

Healing for the Holidays: A conversation with Bob Kellemen:



Robert Kellemen, Ph.D., LCPC, served for over a dozen years as Chairman of the Master of Arts in Christian Counseling and Discipleship (MACCD) Department at Capital Bible Seminary and continues as Professor-at-Large in the MACCD Department. Through the MACCD, by God's grace he has equipped 1,000s of pastors, church leaders, and professional counselors for biblical ministry.

Healing for the Holidays, Part One

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

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

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

A Note to Those Who Are Happy at the Holidays

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

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

A Promise to Those Who Long for Healing for the Holidays

Jesus understands. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). In this one verse, Jesus gives you permission to grieve and permission to hope. Jesus is real and raw, just like life can be. He is also honest and hope-giving. His words, His life, death, and resurrection, give us healing hope.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus, forsaken by His Father because of our sin, was raised from the dead by His Father. Even more (if you can say "even more" about the resurrection!) He is now seated *at* the right hand of the Father! Reunion. Relationship. Oneness. Separation is not final with Christ. It's possible to hope because our God is the God who raises the dead. He can resurrect your hope.

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

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

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

The Problem with Denial

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Benefit of Candor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Rest of the Story

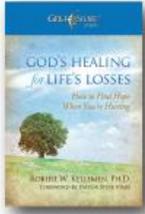
Some people may rightly counter, “But I'm not a talker.” Or, “But isn't everyone different in how they respond to grief?” Great thoughts. So some practical suggestions for “candor” will be the focus of our next post. Just how honest should we be at the holidays?

Join the Conversation

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

Help for Your Healing Journey

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



Read about his new Grief Share book, *God's Healing for Life's Losses*
<http://www.rpmministries.org/writing/gods-healing-for-lifes-losses/>