

Appendix H

Parenting Tips & Family Devotions

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Things for Parents to Remember

When families lose someone significant, it is hard for everyone to process including children. Many times, parents and caregivers of children get caught up in their own grief and, as a result, they have little energy or time left for the children who have been impacted. At times like this, it is important for those close to the family to support and help the grieving caregiver remember their children and needs that might be overlooked.

If you are the parent grieving, ask someone who knows your child well to help you be objective about your child's behaviors and actions. Grief distorts our view of reality and, thereby, can distort our view of our children. We may want to attribute all negative behavior and emotion from the time of loss going forward to grief and this may or may not be the case. Or, we may also go to the other extreme and not see any connection to behaviors and emotions of grief.

Your child will walk through the grieving process differently than you. The pace, manner, and timing of grief may each look different. Being prepared for these differences and knowing how to identify them will be key in helping your child develop good coping skills and process grief cleanly. Some points to keep in mind:

- ❖ **Remember developmentally where your child is** (physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually). A child's brain is not fully developed until after high school, so for this reason alone, their understanding of what has happened will be different from yours, and developing as they mature. Most children have very black and white thinking. They will take our metaphorical or pictorial language literally. If you say, "God took them to be with Him in heaven." Most children will say, "Why is God mean, why would He take someone I love away?" Statements intended to be soften the impact of explaining death can create the type of false beliefs that we are trying to avoid.
- ❖ **It is okay not to have all the answers for children.** We may need to hear that again, "It is okay not to have all the answers for your children." Remember, you do not have all the answers for yourself. Your children need truth and authenticity more than explanations. Sharing your grief process with them is important for them to learn how to grieve cleanly. Be careful that sharing with them does not turn into relying upon them. They are not your sounding board, confidant, or emotional support. Some children will want to take on the role of caregiver for those who are grieving. It is important not to let them assume this role, and let them grieve as children rather than escape through false maturity.
- ❖ **Refrain from sharing details that are not age appropriate.** If the person who died had extenuating circumstances that are immoral or graphic in nature, find ways to be honest but protective of what you tell children. Give the child the general story and then let them ask the questions they have. As they are asking questions, it is okay to tell them you don't know the answer, or answer indescriptively. Sometimes children will ask the same questions over and over. This is normal, and the job of the caregiver is to provide consistent answers to the same questions. For children, this is their way of trying to wrap their minds around what has happened and may happen next.
- ❖ **Children can begin to fear that now everyone in their life may die,** or that they could die. As adults, we can see how this is an exaggeration of the actual threat of death. It is like the child who gets hurt playing baseball and then never wants to play again for fear he/she will always get hurt. But based upon the life experience of the child and largeness of grief's intrusion, this thought pattern is very logical to a child and should not be dismissed as a "silly" childish thought. Asking them questions about what they think, validating that uncertainty is scary, and reassuring that God understands are essential to helping children overcome this fear.
- ❖ **Children grieve in spurts.** Young children (ages 12 and below), will be processing grief one moment and laughing and being silly the next. This is normal, and in keeping with the attention span and information processing styles of children. Like all people (regardless of age), children can only handle so much emotion at a time, so don't

push them to grieve, let them do it at their own pace. On the day of the funeral, the child may seem remarkably good and composed, and three weeks later they may fall apart at the grocery store. Be prepared for their grief because it will likely come at unexpected times. Children tend to grieve in times that feel familiar to them and the formal ceremonies of grief that work well for adults are not always the best grief settings for children.

- ❖ **Look for physical signs of grief.** Many children will have an increase in illnesses during grief. Children's eating and sleeping patterns can change, as will as their ability to think clearly or concentrate. Everything that an adult can experience physically can also happen with children.
- ❖ **Look for behavioral signs of grief.** Common behaviors in grief for children are aggression, clinginess, tearfulness at things that they normally are not, separation issues, regression (maturity, skills like potty training, or habits like sucking their thumb), withdrawal from things they normally would like to do, or become the super-responsible child. The latter behavior is one most overlooked by parents and caregivers. It is sometimes a welcomed behavior, especially when the parents or caregivers themselves are having a hard time being responsible. It is important to not let these children assume more than you normally would. Encourage them to be a child.

