

today's  
christian  
woman

LOVE GOD. LIVE FEARLESSLY.



# Journeying Through Loss

A personal retreat experience from  
Today's Christian Woman



Through all the shock, numbness, and pain you've been experiencing, you've finally carved out some space and time for what you've most needed—being alone. Just you . . . and God.

This is your moment to be real. To face and deal with the loss in your life, but to do it with God. To turn your eyes, your heart, your attention to him as you struggle through this time of darkness toward the light. This is your opportunity to offer God uninterrupted time as you quiet your heart before him and spend time in his presence.

This is your time to offer your **loss** to God.



## How to use this personal retreat:

**A**s busy women, our lives can easily become overwhelming and over-programmed. From work to parenting to marriage to housekeeping to church to volunteering, we can get used to having our lives jam-packed with responsibilities and commitments. This feeling of being overwhelmed is only worsened when we're grieving. Though we long for time alone with God, when we actually get that time, we can flounder. What to do? How do we fill an hour with God? Or two? Or maybe even three?

This *TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN* download contains **12** different ideas and experiences you can use during a period of time you've set aside to be alone with God and focus on the loss you are dealing with. Each idea can take from **10 to 20 minutes**. Flip through these pages and zero in on the experiences that fit you best. If you've got just an hour, plan on doing about 4 experiences; or, alternately, you could take about half of a day to utilize all 12 ideas in this packet.

**You'll need . . .**

## Journeying Through Loss

### How to use this personal retreat

**Supplies:** Bible, pen, journal, notepad, tissues

**Optional:** a picture of the person you've lost (if a loved one has died); a crucifix or artistic image of Christ on the cross; white paper, scissors; a medium- to large-sized smooth stone, several bright colors of acrylic paint, paintbrushes, newspaper; picnic blanket, snacks, and water

Find a **space** in which you can be alone and focused on God, such as a peaceful spot in your local park, a corner of your backyard, or even your bedroom. If you want, bring a picnic blanket to sit on as well as some snacks and water to help you feel refreshed and nourished.

Give yourself **permission** to connect with what you feel during this retreat time. To cry. To be quiet. To moan or to shout. Even to feel numb. Simply be real about what you're going through.

### DEFEAT DISTRACTIONS!

**W**hen you try to spend time focusing on God, countless distractions are bound to pop into your mind. Something you forgot to put on the grocery list. An appointment on the calendar for tomorrow. Worries about your daughter's allergies. A random idea for a project at work.

So be sure to bring a **notepad** and **pen** on your personal retreat. Whenever a distracting thought comes to mind, jot it down on the "distractions notepad" and set it aside. Put the distraction out of your mind and don't let it nag at you while you're trying to focus on God. It's on your notepad—you can deal with it later.



# Journeying Through Loss

A personal retreat experience from Today's Christian Woman

## Quick Overview

Click on an article you'd like to read:

- 7 **IDEA 1:**  
Explore—  
*Study what the Bible says about loss and grief.*
- 11 **IDEA 2:**  
Journal—  
*Use journal prompts to honestly describe your loss.*
- 13 **IDEA 3:**  
Consider—  
*Use a modern-day model to reflect on where you are in the grieving process.*
- 16 **IDEA 4:**  
Pray—  
*Draw upon psalms to form your own prayer.*
- 18 **IDEA 5:**  
Read & Respond—  
*Read an article and contemplate the beauty found in Christ's suffering.*
- 27 **IDEA 6:**  
Express—  
*Declare truths about God's faithfulness.*
- 28 **IDEA 7:**  
Read & Respond—  
*Read an article and invite God to give you a glimpse of goodness.*
- 34 **IDEA 8:**  
Create—  
*Make symbolic paper snowflakes.*
- 36 **IDEA 9:**  
Express—  
*Use the lyrics of a hymn to turn your heart toward hope.*
- 39 **IDEA 10:**  
Read & Respond—  
*Read an article and make a crucial choice.*
- 46 **IDEA 11:**  
Journal—  
*Remind yourself of why you can trust God.*
- 47 **IDEA 12:**  
Create—  
*Use art to make a concrete remembrance.*

Sample 1-Hour Schedule	
<b>IDEA 1:</b> Explore	15 minutes
<b>IDEA 4:</b> Pray	15 minutes
<b>IDEA 10:</b> Read & Respond	15 minutes
<b>IDEA 6:</b> Express	15 minutes

# Journeying Through Loss

## Quick Overview

Sample 3-Hour Schedule	
<b>IDEA 1:</b> Explore	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 2:</b> Journal	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 4:</b> Pray	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 5:</b> Read & Respond	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 6:</b> Express	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 8:</b> Create	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 10:</b> Read & Respond	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 11:</b> Journal	20 minutes
<b>IDEA 12:</b> Create	20 minutes

## For Women's Ministry

You can also use these experiences in a women's ministry setting such as during a women's weekend retreat or weekly Bible study. Simply give each participant a copy of this download and send them off to find a space of their own in which to spend an hour with God. Afterward, have women gather together in small groups and share with each other what their time alone with God was like.



## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 1: Explore



#### Idea 1:

# Explore

Dive into God's Word and explore what it says about loss and grief.

**I**n a [ChristianityToday.com](http://ChristianityToday.com) article, writer Amy Julia Becker explained:

The Bible encourages God's people to experience grief, to recognize that the fabric of community is torn apart when a person dies. Genesis 50 hints at some of the ancient cultural practices surrounding grief, as Joseph mourns the death of his father for 70 days. Psalm 88, which ends with the words "the darkness is my closest friend," may be the starkest example of the biblical writers' sanction of mourning. Scripture includes countless other instances of expressing grief, through official times of mourning, psalms of lament, ritual practices, and even physical markers such as short hair and special clothing.

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 1: Explore

Yet the Bible offers us more than permission to grieve. It does so within the context of hope in a God who is faithful and who has overcome death. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes about believers who have died: "And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died" (1 Thessalonians 4:13–14). Paul makes it clear that Christian hope does not eliminate the need for grief; rather, Christian grief is bound by Christian hope.

As you begin your time of working through your loss, dive into God's Word and explore what it says about pain, suffering, disappointment, and death.

- You're facing a painful loss in your life—God's Word, revealing the truth of what it means to be human, is stunningly honest about loss and tragedy. Over and over again in Scripture, we see people dealing with the difficult blows life deals us. Read about David's grief and mourning in **2 Samuel 12:15–23** and about the death of Lazarus in **John 11:17–26**. How did David, Martha, Mary, and Jesus grieve differently? Who can you most relate to? Why?

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## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 1: Explore

- Sometimes in the pain of loss, we feel mute or numb. Other times we are awash with emotions—very difficult emotions. Some may even be so negative (like doubt, anger at God, extreme discouragement) that we wonder if we still have faith. Consider these raw expressions of pain: **Psalm 22:1–11** and **Psalm 88**. Which phrase, line, or image from these psalms most connects with what you're going through? Why?

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- These expressions of pain are directed toward God—they are prayers. How do these examples of bringing raw, painful emotions *to God* challenge or inspire you as you deal with your own heartache?

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## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 1: Explore

- Read these passages that express God's concern for the hurting and brokenhearted: **Psalm 34:18** and **Isaiah 61:1–3** (a prophecy Christ fulfilled). God desires to comfort you and help you heal from this deep hurt in your life—but comfort and healing don't happen instantaneously. God isn't rushing you toward a false happiness; he cares about you *in* your pain. How do these passages comfort or challenge you? How does their truth line up with what you're going through right now?

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- Sometimes the pain of loss lasts an entire lifetime. Many people whose stories are recorded in Scripture suffered tremendously during their life on earth; even in our deepest pain, God directs us to a *future* hope. Read Isaiah 25:6–8; Revelation 7:15–17, and 21:1–15. What comfort can heaven provide for you as you cope with your loss? How could a more intentional daily focus on heaven help you cope with your hurt?

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Idea 2:

# Journal

**T**here is profound power in simply *naming* your hurt. Be frank and honest about what it is that you're facing. Put it in black and white.

Grab your journal or a piece of paper and take time to describe your loss.

- Is it a **person**? Who was that person? What was he or she like? What was that person's role in your life? Jot down descriptions. Capture memories. (If you've brought along a photo of that person, set it up and look at it as you write.)
- Is it a **marriage**? What were your hopes for your marriage? Describe some of the good times and small comforts. Be frank, too, about difficulties.

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 2: Journal

- Is it a **dream**? Have your hopes or goals been crushed? Describe that dream. What did you hope for or long for? What did it feel like to have that dream?
- Is it a **relationship** or **friendship**? Describe the person who is no longer in your life (or as close as he or she used to be). What was special about that relationship? What special memories do you have?
- Is it a **pregnancy**? What ideas and dreams did you have for your child or your family? What did you hope for? What did you desire to do with your child?
- Is it some **other loss**? Describe it freely and honestly.

When you're done writing, if you're able, read aloud what you've written. God is present with you (whether you "feel" it or not) and he hears your words; he also knows and understands the even deeper currents of pain in your heart that words cannot express (Romans 8:26–27).



## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 3: Consider



### Idea 3:

# Consider

*"To regard grief as somehow unworthy of a Christian who believes in the resurrection is to forget the example of Christ who was so often 'moved with compassion,' who wept at his loss of Lazarus and prayed the longer in his agony. We cannot short-circuit human processes; we have to give the experience time to come home to us before it can become a motive for hope and a promise of fuller life. . . . Grief is only unchristian if it is wholly self-centered or if we never emerge from it."*

*—Maria Boulding, Prayer: Our Journey Home*

**E**very person facing a painful loss experiences that pain uniquely. Yet there's also a common process that most grieving people go through. The foundational model that outlines the experience of going through loss is the five stages of grief developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. These stages are:

- 1. Denial**—a short-term sense that the tragedy may not really be happening or a denial of its painful effect.
- 2. Anger**—a desire to blame others (or God) and a deep sense of questioning ("Why me?").
- 3. Bargaining**—a desire to "make a deal" to make the suffering or loss go away; an inability to accept the reality of the loss.
- 4. Depression**—extreme sadness, feeling and expressing deep grief.
- 5. Acceptance**—though still painful, acknowledging the reality of the loss and moving forward.

