

# Healing for the Holidays

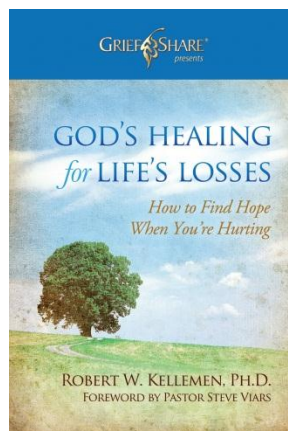
by

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**Developed from Materials in**

***God's Healing for Life's Losses:  
How to Find Hope When You're Hurting***



## **Healing for the Holidays: Part One—A Promise**

Holidays... They're "supposed" to make us think of words like thankful, merry, and happy. We're "supposed" to associate holidays with a phrase like "Home for the Holidays!"

But... what if a loved one is not coming home this holiday season? What if death, divorce, or distance causes us to associate the holidays with words and feelings like depression, anxiety, and stress?

Holidays can create fresh memories of our loss and a fresh experience of pain and grief. The thought of facing another holiday season causes some people to wish they could sleep from the Wednesday before Thanksgiving until January 2. Loss is always hard, and at the holidays it can seem crushing. The thought of being in a festive mood for two months is just too much to bear when our heart is breaking.

### **A Note to Those Who Are Happy at the Holidays**

Some of you might be thinking, "Bob. Don't be such a downer. I love the holidays!" Awesome. I have no desire to diminish your joy.

However, your experience is not universal. For many of your friends, neighbors, co-workers, and relatives, the holidays are bittersweet. So keep reading...if not for yourself, then for others—so you can empathize with and care for those who need *healing for the holidays*.

### **A Promise to Those Who Long for Healing for the Holidays**

Jesus understands. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). I include this verse every time I autograph a copy of *God's Healing for Life's Losses*.

In this one verse, Jesus gives you permission to grieve and permission to hope. Jesus is real and raw, just like life can be. He is also honest and hope-giving. His words, His life, death, and resurrection, give us healing hope.

The Apostle Paul offers the same message of sorrow mingled with healing. Sharing with Christians who had lost loved ones, Paul speaks of Christian grief—grieving with hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

In Part One, I want to follow the lead of Jesus and Paul by giving you:

- Permission to Grieve: Hurting During the Holidays
- Reason to Hope: Healing for the Holidays

In subsequent parts, I want to journey with you through biblical, practical, relevant ways you can grieve and grow, heal and hope.

### **Permission to Grieve: Hurting During the Holidays—It's Normal to Hurt**

It's normal to hurt. When you see the empty chair during Thanksgiving dinner, it's normal to hurt. When you unwrap the ornament that was your loved one's favorite, it's normal to hurt. When you usher in a new year apart from someone you love dearly, it's normal to hurt.

Loss and separation are intruders. This is not the way it's supposed to be. God designed us for relationship—it is not good to be alone.

Jesus did not just talk about loss and grief, He experienced it. When Jesus saw Mary weeping over the death of her brother Lazarus, he was deeply moved (John 11:33). Coming to Lazarus' tomb, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

On the cross, experiencing separation from His Father, Jesus cried out. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

If the perfect, sinless God-man Jesus wept over loss, then it is normal to hurt. If Jesus agonized over separation from His Father, then you have permission to grieve.

Paul did not just talk about loss and grief, he experienced it. Imprisoned and separated from Timothy, his son in the faith, Paul writes, "Night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I might be filled with joy" (2 Timothy 1:3-4).

Toward the end of his life, almost totally alone, Paul recalls, "At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:16).

Memory is a great blessing—and can be a great curse. The memory of relatives separated from us by death, divorce, or distance is a legitimate source of great pain and a legitimate reason to hurt.

### **Reason to Hope: Healing for the Holidays—It's Possible to Hope**

It's possible to hope. In the midst of Paul's grief over being deserted and betrayed he also said, "But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength" (2 Timothy 4:17).

At another point of candid grief, Paul shared that he "despaired even of life" and "felt the sentence of death" (2 Corinthians 1:8-9). Yet, he also knew, "This happened to us that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9). With Christ you have reason to hope for healing for the holidays. Loss is not final or fatal. It's possible to hope.

Jesus, forsaken by His Father because of our sin, was raised from the dead by His Father. Even more (if you can say "even more" about the resurrection!) He is now seated *at* the right hand of the Father! Reunion. Relationship. Oneness.

Separation is not final with Christ. It's possible to hope because our God is the God who raises the dead. He can resurrect your hope.

### **The Rest of the Story**

You may be thinking, "That helps to know that I have permission to grieve, but what do I do with my hurt during the holidays?" And you may be asking, "I'm glad for the promise of healing for the holidays, but how do I find it?" Great questions. We'll journey together in Parts Two-to-Ten to find God's answers for life's losses.

### **Pausing to Reflect**

Shakespeare said, "Give sorrow words." What words would you give your sorrow over your hurt during the holidays? What glimmers of hope and healing are you seeing this holiday season?

## Healing for the Holidays: Part Two—Give Sorrow Words

C. S. Lewis famously wrote, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” Loss always hurts, and holidays are like a megaphone magnifying that pain. Or, for our generation, like the volume control on your iPod—holidays can intensify and heighten the pain.

