

GOD HELP ME, I'M GRIEVING

*Finding Healing
After Loss*

KATHERINE B. BARNER
— Foreword by Lee E. Skinner —

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DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to the women upon whose
shoulders I stand:

my mother, Norma J. Broussard,
my grandmother, Katherine E. Rines, and
my great-grandmother, Jennie V. Paul.

Because of them, I am.

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Phew! After nearly a year of thinking, praying, writing, stopping, arguing with God, starting again, arguing with God some more, tears, early mornings, and late nights...I did it! This has been one of the most challenging experiences of my life. Trust me when I tell you, writing a book and doing it the right way is not for the faint hearted. There is no way I could have completed this project without the love and support of some amazing people God has placed in my life.

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To my Aunt Ann, thank you for being my safe place when I felt the walls of grief closing in on me.

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FOREWORD



“I need to make an appointment to sit on the burgundy sofa.” This is code for, “God is up to something in my life and we need to talk about it.” Katherine Barner whom I affectionately call “K.B.” has been a friend and confidante to Marcia and me for the past fifteen years. In that time she has shared with clarity and captivating humor her journey from Orange, TX; time spent at Spelman College in Atlanta, GA earning her bachelor’s degree; transitioning to North Texas to complete her master’s degree in Counseling; and later forming a family in Houston, TX. Those years have included challenges that stretched the boundaries of her professional training and tested her Christian character. She has provided comfort to others, but as life would have it she has needed comfort of her own...hence, “the burgundy sofa.”

Comfort at its core means to make one feel better. Conceptually, it is the desire of most of us to not only give but receive as well. The hope or expectancy in life for better outcomes is often overshadowed by outliers of disappointment. To that end, the ever present shadow of comfort aligns with the need to have our balance restored. The

ideal is to bring the practical application of and desire for comfort into a symbiotic relationship. In *God Help Me, I'm Grieving*, Katherine demonstrates how to move the needle from ideal to reality with grace and poise.

The saying, “a picture is worth a thousand words” certainly applies in this case. To personally witness an individual go through the various trials of life that God allows and come out of them with His glory in mind is admirable. A collage of moment to moment snapshots is what Katherine has vividly portrayed in this book.

In a day when many are propounding a gospel of ease and pleasantries, Katherine has given helpful insights to counter that false perception. Her experiences reveal what we can do to manage and survive the symmetry of hope and despair.

In her consistent pursuit of God and His word she is a vital member of our church's teaching ministry. That has been enhanced by her studies at Grace School of Theology. Many individuals of our church family have benefited personally and privately from Katherine's wise, professional counsel.

I believe her words that extend from God's word must be read and applied by anyone who needs to find or wants to give healing after loss. For those grieving right now, prepare yourself to be restored. For those wanting to provide hope, consider this a necessary and valuable resource.

Do it for His glory!

Lee E. Skinner, Pastor

Good Shepherd Baptist Church

Houston, TX

INTRODUCTION



I'm so excited you've decided to embark on this journey. I may not know you, but I've been praying for you. That may sound a bit weird, but as I worked on this project, I prayed for every person who would hold this book in his or her hands. And since you're reading this, that includes you. Now let me share why I started writing at all.

I've counseled countless individuals over the past twenty years whose lives have been shattered by grief in one form or another. With each encounter I discovered a common thread running through the stories of loss. That thread was the search for understanding and healing—understanding of a complex construct with its unsettling twists and turns and healing from its relentless grasp.

I've also had my own run-ins with grief. In the majority of those instances, I was clear on what to do and how to move forward. After all, as the mental health professional, I was supposed to have it all figured out, right? But something changed after my parents died. All the years of experience seemed to fly out the window, and I found myself

grasping to make sense of my life. Thankfully, with those years of experience and a strong faith in God, I at least knew where to start. But don't think for a moment my road was easy. Here's what I realized: if I struggled as much as I did to find healing after my own loss and I *knew* all about grief, how in the world was everyone else getting through this unimaginable pain?

That's my why. I got tired of watching people flail in the wind with no clear direction on how to heal. So, I want to provide a resource for you as you seek to understand your loss. I want to give you hope that healing really is possible. I suppose the biggest lesson I want you to gain from this book is that your grief is valid. No one gets to tell you it isn't, and no one gets to tell you how or for how long you should grieve.