For the Christian, the experience of grief may be somewhat different as we cling to hope in God or as we seek spiritual help to make it through the hardship. Nonetheless, many pastors and Christian counselors have found these basic five steps to be helpful as they aid others in dealing with loss.

Which of the above stages of grief do you think you may be in as you deal with the loss in your life?

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 3: Consider

Take a short walk to quietly reflect on your journey. What happened before your loss? What have you journeyed through since the initial loss? Where are you now in the grieving process? Where do you hope to see yourself one year from now?

As you walk, remember that God is with you. Invite him to guide your thoughts and comfort your heart.



Idea 4:

# Pray

**U**se these biblical prayers to guide your own time of honest prayer about your feelings, your frustration or hurt, your loss, and your desire to continue to trust God despite all you're going through. As you pray through the psalmist's words, pause to add in your own words and expressions whenever you feel led to.

## Psalm 13

O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever?  
How long will you look the other way?  
How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,  
with sorrow in my heart every day?  
How long will my enemy have the upper hand?  
Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!  
Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die.  
Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have  
defeated him!"

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 4: Pray

Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.  
But I trust in your unfailing love.  
I will rejoice because you have rescued me.  
I will sing to the LORD  
because he is good to me.

## Psalm 130

From the depths of despair, O LORD,  
I call for your help.  
Hear my cry, O Lord.  
Pay attention to my prayer.  
LORD, if you kept a record of our sins,  
who, O Lord, could ever survive?  
But you offer forgiveness,  
that we might learn to fear you.  
I am counting on the LORD;  
yes, I am counting on him.  
I have put my hope in his word.  
I long for the Lord  
more than sentries long for the dawn,  
yes, more than sentries long for the dawn.  
O Israel, hope in the LORD;  
for with the LORD there is unfailing love.  
His redemption overflows.  
He himself will redeem Israel  
from every kind of sin.



**Idea 5: Read and Respond**

# Three Gifts for Hard Times

What I've learned as life has taken a turn  
for what most people think is the worst

By William J. Stuntz

**S**urvivors of some horrible plague or battle often find themselves wracked with guilt: Why did I live while so many died? Though I had no battle scars, I used to feel a similar sense of guilt. I married the only woman I've ever loved. We have three terrific children. I have a secure job that I love and that pays well. Sometimes I would ask God: Why have you been so kind to me? Why have I gotten such an easy life?

I don't ask those questions anymore.

A little over nine years ago, while driving home from a family vacation, my car got a flat tire. When I started to change it, something nasty happened at the base of my back. Ever since, my lower back and the top half of my right leg have hurt. After two operations, dozens of injections, physical therapy, psychotherapy, and thousands of pills, my back and right leg hurt every waking moment, and most of those moments, they hurt a lot. Living with chronic pain is like having an alarm clock taped to your ear with the volume turned up—and you can't turn it down. You can't run from it; the pain goes where you go and stays where you stay. Chronic pain is the unwelcome guest who will not leave when the party is over.

A few months after my back turned south, my family and I moved when I accepted a job at Harvard Law School. Our family began to unravel. One of our children suffered a life-threatening disease, and my marriage fell apart.

Those crises faded with time but left deep scars. Early last year, another piece of bad news struck me: Doctors found a large tumor in my colon; a month later, films turned up tumors in both of my lungs. In the past year, I've had two cancer surgeries and six months of intensive chemotherapy. I've been off chemo for a few months, but I'm still nauseated and exhausted most of the time. Cancer kills, but cancer treatment takes a large bite out of one's pre-diseased life, as though one were dying in stages. Some of that stolen life returns when the treatment stops. But only some.

Today, my back and especially my right leg hurt as much as they ever have, and the odds are overwhelming that they will hurt for as long as this life lasts. Cancer will very probably kill me within the next two years. I'm 50 years old.

Such stories are common, yet widely misunderstood. Two misunderstandings are worth noting here. First, illness does not beget virtue. Cancer and chronic pain make me sick; they don't make me good. I am who I was, only more diseased. Second, though I deserve every bad thing that has ever happened to me, those things didn't happen *because* I deserve them. Life in a fallen world is more arbitrary than that. Plenty of people deserve better from life than I do, but get much worse. Some deserve worse and get much better. Something important follows: The question we are most prone to ask when hardship strikes—why me?—makes no sense. That question presupposes that pain, disease, and death are distributed according to moral merit. They aren't. We live in a world in which innocent children starve while moral monsters prosper. We may see justice in the next life, but we see little of it in this one.

Thankfully, God gives better and more surprising gifts to those living in hard times. Three gifts are especially sweet.

### **Redeeming curses**

First, God usually doesn't remove life's curses. Instead, he redeems them.

