

Jan Johnson writes with beautiful transparency, inviting us to journey alongside her as she tenderly reminisces about her personal moments of grief. This book is sure to ease hurting hearts and encourage those navigating seasons of deep sadness and loss. With an incredible ability to lean hard into her faith amidst some of life's most painful hardships, Jan offers rich inspiration and hope-filled wisdom—beyond the pain. Like a best friend who has “been there,” Jan’s comforting relatability propels readers toward better, stronger, joyful tomorrows.

—**LaTan Roland Murphy**, author of *Courageous Women of The Bible*

Janet K. Johnson has written a heartfelt devotional to help guide you through your own grief process. This devotional shares the author’s experiences through life and how she saw the Lord’s hand in her every day experiences. As a marriage and family therapist who works with clients with PTSD and trauma, I can share that this devotional has touched me deeply. I have found it completely comforting for me to remember that the Lord is always with us. This is a lovely book to help those who are on their own journey of grief.

—**Amanda Booth Bice**, MA, marriage and family therapist,
Heart of the Matter Counseling

Tragedy, loss, and grief are no strangers to Janet. She leads her readers by example in how to walk the path of sorrow and still experience peace, knowing that we are not alone in our journey and there is hope. This beautiful work is anchored in the truth that somehow, beyond our understanding, God will use the worst of circumstances for our good.”

—**Lori Heagney**, professional counselor, Summit Wellness Centers

Grief: The Unwanted Journey is an inspiring and well-crafted book, a “thirst-quenching” journey that will satisfy readers by helping them to understand and process their own grief. This book is a deep well for the journey we all have or will experience. It is based on Scripture with wonderful “God Moments” and is a must read for all brothers and sisters in Christ.

—**James Bice**, Major, USAF retired, Stephens Minister,
and Life Coach

GRIEF

the Unwanted

Journey

GRIEF

*the Unwanted
Journey*

Reflections to Help Navigate Your Way
through Tragedy and Loss

JANET K. JOHNSON

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Grief: The Unwanted Journey

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To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who has not only traveled with me through times of sorrow and joy but has gone ahead to prepare for my final homecoming.

To my family, who has been a source of support, encouragement, and love during times of joy and sorrow, as well as during my times of learning to trust and never give up. Rick, Mark, David, James, and Rebecca, thank you.

To the saints mentioned in this book whose lives forever touched mine and which I now share through the stories from my memories.

My brother Ken
My father and mother
Our son David
My friends Debbie and Linda
My father-in-law and mother-in-law
My brother-in-law Ron

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Introduction



Have you ever read *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst? If your days don't seem to be all they should, it might just help. I don't want to spoil it for those of you who haven't read it, but let's just say that Alexander gets gum in his hair, has trouble at school, falls in the mud, gets soap in his eyes, bites his tongue, feels as though no one listens to him, and decides it would be better to move to some far-off place. There have been days—many days, in fact—when I haven't even wanted to get out of bed. At least Alexander did that!

I heard a statement one time that reminded me not only of Alexander's days but also about the many ups-and-downs I have faced in my life. Even as I have written the reflections for this book, I have relived some of the moments that caught me by surprise—and not in a good way. Tragedy and loss have touched my life, just as they probably have yours. To live is to experience loss. These losses may come from the deaths of loved ones or having to move away from those you hold dear. Sometimes loss comes by way of a divorce, financial reversal, termination of a job, or having to let go of future hopes and dreams. There are those who encounter loss because of aging or health issues. So many mornings we get up to find that the day feels hopeless and, if it didn't start like that, it certainly might end that way.

The statement I referred to went like this: “God promised that everything will be okay in the end. So, if everything is not okay, then this is not the end.”

Well, if everything is going to be okay, then maybe there is hope for each day!

My prayer is that the reflections in this book will help you in the struggles you face as you journey through loss and grief. Whether you use the reflections in order or by topic, based on how you are feeling on any particular day, makes no difference. Grief is a journey, and each person’s journey in grief is different. Give yourself grace and time for the process. Invite God into each day and know that you do not face any day alone.

On really bad days I have discovered that it helps to return to a place in my mind that brought me a sense of peace and hope. For me that was as a girl, wading in a clear, gently flowing stream. Notice I said stream, not raging river. For me, there was something about being in the gurgling water that was refreshing. Like the currents of water that flowed around the protruding rocks, my way around them became obvious due to the currents. Those memories remind me that there are safe ways around the rocks (life’s tragedies and losses) that appear and that, even if I fall, it is possible to pick myself up again and keep on wading.

As I look back, there have been many rocks I have had to navigate on my journey thus far. As a young girl I always felt that I wasn’t quite good enough. I knew my parents loved me, but I always thought that if I got better at whatever I did, they might love me more. As a teenager I was attacked on the way home from school—an experience that replaced my trust with fear. Later, in college, I faced classes that challenged my faith and my ability to continually do better, and as the result of graduations, I experienced inevitable separations from others I cherished. As

a military wife, that scenario replayed itself over and over. Either people were leaving before we left, or we moved away.

The crushing tragedies, however, began when one of our sons turned out to be what James Dobson labels a “strong-willed child.” He became our prodigal. This child, who was loved deeply, created disunity and heartache in our family. It took years and much love to help him understand how deeply that love went.