In Part One, we saw Jesus and Paul giving us permission to grieve. Now we ask, “*But what do I do with my hurt during the holidays?*” Shakespeare said, “*Give sorrow words.*” God’s Word models that principle—we need to move from denial to candid honesty about the hurt that holiday memories can bring.

### “Don’t Talk about Him!”

I faced my first experience of the death of a loved one when I was ten. My grandfather died unexpectedly one cold, snowy day in early December. Two weeks later the extended family gathered at my Grandmother’s home for the holidays. Even as a ten-year-old, it struck me as odd that no one dared to mention “Moshe” (Romanian for Grandfather). The unspoken admonition was, “*Don’t talk about him!*”

For many reasons—spiritual, personal, and emotional—my family was uncomfortable and unprepared to talk about Moshe. Somehow the thought seemed to be, “*If we don’t mention his name, then we won’t feel the pain.*”

### The Problem with Denial

The barren Shunammite woman of 2 Kings 4 pictures for us the problem with denial. After years of barrenness, she bears a son who fulfills a lifetime of hopes and dreams. Tragically, he dies. Life has sent her two caskets: the first one—her inability to conceive, the second one—the death of the child she finally bore.

Rather than facing her loss, she keeps repeating, “*It’s all right.*” Her heart is sick, her soul is vexed, yet she keeps insisting, “*It’s all right. I’m all right.*”

Have you “been there, done that”? I have. Faking it. Pretending. But we can’t play make-believe forever.

Eventually it all spills out like it did for the Shunammite woman. She finally screams at Elisha, “Did I not say to you, ‘Don’t deceive me! Don’t get my *hopes* up.’” Denial refuses to hope ever again, to dream ever again.

Hope deferred makes the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12). Hope hoped for, received, then lost again, makes the heart deathly ill. Fragile. Needy. We hate being there, so we block it out. We deaden ourselves by refusing to hope, long, wail, or groan because groaning exposes us as the needy people that we are.

The problem is, God made us longing, thirsting, hungering, desiring beings. So we follow a trillion different strategies for deadening our desires and shutting out the wail of our soul. But none of them work.

Denial is like trying to forcefully keep an inflated beach ball submerged on the ocean floor. We can’t. Like with the Shunammite mother, inevitably the pain forces its way to the surface—only made worse by our refusal to face it.

Playing the denial game at the holidays is particularly difficult. A million different reminders flood our memories. The traditions we shared. The family pictures. The empty chair. If we're not careful we expend all our energy trying to keep that beach ball forced down, and we have little left for the loved ones who are with us now.

### **The Benefit of Candor**

Candid honesty courageously faces the pain of loss. As David does in Psalm 42:3-5, triggered by his memories of days gone by.

“My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?”

The Apostle Paul does not tell us not to grieve; he tells us not to grieve *without hope* (1 Thessalonians 4:13). He chooses a Greek word meaning to feel sorrow, distress, and grief, and to experience pain, heaviness, and inner affliction.

Paul is teaching that grief is the grace of recovery because mourning slows us down to face life. *No grieving; no healing. Know grieving; know healing.*

The only person who can truly dare to grieve, bear to grieve, is the person with a future hope that things will eventually be better. When we trust God's good heart, then we trust Him no matter what. We need not pretend. We can face and embrace the mysteries of life.

A good friend of mine provides a beautiful and powerful portrait of candid grieving with tenacious hope.

“Bittersweet is the word I use so often. My husband's empty place and missing smile are truly hard to bear. Tears come so frequently and people don't always understand how much it still hurts. My dad died in 1998 and all my and my husband's grandfathers have passed on also. I don't think I have really cried over them in years, just wistful memories and sadness. But the last few days I have totally broken down missing them! Grief is such a strange companion! But the sweetness is knowing they are all Home together with our Savior and I DO have the BLESSED HOPE of seeing them again and sharing all good times that have happened since they have left us!”

### **The Rest of the Story**

Some people may rightly counter, “But I'm not a talker.” Or, “But isn't everyone different in how they respond to grief?” Great thoughts. So some practical suggestions for “candor” will be the focus of Part Three. Just how honest should we be at the holidays?

### **Pausing to Reflect**

What words would you give your sorrow over your hurt during the holidays?

## **Healing for the Holidays: Part Three—Q and A About Holiday Honesty**

I appreciate friendships that are secure enough for “push-back.” Someone who lovingly says, “Bob, I get what you’re saying, but what about...?” Today, I want to give voice to four possible “push-backs” on Part Two: *Give Sorrow Words*. Consider these as Q/A about just how honest we should be around the holidays.

### **Push-Back # 1: “*But Doesn’t Everyone Handle Grief Differently?*”**

Absolutely. Everyone handles grief differently. There’s no one typical response to grief, and there’s no one universally “correct” path toward healing for the holidays. Healing is a journey—a personal journey with God and we all take unique twists and turns on our journey.

Your timing will be different from mine. Your way will be different from your relatives. We can’t force anyone else, or even ourselves, onto a certain timetable or a one-size-fits-all plan.

That said, good research and caring engagement with people consistently shows that “denial” is a very common initial response to grief. And initially, it can even be a grace of God that allows our minds and bodies to slow down long enough to survive the horrors of our loss.