Joseph's story makes this point. Joseph was victimized by two horrible injustices: one at the hands of his brothers who sold him into slavery, the other thanks to Potiphar's wife, who falsely accused him of attempted rape. God did not undo these injustices; they remained real and awful. Instead, God used those wrongs to prevent a much worse one: mass starvation. When Joseph later met with his brothers, he said this about the transaction that started the train rolling: "You meant it

for evil, but God meant it for good." That doesn't mean that slavery and unjust imprisonment are good; rather, the point is that they *produced* good, and the good they produced was larger than the wickedness that was visited upon Joseph. Evil was twisted back on itself, like a gun barrel turned so that it aims at the would-be murderer firing the weapon.

Joseph's story foreshadows the central story of the Gospels. The worst day in human history was the day of Christ's crucifixion, which saw the worst possible punishment inflicted on the One who, in all history, least deserved it. Two more sunrises and the Son rose: the best day in human history, the day God turned death against itself—and because he did so, each one of us has the opportunity to share in death's defeat.

That is our God's trademark. Down to go up, life from death, beauty from ugliness: the pattern is everywhere.

That familiar pattern is also a great gift to those who suffer disease and loss—the loss may remain, but good will come from it, and the good will be larger than the suffering it redeems. Our pain is not empty; we do not suffer in vain. When life strikes hard blows, what we do has value. Our God sees it.

### **A change in suffering's character**

The second gift is often missed, because it lives in salvation's shadow. Amazing as the greatest of all gifts is, God the Son does more than save sinners. Jesus' life and death also change the character of suffering, give it dignity and weight and even, sometimes, a measure of beauty. Cancer and

chronic pain remain ugly things, but the enterprise of living with them is not an ugly thing. God's Son so decreed it when he gave himself up to torture and death.

Two facts give rise to that conclusion. First, Jesus is beautiful as well as good. Second, suffering is ugly as well as painful. Talk to those who suffer medical conditions like mine and you'll hear this refrain: Even the best-hidden forms of pain and disease have a reality that is almost tactile, as though one could touch or taste them. And those conditions are foul, like the sound of fingernails on a blackboard or the smell of a cornered skunk. Some days, I feel as if I were wearing clothes soaked in sewage.

Some days—but not most days, thanks to the manner of Jesus' life and death. Imagine an attractive actor putting on a bad suit or wearing an ugly dress. The suit wouldn't look bad, and that dress wouldn't be ugly. Attractiveness spills over onto their clothing, changing its meaning and the way other people respond to it. If they wear it, it's a good-looking outfit. If they wear it often enough, it becomes a good-looking outfit even when you or I wear it. God's Son did something similar by taking physical pain on his divine yet still-human person. He did not render pain itself beautiful. But his suffering made the enterprise of living with pain and illness larger and better than it had been before. He elevates all he touches. Just as his years of carpentry in Joseph's shop lend dignity and value to all honest work, so, too, the pain he bore lends dignity and value to every pain-filled day human beings live.

*The Shawshank Redemption* is about a prisoner convicted of a murder he didn't commit. That prisoner escapes by crawling

through a sewer line until he's outside the prison's walls. The narrator describes the transaction this way: "He crawled through a river of [dung] and came out clean on the other side." God the Son did that, and he did it for the likes of me—so that I, too, and many more like me, might come out clean on the other side. That truth doesn't just change my life after I die. It changes my life here, now.

### **The God Who Remembers**

The third gift is the most remarkable. Our God remembers even his most forgettable children. But that memory is not the dry, lifeless thing we feel when one or another old friend comes to mind. It's more like the passion one feels at the sight of a lover. When Jesus was dying, one of the two convicts crucified with him said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Jesus responded by telling him that he would be in paradise that very day. As we use the word *remember*, that story sounds off, as though the thief on the cross and the Son of God were talking past each other.

The story sounds off because to us, *remembrance* merely means "recall"—I remember when I connect a student's name to her face, or when I can summon up some fact or the image of some past event. That kind of remembrance is a sterile enterprise, lacking both action and commitment.

In the Bible, remembrance usually combines two meanings: first, holding the one who is remembered close in the heart, and second, acting on the memory. When God repeatedly tells the people of Israel to remember that he brought them out of

Egypt, he is saying much more than "get your history right." A better paraphrase would go like this: "Remember that I have loved you passionately. Remember that I have acted on that love. Hold tight to that memory, and act on it too."

Job understood the concept. Speaking with God about what would follow his own death, Job utters these words: "You will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made. Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin" (14:15–16). Notice how memory and longing are fused. Job longs to be free of his many pains, which occupy his mind like a sea of unwanted memories. God longs for relationship with Job, and Job knows it: hence, his belief that the Lord of the universe remembers each of his steps. He is the Lover who will not rest until his arms enfold the beloved. To Job, the curses Satan has sent his way are a mighty mountain that cannot be climbed, an enemy army that cannot be beaten. In the shadow of God's love, those curses are at once puny and powerless.