“Children will generally exhibit one of three behavioral responses to changes in their lives: they will act out, withdraw, or become the responsible manager of the family. Many, including myself, think the third option is the most dangerous. The child who is acting out will get attention, if only a reprimand. The child who is withdrawn will also probably get attention from someone who cares about him. But the third child will more likely be commended for taking on adult responsibilities or excelling in school... Sometime later in life, this house of cards may well collapse of its own weight... Such a child needs someone to come alongside and give him his childhood back so that he can grow to maturity by being strengthened from the inside out (p. 25).” Judy Blore in “How to Help a Grieving Child” from *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* (Winter 1998).

- ❖ **Help your child name his/her feelings.** Children do not have the vocabulary to vocalize their grief. They cannot connect the experience of numbness, denial, sadness, anger, loneliness, doubt, fear, worry, or guilt with the words that communicate their experience. This can add to their sense of loneliness and insecurity during grief. Sharing with children about your own feelings and journey will help bring them alongside and reduce the likelihood they will get stuck in the grief process. While it is important to help children name feelings, be careful not to tell them how to feel or that they are wrong for feeling a certain way.
- ❖ **Know where the child is spiritually.** If a child has accepted Christ as Lord and Savior, this will be an important time to teach the hope that the gospel brings about death. However, this should only be done if the person who died was a Christian. If it is uncertain whether the deceased was saved, then be honest about the uncertainty but point them back to trusting God to be loving, fair, and just.
- ❖ **Create a memory box of the person who died.** It is very important as a child moves forward in life that they have something they can tangibly go back to in order to remember the deceased. Set aside special things, pictures, and narratives for the child to have. Record memories for them so they do not forget.
- ❖ **Children will grieve at different stages of life as they grow.** If a child loses someone significant (like a parent) early in life, they will grieve the loss at various stages. As a child grows emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually they will revisit the death to gain more and more understanding. As the parent or caregiver, be available to answer questions again, listen, and share your processing with them. Just because you as the adult have cleanly moved on, you may have to revisit time and again for the child. This does not mean the child is not grieving cleanly, just that it may take longer depending on where the loss occurred in development. This is why a memory box and journal are important to keep so the child can read, remember, and see how someone else processed the loss.



Family Devotions & Parenting Tips

Chapter One

PREPARE yourself physically, emotionally, and spiritually to face your suffering.

Devotion for Mark 10:13-16. (This passage is found in *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones starting on page 256.) When you are preparing for the journey of grief the most important thing to remember is that you can always run to Jesus. Grief makes us feel alone physically (someone is missing) and emotionally (no one understands). The truth of the gospel is that Jesus is intimately familiar with death and loss. He understands the pain, loneliness, sadness, and life disruption like no one else can.

God wants us to come to him like children. Children are honest, candid, and accepting of truth, and never afraid to ask for help. This is how we are to be on our journey. In this story, Jesus invited the children to come. They didn't have to look a certain way, behave a certain way, or do anything to get to see him. As you and your family grieve, remember Jesus called the children to him, and he does the same today. He not only calls the actual children to him, but calls us to be as children.

Activity: Affirm your children's questions. Make a list of the things they have asked you. Tell them, "God is glad when we ask Him questions. Even if our questions are sad, confused, or angry, God wants to hear our questions." Hug your children and make eye contact with them as you tell them this. Let them know that it takes courage to ask during a painful time and that while they may feel weak you admire the strength they have shown to ask honest questions. Then remind them, "You don't have to be strong to be loved by me or God, but God is faithful to be with us and give us the strength of His presence in times like these."

Ask your family:

- What did you like about this story?
- What would you like to say to Jesus today about how you feel?
- What would you like to do with Jesus if you could see him?
- Are there any questions you would ask him?

