

LIVING IN THE
SHADOW
OF GRIEF

ENLARGING YOUR
CAPACITY TO GRIEVE
WITH HOPE



DAVE & DEBBIE KEEHN

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D6 FAMILY MINISTRY
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WHAT OTHERS ARE SHARING ABOUT THIS BOOK

Dave and Debbie have endured unimaginable loss and have opened up their hearts and faith for all to see. If you've experienced loss or want to pursue a deeper faith for whatever lies ahead, this is a challenging and hopeful read.

—**Josh Griffin**, *Download Youth Ministry*,
junior high pastor Mariners Church

Living in the Shadow of Grief is a sacred gift to anyone walking through the valley of loss. Dave and Debbie Keehn write with authenticity, vulnerability, and deep faith. With each page, they invite readers into their story while pointing them toward the hope only Jesus can give. Their honesty about pain and their unwavering trust in God make this book both comforting and life-giving. Whether you are grieving yourself or walking beside someone who is, you'll find truth, peace, and encouragement on every page. This book beautifully reminds us that even in the shadow of grief, the light of God's grace still shines.

—**Todd Pearage**, *founder and president of The Youth Leader Oasis*

Living in the Shadow of Grief

Living in the Shadow of Grief is a raw, gripping, and hopeful book. With the unexpected loss of their young son, Adam, Dave and Debbie had their lives turned completely upside down. There is no perfect formula for grieving. It's messy. And yet, in this book, the Keehns share their heart-wrenching journey of grief and offer biblical principles for grieving with hope.

—**Sean McDowell, Ph.D.**, *professor of Apologetics at Talbot School of Theology, author of over 20 books, and popular YouTuber*

Reading this book has come at just the right time in my own grief journey. At its core, *Living in the Shadow of Grief* radiates with authenticity and vulnerability, graciously allowing its readers permission to grieve and wrestle with the deep, heart-aching questions and feelings that inevitably accompany the grief journey. The words poured out on these pages have been a salve for my own personal pain, inspiring a new way to walk in my own “shadow of grief.” This book is a powerful tool, providing deep yet practical insights for navigating grief. Whether you are a ministry leader caring for others, a parent leading your family or you are personally seeking to find your way out of the depths of painful grief, I have no doubt that Dave and Debbie’s story will be a beacon of hope in the midst of your journey.

—**Meghan Landi**, *Empowered Homes Ministry*

The valley grief and loss is a constant reality in pastoral ministry. Whether it is our preference for the mountain tops, or our own discomfort seeing ourselves and others in pain, sometimes we can be unaware of this landscape. Dave and Debbie have opened themselves up to chart a course through that valley. This book is practical and biblical guidance for those who find themselves in that valley or are walking with them.

—**Craig Hill**, *senior pastor Taft Ave. Community Church*

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Living in the Shadow of Grief



LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF GRIEF: ENLARGING YOUR CAPACITY TO GRIEVE WITH HOPE

INTRODUCTION

June 8, 2022, changed my life forever.

As a parent I (Dave) never expected to receive that call. As a pastor, it was always another family that had the tragedy, but now it was

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me. Through tears, my daughter-in-law¹ broke the news: Adam had died. My life has never been the same.

In the months that followed that dark day, my wife, Debbie, and I read some great books on grief (*A Grace Disguised* by Jerry Sittser was especially helpful), but we found there was not a book that looked at the permanent change that grief forced upon us. For twenty-five years, many have encouraged me to write a book, but I never felt I had anything unique to say—until now. I did not want to write this book. I wish I didn't have to. But I write to help those who are hurting to grieve with hope.

This book is for anyone experiencing deep loss, whether it be a cherished loved one, a marriage, or other life-altering change. When our son Adam died, Debbie and I leaned heavily into our faith in Jesus Christ. While you may or may not share this same faith, we hope you will find encouragement in our journey. You will read in the pages ahead of the peace we found in the reality of Heaven according to the Christian Scripture: the Bible. You will witness the difference knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord has made in our lives, but that is not a prerequisite to read this book. We desire to give you an enlarging capacity to grieve with hope, as life will never be the same for you again as well. This book is also for those walking alongside someone on a journey with grief. We hope to give you an understanding that the person you knew before their loss will never be the same again, and to provide you tools to help and not hurt the person further.

The unique insight we offer was gained in our experience of grieving Adam's death. The bottom-line hope we desire to share with you

¹ Throughout this book, we do not give the names of Adam's wife and daughter out of respect for their privacy. This is our (Dave and Debbie's) story of grief, of which they are the unfortunate participants. They would never want any attention from this experience to be focused on them. We wrote our story with their support and we love them dearly.

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is that grief evolves, yet never disappears, and, with the grace of God, can actually enlarge our lives. The long shadow of grief is not absent the long arm of God's grace. What do I mean by a "long shadow"?

Have you ever had a feeling you could not shake? Something that shapes how you view your daily experiences? That is how I have felt the past few months; two-plus years now removed from the sudden death of my son, Adam. I've had an insatiable urge to scream into the darkness that envelopes me. This darkness is not depression, but a shadow that touches everything I think, feel, and do. In the shadow, I am able to experience good days. I can laugh with friends. I can enjoy a roller coaster at Disneyland, screaming with glee. I can love my wife and receive her love. I worship God and experience His peace in powerful and personal ways. However, in all of these good moments, I feel the shadow, and it impacts my ability to be fully present in the moment as I move forward in my journey with grief.

I didn't expect the shadow. I did not even know how to name it. It wasn't until now, two years after Adam's passing, that I began trying to figure out what I was experiencing. I started processing with my wife and she nodded and spoke of a similar experience. We both have good days and enjoy the moment. Yet, even as everything was settling in, we began to understand that our new normal was going to be darker than we thought.

This is not a "how to" book, but we will share wisdom we gained along the way. I (Dave) will take the primary lead-author role detailing our journey, explaining the Christian theology of death, suffering, and Heaven; and providing applications to life after loss. Debbie will add her perspective of her journey in ways that differed from me. These paragraphs, a few each chapter, will be identified by a unique handwriting font used. This book is not a substitute for pastoral care or professional counseling, though it has been therapeutic to write and we do hope it comforts and helps. Our aim comes from the

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words the apostle Paul once wrote to grieving believers in the first century. “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep [have died], that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, ESV).

Grief is a continued presence in my life because of the love I have for my son. It was not until his death that I considered there were consequences to love. My love for Adam—the value who he is in my life and the impact he’s made in the world—perpetuates this feeling of loss in his death. The price of loving someone is the grief you experience in their absence. We hope you receive from reading this book an understanding of how your love is persevering and enlarging your capacity to grieve with hope. This book is written in four sections. The first section of the book seeks to understand how we encounter grief and the full weight of its impact. The second section of the book offers some pathways (not advice) that helped us to respond to the deep grief of losing our son. The last two sections of the book are meant to understand pieces of your brokenness that are your “new normal,” and how to live with these new characteristics as instruments of hope.

Grief is like a ball in a jar. The ball does not get smaller over time, but rather what I am finding is while the ball of grief may remain the same size, the jar is enlarging—enlarging my capacity to grieve with hope. By God’s grace, I am able to care more for others. I am able to give more to my family. I am able to take on more opportunities for the sake of God’s kingdom work. I have found that, through the grace of God, I am enlarging as a person: my preaching has more substance, my compassion is more authentic, my purpose more focused. My grief is not a hindrance to this growth, but, by the wisdom and mercy of God, my grief grows me. Our prayer is that your journey in the grief will be with hope—not in the past life returning, but that the new normal you are living in, the shadow of grief will become the backdrop to a beautiful life that God is enlarging you to become.