I've included parts of my own story throughout the book. I'll be honest; I didn't want to add those for a couple of reasons. The first, because I'm a super private person and I keep things pretty close to the vest. The second, because this isn't about me. It's about you and your journey toward healing. But I realized sharing a bit of myself might just help you see exactly what I'm trying to convey, that what you're experiencing is normal and you are not alone.

In each chapter you'll find practical information, portions of my personal experiences with loss, and plenty of scripture references. I've also included an entire chapter to address dealing with your grief during the holidays. Because let's face it, holidays can be tough to navigate without the people or things that are no longer with us. There is

space at the end of each chapter for you to take notes or record your thoughts. Make sure you have a pen and highlighter handy to capture points that jump out at you.

Let me say upfront; grief can be messy and complicated. Finding healing after loss can be hard work. There will be roadblocks and setbacks along the way. There will be times when you'll think the reality of healing is nothing more than a cruel joke. And that's OK. Just keep moving ahead because what I can also say is this, the pain along the way will pale in comparison to the joy you'll experience once you've made it successfully through the process. How do I know? Because I've traveled the road ahead of you and made it safely to the end of my journey. That means you can too!

God bless you as you heal.
Katherine

CHAPTER 1

Unmasking Grief

No matter who you are, where you live, or what you have accomplished, at some point in your life, grief will become a reality for you. It is an inevitable part of living, loving, and acquiring. Grief is often misunderstood, misinterpreted, and its impact minimized. It is, however, a normal human response after any significant loss. It is a process you must move through in order to discover healing and contentment.

Grief comes in many different forms and is expressed in many different ways by each of us. Dealing with grief can be challenging when you do not fully understand its many layers. Having a clear understating of your grief is key to adequately addressing and healing from its effects on your life. There are a few important characteristics vital to obtaining this outcome. I refer to these as the “Three P’s of Grief.”

Grief Is Perfectly Normal

People often view grief as an abnormal emotional response when in fact it is the exact opposite.

The emotions experienced with grief do not mean you are crazy or weak. The experience of emotion related to your grief does mean you are a normal human being who is in need of healing from your loss.

When grief is treated as an abnormal occurrence, moving forward can pose a significant challenge. Judgmental and unsympathetic responses by well-intended family and friends who do not understand the grief process can hinder your ability to realize true healing. It is important for you to understand, and respect the journey you are on even when others don't. It is not uncommon for those within the Christian community to cause one another to feel that because of your professed faith in Christ you shouldn't grieve. In reality nothing could be farther from the truth. You may hear the following phrases:

- "You should be over that by now."
- "It's been long enough. You need to just move on."
- "Don't cry; you know he or she is in a better place."
- "God wouldn't put more on you than you can bear."

While each of these statements may have some truth to them, it's important as you move along your journey toward healing that you reject the sentiments of others who view your grief as out of the ordinary. I experienced this firsthand several years ago after my father's death. It had been about three weeks since his passing, and I was

still experiencing the sadness that came with the finality of that relationship. While talking with my husband one day about how I was feeling, he said, “It’s been three weeks. You should be better by now.”

Now, let me be completely honest and say my follow-up response was not one that was pleasing to God! And yes, it took more than a few minutes for me to calm down and cool off. But, once that happened, it was crystal clear to me my husband was not trying to send me into orbit. The reality was he simply did not know how to handle my grief in that moment. It made him uncomfortable because he could not fix it.

More often than not, people forwarding these “grieve faster” ideas are in fact having difficulty dealing with your grief and therefore would like for it to end as quickly as possible. The comments you hear regarding moving on, not crying, or placing a time limit on your tears have very little to do with you and far more to do with those around you. After all, grief isn’t pretty. It’s hard, painful, and can be downright ugly at times.

As difficult as it may be for family and friends to witness your grief, do not apologize for it. It is normal. And it is an important component of your healing. You have the right to grieve in your own way and in your own time.

Grief Is a Process

I don’t know anyone who enjoys pain and suffering. On the contrary, when pain arrives on the scene, almost everyone I know wants it gone as quickly as possible. The

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same is true with grief. Unfortunately, it just doesn't work that way. Healing from grief is a process. This is probably the most difficult aspect of grief to understand.

A common question from people dealing with grief is "how long does it last?" Simply put, it takes as long as it takes, and the timeframe is different for every individual. I know that's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth. There are some common stages you will move through as you heal (we'll cover those in detail later). But those stages are not as simple as one, two, three, and you've arrived at healing. It's a bit more complicated.

