

WHEN  
YOUR CHILD  
IS  
GRIEVING

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This book includes stories in which people's names and some details of their situations have been changed.

## **When Your Child Is Grieving**

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He's with the  
Lord how I see  
He's where he's  
supposed to be  
even though he's  
not with me  
he's where he  
should be.

Heaven is a  
perfect place  
to be.

Art by Annika, age 9



## Begin with the Most Important Thing

*GOD said, “My presence will go with you.  
I’ll see the journey to the end.”*

EXODUS 33:14 MSG

**W**hen grief enters your home and touches your child, it is you, the parent or guardian, who bears the primary responsibility of helping that child. You can feel lost and alone in the journey for many reasons.

**Sometimes it isn’t obvious that grief is the root of a change in a child.**

We often associate grief with death, yet any situation of loss can initiate grief in a child—the altering of a family through divorce, a long-term disability or impairment of a family member, a missing pet, moving away from a cherished friend, or growing up in foster care.

**Children grieve differently.**

You may sense that grief is in the heart of your child, but you might not understand the way it is echoing throughout their life and actions. Some children grieve quietly. They go to school, softball practice, and church, doing what they’re supposed to do without anyone ever seeing their broken hearts. Other children grieve loudly. Their grief triggers actions that get noticed and possibly mislabeled as ADHD, oppositional defiance, rebellion, or other unwanted behavior.

**We have a hard time talking about grief.**

We don't know what to say or how to say it, so we don't say anything at all. And our children continue to grieve. When the thought of writing this book first crossed my mind and planted a seed in my heart, I must admit that my own discomfort about how to approach you and your child's pain held me back. I care deeply. I am a mental health professional, a pastor's wife, and a teacher of counselors—caring for others is what I do every day. Still, I wasn't sure how to enter this conversation with you.

**Resources are difficult to find.**

Parents and mentors of grieving children don't know where to turn. Soon after the possibility of this book started to grow in my heart, I was preparing a counseling class on crisis, trauma, and grief, and I couldn't find any good sources for helping grieving children. I was at a loss on how to train my counseling students in this area. And that was a problem because counselors encounter so many grieving children at school and in their therapy offices. It became clear that if good resources for counselors are hard to find, then even fewer good resources are available for parents—especially Christian parents.

Knowing that parents watch with sadness and uncertainty as their children struggle to maneuver waves of grief, I became convinced I needed to write this book for you. My dilemma turned me in the direction of a decision. My heart was preparing for what came next.

**Why You and I Are Here**

The main reason I wrote this book is also the most important thing you need to know about parenting your grieving child. The week after I began, after my quest for resources, I was on a road through the mountains of Central Oregon to Portland. It was a glorious fall day, and my spirit was filled with gratitude. I started to sing, pray, and worship. All the needs of my heart came to the surface. My insecurities, worries, and discomfort were soothed, and the Lord spoke to me: "Amy, one reason I sent my Son, Jesus, to the world was to heal grief. Too many of my children are hurting and grieving. Write this book. Tell them I see

them. Tell them I love them. Tell them I will heal them. Tell them Jesus came to bind up their broken hearts.”

God always knows what to say.

You and I will walk together on a journey toward healing because God doesn't want his children stuck in grief. That includes you. That includes the beloved child you are worried about. He wants all his children to experience joy and peace through the fullness of relationship with him. Grief and loss are a part of life, but they are not God's ultimate plan for your life. In the Bible, God promises to heal grief and turn mourning into joy (Psalm 30:11; John 16:20). Joy, peace, and abundance are in his plan for you, your child, and the entire world.

.....  
 “Tell them I see them. Tell them I love them. Tell them  
 I will heal them. Tell them Jesus came to bind up their  
 broken hearts.” God always knows what to say.  
 .....

If you're not a Christian, I believe wholeheartedly that this resource will still be a balm to your wounds, a help to your child, and a guide for your journey. You're going to learn about your child's grief through an integrated perspective of current psychological principles and Christian faith, and you'll learn a lot of parenting skills specific to grieving children.

## **The Most Important Thing**

No matter what road has brought you to this point of need, to your child's ache of loss, the most important thing you need to sustain you is hope. We will gather insights, skills, support, and wisdom for everyday wants and wounds. You will see the real heart of God for you and your child, and you will experience God's warm, comforting healing through his words.