Philosophers and scientists and law professors (my line of work) are not in the best position to understand the Christian story. Musicians and painters and writers of fiction are much better situated—because the Christian story is a *story*, not a theory or an argument, and definitely not a moral or legal code. Our faith is, to use C. S. Lewis's apt words, the myth that became fact. Our faith is a painting so captivating that you cannot take your eyes off it. Our faith is a love song so achingly beautiful that you weep each time you hear it. At the center of that true myth, that painting, that song stands a God who does vastly more than remember his image in us. He

pursues us as lovers pursue one another. It sounds too good to be true, and yet it *is* true. So I have found, in the midst of pain and heartache and cancer.

*William J. Stuntz is the Henry J. Friendly Professor at Harvard Law School. This article was first published in the August 2009 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.*

## Reflect

Look at the crucifix or image of Jesus dying on the cross that you brought with you. (If you don't have one, do your very best to imagine it in your mind's eye.) Consider Stuntz's assertion that in his suffering and crucifixion, Jesus "did not render pain itself beautiful. But his suffering made the enterprise of living with pain and illness larger and better than it had been before. . . . [T]he pain he bore lends dignity and value to every pain-filled day human beings live."

Take time now to meditate on Jesus' own suffering. Focus on the visual representation you've brought with you; contemplate the physical and even emotional pain he went through.

In an attitude of peaceful and prayerful contemplation, ponder these questions for a few minutes:

- *How can your common experience of pain draw you even closer to Jesus in his moment of suffering and death?*
- *How has Christ strangely and miraculously brought a beauty and a dignity to suffering and loss? What can this mean to you?*

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 5: Read & Respond

- *You may experience pain from your loss for a long, long time—perhaps throughout the rest of your life. Prayerfully consider with God how Christ can bring "dignity and value" to the many painful days ahead for you.*



Idea 6:

# Express

**G**od is faithful. God is with you right now. He's been with you throughout the painful experience you've gone through.

But it may not feel like it. Those words may ring hollow for you.

Yet they are nonetheless true.

The following passages affirm the truth of God's faithful presence even as we suffer. Read them *aloud*. Even if they don't "feel" true to you right now, declare them in a firm and determined voice.

- Psalm 42
- Psalm 46
- Isaiah 43:1-4

Select one that stood out to you most and read it aloud, one more time.



## Idea 7: Read and Respond

# Missing My Mom

My loss changed the way I feel about  
my daughters—forever.

By Carolyn Kimmel

**I**t's a girl!" my husband joyously exclaimed. "You got your little girl!"

After a seemingly endless labor, I should have been exhausted—but all I felt was indescribable joy. *A girl!* I marveled. *We'll be as close as Mom and I were!*

Suddenly, pain pierced my exhilaration. *If only my mom could see her beautiful granddaughter*, I thought. I pushed tears from my cheeks, resolving that this familiar ache was not going to tarnish my joy.

My mother died from ovarian cancer when I was nine years old. My memories of her now, at age 33, are few, but I know we were practically inseparable. I was a "Mama's girl," always hanging on her skirt, gladly helping her with any household chore, just to be with her.

Some of the best times we spent together were lazy summer days at the beach near our home. In the morning, Mom would pack up the cooler with sandwiches, lemonade, and a special dessert. Then she would put on her sun hat and off we'd go for a day in the sand and sun.

My clearest, dearest memory of Mom, however, is when she knelt by my bed and helped me accept Jesus into my heart. I was five.

Sadly, most of my other memories are of when she was sick for three years before her death. I'll never forget that horrible uncertainty of waking to find Mom's bed empty, only to be told she'd been rushed to the hospital during the night.

One year Mom was allowed to come home on Christmas Eve. I can still see her lying on the couch when I came in the door from the school bus. She was too weak to get up but her arms flung open wide to hug me. That was our last Christmas together.

By God's grace and with the loving support of our extended family, I got through that early loss, but that longing has always been a part of me. I was unprepared, however, for the ache I felt when I became a mother myself.

While those early days with my daughter, Olivia, were filled with wonder and amazement, I suddenly became afraid I wouldn't live to see her grow up. I began thinking of my mother, her death, and my death every day. At midnight, while I sat nursing Olivia, surrounded by darkness, my chest tightened as I thought of nothing but death, death, death. Long after Olivia was nestled back into her bassinet, my mind raced.

My husband lay asleep next to me; I longed to shake him and blurt out my feelings. Yet I was too embarrassed to share this fear with anyone, even him. I questioned my faith, not in God, but in my belief that he would truly care for me. I wanted to experience that "peace that passes understanding," but how?