Chapter Two

ACKNOWLEDGE the specific history and realness of my suffering

Evaluating and examining the realness of your suffering is a hard step to walk through. For children this step is most effectively accomplished through conversation or expression through play. "Acknowledge" is too abstract of a concept for most children. If they can talk about it or act it out, it is real and the history is being assimilated into their story.

Devotion for Matthew 6:5-15. (This passage is found in *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones starting on page 222.) One of the most important things that can get lost in grief is prayer. It is important to allow your children to hear you pray about your loss and how it is affecting you. This reminds your children they can always talk to God about these people. Even simple prayers like "God, please tell [name] I love them and miss them," can help the child acknowledge the realness of their loss within the context of God's care.

Activity: Looking at the Lord's Prayer as an example, it may be helpful for your family to write a family prayer for this time of grief. As you write the family prayer keep the following things in mind:

1. Who are you praying to (v. 9) (Father, God, Creator, Provider, Sustainer, The God Who Sees)
2. What can you praise Him for (v. 10)
3. What do you want from Him (v. 11-12)
4. What are you scared of (v. 13)
5. How can you end with praise

Be honest and real in your prayer, let it be for the whole family, add to it as the family is better able to put their grief into words, and record ways that God answers your prayer or things that you learn about Him. Keep a copy of this prayer for the memory box, for children to see how you prayed during this time.



Chapter Three UNDERSTAND the impact of my suffering

Activity: Make the dirtiest feet you can. Find a silly reason to play in the mud bare footed. Having some lighter moments of fun can remind children that the “impact of suffering” is not going to erase all joy, laughter, and color from their lives. Then ask, “Who wants to wash everyone’s feet?” As it becomes obvious that this “activity” is becoming a “lesson” follow up with, “Why not?” and “What would be hard or unappealing about washing them?”

Devotion for John 13:1-20. (This passage is found in *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones starting on page 286.) Grief can feel as dirty and unappealing as messy feet. It is a process that no one wants to go through because it is so hard. Going through grief feels very raw, dirty, and scary. No one would choose the road of grief.

Jesus not only washed dirty feet, he walked this road of grief. In this story, Jesus, before his death, washes His disciple’s feet. Interesting choice of activities to share with his friends, but the message is great in so many ways. Yes, it is an example of servitude, and how we should be willing to serve, but it is also the statement that he wants us to be clean.

People didn’t understand him, or see what He was doing, but he was providing a road of hope. As you walk this journey, the desire is that you will do it as cleanly as possible. In the story it appears the disciples were willing to ignore the dirt on their feet. Often we want to ignore the “impact of our suffering.” Children can identify with wanting to ignore dirty things, especially something as overwhelming and unpleasant as grief. Jesus calls our attention to the impact of suffering to cleanse them, not to embarrass or shame us.

Ask your family the following questions (have each person give an answer):

1. What have you been feeling recently?
2. When do you have these feelings the most?
3. What is the worst part of what your family is going through?

Let each person have their answer, validate them, don’t minimize or try and tell them they shouldn’t feel however they shared. Close with the prayer that your family wrote together.

Chapter Four LEARN my suffering story which I used to make sense of my experience

Activity: Take time to evaluate the seven themes as a family, give each person a chance to talk about what it is they are feeling and believing about the loss. Ask, “Do you ever feel like [one of the seven themes]?” The answers to these questions may feel very raw, but these honest, raw emotions set up the family devotion.

Devotion for Luke 22:39-46. (This passage is found in *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones starting on page 294.) The story of Jesus in the Garden is one of the clearest accounts of Jesus’ human-ness recorded in Scripture. We see Jesus wrestling with powerful emotions that caused significant physical impact (i.e. sweating drops of blood, v. 44). Jesus is battling to make sense of his suffering as He repeatedly asks if there is any other way.