#### *Push-Back to the Push-Back: Faith Faces All of Life Honestly*

Good biblical study reveals a clear pattern (not a universal command)—faith faces all of life honestly. That’s what candor is—a faithful facing of life courageously and honestly. On your journey of healing for the holidays, at least be aware that being honest with yourself (candor) is one signpost on your journey that you’ll want to zig and zag toward.

### **Push-Back #2: “*But Not Everyone Is a Talker!*”**

It’s absolutely true that God uniquely designed everyone one of us—we are each fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). Our different personalities, different backgrounds, different upbringings, different settings, different choices, and different losses all combine to make us unique.

So no one should ever feel, “I need to talk about this X amount.” Or, “I need to talk about this like Suzy does.” Nope.

#### *Push-Back to the Push-Back: Everyone Needs Relationship*

Good biblical study reveals that God designed us to relate to Himself, to others, and to ourselves. We need relationship. In a sense, you could picture denial as a refusal to relate honestly to your own self.

Notice something about the passage we probed yesterday (Psalm 42:3-5). David starts by talking to himself! “Why are you downcast, O my soul?”

Candor doesn’t mean you have to blurt out your deepest, darkest secrets to every stranger who walks down the street. It does mean that you would be wise to start by talking to yourself.

Allow yourself to feel what you feel. Then put words to your feeling. That’s candor.

Like David, many people (not all) find that capturing their thoughts on paper can be very helpful. We might call it “journaling.” I like to call it “psalming.” Write your own psalm of candor about your holiday hurt.

Of course, in your uniqueness, maybe you’re not a writer. So what song conveys the feelings of your heart? Or what picture, image, or artwork conveys the ache in your soul? What movie scene captures your pain?

### **Push-Back # 3: “*But People Are Clueless How to Relate to Me!*”**

Yep. Many times this is so true. And it’s one of the reasons we’re hesitant to be candid with others about our hurting during the holidays. Many people don’t know what to do after the hug. And, there’s the biblical principle of not casting your pearls before swine. So, some people are so obtuse, so lacking in empathy, that it just may be unwise to share much, if anything, with them.

*Push-Back to the Push-Back: Find at Least One Faithful Friend*

Good biblical study reveals that God designed the Body of Christ to comfort one another (2 Corinthians 1:3-9). Pray that God will give you at least one faithful friend who knows what to do after the hug. In your timing, slowly open up to your spiritual friend about your emotional pain. Others find that a recovery or support group of people with a similar loss is an excellent place to start the candor journey.

### **Push-Back # 4: “*But I Don’t Want to Be a Downer Who Ruins the Holidays for Others.*”**

That can be a very other-centered thought. It also could be a cop-out, but let’s assume it is rightly motivated.

*Push-Back to the Push-Back: Christ-like Relating to Others*

First, it’s a God-thing that you can be so thoughtful about others in the midst of your holiday hurt. That’s amazing! Second, we’ve already said that candor is more about talking to yourself and at least one other godly, caring person. So candor doesn’t require you to interrupt the Thanksgiving meal to share your deepest hurt. Third, in the long run, your candor now will bring healing hope for future holidays. Remember, *No grieving; no healing. Know grieving; know healing.*

## **The Rest of the Story**

Healing for the holidays starts with candid honesty with ourselves, but it doesn’t stop there. I noted that God created us to relate to ourselves, to others, and to Him. Holiday healing also requires honesty with God—what the Bible calls lament—the focus of Part 4.

## **Pausing to Reflect**

Which of the push-backs were running through your mind? How can you apply the push-back to the push-back?

## **Healing for the Holidays: Part Four—A Lament for Your Loss**

I've received a batch of emails in response to this series. One theme is: "*Does my holiday grief count?*" One person asked, "I haven't lost a loved one, but because of a divorce, half the holidays I don't even see my children. Is it still okay to grieve over that?" Another friend asked, "My adult kids live in Europe and I rarely see them for the holidays. Is that a reason to grieve?"

In writing *God's Healing for Life's Losses*, I wanted to communicate that *every* loss, *every* separation is a mini-casket experience. Each loss is a reminder of the ultimate loss of death. That is not to say that every loss is of the same magnitude. It is simply to recognize the reality that all loss hurts because every loss is a separation, a tearing away of what was meant to be together.

Yes, *your* loss counts. Most importantly, your loss counts to God. That's why He invites you, like He did the saints of old, to lament your loss. Let's ponder six practical principles of lamenting holiday loss—whatever shape or size your loss takes.

### **Holiday Lament Principle # 1: Getting Started Is the Hardest Part**

Many people find that the hardest part of the grief journey is simply getting started. Stepping on the path by facing your pain and hurt can be terrifying. All sorts of questions flood your mind.

*"What will I feel? Will I be able to handle whatever I feel? What if my thoughts consume me and my feelings overwhelm me? Will anyone understand? Will anyone join me? Is it worth it? What's the point?"*

But remember, it is worth it. As we learned in Part One, denial changes nothing. Denial only prolongs the inevitable. Pretending doesn't change the facts, can't alter reality. So don't beat yourself up because you're finding it hard to be honest with yourself and God. But do challenge yourself to begin the journey.

### **Holiday Lament Principle # 2: Other People May Not Understand**

One of the ironies of holiday loss is that your family and friends may think that you're the one who can't move on because you're still grieving. Often, the opposite is true. They can't move on because they've never even started grieving. They're the ones who can't even look at pictures of the lost loved one. They're the ones who don't dare to talk about the relative who is away during the holidays serving our country in Afghanistan. Don't let their fear deter you. Don't let their denial cause false guilt in you about your grief.