Prayer became my biggest ally. Every night as I nursed Olivia and the same dark thoughts haunted me, I immediately prayed for deliverance from my fears. One night I opened my Bible to Psalm 91. By the dim glow of a nightlight, I read, "If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the LORD, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

The words washed over me. For the first time since Olivia's birth, I felt peace. I memorized verse 14: "'Because he loves me,' says the LORD, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.' "

From that night onward, whenever I began to worry, I would repeat that verse. Slowly, I let go of those debilitating fears and allowed the joy of motherhood to consume me. I also calmed my fears by reminding myself of how God had answered prayer in other areas of my life. At the suggestion of my

pastor's wife, I had begun praying for a Christian husband when I was 12. I ended my nightly prayers with that plea until I was 27 and the Lord finally granted my request. There were times during dating fiascos, however, that I'd wondered if my prayer went unheard. But God does—and did—hear. I only hope my new prayer, "Let me live to raise my children," will be granted as well.

I also realized that in order to find true peace about my loss, I had to deal with it all over again. This time, however, I wasn't grieving as a young child yearning for her mommy, but as an adult woman who longed for the wisdom, understanding, and unconditional love of her strongest female ally, her mother.

I asked several people who knew my mother best to write about her for me—to tell me about what made her laugh, what made her angry, what zany things she liked to do, what her passions in life were. I asked my dad to write about what kind of mother she was. I devoured each reply I got.

Many a tear threatened to blur the ink on the pages as I read. But I emerged feeling my mother had come alive—if only for a few minutes—through the recollections of others. Now, I feel I know her a little bit better.

To make my mother real to my children, I've tried to incorporate her into their lives. Her picture sits in our living room and we often talk about her. Olivia, and now my second daughter, Rebecca, know their grandma lives in heaven with Jesus.

Losing my mother has undoubtedly made me a better mother myself. I treasure each day with my daughters, regardless of

teething crankiness and terrible twos. Tomorrow is not promised. But rather than view that as a threat, I see it as a reason to bask in the joy of life's simple pleasures. I strive to be like the woman in Proverbs 31:25 who "can laugh at the days to come," free of anxiety.

I treasure a note I have from my mother, not because it imparts any last words of wisdom from a dying mother to her daughter, but because it was written by her to me. The contents are trivial—she thanks me for some chocolate chip cookies I sent to the hospital for her and she tells me they're her favorite kind—but to me it's a precious tidbit of knowledge; the only thing I know about her that she told me herself. Often I feel cheated that I'll never know—on this earth, anyway—the woman who gave birth to me. And that makes me realize I want my children to *really* know me.

So I've started a mother's journal, writing down my thoughts and feelings about Olivia and Rebecca, their dad, our lives, the world, the future. I also kept detailed pregnancy records and am writing elaborate baby books for them. Lord willing, I'll be here when they grow up and we can have fun reading these books together. But if I'm not, what a legacy these written words will be.

Today, I can actually say I'm at peace with my mother's death. God's used it to shape me into the person I am. And I can praise God that, while he takes away, he also gives. I need only gaze upon my two girls to know that.

*At the time of this article's first publication, Carolyn A. Kimmel was a reporter with The York Dispatch and she lived with her family in Pennsylvania. This article was first published in the May/June 1998 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.*

## Reflect

Carolyn's grief felt fresh to her, even though her mother died decades earlier. Loss can affect us for the rest of our lives. But for Carolyn, the pain of her loss also led to some profoundly good "effects" on her life. She writes, "Losing my mother has undoubtedly made me a better mother myself."

• *Imagine for a moment—and this may seem difficult—how good could eventually result from the pain you're wading through right now. With God's help, try to dream some good dreams: How could this shape your character? How might it change the way you relate to those who are dearest to you? How might this alter your goals or dreams? Invite God to show you a glimmer of goodness that will be a part of this painful journey.*



Idea 8:

# Create

**T**ake some time to do something you may have done as a child, but infuse the experience with new meaning. Create paper snowflakes.

Fold (and fold again) pieces of white paper into squares or triangles. Use sharp scissors to make cuts of various shapes and sizes into the paper, then open it to see what you've made.

As you cut the paper, let it symbolize the "cuts" in your life—the pain and hurt, the now empty spaces created by your loss. Think of specific hurts you've experienced in the difficult situation you've gone through.

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 8: Create

And as you gently unfold the paper to reveal the beautiful, unique creation you've made, ask God to help you see (even if it is just a tiny glimpse) how he can make something beautiful even *through* this painful experience.

When you get home, hang a snowflake in your window to remind yourself of this experience.



#### Idea 9:

## Express

**T**he child of a slave, Charles A. Tindley went on to receive two doctoral degrees, pastor a church, and pen many famous hymns including "We Shall Overcome." But despite his successes, as an African American living during the late 1800s and early 1900s, he experienced profound hurt and loss. In his heartache, he turned to his tenacious faith in Jesus.

Read aloud the words of "Some Day," a hymn Tindley wrote in 1906. As you do, use your voice to express the meaning of the words and their connection to your own experiences and hope of heaven.