Hope, the most important thing, is where we begin...and God can give us hope in abundance.

## Provisions for the Journey

### *Wisdom Principle*

Seek wisdom.



*If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.*

JAMES 1:5

**T**he unthinkable happened. Death. Disaster. Perhaps an accident, illness, or tragedy. A cherished person or an entire family, gone. As a result, your child experienced one of life's tragedies: *great loss*. She's different now. You can see it on her face. You can see it in her body. You can feel it in your heart. She's not the same little girl anymore. This one thing, this great loss, has changed her.

Her heart is broken.

As her parent, your heart breaks too. You want to make it right—to protect her—but you don't know how. This great loss goes beyond what you naturally know to do as a parent. You don't know how to fix this, and you don't know how to fix her.

You both know that things will never, ever be the same again. You are worried and maybe even a little scared. What is the best thing to do? What is the best thing to say? How can you know what she is really feeling and thinking? Is she even grieving the way you think she might



be? What if she doesn't get better? What if this great loss sets her on the wrong path and permanently affects her life?

Let me assure you. Your child is going to be okay. She is going to heal, because God sees her. He longs to bind up her broken heart. In fact, binding up the brokenhearted is one of the main assignments of Jesus Christ. Isaiah 61:1-3 is a prophecy of the coming Messiah:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
 because the LORD has anointed me  
 to preach good news to the poor.  
*He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,*  
 to proclaim freedom for the captives  
 and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor  
 and the day of vengeance of our God,  
 to comfort all who mourn,  
 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
 to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
 instead of ashes,  
 the oil of joy  
 instead of mourning,  
 and a garment of praise  
 instead of a spirit of despair.  
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
 a planting of the LORD  
 for the display of his splendor.

Jesus is like the nurturing grandma who always knows how to fix it. He's got a great big sewing kit with just the right scissors to cut what needs to be cut, the right needles for tough fabric, and the right thread for the perfect stitches. First stitch: comfort. Second stitch: provision. Third stitch: beauty. Fourth stitch: joy. Quietly, confidently, Jesus is there, mending your child's broken heart stitch after stitch, until finally the fragments of her heart are transformed into a beautiful garment of praise.

.....  
Jesus is mending your child's broken heart.  
.....

Jesus is going to do another amazing thing. He will turn your child's grief into a source of strength in her life. Look at the last sentence in the quote above: "They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor." Imagine the Lord planting a beautiful, strong oak tree by a stream of water. That oak tree provides shade, shelter, and respite. It provides inspiration with its beauty and its majesty. It provides peace.

Your child is that planting of the Lord.

And it doesn't end there. The rest of Isaiah 61 promises that those who grieve will eventually prosper. They will rebuild. They will become ministers and agents of healing. They will receive a double portion. They will rejoice.

Comfort and healing. Strength. Prosperity. A joyful, peaceful life. These are the promises for your child.

So take courage, dear parent. This great loss, while incredibly difficult, is not going to hold your child back. God always fulfills his promises. And one of the ways God is going to fulfill his promises is to use you. Yes, you—even though you probably feel inadequate and overwhelmed because of this huge assignment. The Lord sees you too. He's going to walk this journey with you.

## **When Grief Hits Home**

Many years ago, my family went through a horrible tragedy. We grieved every day. Grief was like a dark cloud that hung over our household, making us feel heavy and stuck. We couldn't move forward. One night, my husband and I watched the popular movie *The Way*, a story about a grieving man who walked the Camino de Santiago, a 600-mile spiritual trek through France and Spain. My husband, a pastor, felt a gentle calling from the Lord: "Get up. Go. Walk. One foot in front of the other. I will walk with you. I will meet you on your journey. My presence will go with you, and I will see the journey to the end." Right

there, on the couch in our empty family room, my husband decided to get up and walk.

A 600-mile journey—on foot, no less—takes a bit of planning and preparation. Like the other Camino pilgrims, my husband would carry everything he needed for the 40-day journey on his back. He would need provisions, but he would need just the right provisions because he had a limited capacity to carry the load. Now, don't get me wrong—my husband is a strong man. He can carry a lot. But for this 600-mile journey over high mountains, in harsh and unpredictable conditions, and with no guarantee of food, a bed, or a hot shower, my husband could take only the most important things. He could take only the necessary provisions to see the journey to the end.

