

Healing for the Holidays: Part Two -- Holiday Honesty

Giving Sorrow Words

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Push-Back # 3: "But People Are Clueless How to Relate to Me!"

Yep. Many times this is so true. And it's one of the reasons we're hesitant to be candid with others about our hurting during the holidays. Many people don't know what to do after the hug.

And, there's the biblical principle of not casting your pearls before swine. So, some people are so obtuse, so lacking in empathy, that it just may be unwise to share much, if anything, with them.

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

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

Push-Back # 4: "But I Don't Want to Be a Downer Who Ruins the Holidays for Others."

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

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

First, it's a God-thing that you can be so thoughtful about others in the midst of your holiday hurt. That's amazing!

Second, we've already said that candor is more about talking to yourself and at least one other godly, caring person. So candor doesn't require you to interrupt the Thanksgiving meal to share your deepest hurt.

Third, in the long run, your candor now will bring healing hope for future holidays. Remember, *No grieving; no healing. Know grieving; know healing.*

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

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

A Lament for Your Loss

Does My Holiday Loss Count?

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

In writing *God's Healing for Life's Losses* (<http://bit.ly/bKWaP4>), I wanted to communicate that every loss, every separation is a mini-casket experience. Each loss is a reminder of the ultimate loss of death. That is not to say that every loss is of the same magnitude. It is simply to recognize the reality that all loss hurts because every loss is a separation, a tearing away of what was meant to be together.

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

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

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

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

But remember, it is worth it. As we learned in Part One, denial changes nothing. Denial only prolongs the inevitable. Pretending doesn't change the facts, can't alter reality.

So don't beat yourself up because you're finding it hard to be honest with yourself and God. But do challenge yourself to begin the journey.

Holiday Lament Principle # 2: Other People May Not Understand

One of the ironies of holiday loss is that your family and friends may think that you're the one who can't move on because you're still grieving. Often, the opposite is true. They can't move on because they've never even started grieving. They're the ones who can't even look at pictures of

the lost loved one. They're the ones who don't dare to talk about the relative who is away during the holidays serving our country in Afghanistan. Don't let their fear deter you. Don't let their denial cause false guilt in you about your grief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But dare we ask? Do we dare verbalize our lament to God?

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

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

Lament demonstrates your faith in God. According to Psalm 62:8, if we truly trust God, then we'll share everything with God. "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge."

Think about that. The person who can't be upfront with God about pain, loss, and grief, is the person who doesn't trust God.

Pour out your heart to God. Why? *Because* God is your refuge.

When you lament, you live in the real world honestly, refusing to ignore what is occurring. Lament is your expression of your radical trust in God's reliability in the middle of real life.

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

Psalm 73 is a prime example of lament. Asaph begins, “Surely God is good to Israel” (73:1). He then continues with a litany of apparent evidence to the contrary, such as the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the godly (73:2-15). When he tries to make sense of all this, it’s oppressive to him (73:16). He then verbalizes to God the fact that his heart is grieved and his spirit embittered (73:21).

His lament drew him nearer to God. It did not push him away from God. “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand” (73:23). He concludes, “But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge.” (73:28).

It was Asaph’s intense, candid relationship *with* God that enlightened him to the goodness of God even during the badness of life. “Till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. . . . As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O LORD, you will despise them as a fantasy” (73:17, 20). Spiritual friendship *with* God results in 20/20 spiritual vision *from* God.

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

To deny or diminish suffering is to reject dependence upon God. God wants us to make use of our suffering, to remember our suffering, to admit our need for Him in our suffering, and to rehearse our suffering before Him. But what does God do when I am honest with him about my holiday hurt? What are realistic expectations about what happens in me and what God promises to me? Great questions—let’s explore these.

Tidings of Comfort and Joy

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

When we cry out to God, here’s His promise: *He comes*. He comes in His comforting presence.

In *God’s Healing for Life’s Losses* (<http://bit.ly/bKWaP4>), I defined comfort like this:

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

My Personal Comfort Journey

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

For me, comfort reflected itself in my decision not to give up on God and not to give up on ministry. I was in seminary, preparing for ministry, and secretly doubting God—doubting His

goodness, His trustworthiness, His ability, or at least His desire, to protect me and care for me. As comfort came, I came face-to-face with God. We had some wild talks. We had some fierce wrestling matches.

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

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

Asaph's Personal Comfort Journey

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

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

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

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

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

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

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

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

Now to the Lord sing praises,

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

Our “tiding” at Christmas is “Merry Christmas!”

The holy “tiding” of Christmas is “Comfort and joy!”

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

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

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

Surviving the holidays is, for many, a pretty major goal. But...is it possible that even more could occur? Could we move from *surviving to thriving*?

All I Want for Christmas Is Hope

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

Paul Tells It Like It Is

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grieving and Growing

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

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

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

So Heavenly Minded/Great Practical Earthly Good

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

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

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

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

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

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

How about you?

Are you clinging tenaciously to the Author of life?

The Rest of the Story

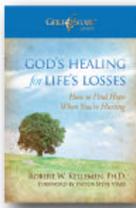
Healing celebrates the resurrection by waiting on God (trusting God with faith), wailing to God (groaning to God with hope), weaving in God's story (perceiving suffering with grace), and worshipping God (engaging God and others with love, even during suffering). In our final installments in our mini-series,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

Join the Conversation

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

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/>