### **Holiday Lament Principle # 3: Be Honest with God—He Knows Everything Anyway!**

If candor is being honest with yourself about the pain you feel over loss, then lament is being honest with God about your loss and pain. Lament is facing your grief face-to-face with God.

We somehow think we're hiding things from God when we refuse to verbalize them. But since God is all-knowing, and since He knows the thoughts and intents of our heart, He already knows all that we think and feel.

The Psalmists understood this, which is one reason why there are more psalms of lament than psalms of praise and thanksgiving. Let that sentence sink in. So tell God the truth...whatever it is you are thinking and feeling.



### **Holiday Lament Principle # 4: Be Courageous—God Invites Lament**

But let's be honest, this is where grief gets very confusing for the committed Christian. We love God; we know He loves us. We know God is good; we know life has now turned bad. So we want to know, sometimes we want to scream it, "*How could a good God allow such loss!?*"

But dare we ask? Do we dare verbalize our lament to God? The Scriptures are clear—*God invites lament*. The Bible repeatedly illustrates believers responding to God's invitation with honest words that would make many a modern Christian shudder. If you doubt that, read Psalm 13, Psalm 73, Psalm 88, Job 3, Lamentation 5.

### **Holiday Lament Principle # 5: Tell God the Truth—He Cares Infinitely**

Lament demonstrates your faith in God. According to Psalm 62:8, if we truly trust God, then we'll share everything with God. "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge." The person who can't be upfront with God about loss and grief is the person who doesn't trust God. Pour out your heart to God *because* God is your refuge. When you lament, you live in the real world honestly, refusing to ignore what is occurring. Lament is your expression of your radical trust in God's reliability in the middle of real life.

### **Holiday Lament Principle # 6: Honesty with God Draws You Nearer to God**

Psalm 73 is a prime example of lament. Asaph begins, "Surely God is good to Israel" (73:1). He then continues with a litany of apparent evidence to the contrary, such as the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the godly (73:2-15). When he tries to make sense of all this, it's oppressive to him (73:16). He then verbalizes to God the fact that his heart is grieved and his spirit embittered (73:21). His lament drew him nearer to God. It did not push him away from God. "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand" (73:23). He concludes, "But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge." (73:28).

It was Asaph's intense, candid relationship *with* God that enlightened him to the goodness of God even during the badness of life. "Till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. . . . As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O LORD, you will despise them as a fantasy" (73:17, 20). Spiritual friendship *with* God results in 20/20 spiritual vision *from* God. To deny or diminish suffering is to reject dependence upon God. God wants us to make use of our suffering, to remember our suffering, to admit our need for Him in our suffering, and to rehearse our suffering before Him.

### **The Rest of the Story**

But what does God do when I am honest with him about my holiday hurt? What are realistic expectations about what happens in me and what God promises to me? Great questions—ones we'll explore in Part Five of *Healing for the Holidays*.

### **Pausing to Reflect**

Psalm 88 is a classic psalm of lament. In fact, some have called it the Psalm of the Dark Night of the Soul. What would your Psalm 88 sound like?

## **Healing for the Holidays: Part Five—Tidings of Comfort and Joy**

When we lament to God and cry out to Him when we're experiencing holiday loss, what does God promise? Does He promise to remove all grief? No, for this side of heaven that would require removing all memory of our loved one—something none of us would want. Does He promise to change or “fix” everything? No, that's not what God promises either.

When we cry out to God, here's His promise: *He comes*. He comes in His comforting presence. In *God's Healing for Life's Losses*, I defined comfort like this:

*Comfort experiences the presence of God in the presence of suffering—a presence that empowers me to survive scars and plants the seed of hope that I will yet thrive.*

### **My Personal Comfort Journey**

My Father passed away on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. It was a year later, on my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, that I began to experience God's comforting presence.

For me, comfort reflected itself in my decision not to give up on God and not to give up on ministry. I was in seminary, preparing for ministry, and secretly doubting God—doubting His goodness, His trustworthiness, His ability, or at least His desire, to protect me and care for me. As comfort came, I came face-to-face with God. We had some wild talks. We had some fierce wrestling matches.

God won. I surrendered. I was still confused about the details of life, but committed to the Author of Life. More than that, I surrendered to Him *and* was dependent upon Him. My attitude was like Peter's when Jesus asked His disciples, “Will you, too, leave me?” Remember Peter's reply? “To whom else could we go? You alone have the Words of life.”

I was surviving again, surviving though scarred. I was not and never again would be that same naïve young Christian who assumed that if I prayed and worked hard enough, God would grant me my every expectation. My faith was not a naïve faith, it was now a deeper faith—a faith that could walk in the dark.

### **Asaph's Personal Comfort Journey**

According to Psalm 73:21-28, suffering is an opportunity for God to divulge more of Himself and to release more of His strength. When Asaph's heart was grieved, and his spirit embittered, God brought him to his senses. Listen to his prayer. “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26).

In grieving we say with Asaph, “My flesh may be scarred, my heart may be scared, but with God I can survive—forever.”