Then there was my brother, my only sibling, who was murdered. There are no words to describe the depth of that pain. That was followed by my father’s lingering death from cancer. Years later, our prodigal returned home and was killed in an accident—eight months after he was married and just when it looked as though his life was beginning to shine. After personally struggling to make sense of all that had happened to that point, my mother joined other loved ones who had gone before her to their eternal home.

Amid these losses came the death of a mother-in-law, whose surgery was intended to bring her new energy and life but instead ended her life. She was later joined in eternity by my father-in-law, whose journey through Alzheimer’s stripped him of his life. Then one day we learned that my brother-in-law had committed suicide, leaving two children and several grandchildren.

I have not mentioned a very close college friend who died much too young, a prayer sister and best friend who suffered a stroke and, though still living, has continued to experience lingering side effects. There are others. We can all identify with many losses. These are mine.

What I have learned through all these tragedies and losses is that God has been there. I couldn’t always see Him or feel

Him, but I've been assured of His presence because I know He holds me so closely that He catches my tears (Psalm 56:8). Not only has He been there, but God has been the stream into which I have wandered for the refreshing of my soul. Seeking His comfort and strength has allowed me to know that, in the end, all will be okay.

Perhaps that calls for bold print: **in the end, it will be okay.** That is God's great promise for those who love Jesus as their Savior. The end will be better than okay, because Jesus has overcome all our earthly struggles, and has a place for each one of us that far surpasses anything we can imagine.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

(Revelation 21:3–4)

Season One

Tragedy Begins My Unwanted Journey



Life After Death? Yes!



Once too frail to do anything for herself, she now sat up without any help. Her arms, which had been so weak she had not been able to use them, were now raised outward from her body and upward toward heaven as though she were reaching for something—or Someone. Her eyes, which had been dim and steel gray, now had a twinkle, as though she were seeing something she had anticipated for a long time. In an instant my mother had gone from someone who seemed lifeless lying in bed to someone sitting up with an expression of anticipation and total peace.

My mother's death, which came moments later, offered me the gift of watching a deeply spiritual woman transition from her earthly life to her heavenly home. It was a moment in time when my understanding of life after death took on a meaning I had never truly grasped before. While I could not see what my mother saw, I knew she was seeing things in the heavenly realm and was being welcomed home. Even at her death, I beheld life.

As Christians, each year we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. The Scriptures reveal that Jesus talked and walked, taught and encouraged His disciples *after* He had defeated death. He was, without question, alive!

While losing loved ones is never easy, the knowledge that they are experiencing life beyond this earthly world can bring incalculable comfort. We can trust in the power of the

resurrection and know that the one(s) we grieve are now whole and at peace, experiencing joy beyond measure.

Sometimes, in *our* pain, it is difficult for us to be happy for the one who has gone before us to life eternal. Living without the physical presence of someone can be agonizingly hard. But recognizing that the great cloud of witnesses (including our loved ones if they knew Jesus as Lord) are pulling for us to be comforted and at peace can help us live more fully, even while we grieve.

I can only imagine my mother saw Jesus, and other departed loved ones, among the great cloud of witnesses that welcomed her as she transitioned from this earthly life. What I do *not* need to imagine is that *there is life beyond death!* That is the eternal promise to which you and I may cling.

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.
(Hebrews 11:1)

Prayer:

God of eternity and hope, I come today thanking you for the gift of eternal life. Help me to sense your presence amid my grief and to trust you with my future. Amen.

Reflection:

How do you envision eternity? What are the ways you are reaching out to the Lord now?

God's Forever Promise



It was a Tuesday—Tuesday, September 16, 1975. Within me was a new life about to be born! I was in labor with our second son, David, who arrived in the afternoon and weighed in at 9 pounds, 13 ounces. As I held him in my arms, counted his tiny fingers and toes, and felt his full head of dark hair, I sensed a wonderful joy. I just wanted to hold him close.

Twenty-six years later our precious David was involved in an accident that he did not survive. When we received the call no parent ever wants to receive, memories of his impish grin, his ability to debate almost any issue, his love of fishing and the outdoors—and his love of family flooded my shattered heart. The depth of a parent's agony at losing a child for which she has cherished hopes and dreams cannot be measured or put into words. David's accident could not be explained. We will never know its cause. The pieces of my heart that were torn apart that day have mended, but the scars of the loss will always be present. While I can no longer hold him close, his life has touched mine forever.

Sudden, unexpected death has a life all its own. Often, conversations are left unfinished. A final word of love may go unspoken. Dreams of the future for the one who has died are left unaccomplished. Questions go unanswered.

In times like this we cannot have all the answers—nor do I think we are supposed to. That's where our faith takes over and

we trust. Scripture tells us that in our eternal home there will be no more sadness or pain because death has been overcome by victory through Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:54; Revelation 21:4). I am forever thankful for Jesus, who died for David. Even as David was being resuscitated in the helicopter on the way to the hospital, Jesus was preparing to receive him into his forever home, where one day I will hold him close again. That is God's promise.

*“But your dead will live, LORD;
their bodies will rise—
let those who dwell in the dust
wake up and shout for joy.”
(Isaiah 26:19a)*

Prayer:

God, you are the giver of all true hope. Even when I do not understand, when life seems unfair, I know I can put my life in your hands, because of your love for me and my loved ones. Thank you for the blessing of life. Amen.

Reflection:

Think about some of the stories others tell about near-death experiences. How does this give you assurance and hope?

