color were taken as antichrist or demonic.

I thought, *I don’t know this Jesus who is unconcerned with all people groups.* The atmosphere in our country felt chaotic and confusing. I had to keep reminding myself that God is not the author of confusion.

My friend Stevie Swift says, “There are no throwaway people.” But it felt as if those whose lives were intentionally taken were disposable trash, waiting to be thrown away with the next day’s garbage—not even worthy of being recognized as the human

beings they were. Hope for change, for racial reconciliation, for justice, for unity in the church and America felt hopeless.

This is grief.



In August 2011, my sister Sharon called just a few short days after I visited her at home, after her emergency surgery to remove part of an intestine due to a blockage. Happy to hear her voice, the joy in my spirit turned to angst. My stomach knotted up and my muscles tensed as she spoke. “The doctor diagnosed me with cancer,” she said.

I felt thrown into a dark tunnel. Her voice was muffled, and I stopped breathing for what seemed the remainder of the conversation. I tried to remain calm and controlled. I stuffed my emotions down as I had learned to do over the years while she described what the doctor called a “promising outlook.”

Weeks later, my niece Nicole called frantically. “They’re asking what to do,” she said.

“What to do about what?” I answered.

“Mom is unresponsive, and they’re asking me what to do.” Her voice registered panic; my heart did too.

I told myself to be calm. “Tell them to do whatever they need to do to keep her alive,” I told her.

For weeks, we prayed, fasted, and lived at the hospital. After work, my niece and I alternated evenings at her bedside. I read healing Scriptures over her, and the slightest signs of improvement nudged on our faith. The physical and occupational therapists were scheduled to begin . . .

But then I received the call. “The doctor said she’s brain dead, and the medical team needs the family to decide about life support,” my niece said through tears.

The hospital support staff encouraged us to say our last words to Sharon.

“No. She can’t hear me anyway,” I told the staff. To be honest, I didn’t know what I was saying. I wanted to tell her everything, but

forming words was hard. I said goodbye, but my heart reeled. Who dies only two months after a cancer diagnosis? Sharon was forty-two when she took her last breath on this earth.

This is grief.



In the summer of 1996, I isolated myself from the world. For months, I juked and dodged almost everyone I knew to hide an unplanned teen pregnancy. One summer night I sat afraid in a warm, water-filled tub, unaware of the moments to follow. My back felt as if a three-hundred-pound weight lay on it while a sensation of a tight squeeze and release played out in my abdomen. I shifted from side to side to ease the pain. At forty weeks, labor commenced. My sister drove me to the hospital, where I delivered a healthy, stunning baby. I held him in my arms and melted.

“I wanted to keep him, but I gave him away already,” I cried.

The adoption agency liaison took my baby boy to his new parents that day. Now, somewhere out there, there is a boy who made me a momma for the first time. I’ve only seen him in photos since the day I birthed him. Does he even know I exist? I pray over him every day when I pray for my kids who are with me. I wish we were a part of each other’s lives.

This is grief.



In the fall of 2012, my dad arrived at the ER with high blood pressure and abnormal blood sugar levels. He smiled as I walked into the room just before the doctor asked me to step into the hallway.

“I believe your dad has lymphoma. His scans show enlarged lymph nodes, and I’d like to refer him to a doctor at the cancer center.”

My heart crashed, yet something rose inside me. “No, this is not happening again,” I told the doctor.

But he believed it to be the same type of cancer that caused my sister Sharon's death. Determined to disrupt and change the narrative, we prayed, believed, and grasped for Dad's healing, like a miracle within reach. Test after test, scan after scan for over a year, the doctor gave Dad a clean bill of health.

Dad beat cancer that time, but it resurfaced in the spring of 2016. His lack of appetite and the sudden loss of his sight indicated a truth my heart denied. There were no answers from the primary physician, so I arranged for care with the oncologist Dad had visited five years prior.

Within six months, my family and I arrived at a hospice facility behind the medical transport carrying my dad. At the time, I was unfamiliar with hospice care but would come to know it well. I clearly remember one of my children saying, "Mommy, this place is nice." The facility boasted comfy chairs, snacks, lots of sunlit rooms, flowers, and inviting decor. Empathetic cooks prepared nourishing food as if they knew our grief-stricken hearts needed it. I told my niece Nicole, "Dad's going out in style."