CHAPTER 1

THE LAST WORD

ADAM'S STORY

A friend wrote me an email when he learned that my son, Adam, had suddenly died. He proclaimed over the situation: “Jesus has the last word and won’t let Adam’s story end here.” I have lived with that truth squarely in front of me, guiding me, sustaining me in this long journey with grief. Adam’s story did not end that dreadful day on earth.

But how did Adam’s story begin?

Adam almost wasn’t. Debbie got very sick after the birth of our first child, Aimee. According to the medical advice we received, we should not get pregnant because of the very powerful medication that was keeping her system alive. I was angry at God. We got married young and were able to conceive Aimee quickly—she was born almost on our second wedding anniversary. The honeymoon was over,

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and the vows of our marriage were tested: for better, for worse; in sickness and in health. God reminded me of these vows one night as I railed against Him. Almost three years later, Debbie's health improved, and the doctors gave us permission to try again to conceive a child. Debbie stopped taking the medication and we were soon pregnant again. However, Debbie's health quickly declined again, forcing her back on the dangerous medication. We were barely through the first trimester, but we could not wait any longer; prayerfully Debbie was hooked up to an IV and bedridden for most of the remainder of the pregnancy.

Debbie's "water" broke just after midnight on Sunday, September 7, 1997. We went to the hospital to begin the arduous journey that is childbirth. Our church, where I was serving as the youth pastor, announced in the worship services that we were at the hospital as part of their prayer time—numerous people got up and left to join in the hospital wanting to support us in the moment. Later that day Adam was born. However, he was immediately in distress. Instead of placing Adam on Debbie's chest, as most babies are, they whisked Adam out of the room and down the hallway. Debbie, sensing something was wrong, yelled for me to follow Adam. When I found my son, he was blue. The doctors and nurses were hovering around him, giving him oxygen and trying to stimulate his body to respond on its own. Finally, I heard the sound I had been waiting for—Adam's first cry. His screaming was miraculous. Adam was alive and doing well!

Adam was our miracle child, and we knew he was a gift from God right away. Because of Debbie's ongoing medical condition, she couldn't nurse Adam. This meant I got to take some of the night shifts, getting a bottle ready and feeding Adam. Those hours in the dark, feeding Adam, gave me time to pray over him—praying for God's blessing and will to be done. Debbie and I truly believed God gave us Adam for a reason; we were just waiting to discover what he

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would become. I prayed Psalm 139:16 over him: “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (NIV). I dreamed what all those days would be, never did I think I would see the fullness of those days.

Adam was an active child. He loved to climb, run, and play hard like most young boys. Debbie and I knew we needed to find an outlet for all that energy. We tried multiple youth sports programs. First up was baseball. Adam was small but very fast. He was an ideal lead-off hitter for the coach. Adam did not like this situation; he did not enjoy all the attention with everyone yelling his name in encouragement as he would be the first batter for our team. Adam also found baseball too slow as he often played defense in the outfield to chase down the ball. Standing around for something to happen was not Adam’s way of doing life—I observed this early on. So, after a few seasons, we moved onto basketball. Adam enjoyed the running up and down the court, but his short stature made it difficult for him to shoot the ball. Basketball did not last long in our schedule. Adam was invited to join a youth soccer team with his friend, and he found his promised land. Adam’s quickness was an asset on the large soccer field. Adam was one of 22 boys on the field so even if I yelled his name, he did not focus on it. Adam grew in his soccer skills quickly and was invited to join a new club team, with a new coach.

Adam loved soccer. Adam thrived in this environment. The friends made and instruction for life that he received in this young season of life were foundational to the man he would become. The loyalty Adam displayed was formed on the soccer team—loyal to a coach and teammates when he was offered opportunities to move to teams with greater prestige. The hard work and sacrifice that Adam demonstrated in his ministry leadership were from the hours of practice and drilling that were done when no one was watching. Adam

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loved people as they were; he was gracious with his teammates when they were lacking in skill. Adam saw the benefit of leading his peers on the soccer team, receiving honors from his coaches, and his impact on forming a team-first mentality.

Adam's passion for soccer led him to play competitively through high school. Adam stopped playing at the club level when he entered Biola University, opting instead to play intramurals with his friends. He gathered around himself like-minded college students, those who played soccer in high school with skill but did not want to continue at the collegiate level. Adam formed a team of these highly skilled players and they won the whole league his freshman year. However, after that first year Adam decided to focus on other priorities.

Looking back on Adam's journey, it cannot be understated that Adam grew up in a pastor's family, which meant Adam had to go to church. This became a source of struggle for Adam when he was in high school. Adam wrestled with his faith, trying to adjust to the lifestyle he saw his friends enjoying. I believe Adam had a faith in "God," but he had not surrendered his life to Jesus yet. During Adam's teenage years he saw his relationship with God enmeshed in his relationship with his parents. Adam and I struggled to find common ground to build our relationship upon. In desperation, I turned to soccer. Adam and I got season tickets to the Los Angeles Galaxy soccer games. During the long drive to and from the stadium, I would try to talk to Adam about life and Jesus, but he would simply fall asleep on me. Debbie and I continued to pray, and I was constant in my love for Adam. To accommodate Adam's desire to advance in his soccer "career," we enrolled Adam in JSerra Catholic High School in San Juan Capistrano, as they had a high-level athletic program and a ranked soccer program with a coach brought in from Europe. For the first time Adam was being taught something different about Jesus than he had heard from me. His Bible classes held onto many of

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the key truths Adam learned in Sunday School, but the application and practices of following Jesus were different. Adam would come home from school and ask me questions about God. When Adam was a sophomore in high school, he went to Costa Rica with me for a mission trip. This trip provided opportunities for me to press into what he believed about Jesus. I was still hitting a wall when it came to surrendering life to Jesus, but God was working on Adam's life.

Over the next few years, we experienced new lows and more challenging circumstances with Adam's behavior. When I thought Adam was walking away from God once and for all, Adam had an experience with the Holy Spirit at a senior retreat with his school. God revealed to Adam in a vision of two paths ahead of him; he saw people he knew from our church ministry—Adam took this as a call to return to what he knew from a child to be true. That encounter led Adam to decline pursuing playing soccer in college and enter Biola University, still unsure of what Jesus was asking of him. In God's providence, Adam was surrounded in his dorm that freshman year with many God-fearing Jesus followers who ministered graciously to Adam. Adam sensed the love of God and for the first time in his life understood the grace of Jesus. Adam in his first year at Biola had his "coming to Jesus" moment and fully surrendered his life to Jesus.

As Adam deepened his faith in Jesus, he got involved in sharing the grace of Jesus with others. During the Christmas break of his sophomore year at Biola, Adam participated in a mission trip to do street witnessing in Chicago and work with local churches' holiday outreach. I was impressed with his desire to do this but questioned the methodology of the mission. I told him, "Adam—no one is on the streets of Chicago in December; it's -4 degrees!" Unfazed, Adam simply responded, "We will find them and share Jesus still." That's exactly what Adam did—Adam shared Jesus!

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When he returned to school for the spring semester, I met Adam in the café at Biola to talk about next steps for his life, pressing him to consider the career he would pursue. Basically, I told him that he needed to get a job. I was eating in the café that day because I was hosting dozens of local youth pastors on Biola's campus for a day of meetings. During our lunch, the middle school pastor at Mariners Church Irvine, Justin Herman, walked up to Adam noticing the sleeves of tattoos that Adam has, and says to Adam, not knowing Adam is my son, "Dude, I like your ink—I want you to come work for me." Adam turns to me and says, "Look dad, I got a job!" I pointed out that Justin was offering an unpaid summer internship, but Adam took that opportunity on with the same passion, energy, and effort he gave to the soccer field. God worked in and through Adam that summer. When it was time to return for his junior year, Adam declared God was calling him to be a youth pastor, switched into the ministry major at Biola in which I taught, and joined the paid staff at Mariners as the part-time weekend coordinator for middle school.