It took my husband several months to plan his journey. He read Camino stories written by other pilgrims. He studied weather charts. He wrote packing lists. He purchased the lightest backpacking gear possible. He planned a budget, and he created a contingency plan for emergencies. He wanted to be as prepared as possible.

You should have seen our family room! For months, all his gear, packing lists, and clothing were strewn about. Our living space looked like a tornado had descended on us. But the real tornado that had plowed through our household was our great loss. Knowing that he was going to step forward out of the mess toward healing gave us both a sense of power and purpose.

### **Gathering What You Need**

You and your child are at the beginning of a journey. A journey toward healing. You have a special assignment from the Lord—a calling to parent a grieving child. Parenting is a challenge, even in the best of circumstances. I know that like my husband, you can carry a lot. But grief adds another layer. There are so many unknowns ahead of you, and you cannot take a single step of this journey without being prepared. You need exactly the right provisions to see the journey through to the end. You must carry only what you need to carry. No more and no less.

I imagine you now, thinking about what you need to finish this

journey. What should you pack, and what should you leave behind? What do you have now that you can use, and what do you need to acquire? How can you acquire what you need? You will need practical provisions for your day-to-day life. But you also need some essential provisions to keep you walking, especially on the days when you are tired and discouraged. These provisions from God are wisdom and hope.

.....  
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toward healing. You have a special assignment from  
the Lord—a calling to parent a grieving child.  
.....

Wisdom is the ability to make good judgments, and it helps us live the best life we can. The Bible says that wisdom comes from God: “The fear [awe, reverence] of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10). Through your relationship with God, he gives you the wisdom you need to live your life in peace. Especially when it comes to parenting your grieving child.

It’s going to be very important that you stay close to God through this journey. Seek wisdom from him. As we saw in the verse at the beginning of this chapter, he promises to give it to you if you ask.

One of the best ways any of us can prepare for a journey is to get on our knees. In fact, I encourage you to get on your knees every day and pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with his presence, and ask the Father to give you wisdom about how to interpret the concepts in this book and how to use them with your child. I know it’s hard to believe, but God knows your child better than you do. He loves her more than you do. He knows exactly what she needs to hear and exactly what she needs in order to heal. Ask God for those answers. He will be faithful to provide them for you.

Life will never be the same again because something or someone is missing. Amid the grief, it is hard to see anything good ahead of you. This place of sorrow is dark, cold, and as unpredictable as the journey

you are now preparing for. Hope is the expectation that something good will happen at the end of your journey. It is a gift that God gives us for our encouragement, to keep us moving forward. Hope will help you put one foot in front of the other, even when you don't feel like walking anymore. This book will encourage you the whole way, giving you hope when you are exhausted, afraid, or lonely. And during this time that we share and well beyond the turn of the last page, I will be full of hope for you and your child.

.....

Hope is the expectation that something good will happen at the end of your journey. It's a gift that God gives you for your encouragement to keep you moving forward.

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### **Skills for Your Journey**

Some years ago, a friend of mine tragically lost her brother in a freak plane accident. My friend's daughter was three at the time of her uncle's death. My friend told me, "I always wondered if his death affected her because she loved her uncle so much. One day he was there, and the next day he was gone. Our entire family was in extreme shock and chaos for a long time. My daughter was so young, I didn't know if she really knew what grief was." The answer is yes. Even if she could not articulate it, the daughter experienced grief, and her life was impacted by the uncle's death. Grief impacts children of all ages. It impacts children who are nonverbal and children who have special needs. Different types of losses also affect the way children experience grief.

My friend was aware of her daughter's grief, but at the time, she didn't know how to put that awareness into action. Her daughter's response to the death was different from the rest of the family's. It's easy to assume children don't experience grief because they don't express it in the same way adults do. But the developmental differences between children and adults lead to big differences in things like

physical responses, language, emotions, and behavior. What works to heal or support a grieving adult will rarely be effective with children.

My friend needed to acquire new provisions to help her daughter grieve. She needed to develop skills unique to grief and skills unique to the developmental level of her child. I'll guess it's the same for you. Each chapter of this book highlights a specific skill for parenting your grieving child. These skills are practical, everyday things you can apply. They are based on biblical wisdom and scientific knowledge. The skill for this chapter involves learning about grief through your Christian faith and current science.