Jesus confides in his disciples that his “soul was sorrowful to the point of death (Mark 14:34)”, this is extreme sorrow – He understands our sorrow, fear, and wanting another way. Jesus sense of His suffering accurately as “God, why have you forsaken me (Mark 15:34)?” so that this theme would not have to be true in our story. Jesus bore what we fear to be true, so he both completely understands and is able to (with great compassion) reassure us that our fears are not true.

Chapter Five MOURN the wrongness of what happened and receive God’s comfort

Activity: Get a glass bottle of some type, and fill it up with water. At your devotion time, ask your family how many tears they think it would take to fill up the bottle? If your kids get into the question, you can get an eye dropper and count how many drops it takes to fill the bottle.



Ask your child, “Do you feel like you have cried that many? Are there times when you have cried alone; maybe when you’re trying to sleep? Does the grief feel stronger when you’re alone? Why?” It is good for children to talk about these things, if they have not already. After this discussion, use the devotion below to help bring comfort.

Devotion for Psalms 56:8, “You have kept count of my tossings; put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?” God collects our tears in the way we collect things that are precious to us. Each tear represents a tender moment when God is with us. God counts our tossings each sleepless night like we count things we collect. He is a Father who sits by His children’s bedside through their troubled nights.

In John 11:1-36 we find the story of Jesus’ good friend Lazarus’ death. It tells how his friends told him Lazarus was sick, his delay in getting to see him, and his sorrow when he arrived and experienced the death of his friend. Jesus wept. It brings comfort to know that He knew a loss of someone close, and chose to weep for him. Jesus’ example frees us to weep, and Psalm 56:8 lets us know that God cares.

Share as a family the times you want to cry the most.

Chapter Six **LEARN my GOSPEL STORY by which God gives meaning to my experience.**

Activity: Make a list of people who have been involved in your grief (i.e, doctors, friends, family, etc...). Talk about what each person did and whether their involvement was helpful or hurtful. Ask, “How has God been involved in our grief? When you think about God during your grief does it help or hurt?”

Devotion for Mark 15:16-41. (This passage is found in *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones starting on page 303.) This is the story of Jesus’ crucifixion. As you are seeing the gospel through your experience of grief, it is important to turn back to the Gospel to remember where it all began. There are several participants in the crucifixion that are worth noting.

First are the soldiers, they killed Jesus not knowing He was the Son of God, they confused the crowd by calling him a criminal. Jesus asked God to forgive them because He said they didn’t know what they were doing. There will be people and circumstances like this in our grief story. Things that we don’t understand, feelings we experience, and people who say things that aren’t helpful. Don’t let these things change who Jesus has always been in your life. Don’t let these people or events define God, let God’s word describe and teach you about God.

Second is Jesus. He does not seem like the same man who healed and fed so many. He did so many great things why didn’t He stop what was happening? He said He could call angels, why didn’t He? The same kinds of questions we ask about the crucifixion, we ask about our grief. Why didn’t God heal them? Why didn’t ...? What does this all mean? It is OK to ask questions. Questions are a normal part of grief. The same God who had a plan for Jesus’ death on the cross has a plan for your grief as well. Part of learning the gospel in your experience is looking at the cross differently. The cross is a grief story. The difference is we know the ending to the cross.

Third is God the Father. Where was He? Did He really just let them kill His Son? Did He really mean for all of this to happen? Did God the Father feel anything that day? There are several physical things that happened which show God was moved. In Matthew 27:51-52, the temple curtain was torn into, the earth shook, the rocks split, tombs were opened, the sky was dark, all evidence that God was moved by what was happening. God the Father was not stoic. In your grief how much do you want to rip the barrier of death, shake the world, tear things up, or hide in the dark? God the Father was defeating the enemy of death (1 Cor. 15:26). God did to death what we feel like doing but can’t, so that there can be hope for our grief.

In your devotion time, talk about the people in your grief story. How have they help or hindered the process? How can you get encouragement from the cross? Where do you see God in your story? Where would you like to see God in your story?