It was amazing to watch Adam serve his middle school students in various ministry contexts. Debbie and I would sneak up on Saturday nights to watch Adam teach a Bible study and share the gospel of Jesus with hundreds of middle school students at Mariners. I was so proud to tour the youth offices where he had theology books on his desk. Adam loved his students dearly and they loved him back. He was a piper for Jesus. During Adam's senior year at Biola, his time at Mariners finished but he quickly began to interview for youth pastor positions across Southern California. Through a brief encounter I had with the executive pastor at Grace Church Glendora, Adam met, interviewed, and was hired as the middle school pastor for this church in February 2020. The next month COVID shut the world down.

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However, because Adam was so passionate for the gospel and innovative with technology, his ministry continued and even grew during this “lockdown” season. Adam preached online, “Door-dashed” food to students so they could have a virtual lunch together. Adam met students where he could, even on their driveways, encouraging them to carry on in the depressing era COVID became. When his ministry could return to meeting together outside, it had actually grown in size and commitments to Christ during the COVID pandemic. I sat back in amazement again, marveling at the work of God in Adam’s life.

Relationally, Adam was thriving with family and friends. After his “coming to Jesus” moment in his freshman year at Biola, Adam and I reconciled the brokenness of his tumultuous teenage years. In the next six years before his death, Adam and I became best friends, as we sought each other for fun and advice. His relationship with the rest of his family improved as well. It was also during this time that Adam met his wife at Mariners Church where she volunteered in his ministry. Adam was smitten by her quickly and we watched their relationship blossom into marriage. The full-time job at Grace Church gave Adam the resources to get married and he had a small wedding in the church’s courtyard the November (2020) after he was hired. Adam and his wife loved to do ministry together; she was the anchor his creativity and energy needed to stay grounded in the work God had called him to do. They wanted a family, so after getting a dog, Adam’s wife became pregnant. Adam was excited to become a father, talking to and praying for his unborn child. Adam was three weeks from meeting his daughter when the worst became our reality.

Adam was missing from his staff meeting. His boss felt something was wrong and reached out to Adam’s wife, who was at work and missed these phone calls. Eventually around noon, Adam’s wife got the messages and rushed home to find Adam unresponsive. An

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autopsy later would reveal Adam suffered a massive brain aneurysm and died instantly. Nothing could have been done to save him.

I was riding along with Orange County Fire truck 59 and just finished an emergency medical call in the community where I live, when I got the call from Adam's wife. When she said, "I think Adam died," I told her to call 911 and we will be right there. In my mind, Adam had a seizure, a stroke, something that required medical attention and he would be alright again. Adam's wife was telling me the truth, but I could not accept it yet. I called Debbie who was shopping at the time, "Something has happened to Adam—come home now!" I was not sure what happened, but I was not thinking death—I couldn't entertain that thought. The fire truck took me back to the station running their lights and sirens to get me there as quickly as possible. When Debbie and I were able to meet at our house we got another phone call, this time from Adam's wife's sister—I could hear wailing in the background and she confirmed the worst, "He's gone." Now it was time for us to cry out in pain. As a chaplain for the local fire department, I comforted countless parents in their darkest moments of grief. Now, people were coming to me, and I did not want their comfort. I was in shock and disbelief. I was numb to the world. It was not until the next morning that I broke. I cried. I sobbed. I screamed.

A family friend passed our story on to other churches for prayer and somehow our tragic news found its way to the well-respected pastor, Greg Laurie. He too had experienced the loss of a son; he got my phone number and called me. As he talked, I listened to his story, to his challenges of leading amidst the grief and to his warning counsel: "your life has forever changed." Greg was right. I am not the same person. My "normal" is different. Death changes things we experience in life.

One of the last Bible studies Adam taught his students is "Jesus changes everything." We found stickers and graphic designs in his

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office with this proclamation that we have since made into t-shirts as well. When we wear this t-shirt in public, testifying the reality that Jesus does change everything, we get stopped by people to affirm that truth. Death may have changed some things in my life, but Jesus has the power to change everything! Jesus even changed how I think of death and its finality.

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: *“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”*

“Where, O death, is your victory?”

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54–57, NIV).

I reflect often on my friend’s email message, “Jesus has the last word and won’t let Adam’s story end here.” *It is the hope I live by!* Jesus’ last word from the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30), means that my life could begin. Jesus’ last word over creation will cause every knee to bow before Him in recognition that He is God (Philippians 2:9–11). Jesus’ last word about Adam’s earthly life was His first words to Adam in Heaven, “Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matthew 25:21). “Jesus has the final say” produces the hope of eternal life, which makes life on earth meaningful but the ultimate purpose for living; there is something, therefore, much greater to live for.

Adam lived that way too. Paul affirmed the Colossian church in his epistle, stating,

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people—the faith and love

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that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel (Colossians 1:3–5, NIV).

Adam had an amazing faith in what God alone would do. Adam loved all people—just as they were. I believe he lived this way because when he trusted Christ as Savior and Lord, the reality of Heaven was his hope. I want to be known that way too. What is such a loss to me is equally a gain for Adam. He is living in the presence of Jesus—his hope fulfilled. Adam is fully alive but I am broken-hearted as I await to be reunited with my son.

I'm not alone in experiencing loss and feeling broken-hearted in the death of loved ones. The apostle Paul wrote to a suffering church about the truth of Christ-followers' experience with death, loss, and grief. "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep [have died], *that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13, emphasis added, ESV). Our grieving with hope is not wishful thinking. Our questions about the afterlife may cause fear but Jesus responded to this very issue when he was talking with His disciples at the Last Supper. In one of His last words to His best friends and followers He comforted them with these words:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (John 14:1–3, ESV).

Jesus' words contained a description of where we will be after death. When Jesus described this place, He deliberately chose com-

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mon, physical terms (house, rooms, place) to describe where He was going and what He was preparing for us—this is our first clue to what Heaven will be like. Heaven is a real, tangible place and able to be experienced in ways we know today. We can grieve with hope because of the reality of Heaven. We grieve with hope because we will be reunited in resurrection with our Savior and our loved ones. We grieve with hope because “Jesus has the final say.” Jesus has the last word!

Jesus’ last word is Adam’s first work. Adam is living and active in Heaven. I picture Adam, energetically welcoming those who have died after he did—his papa and abuela, and other friends who have died. As his father, I know I will see Adam again—the Adam I know and remember as the passionate young man, full of life. This is not just my hope; this is a statement of faith.

As you read this book, you may not be able to claim the faith Adam had. For some, the grief you feel is too much to process still. My hope is each of the following stages Debbie and I had to work through and process over years and tears will become a pathway for you in your journey with grief. Ultimately, to all who read this book, may the truth that Jesus has the last word, be both a caution and the ultimate hope for you. Live in the shadow of grief as this is not the end of your story.

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SECTION 1

ENCOUNTERING GRIEF

For some of you, grief is an “old acquaintance.” You have dealt with loss on multiple levels, many times. However, each loss is different and will cause you to grieve differently. This section is meant to help you reconsider the most recent encounter with grief, desiring to give you an expanding capacity to grieve with hope. To the rest of you, grief is an unwelcomed addition to your life. You were not expecting the loss, you are not ready to grieve as deeply as you are. For you, this section is meant to give you some basic understanding of the chaos you are now experiencing, providing you a lifeline of hope.

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CHAPTER 2

THE SUDDENNESS OF GRIEF

If I am honest, June 7, 2022, was one of the best days of my life. We were celebrating my wife's birthday at Disneyland with our daughter Aimee, her husband and our granddaughter, and our youngest son Mfundo. I bought a Father's Day shirt for Adam as he would soon be welcoming his first child with his wife. I remember a distinct feeling of God's graciousness and blessing. It's head-spinning how fast you can go from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows.

