A DEEPER ROOTS FOUNDATION PUBLICATION

# Grief Is Not the Enemy

*A Faith-Based Guide to Understanding, Honoring, and Carrying Loss*

*(re·lens·ing) v. To believe and accept that you were made for more than survival.*

> *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*
>
> MATTHEW 5:4

> *“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”*
>
> PSALM 147:3

> *“Jesus wept.”*
>
> JOHN 11:35

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Nobody tells you that grief is a form of love. They tell you it is a stage. A process. Something to move through, work past, eventually get over.

They hand you a timeline — implied or explicit — and measure your recovery against it. And when you are still carrying the weight six months later, a year later, five years later, the world begins to wonder quietly if something is wrong with you. Nothing is wrong with you. Grief is the price of having loved something or someone that mattered.

This paper is not about getting over grief. Nobody gets over grief the way you get over a cold or a setback at work. What changes, over time and through the specific practices of faith and community and intentional remembrance, is not the presence of the grief but your relationship to it. The weight does not disappear. You learn to carry it differently. And in learning to carry it differently, you discover that the grief itself is not only a wound — it is also a testimony. Evidence of a love that was worth having. A life that was worth knowing. A bond that the grave cannot fully take.

SECTION ONE

## What Grief Actually Is

**Grief is love with nowhere to go.**

That definition — simple, exact, and more theologically precise than it first appears — names the experience from the inside in a way that clinical language does not. When someone you love dies, or when something you valued is gone, the love does not die with it. The love continues. But the object of the love is no longer accessible in the way it was. And the love that has nowhere to go becomes grief — the specific, relentless ache of affection without its object. *(Kessler, Finding Meaning, 2019)*

This is why grief is not a sign that something is broken in you. It is a sign that something worked. That you loved. That the love was real enough to persist past the loss. The depth of your grief is a direct measure of the depth of what you had — and what you had is worth honoring, not pathologizing. *(Worden, Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, 4th ed., 2009)*

KEY VOICES ON GRIEF

*"Grief is the price of love. When you grieve, you loved."*

— David Kessler, Finding Meaning (2019)

*"Grief never ends, but it changes. It is a passage, not a place to stay."*

— Margaret Stroebe, Dual Process Model (1999)

*"Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity."*

— J. William Worden, Grief Counseling (2009)

> *Jesus wept.*

> JOHN 11:35

The shortest verse in the Bible is also one of the most theologically significant. Lazarus is dead. Mary and Martha are grieving. And Jesus — who knows He is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, who has the power to undo the death at any moment — weeps. Not because He does not know the outcome. Because the grief of the people He loves is real to Him. Because death is genuinely wrong. Because love, encountering loss, weeps — and God in the flesh does not exempt Himself from that weeping.

If Jesus wept at the tomb of His friend, your tears are not a failure of faith. They are a participation in something God Himself has done.

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SECTION TWO

## You Do Not Get Over It — You Learn to Carry It

One of the most damaging things the world says about grief — and sometimes the church says it too — is that healing means reaching a point where the grief is gone. Where you have processed it fully, integrated it completely, and arrived at a place of resolution that no longer costs you anything.

That is not what healing looks like. That is not what Scripture promises. What Scripture promises is comfort — not the elimination of the wound, but the presence of the Comforter in it. *(Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son, 1987)*

Binding a wound is not the same as erasing it. A bound wound still carries the mark of what happened. It still aches in certain weather. It still needs care and attention and time. But it is held — wrapped, tended, sustained by something that keeps it from destroying the whole. *(Smedes, How Can It Be All Right, 1982)*

What changes over time is not that grief disappears. What changes is your relationship to it. The grief and the joy can coexist — that you can carry the loss and also laugh, also hope, also be genuinely present in the life that continues. *(Stroebe & Schut, Death Studies, 1999)*

***Grief does not mean you loved wrong.***
***It means you loved well.***

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SECTION THREE

## Grief Came From Love — Honor the Evidence

Here is the reframe that changes everything: your grief is not evidence of damage. It is evidence of love. It is the mark left by something extraordinary — a person, a relationship, a bond, a life — that was worth having and that mattered enough to leave a permanent impression on the fabric of who you are. *(Lewis, A Grief Observed, 1961)*