Thus faith perceives that God feels our pain, joins us in our pain, and even shares our pain. In fact, faith believes that, “in all their distress he too was distressed” (Isaiah 63:9). His sharing of our sorrow makes our sorrow endurable.

Faith does not demand the removal of suffering; faith desires endurance in suffering, temptation, and persecution (1 Corinthians 10:13). Faith understands that what can't be cured, can be endured. Faith delights in weakness, because when we are weak, then God is strong, and we are strong in Him (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Grieving is a normal response to loss. However, God does not abandon us in our dark, dank casket. God, who is Light, shines His light of comfort into our hurting hearts.

### **God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen**

The traditional Christmas carol, *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* beautifully communicates the comfort we find in God's presence. The carol is about the incarnation of Christ—Christ's being born in the flesh so that He could be present with, dwell with us.

Like all true and faithful Christmas carols, *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* tells a story in stanzas—a story that progresses from Christ's birth to His death and resurrection on our behalf. The final stanza captures our Christmas comfort, our holiday hope.

*Now to the Lord sing praises,  
All you within this place,  
And with true love and brotherhood  
Each other now embrace;  
This holy tide of Christmas  
All other doth deface.  
O tidings of comfort and joy,  
comfort and joy,  
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

Our typical “tiding” at Christmas is “Merry Christmas!” The holy “tiding” of Christmas is “Comfort and joy!”

At Christmas, you may not feel “merry.” But in and with Christ, you can experience comfort (God's comforting presence). And you can experience joy. Joy is not happiness or merriment. Joy is a settled, quiet peace and confidence that God is good even when life is bad and sad.

My tiding for you this holiday season is more than “Blessed Thanksgiving,” or “Merry Christmas,” or “Happy New Years.” My tiding to you through Christ is, “Comfort and joy.”

### **The Rest of the Story**

Surviving the holidays is, for many, a pretty major goal. But...is it possible that even more could occur? Could we move from *surviving to thriving*? We'll discuss that journey beginning in Part Six.

### **Pausing to Reflect**

How could you experience God's presence in order to experience His comfort and joy this holiday season?

## Healing for the Holidays: Part Six—All I Want for Christmas Is Hope

For Christians, surviving the holidays is an admirable first goal, especially when memories of loss and separation flood the mind. However, our ultimate goal is not just surviving, but thriving. That's where healing hope enters the picture.

### Paul Tells It Like It Is

The Apostle Paul models the healing process in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11.

“We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.”

Paul begins by modeling what we discussed in Parts 1-4. He's candid and honest with himself, God, and others about his suffering. He talks fearlessly about his external suffering—the things that have happened to him, his losses and crosses. He also shares courageously about his internal suffering—his agony of soul.

But Paul doesn't stop there. Despairing of life and feeling the sentence of death, Paul clings tenaciously to the Author of life.

I'd like to ask you to stop reading. Reread 2 Corinthians 1:8-11.

- Reflect on Paul's grief *and* on his hope.
- Reflect on your grief.
- Pray for your healing. Ask for hope. Ask God for the faith to believe that a new beginning is possible—it's possible to hope, to thrive.

### Grieving and Growing

Grieving can produce growth. Spiritual emergencies can produce spiritual emergence. It's supernatural to grow.

Grief admits, “*Life is bad.*” Healing says, “*God is good—He's good all the time.*” In grief, we candidly enter the smaller *earthly, temporal* story of hurt. In healing, we enter the larger, *heavenly, eternal* story of hope.

In grieving, we're in a casket—the tomb of grief and loss. In healing, God rolls the stone away. We *celebrate the resurrection*. We trust in our God who raises the dead.

### So Heavenly Minded/Great Practical Earthly Good

“Nice,” you think. “Just another batch of platitudes: pie-in-the-sky, sweet-by-and-by, too-heavenly-minded-to-be-of-any-earthly-good!”

Not at all. In fact, biblical hope is so heavenly minded that it is of great practical earthly good.

Think about the fifth and final phase in the *world's* grieving process: *acceptance*. The goal is to face calmly the finality of loss. If it is one's own impending death, then it's a time of quiet resignation. If it is the loss of a loved one, or a relationship, or a job, then it's a time of regrouping. "Life has to go on, somehow. How? What's next?"

In Christ, loss is never final. Christ's resurrection is the first-fruit of every resurrection.

"Acceptance" and "resignation" are too earthly minded to be of any earthly or heavenly good! Acceptance can't halt retreat because it has no hope for advancement, no foundation for growth.

I refuse to accept the hopeless remedy of acceptance. I also refuse to accept simplistic platitudes. I choose to embrace Christ's healing hope. I choose to embrace the biblical truth that "it's possible to hope and supernatural to grow."

How about you? Are you clinging tenaciously to the Author of life?

### **The Rest of the Story**

Healing celebrates the resurrection by waiting on God (trusting God with faith), wailing to God (groaning to God with hope), weaving in God's story (perceiving suffering with grace), and worshipping God (engaging God and others with love, even during suffering). In our final installments, we'll learn how.

### **Pausing to Reflect**

Do you have the faith to believe that it's possible for you to hope—that not only can you survive the holidays, you can thrive during the holidays—because of Christ?

## Healing for the Holidays: Part Seven—Clinging to God’s Rope of Hope

One of the hardest parts of healing for the holidays is the waiting. Everyone else is waiting with joyful anticipation—for the family reunion, the big dinner, opening of presents. And we’re just waiting for it all to be over. So we can get back to “normal” whatever that is since our loss. That’s normal and natural—we want to survive the holidays.