Some storms come with warnings, earthquakes do not. When an earthquake hits, even small ones, there's a moment where you stand frozen; the ground moves but you do not. You're trying to understand what is happening. Losing a loved one is similar in many ways. It's sudden. It's disorienting. We have no chance to prepare ourselves for what is to come. We don't get to say goodbye. We are frozen. We are

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confused, not able to fully understand what just happened. In an instant, our lives as we know them come to a sudden and painful end. We can't even begin to think of what the new life will be.

The last time I saw Adam was a great day. He came down with his truck to help me with some errands. In return, I treated him to lunch and a movie. I have fond memories of that pizza lunch and the Marvel movie. When we said goodbye, we hugged each other and drove off in separate directions. I could see his truck turn onto the freeway. It reminded me of the last scene in the movie "Furious 7," of the Fast and Furious franchise, when Paul Walker's character drives off as a loving honor to the actor who passed away during the filming of the movie. Looking back, it was an ominous impression that still haunts me. We were supposed to see Adam and his wife in a week to celebrate Father's Day and then a few weeks later we expected the birth of his daughter. I did not expect what came instead. I was not prepared, nor could I have been.

Even those who grieve the death of a loved one after a long-term illness experience the suddenness when death finally comes. Even then, we don't know when that final breath will come. While there may be relief that someone's physical suffering on earth has ended, there is still a suddenness of the new reality we find ourselves in. My dad fought cancer for two long years of prolonged deterioration, but even then, I did not expect the phone call with the news he'd passed. I rejoiced that my dad was in Heaven enjoying new life, but the fact that I would never sit beside his hospital bed again was suddenly thrust upon me.



Debbie's Journey

My last memory of Adam was the same day he came over to help his dad with his errands. He was leaving our home with Dave to

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go to lunch and a movie, and I gave him a big hug and kiss. The high of celebrating my birthday and anticipation of celebrating my son becoming a father felt like all was right where it should be. I don't freeze in an earthquake like some do, I react and get loud. On that day, June 8, when we received the call, I began to wail and cry out in the deepest pain and despair. At the same time, I felt the presence of Jesus, and I felt my heart and guts were removed from my body. His presence led me to cry out to Him in my pain!

The fragility of life brings about a fear that the suddenness of grief confirms. We may say, “Any day I wake up is a good day” or “we don’t know how much time we have on earth”—but most of us live as if we are invincible. We never think of death, especially the young people among us. Therefore, when death unexpectedly comes, the suddenness of grief is an earthquake to our soul, our relationships, our wellbeing, and our life.

THE SUDDENNESS OF GRIEF AND ITS IMPACT

Grief is an intense emotional reaction to loss. I’ve always heard of grief coming in stages: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and finally acceptance. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, developed this model from interviews with terminally ill patients coming to terms with their own impending death, not to describe the process of grieving the death of a loved. Missing from this sequence in grieving death is the ability to truly “bargain” as I will never see Adam again this side of Heaven. However, I found I was still bombarded by the various feelings, all at the

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same time. I ricocheted against my overwhelming sadness, to denial, to a moment of acceptance, right back to sadness, then to anger, and round and round it went. I was the pinball in the machine. In the suddenness of grief, we are consumed with sadness as the emotional expression of our denial that the worst has occurred. We sit in the sadness reflecting all we have lost in the passing of our loved one. The primary role the loved one played in your life will be the first loss that you grieve. When a spouse passes away, the widow has lost their lover, companion, friend. When a parent passes away, the child has lost their protector and role model. When a child passes away, the parent has lost “what might have been”—all the potential happenings that will no longer be.

THE IMPACT OF PRIMARY LOSS

In the suddenness of grief, these primary losses create deep sadness. The physical reactions, which adds stress to grief, are often unseen so perhaps it is best to consider grief to be an iceberg. As with an iceberg, we only see a small fraction of what is really there. Using this analogy, the expressions of grief we see are the crying at a funeral, the absence of engagement in normal daily routines. However, “under the waterline,” what we don’t see, is all the stresses grief is causing: the tightness of the chest, the feeling you can’t breathe, feeling isolated, the feeling of guilt that perhaps more could have been done, the sleepless nights, the lump in your throat that never goes away. These are just some of the physical reactions to the suddenness of grief as you begin to realize how life has changed.

THE IMPACT OF SECONDARY LOSS

The completeness of this life change is due also to the secondary losses, which create paralyzing fear within us. Secondary losses are what the loved one gave us besides their presence. Things that impact

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our ongoing life. Like the widow who loses her primary financial provider, she loses more than just an income. Other secondary losses of a spouse could include:

- Loss of identity
- Loss of support system
- Loss of long-term financial security
- Loss of intimacy
- Loss of confidence
- Loss of faith
- Loss of parenting partner
- Loss of dreams for the future

The list could go on. Death has stolen what could have been later and what is necessary now. This loss of stability creates stress that cripples us, especially when combined with sadness of our loved one's absence. On the Holmes and Rahe stress scale, the death of a spouse is 100 points.² All these secondary losses increase that number, making us prime candidates for illness and mental health breakdowns.

No one realizes how much they lost when their grief begins. It evolves over time. Your first thoughts may be, "How will I make it?" referring to some of these secondary losses. Other losses will become much more apparent as the days go on. This prolongs our sadness and makes working through the grief difficult because it feels like each new realization thrusts you back to the beginning. The sudden-

² The American Institute of Stress, "The Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory," Stress.org, accessed October 1, 2025, <https://www.stress.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Holmes-Rahe-Stress-inventory.pdf>.

ness of grief is like the amputating of a limb; you no longer have the use of it, and it takes a lot of time to learn how to live without it. The suddenness of grief is also like a wave on the beach that crashes on the sandcastle you were building; what is left behind looks nothing like the structure you had been working. So, how do we live without them?

HOW TO LIVE AFTER THE LOSS IN THE SUDDENNESS OF GRIEF

BREATHE

Just try to breathe. When that terrible news comes, your breath will be stolen from you. There will be tightness in your chest. Your mind is so consumed trying to understand the unthinkable that it forgets to tell your lungs to breathe. So, breathe—slowly—intentionally. Breathe. There is more to do than just breathe, but my purpose is to help you survive this moment, and to do that you must start with breathing.

PRAY

I want to encourage you to focus your mind in these first moments of loss by saying “Breath Prayers.” These are short prayers that you can say in one breath. “God help me.” “God save me.” “Jesus!” These prayers will help with two things. First, they’ll make sure that your breathing is steady and deliberate. Second, they’ll focus your eyes on God. Only with your eyes set on Him will you begin to find the right posture of dependence you will need in the coming days, weeks, months, and years.

EMBRACE

You probably found yourself wailing and screaming, Debbie did, and this normal emotional response to sudden grief is understandable. However, this emotional response can also lead to hyperventilation (breathing too much). When a wave hits the sand, it is called a “shore breaker” and the impact is as devastating as it sounds. When grieving suddenly, this is the extreme emotional wave that you must endure and then prepare for many more to come. Therefore, as the first emotional wave begins to recede, you must begin to change your posture to one of embrace. Embrace is not acceptance, at least not yet, but readying yourself for what is inevitable and out of your control. This is where Breath Prayers can help you steel yourself to endure the continued waves of grief as you realize the full brunt of the loss.

REACH OUT

Have you noticed that when little children play in the ocean waves, they are holding onto someone else. They know the waves are too much for them to handle on their own. The suddenness of grief must be handled the same way—reach out to someone. The most instinctive movement when you hear tragic news is to collapse; the body cannot handle the emotional weight of what it just heard. The second instinctive body movement is reach for someone else. You grab their shoulder; throw your arms around someone; reach for a hand. Even if you do not want to be touched, and that is ok if you don't, you will need others to emotionally lift you up. Who will you reach out to in that moment?