The veteran who grieves a brother who did not come home is not malfunctioning. He is carrying the evidence that the brotherhood was real. That the bond forged in hard places was genuine. That the loss cost something because the relationship was worth something. The grief is the shadow cast by something extraordinary — and the shadow is proportional to what cast it. *(Shay, Achilles in Vietnam, 1994)*

> *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*
>
> JOHN 15:13

When you find yourself grieving hard, years after the loss, on a day that should be ordinary but isn't — the right question is not: why am I still feeling this? The right question is: what was this person, this relationship, this bond worth? And the answer your grief is giving you — by its very persistence, by its refusal to simply go away — is: more than you can fully calculate. More than any timeline can contain. That is not a problem. That is the testimony of a life well loved.

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SECTION FOUR

## Honor the Memory — This Is Sacred Work

One of the most important things a person who is grieving can do — and one of the things that faith makes uniquely possible — is to honor the memory of who or what was lost. Not as a morbid dwelling in the past. As a sacred act of testimony. As the ongoing commitment to say: this person existed, this life mattered, this bond was real, and neither time nor death can make it not have been true. *(Klass, Silverman & Nickman, Continuing Bonds, 1996)*

> *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die… a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.*
>
> ECCLESIASTES 3:1–2, 4

Honoring memory looks different for different people and different losses. It might be a specific day each year set aside to remember and speak the name out loud. It might be the carrying of a small object, a photograph, a challenge coin, a piece of gear. It might be the choice to speak freely about the person when others grow uncomfortable with the speaking — to say the name rather than let it become unspeakable.

> *For I am sure that neither death nor life… nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*
>
> ROMANS 8:38–39

If nothing can separate us from the love of God, then the love that was shared between human beings — real, costly, formative love — is also not simply erased by death. The love persists. The memory persists. The impact persists. And the honoring of that persistence is not weakness. It is faithfulness.

CONTINUING BONDS

*"Research has overturned the old model of 'letting go.' Maintaining an ongoing connection to the deceased is not pathological — it is healthy and consistent with adjustment."*

— Klass, Silverman & Nickman (1996)

*"When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."*

— Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning (1946)

*"Speak the name. Grief shared is grief carried."*

— James Pennebaker, Opening Up (1990)

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SECTION FIVE

## What You Experienced Was Extraordinary — Own That

### For the Veteran Reading This

There is a specific lie that grief sometimes carries, particularly for veterans who have lost people in hard circumstances: the suggestion that the depth of the loss is somehow disproportionate. That the grief is too much. That a person who is still grieving years later is stuck, or damaged, or unable to move on.

The counter to that lie is the truth: what you experienced was extraordinary. The bond you had — the brotherhood, the relationship, the love — was real and deep and formative in the specific way that bonds forged in hard places always are. The loss of something extraordinary produces extraordinary grief. That is not pathology. That is proportion. *(Litz et al., Clinical Psychology Review, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, Psychological Inquiry, 2004)*

Own what you had. Not in a way that makes the present impossible to inhabit — not as a shrine that prevents living — but as the true account of a life that was genuinely richer for having had that person, that relationship, that bond in it. You were changed by what you had. The change is still in you. The grief is part of the change. And all of it — the love, the loss, the grief, the change — is the record of a life that was worth having. *(van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score, 2014)*

> *The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*
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> PSALM 34:18

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SECTION SIX

## The Faith Practices That Help

Faith does not make grief disappear. What it does is give grief somewhere to go. The practices of the Christian life — prayer, Scripture, community, testimony, worship — do not resolve the loss. They provide a container for it. A framework for carrying it. A community to carry it in. And a God who is not surprised by it, not uncomfortable with it, not waiting for it to be over before drawing close. *(Powlison, Seeing with New Eyes, 2003)*

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OF THE PSALTER IS LAMENT — GOD'S OWN PRAYER BOOK INCLUDES THE LANGUAGE OF GRIEF, ANGER, AND ABANDONMENT