What’s supernatural? What type of spiritual waiting could lead eventually to thriving even during the holidays? To healing?

### The Day of Waiting

Tony Compolo preaches a message where he repeatedly says, “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s comin’.” He’s focusing his audience on Friday-truth: the crucifixion of Christ, and on Sunday-truth: the coming resurrection of Christ. I would change the metaphor a tad because we aren’t living on Friday, we’re living on Saturday. Symbolically, life lived on fallen planet Earth is Saturday living—the day between the crucifixion and the resurrection. The day of waiting. The day that tests our trust.

You’ll never see waiting as one of the grief stages in any research study because it is not natural in a fallen world. It is supernatural. Hope waits. Hope is the refusal to demand heaven now. *Waiting is trusting God’s future provision without working to provide for myself.* Waiting is refusing to take over while refusing to give up. Waiting refuses self-rescue.

In the context of grief, waiting says, “I want to feel better. I wish things were the way they once were. But I trust God’s good heart. I know one day He will wipe away all tears. I know today He has good plans for my life ahead.”

### Remembering the Future

Waiting is rooted in the Old Testament. The Prophets promised Israel that a better day was coming, *later*. The New Testament writers develop the waiting theme when they urge us toward patience, perseverance, long-suffering, and remaining under suffering without giving in to despair (Romans 5; James 1; 1 Peter 1-2; and Hebrews 11). The Bible teaches us that in waiting *we cling to God’s rope of hope, even when we can’t see it.*

Moses teaches that we cling to God’s rope of hope by remembering the future.

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He *chose to be mistreated* along with the people of God *rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time*. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, *because he was looking ahead to his reward*” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

No quick fix for Moses. No “Turkish Delight” from the White Witch of Narnia. No pleasures of sin for a season. Why? How could he wait? He chose eternal pleasure over temporal happiness. *He remembered the future.*

Faith looks *back* to the past recalling God’s mighty works saying, “He did it that time; He can do it now.” Hope looks *ahead* remembering God’s coming reward saying, “I consider that

our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation *waits* in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed” (Romans 8:18-19).

### **Your Waiting Journey and Journal**

1. *Faith—Remember the Past*: Think back to a time when God brought hope, joy, newness, and resurrection into your life after a loss.
  - What did God use to bring about your spiritual victory?
  - How did you wait on God by clinging to His rope of hope even when you couldn’t see it?
  - How did you begin to see God differently? How did you begin to experience more of His goodness? How were you able to love Him more deeply?
  - As you found His strength in your weakness, what was God able to do through you?
2. *Love—Face the Present*: God’s timing and ours are often light years apart.
  - What are you experiencing as you wait on God?
  - What would it look like for you to rest in God right now?
  - Explore passages like Romans 5; James 1; 1 Peter 1, and Hebrews 11 that teach how to wait on God in the midst of suffering. Paraphrase their message for your life today.
  - Find a trusted, safe friend and take the step of sharing with him or her about your hopes and dreams.
3. *Hope—Remember the Future*: Hope waits.
  - What are you waiting on God for? How are you trusting God’s future provision?
  - Paul considered that his present sufferings were not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18-19). What future glory are you focusing on?
  - Read Revelation 7. How do these pictures of your future hope give you hope today?

### **The Rest of the Story**

Healing hope does not mean we pretend everything is fine. Instead, in our next part we’ll learn that thriving at the holidays means being pregnant with hope. Think about that—the pain of the pregnancy is there, but so is the joyful anticipation of the birth of new life.

### **Pausing to Reflect**

What does it look like for you to cling to God’s rope of hope even when you can’t see it?

## **Healing for the Holidays: Part Eight—Pregnant with Hope**

I counsel often with grieving people. I read a lot about grief. Articles that offer a few quick quips, three steps, or secrets to survival rarely provide lasting help for profoundly hurting people. Healing for the holidays requires God's curing truth for our troubled souls. True grief recovery demands Truth from the Author of life. Nothing is more relevant because only the Creator and Lover of the soul knows what cures the soul.

Nowhere is this truer than with holiday healing. God's Word shows us how to stay alive to life even when it tries to crush us to death. Through the Bible, God speaks to our wounded souls with words of life. As the great Soul Physician, Christ treats our labor pains by encouraging us to remain pregnant with hope. He teaches us to:

- Long fervently for heaven *and* live passionately for God and others while still on earth.

### **Loving Hope, Hope That Loves**

Paul personifies hope that loves in Philippians 1:23-25.

"I am torn between the two: I *desire to depart and be with Christ*, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and *I will continue with all of you for your progress* and joy in the faith."

Paul neither deadens his longing for heaven nor minimizes his calling on earth. Paul grieves the "not yet." He hungers and thirsts; he longs and wants what is promised, but what he does not possess. As he writes, he's jailed. Separated from all who love him. If anyone has an excuse to give up hope *and* to give up loving, it is the Apostle Paul.

But he chooses to remain pregnant with hope, to participate in loving hope, in hope that loves. He says, "I want to go home. This world is messed up. I ache for heaven, for Paradise. But I'm pulling weeds until the day I die! My grief is not excuse to ignore your growth. I'm living for *your* joy and spiritual progress."