#### **“Some Day”**

*Beams of Heaven, as I go,  
Through this wilderness below,  
Guide my feet in peaceful ways,  
Turn my midnights into days;  
When in the darkness I would grope,  
Faith always sees a star of hope,  
And soon from all life's grief and danger,  
I shall be free some day.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
Nor what the future holds for me,  
But this I know, if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home some day.*

*Oftentimes my sky is clear,  
Joy abounds without a tear,  
Though a day so bright begun,  
Clouds may hide tomorrow's sun;  
There'll be a day that's always bright,  
A day that never yields to night,  
And in its light the streets of glory  
I shall behold some day.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
Nor what the future holds for me,  
But this I know, if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home some day.*

*Harder yet may be the fight,  
Right may often yield to might,  
Wickedness awhile may reign,  
Satan's cause may seem to gain,*

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 9: Express

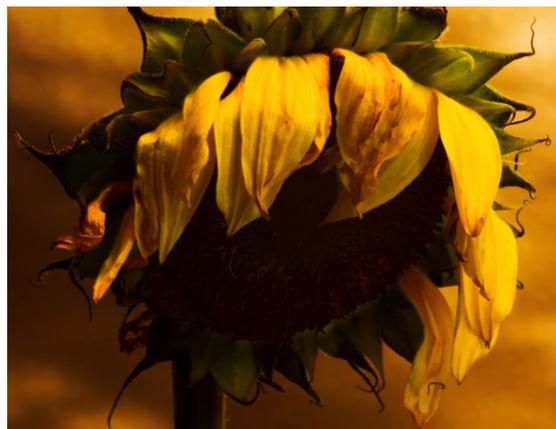
*There is a God that rules above,  
With hand of power and heart of love,  
If I am right, He'll fight my battle,  
I shall have peace some day.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
Nor what the future holds for me,  
But this I know, if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home some day.*

*Burdens now may crush me down,  
Disappointments all around,  
Troubles speak in mournful sigh,  
Sorrow through a tear stained eye;  
There is a world where pleasure reigns,  
No mourning soul shall roam its plains,  
And to that land of peace and glory,  
I want to go some day.*

*I do not know how long 'twill be,  
Nor what the future holds for me,  
But this I know, if Jesus leads me,  
I shall get home some day.*

(Public Domain)



Idea 10: Read and Respond

# My New View of God

How the loss of my children  
changed my faith

By Marshall Shelley

*Within a three-month period, Marshall and Susan Shelley saw two of their children die. In November 1991, son Toby succumbed to birth defects after two minutes of life. Then in February 1992, daughter Mandy, almost 2, died of pneumonia. Four years later, Marshall penned this article for LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.*

**A**fter losing two children, and after four years of reflection, I see some aspects of God's character in much sharper focus than before, while others are still behind a glass dimly.

**Serving God demands more.**

I hadn't realized the cost of discipleship. God assigns some people incredibly tough situations.

Since our two children died, I can't help but pause, and wince, each time I read the Bible and see afresh the ordeals children faced, often at the hand of God. Sometimes his ways are severe.

In Genesis, at God's direction, Ishmael and his mother are evicted from their home into the desert. Young Isaac is bound as a human sacrifice (though soon released). In Exodus, all firstborn sons of the Egyptians are slain by the death angel. Job's children (though probably grown children) are killed in Satan's test, sanctioned by God.

And this doesn't include the children killed in God's broader judgments, such as the flood of Noah's day, the destruction of Sodom, or the conquest of Canaan.

In the story of David and Bathsheba, the adultery and the murder of Uriah no longer hold much interest for me—simply more evidence of human sinfulness. Now I fixate on God's treatment of the two sons produced by David and Bathsheba's union—one, a nameless son, died as God's judgment on David's sin; the second, Jedidiah (meaning "loved by God"), became Solomon and enjoyed God's most lavish blessing. I ponder that first son's destiny—dying as punishment for David's sin (even though David apparently didn't grieve the death).

In Matthew, all boys in Bethlehem under age two are murdered, in fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy.

In John 9, in front of a man blind since birth, Jesus is asked if this suffering is due to his own sins or to those of his parents. Jesus explains it is neither but rather "that the work of God might be displayed in his life." A childhood of blindness for God's greater glory? That answer—especially from Jesus, known for his love of children—causes me to tremble.

Ultimately, of course, God's own Son is sent to die upon a cross.

Living for God's glory is not for sissies.

The only way I can gaze upon such severe treatment of children, without becoming catatonic, is trusting that God's purposes require a stiff price. Redemption must be ever so much costlier than I imagine. Earth's contamination by sin must be so severe that equally strong medicine is required.

And even trusting God's purpose, I still occasionally flinch.

### **Eternity is nearer.**

Before my children died, I considered the doctrines of resurrection and heaven pleasant but remote, a bit quaint. Now, they are central and strategic.

As I held both Toby and Mandy within seconds of death, I was overwhelmed by a sense of how close every one of us is to eternity. I was cheek to cheek with a child now entering everlasting life. That sense, though sometimes overshadowed by the busyness of life, is never far away.

Many times now, heaven seems so much more substantial than earth. My wife, Susan, sometimes says, "I have one foot

in heaven and one foot on earth." We've already sent part of ourselves on ahead—and we understand better what Jesus meant when he said, "Where your treasure is, there will your hearts be also." Our hearts are continually drawn heavenward.