The family designated me to complete the paperwork that named who to call to notify of Dad's passing and what funeral home to send his body to. The task overwhelmed me. When I turned in the paperwork, the nurse said, "Your dad is in the active stage."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"He's in the active stage of dying, so it shouldn't be much longer now," she told me.

My family and I sat, talked, and kept Dad's mouth moistened by placing a small, wetted sponge on his lips. His eyes opened, but he did not respond. The daylight from the window turned to darkness. Now in a dimly lit room, my family and I watched Dad's chest rise and fall.

Shallow breaths came and went at longer and longer intervals. With each breath, we wondered if it would be his last.

We sat. I waited for hours. I kissed my father and whispered, "Goodnight, Daddy. I love you."

I left.

The nurse called me in the middle of the night. “Your Dad transitioned peacefully,” she said.

This is grief.



In May 2019, I received a call from my niece Nicole. “Anthony’s been shot.”

“Is he all right?” I asked, swallowing my fear.

“I don’t know. They’ve taken him to the hospital,” she said.

“I’m on my way. I’ll meet you there.” I rushed over an hour away to meet her at the ER. The details were still unknown, and I had that too-familiar feeling of my heart sinking, then racing. I talked with Jesus with every single breath as I drove.

When I arrived, family members stood in the hallway outside the operating room. Shortly after that, the medical team came into the family waiting room.

“We did everything we could do,” the doctor said.

It felt like a scene from *The Matrix*, everything moving in slow motion. Furniture flew across the room while some of my relatives fell to the floor. Others trembled, then collapsed in each other’s arms, while guttural sobs and moans from the deepest place of hurt echoed off the walls. Calm arose within me, like the eye of a storm, unexplainably so. The shock from yet another traumatic loss closed in on me. My nephew, only twenty-eight years old, died from a gunshot wound to the chest that night.

This is grief.



In 2021, my only living sister, Charlotte, called. She said, “My friend just called, said he was sorry to hear about our aunt, said she died in a bad accident.”

What? This didn’t make any sense. I pushed back. “No. This can’t be. Are you sure he saw the right name?”

I called my aunt's cell phone, but there was no answer. I googled her name and found articles about the accident. How could this be? My heart sank, helpless to undo the hurt and ensuing pain brought upon my family. My aunt and baby cousin died because an oncoming driver crossed the center line. As I write, this happened only a few months ago.

This is grief.



Friend, these stories represent part of my story of grief. This grief took me on a journey to understand how to process my emotions. Understanding my own emotions proved to be a huge learning curve. I battled anger, confusion, shock, and disbelief. I began to understand that grief could be expressed in these different forms. I saw how different grief can look, day to day, over time and years. I began to realize that grief is normal.

Let me say that again. Grief is normal.

I had to learn how to cope with grief. With each loss, I found myself unprepared, as most do, even when walking through a terminal illness with a loved one. I didn't have a plan. I felt lost. I walked around in a fog, hoping, praying, and wishing for the grief to go away. Pushing it down, pushing it away, and choosing to block uncomfortable memories. But I realized to pretend grief doesn't exist won't heal or fix it. So I learned to let it out in safe places, to safe people.

I had to learn how to heal. I walked through iterations of healing. I had to learn how to process any guilt, unforgiveness, or anger (really, any negative feelings) brought on by the grief. Like an onion peeled layer after layer, I lay everything bare before the Lord. He peels back a layer, bringing hurt to the surface to heal it. I wish I could say I'm "through" it, but I am still healing. The healing process continues.

As you read this, you may have questions like:

- How do I process this loss?
- What emotions can I expect?

- Is what I'm feeling normal?
- What is normal?
- How does normal behave?
- What does it feel like to grieve?
- How do I express my grief?
- How do I cope with this pain?
- How long will it last?

My prayer is that through these pages, you will learn how to process your emotions, to cope with grief, and to begin your journey to healing. You'll find relatable stories, what God says, what experts say, and you'll find space for connecting with God through Scripture meditation, grief exercises, and prayer to promote your healing journey.

To you who want to love the grieving well, these pages will

- help you to understand grief and those who grieve and
- teach you how to sit with the grieving with practical tips.

In these pages, I invite you to just sit with me.

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