**1/3**

OF BEREAVED PEOPLE SHOW MEASURABLE HEALTH IMPROVEMENT THROUGH DISCLOSURE AND TESTIMONY *(PENNEBAKER, 1990)*

**∞**

NO TIMELINE ON GRIEF. NO SCHEDULE. NO EXPIRY DATE ON LOVE — OR ON MOURNING WHAT LOVE COST

> *"Bring it to God honestly. The Psalms model this without apology. Psalm 22 opens with: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That is not the prayer of someone who has faith all figured out. It is the prayer of someone in genuine anguish, bringing the anguish directly to the God who can handle it."* (Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, 1995)

**Read the Psalms of lament.** Nearly a third of the Psalter is lament — God saw fit to include the language of grief, confusion, anger, and abandonment in the primary prayer book of His people. You are not outside the faith when you bring those things to God. You are squarely within a tradition that has been doing exactly that for three thousand years. *(Billman & Migliore, Rachel's Cry, 1999)*

**Let the community hold you.** Grief is not meant to be carried alone. Find at least one person who knew the person you lost, or who has been in a similar place of loss, and let them be present in it with you. You do not need them to understand perfectly. You need them to stay. *(Cacioppo & Patrick, Loneliness, 2008)*

**Name the person out loud.** Say the name. Tell the stories. Allow the memory to be spoken rather than preserved in silence. The speaking of the name is one of the most powerful things the living can do — it refuses the erasure, insists on the reality of the life, and keeps the testimony alive in the community that carries it. *(Pennebaker, Opening Up, 1990)*

**Allow the grief and the gratitude to coexist.** The grief does not have to preclude the gratitude. You can be genuinely grateful for what you had and genuinely grieving that it is gone. Both measure the same extraordinary thing from different angles. *(Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)*

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A WORD TO THE DRF COMMUNITY

## You Were Not Made to Carry This Alone

Deeper Roots Foundation exists because grief is real, and the men and women who come through our programs have often been carrying theirs alone for a very long time. The Soldiers on Safari program, the Rooted and Restored gatherings, the community that forms around the fire pit in the Limpopo and in the church halls of Southern California — these are not grief programs. They are formation programs. But formation, done honestly, always eventually touches grief.

We do not promise to take the grief away. We promise to create the conditions in which it can finally be named. In which the person who was lost can be spoken of freely. In which the weight that has been carried alone can be carried in community. In which the God who draws close to the brokenhearted can actually get close — because the managed distance has been lowered enough for the encounter to happen.

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***Grief is the evidence that what you loved was real.***
***Honor it. Carry it. Let it point you back***
***to the one who holds all things —***

*including the ones you have lost.*

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

## Bibliography & Recommended Resources

*The following works inform the theological and clinical framework of this paper. They are recommended for veterans, chaplains, counselors, and pastoral leaders supporting people through grief.*

### PSYCHOLOGY & CLINICAL RESEARCH

**Bowlby, John.** *Attachment and Loss, Vol. 3: Loss — Sadness and Depression.* New York: Basic Books, 1980. The foundational work on attachment theory and grief. Bowlby established that grief is a natural biological response to the loss of an attachment figure — not a disorder, not a weakness, but the predictable consequence of love.

**Cacioppo, John T., and William Patrick.** *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection.* New York: W. W. Norton, 2008. Documents the biological damage of social isolation. Critical support for DRF's conviction that grief carried alone is more dangerous than grief carried in community.

**Kessler, David.** *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief.* New York: Scribner, 2019. Kessler — who collaborated with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross — argues that meaning-making is the necessary sequel to grief. His work challenges the stages model that implies grief has a finish line.

**Klass, Dennis, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, eds.** *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief.* Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1996. The landmark work that overturned the "letting go" model of grief. Maintaining an ongoing bond with the deceased is not pathological — it is normal, healthy, and consistent with adjustment.

**Litz, Brett T., et al.** "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy." *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706. The foundational paper on moral injury. Essential for understanding why veterans' grief is often entangled with shame and the wound to moral identity.