For many people, family members will be the primary source of emotional strength we will rely on. However, due to current society norms, many of us do not live close to family and you will need someone who can be at your side quickly. Debbie and I called Jake and Shelli in that terrible moment. We call them our “five-minute

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friends.” The reason for that name is these are friends who will drop everything and get to us within five minutes. When we told them the news of Adam’s passing, Jake and Shelli came immediately over to the house. Shelli hugged Debbie and did not let her go. I was in shock and could not receive the physical support Jake was offering but he began to care for me in other tangible ways. Jake and Shelli drove us the hour’s distance to where Adam was. The whole time all I could do was silently say breath prayers. Jake made sure I had water to drink. Jake and Shelli stayed with us, by our side, for the rest of that day and night. They had plans, but they cleared their calendar to be physically with us in those first sudden moments of grief.

Who are your “five-minute friends”? Who did you reach out to? If you are reading this and cannot name someone other than your immediate family members who would be your “five-minute friends,” I would strongly encourage you to invest time to develop those types of friendships. There will be other people who can help you in the moments of grief: people from your church, a sports team you play with, neighbors who live close by. These people may not be relationally close enough to be able to drop everything to be with you, but they can be present with you over the next season of life. You are the one who will decide what parts of the journey with grief you will allow other people to be with you. However, you may realize the hard way that many people are not ready or able to be present with someone in intense grief and will withdraw rather than seek to comfort. Invest time now into various relationships to increase your network of support, because when the next wave of tragedy crashes into you, you will need someone to hold you up.

CONSIDER WHAT YOUR LIFE'S FOUNDATION IS BUILT UPON

After a severe storm has passed, television cameras record and share the totality of devastation caused. Broken trees, damaged houses, displaced lives. All those descriptions could apply to your life when you lose a loved one. When you survey the devastation, it feels like everything is destroyed. Jesus tells a story of a severe storm in Matthew 7. The story is about a storm that impacts two different men in two different ways. The “foolish man” who has built his house down in the riverbed, on a foundation of sand, had his house destroyed in the flood waters. However, Jesus says of the “wise man” who had built his house higher up on the rock, “the rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock” (Matthew 7:25, NIV). In my naivety, I used to think the wise man’s house escaped all damage, however after the passing of Adam, I have a different perspective. The storm was severe. The rain pelted. The winds beat. The house stood because of its foundation, but there was no doubt damage was done to the house. I can now picture the roof may need to be repaired; the windows have been blown out. In the tragedies of life, you too will observe damage, but the house—your life—can still stand because the foundation is solid!

The point of Jesus’ story is to consider what are you building your life’s foundation on. Those who practice the teachings of Jesus in their daily lives have built their foundation on a solid rock. Notice the foundation is comprised of what you do now in your daily life: the spiritual routines of Bible reading and prayer, the friends you are invested in, and the spiritual community you gather with. Debbie and I practiced these spiritual habits before Adam’s passing, and we continued these spiritual practices daily after Adam’s passing. Our foundation was built on the solid rock of Jesus. You will read throughout this

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journey in the shadow of grief that our lives being dependent upon Jesus is a constant theme. Grief has challenged our faith; that is why I say the house, though built on a solid foundation, now has damage to deal with. Debbie and I have had our faith in God tested and we came through this tragedy still believing God is good and loving, but not always gentle with us and He did not promise to make life fair. The suddenness of grief challenges us to surrender to the sovereignty of God, however I will save that discussion for a later chapter. For now, please know God is the one who is with you and was with you when the suddenness of grief came crashing upon you.

FOR THOSE WALKING ALONGSIDE THOSE WHO ARE GRIEVING

Some of you are reading this book to help others through tragedy. Here are a few practical ways to love them well through the beginning phases of the shadow of grief.

GRIEVE

When someone you care for suddenly experiences a traumatic loss, your natural first reaction will be to respond with an urgency to *do* something to help. It is a good and compassionate response, but it may not be the best action. Instead, grieve with them. This loss has “sucker punched” you too. This loss has taken you by surprise and you need to grieve as well. What is worse about your situation is the pressure you put upon yourself to help alleviate the pain of the situation. When Adam passed away, many people were overwhelmed with grief: the youth of Adam’s ministry and his church, the churches where I had served and was serving at the time, his soccer team, his college roommates, and our large extended family. All these groups

felt a need to help, but it became overwhelming as they all contacted me at once. We must be careful not to overwhelm the person who has lost a loved one. The best help we received were simply the long, silent hugs from people who were grieving too. We did not need a lot of words, although some well-timed and thoughtful texts and emails were especially encouraging. The best thing about those texts and emails is I could go back on my own and re-read them. In each of these examples, the people allowed their grief to guide their response to us.

WAIT

For those walking alongside someone suddenly grieving, the best response to the suddenness of grief is to wait, wait for the other person to initiate the hug, to initiate the conversation. Be present but be silent. Be present but wait in prayer. How grateful I am as well for those in the initial days who simply prayed for us. I was sent a picture from our church on the night Adam died; it was simply a scene of fifty-plus people who spontaneously gathered at our church to pray for our family. I don't know who or how this prayer time was organized but that was the best response my church could give us. Be visible and available, but wait for the person grieving, to reach out to you.



Debbie's Journey

Many have good intentions. In those good intentions, some shared their own past experiences with grief; they wanted me to know that they too know my loss. Those good intentions are not necessarily wrong, but they resulted in words shared that were in poor taste and very bad timing. Please don't share your own story of grief with the one who is grieving and in pain. I only share this out of experience. I have learned many lessons of what not to do

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and say with someone in the deep pain of loss. I have also learned that for someone like me, the journey in grief and the processing of pain can take a bit longer to reemerge back into public. I needed longer than Dave to stay away from groups of people than he did, and that worked best for me. Everyone's journey with grief is different and therefore don't feel like you know someone else's journey.

CARE FOR PHYSICAL NEEDS

If you must do something, focus on the physical needs that are present. A simple example is to organize meals for the family. I got the news of Adam's passing right before lunchtime and our family did not feel like eating for hours, but late in the afternoon, when I finally felt a twinge of hunger, food was there—easy to eat food, finger sandwiches, fruit, and lots of cold-water bottles. This was a gracious gift of love. Churches organized “meal trains” but the best meals were gift cards to Door Dash and Grubhub, which allowed my family to order what we wanted, when we wanted it. A well-organized “meal train” will have one person as the main contact and will leave a food cooler outside the house for people to place the meals in. This allowed us to maintain privacy and receive a phone text message from the one contact person when the food arrived. Other physical needs that will arise in time are arranging play dates for any children impacted to give them a brief respite from the grief, picking up family members from the airport, and doing the yard work. In all these situations, you are meeting a need that the person impacted by the suddenness of grief does not have the mental bandwidth to think about.

SPEAK CAREFULLY

One last word to those of you walking alongside someone experiencing the suddenness of grief, be careful with the words you say. The best thing you can say is, “I’m sorry.” Let silence communicate your love. Too often our words add more pain to the grieving heart. “Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on a wound, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart” (Proverbs 25:20). Cheerfulness around those who are grieving is like ripping away someone’s coat on a cold day or pouring acid on a wound. To help, here are seven statements that many think will help, but rarely do in the initial stages of loss:

Seven statements NEVER to say:

- “*You’ll be ok*”
- “*At least...*”
- “*It’s for the best...*”
- “*I know how you feel*”
- “*Keep a stiff upper lip*”
- “*You should*”/ “*You shouldn’t*” (*don’t give advice*)
- “*God doesn’t give us more than we can handle*”

A good rule to follow is to let those who’ve lost be the pace setter of talking: don’t talk more than they do. To help you with this, remember to WAIT—ask “**W**hy **A**m **I** **T**alking?”