### **PARENTING SKILL**

Learn about grief through your Christian faith  
and psychological principles.

You're on the right path already because this book will teach you about grief, mourning, and healing. You will learn skills that are tailor-made for parenting grieving children, skills based in psychological principles and your Christian faith. Each chapter of this book provides practical suggestions about what you can do right now and activities you can do this week with your child. Also woven throughout this book are Scriptures, prayers, and answers to some of your tough questions. For your convenience, the parenting skills you will learn in this book are listed on pages 197–198. Each skill is paired with a supporting Bible verse. Feel free to copy and post this list where you will see it often. An online version is available at [authoramyford.com](http://authoramyford.com). Consider memorizing the verses for days when you need extra support. Most important, you will see God's heartfelt love for grieving children. You will know that Jesus is the Healer and that he longs to mend your child's broken heart.

My husband stepped out in faith and walked the healing journey to which God called him. Every step of the way, God mended my husband's broken heart. God also healed our family. And now, God is beckoning you and your child on your own journey toward healing. God isn't going to simply sit back and watch you go. No, he's right

beside you and your child, walking with you. He's your friend and partner on this journey. He's smiling at you, saying, "You're going to make it." He, too, brought an essential provision: the needle and thread from his great big sewing kit. Just like that nurturing grandma, he's going to mend. He's going to heal your broken hearts, every step of the way.

Jesus,

*I have a long journey ahead of me, and [your child's name] does too. I'm not even sure how to prepare or where to begin. I ask you to walk this journey with us. We can't do it alone. You have promised in Isaiah 61:1-3 that you will heal and bless my child through this great loss. Help us move toward your healing and blessing. I believe that something good awaits at the end of our journey. I place my hope in you, and I trust that we will experience your presence every step of the way.*

Amen.

**Q:** What is the oil of gladness?

**A:** The oil of gladness is not a metaphor; it is a real thing. In ancient Jewish culture, the oil of gladness was a special essential oil—a blend of myrrh, cinnamon, calamus, cassia, and olive oil (Exodus 30:22-30). It is called the oil of gladness because when God's people applied it in faith and obedience, God restored their joy. It was used specifically to anoint people and things—to recognize a special calling by God and to be set apart for his service.

When we present ourselves to the Lord to be anointed, the Holy Spirit fills and empowers us. When we are walking in our anointing, we experience the fullness of joy. Isaiah 61:3 assures us that the Messiah will give this oil of gladness to those who mourn. This promise means that Jesus will replace your child's mourning with joy and set her apart to walk according to her special calling.

## Steps Toward Healing

### Draw Strength from This Chapter

- One of Jesus's main assignments is to heal grief.
- Your grieving child is promised comfort, healing, strength, prosperity, and a joyful, peaceful life.
- Parents of grieving children need essential provisions for the journey: wisdom, hope, and skills unique to caring for grieving children.

### What You Can Do Right Now

- Pray the chapter prayer over your child.
- Meditate on God's promises for your child (Isaiah 61:1-3).
- Meditate on James 1:5. Ask the Lord for wisdom. Write down what the Holy Spirit is prompting you to do to gain wisdom. Reflect on what you've done well to help your child grieve, as well as what you might need to do differently. What can you celebrate? What do you need to learn? Jot down a few notes.
- Create a reading schedule to finish this book. (Yes, put it on your daily planner!)
- Identify supportive people in your child's life. Share this book with them and ask them to read it so that they can support you and your child.

### Activities You Can Do This Week with Your Child

- Read Isaiah 61:1-3 and Exodus 30:22-30 to your child. You may need to find a simple Bible translation or explain



what these passages mean to your child in language she understands.

- If financially feasible, purchase an essential oil that smells like joy to you. Check Etsy, Walmart, or Christian-based essential oil companies. (You can find the oil of gladness blend already made, or you can find another blend. Any oil will do because oil represents the presence of the Holy Spirit.) Diffuse the oil in your child's bedroom and throughout your home. If she asks, tell your child that you want to make the house smell joyful.
- Search the Bible for a verse about hope. Ask your child to draw a picture about something hopeful. When she's finished, write the verse you found on the bottom of her picture. Put the picture in a place where everyone can see it (like the refrigerator) as a reminder that God is mending things.



Art by Emmalle, age 10