**Pennebaker, James W.** *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions.* New York: Guilford Press, 1990. Research demonstrating that disclosure — speaking or writing about loss — produces measurable physical and psychological health benefits. Supports the DRF practice of testimony and the naming of the dead.

**Shay, Jonathan.** *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character.* New York: Scribner, 1994. Psychiatrist and veteran advocate Shay's work on moral injury and the grief of war. Named the specific quality of military grief that the clinical system routinely misunderstands.

**Stroebe, Margaret, and Henk Schut.** "The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description." *Death Studies* 23, no. 3 (1999): 197–224. The clinical model that best captures how grief actually works — oscillating between loss-orientation and restoration-orientation rather than moving linearly through stages.

**Tedeschi, Richard G., and Lawrence G. Calhoun.** "Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence." *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (2004): 1–18. The research framework for posttraumatic growth — the documented phenomenon of genuine positive transformation following significant loss. The clinical foundation for (re)lensing.

**van der Kolk, Bessel.** *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.* New York: Viking, 2014. The definitive work on how trauma and loss are stored in the body and why healing requires embodied, relational, and experiential intervention.

**Worden, J. William.** *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner.* 4th ed. New York: Springer, 2009. The standard clinical text on grief therapy. Worden's task-based model frames grief as active work rather than passive passage through stages.

### THEOLOGY & BIBLICAL COUNSELING

**Billman, Kathleen D., and Daniel L. Migliore.** *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope.* Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999. A theological study of lament as prayer. Bringing anguish, anger, and grief directly to God is not a failure of faith — it is the most faithful response to genuine loss.

**Brueggemann, Walter.** *The Psalms and the Life of Faith.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. Old Testament scholar Brueggemann's work on the Psalms as the full vocabulary of human experience before God — including the grief, disorientation, and lament that the church often sanitizes out.

**Lewis, C. S.** *A Grief Observed.* London: Faber & Faber, 1961. Written after the death of his wife, Lewis's unsparing account of what grief actually feels like from the inside remains the most honest Christian engagement with loss in print. Required reading.

**Powlison, David.** *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture.* Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003. Biblical counseling perspective on reframing human experience through Scripture. Foundational to the (re)lensing framework DRF uses in program design.

**Smedes, Lewis B.** *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982. Reformed theologian Smedes on suffering, grief, and the nature of grace. One of the clearest evangelical treatments of the question: how does faith hold when the loss is real and the pain is not going away.

**Wolterstorff, Nicholas.** *Lament for a Son.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987. Written after the death of his twenty-five-year-old son, philosopher-theologian Wolterstorff produced what many consider the most theologically profound modern account of grief. His central claim — that grief is love's companion, not love's failure — is the theological spine of this paper.

### CHAPLAINCY, PASTORAL CARE & VETERAN SUPPORT

**Carey, Lindsay B., and Jonathan Hodgson.** "Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care in Critical Care Settings." *AACN Advanced Critical Care* 29, no. 2 (2018): 143–156. Documents the specific role of chaplains in supporting grief in high-stakes environments — directly applicable to veteran and first responder communities.

**Drescher, Kent D., et al.** "An Exploration of the Viability and Usefulness of the Construct of Moral Injury in War Veterans." *Traumatology* 17, no. 1 (2011): 8–13. Research on moral injury in veteran populations with specific attention to the grief dimension — the mourning of who one was before the hard things happened.

**Tick, Edward.** *War and the Soul: Healing Our Nation's Veterans from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.* Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2005. Jungian psychotherapist Tick's work on the spiritual and psychological wound of war — including the specific grief that comes from participating in violence and the theological resources for its address.

> *For additional resources, clinical referrals, and pastoral support, contact Deeper Roots Foundation at **deeperrootsfoundation.org** or **424-392-0009**. DRF maintains active partnerships with VA Long Beach, VA West Los Angeles, and licensed clinical partners throughout Southern California.*

## Deeper Roots Foundation

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HEALING · LOVE · IDENTITY

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— Greg Schwabe, Founder & Executive Director