Have you ever broken a bone or had surgery? Aside from the initial pain, the healing process can be equally as painful and uncomfortable. My son broke his wrist while skating many years ago. (Side note: I still cringe anytime he tells me he's going skating, and he's an adult now.) At any rate, that broken wrist necessitated a trip to the emergency room, consults with doctors, referrals to an orthopedic specialist, temporary cast, permanent cast, x-rays, pain medication, and months of healing and rehab.

There were times when my son was in no pain at all and struggled to understand why he had to continue wearing the cast. At other times, he was in terrible pain, and the mere thought of moving his arm brought him to tears. No matter how much he wanted to wish it away, he had to go through the process in order for his bone to heal properly. Had we removed the cast prematurely, the likelihood of causing additional damage would have increased. Healing had to take place from the inside out.

What's my point? There will be times when you are in so much pain that it is hard to think about anything else. Other times, the pain will be far less intense, and you'll be able to go about your daily routine seemingly unscathed. Your healing from loss has to take place from the inside out as well.

The grieving process includes everything that occurs in order for you to release the past and move on to new experiences. That does not mean you forget the past. It does mean you are able to move forward with life minus the crippling and at times debilitating pain of your loss. It is common for grief to take at least a year or longer. It takes a full year from the time of your loss to cycle through all the "firsts." The holidays, birthdays, special events, and other important dates that will be experienced for the first time without whomever or whatever is no longer part of your life.

Grief Is Personal

Your movement through the grief process will not look like anyone else's. Each individual has his or her own style of grief. Unfortunately, differences in grieving styles can cause tension in relationships when they are not respected. Arguments can ensue. Harsh words are exchanged. And bitterness is born. While it is true of our culture that we have some institutionalized ways of grieving, we must also bear in mind there is no one right way to grieve. Each individual experiences and expresses his or her loss in a way that is unique due to personality, belief system, support system, and situation.

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It's worth noting that there are some differences in the grieving styles of men and women. These differences can help you better understand why an individual may be responding in a particular manner following a loss. However, keep in mind these are gender-specific *tendencies* only and do not mean these are behaviors every man or woman will exhibit during the grief process.

Men typically

- process their grief silently and alone,
- have difficulty allowing themselves to cry,
- need to blame someone or something for their loss,
- have a need to fix the pain of others,
- feel a sense of helplessness.

Women typically

- process grief in conversations with family and friends,
- cry easily,
- focus on understanding why a loss occurred,
- feel a sense of hopelessness,
- want to know how others are feeling.

My husband and I are prime examples of these differences in grieving styles between men and women. Two years after our marriage both his father and my father passed away. Their deaths were a mere two months apart, almost to the day. My father-in-law had been ill for several months, and my husband had spent nearly every week traveling between our home in Texas to his father's home in Alabama helping care for him. On the contrary, my father passed away suddenly with no indication that anything was wrong.

My husband's response to his father's death was typical of many men. He had little desire to share his feelings, cried maybe twice, and was focused on taking care of business. Following the funeral, he wanted to get away from everyone as quickly as possible.

My response to my father's death was very different. The tears seemingly would not stop flowing, and I found great comfort in sharing my pain with trusted friends. Following the funeral, I was overwhelmed with grief but again needed to be around trusted family and friends for support. In both circumstances we were each very much aware of the other's needs and responded to each other based on those needs (minus that one glaring failure I mentioned earlier, for which he quickly redeemed himself). As a result, we were able to move through the grief process in our own way and in our own time.

Just as the grief process is personal for adults, it is as well for children and adolescents. It can be difficult to gauge how children or adolescents are really feeling and if they are processing their feelings of loss appropriately. Adults bear the responsibility of providing a safe and supportive environment for young people to heal from loss. One very important factor to bear in mind is the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development of each child. Every child is different and should be allowed to express grief in his or her own way and in his or her own time.

Young people may

- have some difficulty verbalizing their feelings of loss,
- develop behaviors that may be deemed inappropriate by adults,

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- demonstrate anger toward whomever or whatever they believe is responsible for their loss,
- feel the need to become a caretaker for others,
- have difficulty concentrating on tasks of necessity (i.e., school, homework, etc.).

Remember to be patient and open to adjusting to their individual needs. At every stage of life and development, whether adult or young child, it is vital to remember there is no right way to grieve and there is no wrong way to grieve. There is only *your* way to grieve.