### **My Problem with Typical Grief "Remedies"**

That's other-centered grieving and groaning. And that's why I have a boatload of problems with typical grief remedies, especially related to the holidays. In a desire to express empathy, writers on grief seem to start and stop with what we might call "self-care." "Take care of yourself. Nurture yourself. Be good to yourself. Be patient with yourself." In perspective, there's biblical wisdom in such cautions. I've tried to convey the same empathy throughout this series. But there are two pointed reasons not to stop with or focus on self.

#### *1. The Bible teaches us to focus on others.*

Enough said. While the Bible never minimizes our hurt, it always maximizes hopeful loving. While Christ identifies with, feels, and even experiences our suffering, loss, and grief, He always encourages and empowers us to take the comfort we receive from Him *and comfort others* (2



Corinthians 1:3-6). Do you long for profound healing for the holidays? Offer Christ's healing hope *to others*.

## 2. *Life teaches us to focus on others.*

Research study after research study comes to the same conclusion. Healing comes when we start focusing on others. History teaches us the same lesson. In my book *Beyond the Suffering*, I trace the amazing and inspiring legacy of the heroes of the Black Church. Despite horrific suffering and agonizing grief, men and women of the Black Church not only endured the suffering of enslavement, they moved beyond the suffering. How? By hoping in God and by loving one another—*hope that loves*.

## **Thriving—In God's Love**

Where does hope that love come from? It comes from the God of love. In Romans 8:28-39, Paul insists that even in the midst of trouble, hardship, persecution, and suffering, nothing can separate us from the *love of God in Christ Jesus*. Paul teaches that in all our suffering we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us so.

“More than conquerors” comes from the Greek word *nikao* from which we gain our word “Nike”—victors, winners, Olympic champions. Being pregnant with hope empowers us to long ardently for heaven and to live victoriously on earth. Loving hope, hope that loves, moves us *from victims to victors in Christ*.

## **On the Road to Hope**

You've just encountered another choice point on the road to hope. At this fork in the road, you can turn one direction and choose the journey of living for self. Taking that route, your pain never goes away; it's just buried beneath any number of self-centered diversions.

Or, you can choose the route of being pregnant with hope. You'll feel the pain—the deep pain of grief, of being out of the nest, of living east of Eden, of longing fervently for heaven but living in our fallen world. However, you'll experience the profound joy that accompanies living passionately for God and others. God's Spirit will empower your spirit so that you can be more than a conqueror—now!

## **The Rest of the Story**

Where do we find the *faith* to pursue *love that hopes*? We find it when we weave God's eternal story into our earthly story of suffering. Join me in Part Nine for God's wisdom from before the dawn of time.

## **Pausing to Reflect**

Do you believe that in Christ you are more than a conqueror—able to offer others hopeful love even in the midst of your painful grief?

## Healing for the Holidays: Part Nine—Cropping Christ Back Into Your Holiday Album

At Christmas, we rejoice in Immanuel—God with us. Jesus leaves heaven to pitch His tent in our neighborhood, to invade our world.

### God's Eternal Story Invades Our Earthly Story

Healing for the holidays requires that we allow God's eternal story to invade our earthly story. One of my dear friends from Uniontown Bible Church, likes to say, "*When life stinks, our perspective shrinks.*" She's spot on.

When the holidays arrive and we grieve the loss of a loved one, when we feel the pain of the miles that separate us from immediate family members, when we agonize over a divorce that pulls families in so many different directions, it's natural to focus exclusively on our pain.

It's not only natural, there is a supernatural process involved—an evil supernatural process. Just as we can use digital photography to crop anything we want into or out of our photos, so *Satan attempts to crop Christ out of our picture.*

When life stinks and our perspective shrinks, we need to crop Christ back into the picture. We need to expand our eyesight to God's eternal perspective.

### See in This Some Higher Plan

Our eyes darkened by despair, we need grace-eyes. We need to weave in another way of looking at life. Biblical weaving is *entrusting myself to God's larger purposes, good plans, and eternal perspective.* I see life with spiritual eyes instead of eyeballs only. I look at my suffering, not with rose colored glasses, but with faith eyes, with Cross-eyes, with 20/20 spiritual vision.

There's an amazing scene in *Les Miserables* where Jean val Jean, a paroled prisoner, takes advantage of a grace-filled Bishop. Stealing from him, Jean val Jean is captured by the French police. They return him to the Bishop, fully expecting him to implicate val Jean which would lead to a return to prison without hope for parole. To the shock of everyone involved, the Bishop says, "But my brother, you forgot these," and hands him two silver candlesticks.

Everyone is floored when the Bishops says, "By the witness and the martyrs, by the passion and the blood, I have bought your soul for God. Now become an honest man. See in this some higher plan." Val Jean, amazed by grace, changed by grace, then concludes the scene by singing, "Another story must begin!"

A friend of my, recounting this to me, commented. "Now everything that happens to me, I'm looking for God's higher plan. I'm setting my thoughts on things above—always wondering what God might be up to in this. For me, another story must begin—God's story that doesn't obliterate my painful story, but that gives it meaning."

### Joseph's Story: Grace Narratives

In your holiday hurt, hear Joseph's words to his fearful family in Genesis 50:19-20. "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Joseph uses “intended” both for his brothers’ plans and God’s purposes. The Hebrew word has a very tangible sense of to weave, to plait, to interpenetrate as in the weaving together of fabric to fashion a robe, perhaps even Joseph’s coat of many colors.