Chapter Seven

IDENTIFY GOALS that allow me to combat the impact of my suffering

Activity: As a family make a list of the days in the next six to twelve months that you think will be particularly hard to face (i.e., holidays, seasons, birthdays, anniversaries, sporting events, or even times of day). Discuss ways that these times can be easier together. Use the tools in Chapter Seven to decide how you will tackle the days.

It is important for children to know that it is okay for these days to be sad on days that are normally happy. For instance, children can feel like they are doing something wrong if they miss a lost family member on Christmas Day. Talking about these things in advance removes the guilt of speaking up when a given day is hard.

Devotion for Matthew 28:1-10. (This passage is found in *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones starting on page 310.) The story of the resurrection is not just the most wonderful story in Scripture; it is the story of Scripture. It is hope, peace, and assurance. The resurrection assures us that when things around us may seem unclear, there is one safety net—the fact, Jesus is Alive.

When we think about our life after grief, it is good to remember this, because it is where we will find refuge on hard days, and celebration on good. The fact that Jesus is alive gives us what we need to face our best and worst days. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we have hope that our loved one will as well. Because Jesus rose from the dead, our losses can seem light and momentary because of hope. We can grieve, but with hope.

Go back through the list of hard days and reflect on that plans you made for how to handle those days in light of the resurrection. Chances are many of those plans do not contain a celebration of the life your loved one is now living. We should grieve our loss, but with the recognition that our loved one is more alive than they ever were when we knew them. Our grief is only waiting because of the resurrection. Waiting is hard, but it is not final.

Chapter Eight

PERSEVERE in the new life and identity to which God has called me

Activity: Flip through an old picture album. Look at a favorite vacation or maybe pictures of a beloved pet. Talk about how those memories can make you happy and sad at the same time. You are glad you have the memories; you're life is more rich and full because of them. But you miss those moments as well. This is a good picture (pun intended) of what well-processed grief is like.

Devotion for Luke 24:50-53. (This passage is found in *The Jesus Story Book Bible* by Sallie Lloyd-Jones starting on page 318.) At the end of the Gospel story, something very confusing and sad happens for the disciples. They had knowledge that Jesus was alive, but they had to live without Him. The same is true for us in our grief. We may know that our loved one is alive, but we have to live without them.

Jesus was specific in what He wanted them to do – tell everyone about Him, His love, and the Gospel. Through your experience of grief, you have come to know God in a different way than you have before your loss. This is now part of your story, and God wants you to share it. Just like He wanted the disciples to share their experience, He wants us to now share ours.

As a family discuss some of the following:

- What have you learned about God through this study?
- What are some themes that you continue to struggle with?
- How does the story of Gospel change how you view death, and your purpose now?
- What is one thing new you would like to do?



Chapter Nine STEWARD all of my life for God's glory

Devotion for I Peter 4:9, “Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.” Because we were made for Heaven, grief on earth is not avoidable. We suffer, in part, because God has something better for us. Like children who cry when leaving the playground to go to the beach, we do not grasp what is in store and what is going on. But we learn to trust our Father on the long drive (life) to the beach (Heaven).

Activity: Make a list of the lessons each member of the family learned from your loss loved one and the journey of grief. Feel free to laugh and cry as you make the list. Talk about how each time you benefit from one of these lesson or pass them along to someone else you are extending the impact of your loved one’s life and “entrusting your soul to your faithful Creator while doing good.” Commit to share these times with one another so that the family can rejoice in what God is being faithful to do.

When to Seek Professional Help for Your Child:

If any of the following behaviors have continued for more then six months, contact your church or medical provider for appropriate referrals:

- ❖ Eating behaviors have not returned to normal
- ❖ Sleeping patterns have not returned to normal
- ❖ Aggression Behaviors are not reducing
- ❖ Separation Anxiety has not subsided
- ❖ Regressive Patterns are not improving
- ❖ There are no signs of grief

Other times when it may be appropriate for you to seek help for your child is when the grief is too overwhelming for you. If you as the caregiver are having difficulty processing it for yourself, much less thinking of your child, providing them with someone to help them process it is essential. Do not wait until you “have it together” to then turn towards your child.