The suddenness of grief demands our attention. It brutally interrupts our “regularly scheduled programming” for tragedy and chaos. In these first moments of grieving, take heart—the journey has just begun, but you are not alone. In the next chapter, we will discover who is with you as you live in the grief.

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CHAPTER 3

THE RANDOMNESS OF GRIEF

THE CRY OF WHY?

This is not fair. My mind could not comprehend the words I just heard. “I think Adam died” was what my daughter-in-law said but I honestly thought she meant Adam was just in distress and there was still hope. When her sister called to confirm Adam’s passing, my world began to spin. My mind cried out to God, “What just happened?”

I found myself trying to understand what happened, but I ended up giving God a list of reasons why this should not have happened at all. Adam was a youth pastor, a young married man with a child about to be born. I was a lifelong pastor. I had lived rightly as best I could. Why would this happen to us? This did not make sense.



Debbie's Journey

In the moments of hearing that my son was in some type of distress I knew in my gut that what I would hear next would be even worse. I did my best in that short moment of scrambling to get my things together and get in the car to drive with my husband and teenage son to where Adam was, thinking "I better hear good news!" Then Dave's phone rang, and he didn't even say a word and I knew just watching his face "He's GONE?" What? How?

I hit the ground bending over crying out in the loudest cries of pain I have ever felt. My heart felt as if it leaped out of my body and I couldn't breathe, I cried out to Jesus. The next thing I remember is asking Jesus to be with Adam and to help me.

When Dave could finally get me off the ground, we realized we needed help, we needed to leave immediately to get out to be with Adam's wife. We called our friends Shelli and Jake—I knew they would come, and they were at our place within five minutes to drive us the 60 miles to their apartment. That drive out to Adam was horrendous as my brain couldn't comprehend that this happened. All I knew is that Adam was gone, and I was worried about his wife and their baby. I had to call our daughter Aimee, and she was already on her way to Adam's apartment. So were my close cousins who abandoned a vacation to come hold us.

In my head I knew we would be the last to arrive being the furthest away, though the chaos we encountered was still not what I had ever hoped or expected it to be. That is all I can say without too much detail of when we arrived—because all in all it was the biggest nightmare for me, and I was in such disarray that I could barely focus on any conversation. My brain was so clouded and all I wanted to hear was that my son didn't suffer. A medic could only

tell us that it seemed as if it was instantaneous due to no trauma being found, but I could never get an answer as to why this happened?

On the “outside,” Adam appeared to be a healthy, energetic, active young man with his whole life ahead of him. I could not see the ticking time-bomb inside him, that weak blood vessel in his brain that was about to burst and instantly take his life. The randomness of grief did not allow me to prepare for what was to happen next.

The only aspect of grief that is worse than the suddenness of grief is its randomness. Suffering, loss, and grief do not follow a prescribed formula. While some illnesses or dire consequences have a logical connection to a past behavior, the randomness of grief hits without warning. The unannounced crashes through the “front door” of our lives like a car swerving off a road and into an innocent home. The victims are enjoying life as it should be for them until they are forced to deal with tragedy and mayhem with no preparation. The randomness of grief is the second emotional hit after the suddenness of grief, and causes us to cry, “Why?”

If we are honest about our practical system of beliefs, each of holds to a version of Karma. We expect good things to happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. This is how life usually operates in general terms. However, the randomness of grief implies that at times, more often than we care to admit, bad things do happen to good people. This challenges our faith system, and, for the Christian, we question the sovereignty of God. “How could a loving God allow this?”

JOB'S STORY

Which brings us to the story of Job... The story of Job begins in Heaven, with God pointing out the faith of Job. Satan claimed Job only obeyed God because God had blessed Job with wealth and health, so God allowed Satan to inflict suffering upon Job to test Job's reason for faith. Job had his large stock of animals stolen, and all his farmhands were killed. His house was destroyed, killing his children ... ALL in the same day.

Yet in the midst of suffering Job still praised God: "And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.' In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:21–22). Later, Job contracted a terrible case of boils from head to foot. And as he sat in misery scraping his running sores with broken pieces of pottery, the only comfort and advice he got from his wife was, "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). "But [Job] said to her, "You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive [trouble]?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips" (Job 2:10, ESV).

Finally, Job broke and instead of blaming God, Job cursed the day he was born (Job 3:1–3) and asked a deep question, "Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in? For my sighing comes instead of my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. For the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me" (Job 3:23–25, ESV). Essentially asking, "Why is life given to those with no future, to those who God has purposed to live in distress?"

Job could not understand why God would allow such suffering. "Only grant me two things, then I will not hide myself from your face: withdraw your hand far from me, and let not dread of you terrify

me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me” (Job 13:20–22, ESV). Job in his suffering begged for two things: relief from his suffering, and God’s presence so he could get answers to a reason for his suffering. Job wanted to know “why?” We are the same. We can accept the hardship if we have a reason that explains it cause. This would allow us to predict it, anticipate it, and perhaps even prepare ourselves emotionally and spiritually for the suffering. To be caught off guard—that we could be surprised by suffering that seems random—terrifies us!

The main portion of the book of Job is a series of discussions in the form of poems between Job and his friends. His friends still held onto the idea of retribution—that God is just, and the world is fair, therefore Job must have done something very wrong. They even accused him of hypothetical sins they assumed he’d done, but each time Job defended himself. Job was on this emotional roller coaster: at one point trusting in God and the next moment doubting God’s goodness. Finally, Job couldn’t handle the randomness of his suffering any longer and demanded to meet with God.

This demand from Job brings us to chapter 38. Curiously, God had not been seen since chapter 2. God did not have a direct role during Job’s crisis even though Job had been desperate for an explanation from God. However, after the series of discussions with Job’s friends concluded, God spoke, “Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm” (Job 38:1, NIV).

Job’s life felt like an emotional and spiritual storm, yet God used a physical storm as the backdrop for His divine presence. This nature scene reminds us that the power of God cannot be controlled by human intentions just like the powerful wind of a tornado in uncontrollable. This chaotic scene humbles Job. While the randomness of grief had given Job a “case” against the power and sovereignty of

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God, the power of the storm reveals how hollow and superficial those arguments were. God continued to address Job:

Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” (Job 38:2–7, NIV).

God told Job to prepare for His perspective. God was putting Job on notice that Job’s thinking and rationale was wrong. The randomness of grief had led Job to ask God, “Why?” and to demand answers to the deep question of grief. However, God pointed out that Job was asking to know God’s plan without having true knowledge about the nature of life. Life has an intelligent design that gives it a sense of order, but that does not equate to a fairness of experiences. We demand life be fair; we seek to implement laws and policies that create a sense of fairness for all people. However, a difficult reality to accept is that life is never fair. God’s plan was not to give everyone equal opportunities in life but to restore all people to Himself through the unique situations He allows each to be placed in. God gives each person these opportunities as He “marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him” (Acts 17:26–27, NIV). Notice this implies each person’s opportunities would be different from another person as their appointed times and places were different, but this would not prevent someone from seeking God.

Life is not fair as not everyone has the same opportunities: some would have more, some less opportunities in life. Yet, life does not have to be fair for people to come to God. What appears random to us—the course of our life’s events—is not random to God. God marked out times, ordained boundaries; God has a plan for your life and that allows for the suddenness and randomness of grief. God was preparing Job to understand his position in life and that the randomness of grief is not something Job could understand.