While I still dread the process of dying, the fact that my children have preceded me gives me greater resolve. If my child can go through death's door, certainly I can.

A friend put the issue clearly: "To enter eternity, you must (1) be born, and (2) die. That's the process for every one of us, including Mandy and Toby." After your child enters eternity, it seems amazingly close.

**Prayer is less specific, more intense.**

After desperate pleas for our children's healing, for the ability to swallow, for lungs to breathe, for an end to seizures—and then to see Toby and Mandy's days on earth end—my prayer life has changed.

It's harder to confidently make specific requests. It's now clear that God's redemptive agenda may, or may not, include granting my current passionate desire—even a passionate desire for my son or daughter to breathe.

The day after Toby's birth/death, one of the labor-and-delivery nurses handed us a cassette by Wayne Watson; the title song, "Home Free," described us with uncanny accuracy.

"Out in the corridors we pray for life, a mother for her baby, a husband for his wife. Sometimes the good die young, it's sad but true. While we pray for one more heartbeat, the real comfort is in You . . .

"Pain has little mercy, suffering's no respecter of age, of race, or position. I know every prayer gets answered, but the hardest one to pray is slow to come: O Lord, not mine but your will be done." (copyright 1990 Material Music and Word Music)

God's clear answer to our prayers was not to provide additional heartbeats. It was "Toby and Mandy will live—but with resurrected bodies in heaven with me." If his answer was so much deeper than what we requested, then it's hard not to imagine him also reconfiguring our more mundane requests about jobs, relationships, schedules, and surgeries.

Now, I'm not sure I even *want* him to grant my daily wish list. What I really want is to see God's eternal work and to be a part of it. Prayer is now an intense desire to know God, to understand his ways, and to see good come out of pain.

**Faith is more intentional.**

Do you remember the classical distinction between virtue and innocence? Virtue, unlike innocence, has successfully passed a point of temptation.

Perhaps a similar distinction can be found in faith—innocent faith can trust God because it hasn't seen the abyss; virtuous faith has known the terror and chooses to trust God.

As Abraham Heschel observed, "Job's faith was unshakable because it was the result of being shaken."

Even as a child, I loved to read, and I quickly learned that I would most likely be confused during the opening chapters of a novel. New characters were introduced. Disparate, seemingly

random events took place. Subplots were complicated and didn't seem to make any sense in relation to the main plot.

But I learned to keep reading. Why? Because you know that the author, if he or she is good, will weave them all together by the end of the book. Eventually, each element will be meaningful.

At times, such faith has to be a conscious choice.

Even when I can't explain why a chromosomal abnormality develops in my son, which prevents him from living on earth more than two minutes . . .

Even when I can't fathom why our daughter has to endure two years of severe and profound retardation and continual seizures . . .

I choose to trust that before the book closes, the Author will make things clear. And to remember his words through the prophet: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11, NKJV).

Clinging to that promise, even when the weight of sorrow makes our knees buckle, makes faith intentional and, I trust, unshakable.

*Marshall Shelley is senior editor of LEADERSHIP and Editor in Chief of the Leadership Media Group at Christianity Today International. This article was first published in LEADERSHIP JOURNAL in 1996.*

## Reflect

Marshall writes about trusting the Author of the story—God who is at work in your life, even in the midst of the pain and loss you are experiencing. Maintaining faith during a gut-wrenching loss must be a conscious, intentional choice.

- *Write the phrase "I still believe" somewhere near you. Use a pencil to scrawl it in your Bible, use a marker to tattoo it on your hand, or even use chalk to write it on a sidewalk. Think about what it means for you to make the purposeful decision to believe and to trust.*



Idea 11:  
**Journal**

**C**orrie Ten Boom, who survived a Nazi concentration camp but lost most of her family, once said, "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer." In your journal, write your thoughts about these questions:

- Is it hard for you to trust God right now? Why or why not?
- What about your experience has made it difficult to trust God?
- What reasons do you have to continue to trust God?



#### Idea 12:

## Create

**F**ind a medium- or large-sized smooth stone (or use one you've brought with you) and set it on some newspaper. With some acrylic paints and paintbrushes, create a simple, colorful "stone of hope" or "stone of remembrance" for your garden or to place in a window flowerpot. Consider these ideas:

- Colorfully write the name of the person who has died, decorating the stone with swirls or simple flowers.
- Paint a simple, stick-figure image of a special memory you had with a loved one who has died or of a relationship that has ended.
- Paint a simple image of a hope you've had to give up (such as the image of a home or a mother and child).
- Use bright colors to paint one word that can encourage you, such as *hope*, *faith*, *trust*, or *heaven*.

## Journeying Through Loss

### Idea 12: Create

Your stone does not need to be a work of art. This isn't about impressing anybody! Just enjoy the creating process. It's not what the final product looks like that's important, but it's what it represents to you.

Let the stone dry, then find a special spot to place it at home, such as by your favorite outdoor flowers, under a tree, or on your windowsill. Allow its bright colors to remind you of hope and joy during times of darkness.

today's  
christian  
woman

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