The Old Testament also used the word in a negative, metaphorical sense to suggest a malicious plot, the devising of a cruel scheme. Other times the Jews used “intended” to picture symbolically the creation of some new and beautiful purpose or result through the weaving together of seemingly haphazard, miscellaneous, or malicious events.

“Life is bad,” Joseph admits. “You plotted against me for *evil*. You *intended* to spoil or ruin something wonderful.”

“God is good,” Joseph insists. “God wove good out of evil,” choosing a word for “good” that is the superlative of pleasant, beautiful. That is, God *intended* to create amazing beauty from seemingly worthless ashes for those who grieve (Isaiah 61:3).

Life hurts. Wounds penetrate. Without grace narratives, hopelessness and bitterness flourish. With a grace narrative, hope and forgiveness flow and perspective grows.

Instead of our perspective shrinking, suffering is the exact time when we must listen most closely, when we must lean over to hear the whisper of God. True, God shouts to us in our pain, but His answers, as with Elijah, often come to us in whispered still small voices amid the thunders of the world.

In weaving, God heals our wounds as we envision a future even while all seems lost in the present. Through hope we remember the future; we move from Good Friday to Easter Sunday while living on Saturday. Grace narratives point the way to God’s larger story, assuring us that our Savior is worth our wait.

## **The Rest of the Story**

We’re nearing the end of our healing journey together. In the tenth and final part in our series on Healing for the Holidays, we consider worship. How can we find God even when we can’t find answers?

## **Pausing to Reflect**

How could you crop Christ back into your holiday album this holiday season?

## **Healing for the Holidays: Part Ten—The Light of the World**

Traveling from grief to growth is a long, winding road. Healing for the holidays is not a series of steps or some secret plan. More than anything, healing is relational—our relationship with Christ and the Body of Christ.

As we begin our tenth and final part about Healing for the Holidays, I want us to focus on the two options we have for healing: Christ or self.

### **Path # 1: Digging Cisterns—Pursuing False Lovers**

If we follow the beaten path, the way of the world, then our holiday hurt guides us to false lovers. Idols of the heart. Digging cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Something or someone who will rescue us from agony's clutches—or so we imagine.

God describes digging cisterns in Jeremiah 2:13. "My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

In the Ancient Near East, you had two choices for life-giving water. You could settle near a clear, pure, bubbling spring of fresh underground water, or you could dig a cistern which captured run-off water and held it in a stagnant well that often cracked leaking in more filth and leaking out water.

Spiritual cistern digging involves rejecting God as our Spring of Living Water because we see Him as unsatisfying, unholy, and unloving (Jeremiah 2:5, 19, 31). Once we reject the only Being in the universe who could ever satisfy the last aching abyss of our souls, we choose to turn to substitutes—worthless, putrid, empty, futile substitutes—cisterns.

Now what? Is that all there is?

Not at all. God offers us so much more, infinitely more—because He offers Himself.

### **Path # 2: Worshipping God—Glimpsing the Face of God**

Rather than turning to false lovers who tame your soul, you now turn to your untamed God who captures your soul. You worship God. In the midst of life's losses, *yes you can* choose worship—engaging God with love, which leads to ministry—engaging others with God's love.

"Worship" is such a common word. But what is worship really? Specifically, in the midst of grief, what does worship look like?

- Worship is *wanting God more than wanting relief*.
- Worship is *finding God even when you don't find answers*.
- Worship is *walking with God in the dark and having Him as the light of your soul*.

We must understand the truth that every problem is an opportunity to know God better and our primary battle is to know God well. Thus, if we want our holiday hurts to lead to worship, we have to ask ourselves a primary question, "*How is my grief influencing my relationship to God?*" Grief can either shove us far from God or drag us kicking and screaming closer to Him.

## Whom Have I in Heaven but You?

The Bible consistently invites us to worship God in the midst of suffering. Worship as the end result of suffering has always been the testimony of God's people.

Asaph, reflecting on his suffering, concludes, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25).

David concurs, as his suffering creates a God-thirst. "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Psalm 42:1-2).

Paul looks back upon a lifetime of suffering and says, "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:8, 10).

What these biblical writers present, the hymn writer, Katharina von Schlegel poetical states:

*Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side;  
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.  
Leave to thy God to order and provide;  
In every change He faithful will remain.  
Be still, my soul: the best thy heavenly Friend,  
Thro' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

Grief's ultimate goal is worship: exalting and enjoying God as our Spring of Living Water—our only satisfaction and our greatest joy.

## The Rest of the Story

We're at the end of our written journey, but our healing journey continues ever onward until heaven. My prayer for you is that you will not only survive the holidays, you will, in time and through Christ, thrive in the holidays as you walk with God in the dark and find Him to be the light of your soul.

## Pausing to Reflect

How is Christ leading you through a thorny path to a joyful end?

## Help for Your Healing Journey

For additional help on your healing journey, learn more about *God's Healing for Life's Losses: How to Find Hope When You're Hurting* (<http://bit.ly/bKWaP4>). Also, visit *GriefShare* for information on their small group video series *Surviving the Holidays* (<http://bit.ly/bdSP9j>).