As you read the complete interaction between God and Job, you will notice God does not tell Job about the heavenly challenges from Satan. This is the most frustrating part of Job’s story to me. There was a reason Job went through the suffering. It was not random but an intentional test of his faith. Yet, God never revealed this to Job. But does knowing the cause of the suffering make the situation any better? I don’t think so; it’s like you have an itch, but once you scratch it, you begin to feel the itch in many more places. I think to know the suffering was the result of Satan’s inquiry would not diminish the randomness of grief, as it would just create more questions. Therefore, God does not explain why the suffering happened but instead God took Job on a virtual tour of the universe to give Job a broader perspective.

The first question God asked Job was a rhetorical question: “where were you?” (38:4). Where were you when I created the world, the oceans, and the sun? God pointed out the great details in the universe, things we see every day but don’t understand.

“Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it?” (Job 38:12–13, NIV).

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“Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no one lives, an uninhabited desert, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass?” (Job 38:25–27, NIV).

God asked Job if he even understood the complexities of the world. God asked Job if he could control nature’s forces?

“Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God’s dominion over the earth?” (Job 38:33, NIV).

From Job’s point of view—it looked like God was not just, but God’s perspective is so much bigger. God is interacting with the dynamics of the universe in ways we can’t understand. This is the unknowable way of God considering all the complexities of the universe when He makes decisions.

Job didn’t have an answer for God—but humbly learned to accept his life as it was.

Then Job answered the LORD: “I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer—twice, but I will say no more” (Job 40:3–5, NIV).

The Hebrew word Job used here means, “of no weight.”³ Job, in the presence of the majesty of God, confessed insignificance. Job never learned why he suffered, but he was able to live in peace and in fear of the Lord. David Guzik points out, “The different tone was not

³ Strong’s Lexicon, “H7043 – qālal,” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h7043/kjv/wlc/0-1/>.

because Job's circumstances had substantially changed. He was still in misery and had lost virtually everything. The tone changed because while he once felt that God had forsaken him, now he felt and knew that God was with Him."⁴ Job had experienced the promised presence of God in difficult times, and Job responded to all that God had shown him:

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?" Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you (Job 42:2-3, 5, ESV).

Job's focus was no longer on receiving an answer to his suffering question, but his focus was on God, whom he trusted to know what He was doing. The power of Job's story is that God does not answer the question of "Why Suffering?" but rather refocuses upon the "Who?" Who is worthy to be trusted? *Who is with you* in the suffering. Only God is! When Job experienced the fullness of God, he had no more questions, he humbly realized that the randomness of grief does not eliminate God but rather shines the spotlight on the truth that God transcends our circumstances.⁵ Job confessed that he had a basic understanding about God, which left him asking questions for God to justify himself; but now he had come to know God, and that was all he needed (Job 42:5). Job's final words to God were

⁴ David Guzik, "Study Guide for Job 40," https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/job/job-40.cfm.

⁵ Jerry L. Sittser, *A Grace Disguised Revised and Expanded: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* (Zondervan publishing, 2021) 101.

his repentance and humble surrender to God (Job 42:6). This was the beginning of Job's restoration in life after grief.

THE RANDOMNESS OF GRIEF'S IMPACT ON US

I was going to label this section “Understanding the Randomness of Grief,” but then I realized that is the exact issue with “randomness”: it is unexplainable, there is no understanding it. Therefore, the impact of the randomness of grief upon us is more complex. Unlike the suddenness of grief, which takes its toil upon our physical, mental, and emotional systems through stress, the randomness of grief impacts our faith support system. The randomness of loss and suffering makes it difficult to accept the situation as part of God's will, but as we saw with the purpose of the story Job in the Bible, the randomness of grief and suffering doesn't have to diminish our faith in God.

James the apostle looked back on the life of Job as an example to follow. “Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11, ESV). This word steadfastness can also be translated “patience”; however, this word does not describe a passive waiting but an active endurance. In the context of the Greek text, it is the quality that helps you finish a marathon. The root word in Greek means *to remain under*.⁶ It has the picture of someone under a heavy load and choosing to stay there instead of trying to escape.

⁶ Strong's Lexicon, “G5281 – *hypomonē*,” <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5281/kjv/tr/0-1/>.

It is not easy to remain in the grief. We want to quickly escape it, but that will stifle our healing process and dishonor the one we love. By choosing to be steadfast, we learn more about ourselves and who God is. As James said, it was through remaining steadfast that Job saw a greater depth to the work of God in the world and understood the full character of God. Job learned the mystery that in the randomness of grief, he could experience God's compassion and mercy. What a combination to feel at your darkest moment. I cried out for God's mercy. I could often barely breathe out, "God give us mercy." In the mysterious work of God, I can look back now, a couple years removed from Adam's passing and see the compassionate and merciful hand of God protecting us from further pain. I cannot describe the events because I believe in God's mercy, He shielded us so we could remain steadfast in the little strength we had in ourselves as He was compassionately carrying us along. One of the greatest choices you can make is to allow yourself to be cared for and carried by God.

I learned that I have a choice of how I will respond to the grief. It did not feel this way at first because grief had robbed me of my normal operating system: how I think and feel in normal situations. We thrive in an ordered world. Even those whose life resembles "chaos embodied" still have a standard routine they follow. You most likely sleep in the same bed every night, on the same side of the bed and in the same position (I'm a side sleeper myself). If you or I were to spend the night in a different bed, we probably would not get as good a night's worth of sleep because it is an unfamiliar bed, but I bet you still slept on the same side of the bed as you normally do and in the same position (as best as possible). Order. Structure. The familiar. All these characteristics help us move through our day with as little stress as possible. We don't have to overthink these decisions because we know what we enjoy and what works for us. The randomness of grief severs the familiar. Suddenly it takes great mental energy to make a

Living in the Shadow of Grief

simple decision like what should I eat when I eventually do get hungry. The known has become the unknown and that scares us. The ability to choose how we will respond in the grief is challenged by a flood of emotions, fears, and hormones stimulating our brain and body's "fight or flight" mode. But as difficult as it may be to make, we still have a choice.

I live by the beach and have found great comfort by staring at the waves pounding the shoreline. I have learned I cannot stop the waves, but I can learn how to surf. That is my choice. I can surf the wave; I can choose to jump the wave; I often choose to turn my back to the wave and let it crash over me. The waves will still come but I will always have choices that I can make. While the randomness of grief may impact me emotionally and spiritually, I can choose how I respond. Job chose to remain steadfast in his faith in God. Job's endurance of suffering produced an integrity in his relationship with God. He would be able to say to Satan, if he knew the whole story, "I don't follow God just because He gives me good things ... I follow Him because He is God." What will you be able to say because of how you choose to respond to the randomness of grief?

FOR THOSE LIVING IN THE RANDOMNESS OF GRIEF

ALLOW YOURSELF TO GRIEVE HONESTLY

Do not feel like you need to move on quickly to accepting the loss. For us to "grieve with hope," we first must grieve and not just hope. However, too often Christians feel they are slighting God by feeling the pain, questioning God's judgment, or not desiring to praise God for blessings. Before Debbie and I were finally able to return to wor-

DAVE & DEBBIE KEEHN

ship God with our church family (we had been absent for ten weeks), I wrote the church a letter...

DEAR CORNERSTONE FAMILY,

The Cornerstone Family is truly a family of families! Debbie, Mfundo, and I have felt extremely loved and cared for by you all over the past few months. Thank you to all of you for your prayers, cards, flowers, meals, gifts, and words of compassion. We realize many of you are grieving alongside us, shedding tears for our family and for our church.

We still deal daily with the shock of our son Adam's passing. We know God is still good and in control, and we look forward to seeing all that God will be doing through this difficult journey through a dark valley.

Therefore, as we re-engage with you at church, please know we want to be there, even if we may seem distant at moments. We are worshipping with you, even if we are not singing. We love you, even if we are not able to hug you at this time.

I (Dave) look forward to leading and teaching you what God has been teaching me during this season, even if it may be delayed for now. To this end—when you see us, instead of asking “how are you?”—just tell us, “I'm glad to see you” or “I'm praying for you.” We are not able to answer that question but will still welcome your intentions to show your concern and love.

Living in the Shadow of Grief

The intent of this letter was to inform our church of how to best understand and love us. Notice the permission we were giving ourselves: we were going to attend a worship service but not sing, be with people but not give hugs. I was the teaching pastor of the church, but I needed to be honest about my grief and not try to mask it with false joy. We were going to take the time we needed to grieve, even grieve in public. You need to give yourself permission to do the same; take the time you need to experience the fullness of grief so you can heal.



Debbie's Journey

I only knew how to grieve by doing what I normally did before our loss. I continued to read Scripture and began to focus on learning how to lament in my mourning. I also found great comfort in reading books and learning from others who knew of or experienced similar loss. I especially felt that I needed some counsel in the way I was grieving, which was very different from others in my family. My grief kept coming at me like rough ocean waves, giving me few moments of relief in these turbulent times. I found my ultimate comfort came from the time I was able to have with my Savior in solitude. I had this time before our loss, and I know that my time with Him is where I feel heard and known.

PRAY THE PSALMS OF LAMENT

God's inspired truth includes worship poems, i.e. psalms, that are difficult to understand. These worship psalms were written by men who were in danger or in pain. We call these Psalms of Lament. They are God's way of helping us work through the question of suffering and hardship. They are meant to be sung in public worship at the temple and prayed in private. These prayers of lament are im-

portant because the Bible never answers why God allows suffering, which causes us to question God's justice, even God's character. The structure of a psalm of lament is very specific and guides a worshiper through confessing both the pain of life as well as trust in God. There are five parts to a psalm of lament: a summary of the problem, an explanation of life's painful or overwhelming circumstances, the request for change or relief, a confession of trust in God to provide that deliverance, and finally a renewed vow of praise. The confession of trust in God keeps this prayer from becoming a pity party and instead refocuses the worshiper upon God, enabling the person to continue in faithfulness to God.

Psalm 13 is a powerful psalm of Lament that I prayed over and over in the most intense season of grief.

*How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?*

*Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.*

*But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me*

(Psalm 13:1–6, NIV).

Living in the Shadow of Grief

King David wrote this psalm in a time of despair and discouragement. I identified with this psalm of lament because I was wrestling with the randomness of grief and the deep sorrow in my heart. I wondered how long I had to stumble around in the darkness and wanted God to give me relief (the request of verse 3). In my prayer time, I kept repeating the breath prayer “I trust in your unfailing love,” the confession of trust in this psalm of lament (verse 5). I could not rejoice yet, but I was trying to daily look for the goodness of God. This was my renewed vow of praise (verse 6): God is still good, and I will bend my will to acknowledge that, even if in my pain it was difficult to admit. In my study of the Psalms of Lament, I found that one-third of all the psalms in the Bible are laments. This tells us God is okay with us pouring out our pain to Him as He seeks to comfort us. Praying the Psalms of Laments does not make life instantly easier or better but this practice does place our hearts in a position of trust in God, which is the first and best position to be in when dealing with the randomness of grief.

FOR THOSE WALKING ALONGSIDE THOSE WHO ARE GRIEVING

When you see someone grieving, you will experience a natural reaction to provide comfort. However, in this attempt to encourage the brokenhearted, don't try to stop them from expressing their pain or rush them to get “over” it. Don't try to “fix them.” It's uncomfortable to be with someone in deep grief but you need to sit in the pain with them. Remember, Job's friends gave amazing comfort as they sat with him in silence for those first seven days. It was only when they opened their mouths and tried to reason with Job, seeking to explain away the pain, that they inflicted more pain upon Job. In fact, Job said to his friends after their first round of speeches, “I have heard

many things like these; you are miserable comforters, all of you!" (Job 16:1-2, NIV).

We should all take seriously God's rebuke of Job's friends at the end of the book of Job. As God restored Job, He said to Eliphaz, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has," (Job 42:7, NIV) and calls their words of comfort to Job "folly" (verse 8). God only forgave the friends when Job prayed for them. What a rebuke! The good intentions of the friends to rush Job out of grief and into recovery was foolishness in the sight of God and worthy of punishment. May we not be as foolish before the Lord and simply sit with those we love who are grieving.



Debbie's Journey

Dave and I are now being asked by others how they should help their loved ones in their own grief and loss. This is something I take very seriously because we have experienced both sides of it the good and bad. Do not ever feel something needs to be said other than "sorry for your loss," "thinking & praying for you," or "I love you." These are the best statements and will always be accepted and heard. People in grief do not want to listen to your experience. I once got asked how I was doing by someone who had experienced loss, and I answered by saying, "I am in very deep pain." I was crying as I answered them, but they could not handle it. They couldn't be around me in my grief and pain, so they turned and left without saying a word, not knowing that they had made my grief worse. Please handle with care those around you who are grieving.

Living in the Shadow of Grief

Please listen to two final warnings: don't make promises you can't keep (i.e. if you need anything—just ask...). While you truly want to do what will be needed, the reality is your life will most likely return to normal in a few weeks, when the real needs start appearing, and you will not have the time to meet the requests of the grieving person. Many friendships have ended as those in grief quickly learn who will keep their promise and can be relied upon for help and who only gave them pity.

Lastly, don't try to explain God if the grieving person is angry with God—God will reveal Himself to the grieving heart in due time. This was the mistake of Job's friends; they were trying to find a spiritual reason for the suffering and loss Job had experienced. Instead of simply sitting with Job, quietly praying for Job, they tried to explain the way of God in our lives in the limited ways they understood. Please do not give into that same temptation. Allow God to be the one who brings the ultimate comfort. Be present. Be available. Be praying. Be quiet.

The randomness of grief is a challenge that will never be understood but it does not need to be. While we may never be able to understand the *why* of the loss, we can be assured of *Who* is walking with us in our journey in the shadow of grief. God is present with us. This will be the focus of the next chapter.

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Grief is a shadow that never fully goes away. It changes you, interrupts your plans, and reshapes your future.

For those carrying loss, and for the friends and family walking beside them, the question becomes: How do you keep living when life will never be the same?

In *Living in the Shadow of Grief: Enlarging Your Capacity to Grieve With Hope*, Dave and Debbie Keehn share about the sudden loss of their son, offering a vulnerable yet faith-filled perspective for anyone facing the long road of sorrow. This book is not about giving answers or formulas; it's about helping you understand how grief reshapes life and how, with God's presence, you can enlarge your capacity to live with hope. It is both a testimony and a guide, walking with you through the weight of loss and inviting you to:

- **Encounter grief honestly**—face the suddenness, randomness, and questions that loss awakens.
- **Respond with grace**—learn practical pathways for the first days and months when simply breathing feels impossible.
- **Live with a new reality**—embrace practices that help you carry a broken heart while finding strength for each day.
- **Grieve with hope**—discover how gratitude, friendships, legacy, and Heaven can enlarge your capacity to keep living faithfully in the shadow of grief.

Whether you are walking through loss yourself or standing beside someone who is, this book will help you see that grief may change you, but with God's grace, it does not have to defeat you. Even in the shadow, there is a way forward, and there is a hope that holds.



Dr. Dave and Debbie Keehn have spent over 30 years investing in the church and the next generation of ministry leaders. Dave serves as pastor of Cornerstone Community Church, senior chaplain for the Orange County Fire Authority, and chair of the Christian Ministries department at Biola University's Talbot Seminary. Married since 1992, Dave and

Debbie are parents to Aimee, Adam, and Mfundo, and grandparents to Ava and Kinsley. After the loss of their son Adam, they launched the Adam Keehn Foundation to support and mentor young youth pastors, continuing their shared legacy of hope, faith, and ministry.

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