



# JOURNEYING WITH GOD THROUGH LOSS AND GRIEF

*A Prayer Guide for Church Transitions*



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# INTRODUCTION

## ABOUT THIS PRAYER GUIDE

Change is hard. And changes connected to your church can be especially hard. Your church has likely been a place of comfort and familiarity for you—a place where you know what to expect, where you feel known, where you’ve invested your time, resources and love. When your church goes through a major change—whether welcomed or not—some amount of that comfort and familiarity is lost. And with every loss, there is grief.

This prayer guide is intended to help you walk with God through that experience of grief. As Psalm 23 makes clear, God is always with us—whether in green pastures or in the valley of the shadow of death. And because God is with us, our grief has the potential to not only be an experience of loss and sadness, but an opportunity for tremendous healing and growth as well.

Our grief matters to God, because those who experience it matter to him. All throughout Scripture we see God meet people in their grief. Therefore, we can trust God desires to pour out compassion and comfort on us and wants to relate with us in the midst of our grief.

### How to use this guide

This prayer guide is meant to be used for individual reflection or for sharing in small groups. Here are some tips that will help you to get the most out of your experience with this guide:

- Go through it slowly. It’s best to allow a little time between each chapter—a few days, or even a week—so that the material has a chance to really sink in. If you’re using this guide with a small group, spend one week on each chapter.
- When working through each chapter, begin the time with prayer. Invite God to use your time and this material to deepen your relationship with him.
- Find a quiet, comfortable place where you can pray. You might want to try out different physical postures—like kneeling, or sitting with your palms resting face-up on your lap—to see if any of them help you to pray. (Some people even find they pray best while walking!)

- Each chapter includes a number of questions. These questions are meant for you to *pray* about, not just think about. When you reach a question in the material, ask God that question—and then listen for what God will say. (For more on this, see “How to Listen to God” on the next page.) Making some notes about what you say to and hear from God will be helpful. Your notes can be in this booklet or in a journal, in full sentences or bullet points, or even depicted in drawings—whatever works for you.

A few additional pointers if you’re using this guide in a small group:

- Go through the material individually before the group meets. If every participant completes the material beforehand, then the group time can focus on people sharing about their experiences and reflections and praying for each other.
- Begin each time together with prayer. Ask God to use your conversation to draw you closer to each other and closer to him.
- Practice compassionate listening. Listen to understand, not to respond. Try to make the group a judgment-free zone. Remember that others’ experience of your church’s transition will be different than yours. God is at work through all of it.
- Maintain confidentiality. What is said in the group stays in the group. It might be helpful for the group to define confidentiality and reiterate the group’s commitment to confidentiality at the beginning of each gathering.

## How to listen to God

Hearing God’s voice when we pray is not something that comes naturally to most of us. (Unfortunately, it seems like God doesn’t speak audibly to very many people!) It’s something we have to practice and learn. Fortunately, God is always speaking to us, and he wants us to know his voice.

How does God speak to us, then? In many ways, including:

- our thoughts
- our emotions
- the physical sensations in our bodies (such as tightness in our throats, tears in our eyes, sensations of tension or relaxation in our muscles)
- images that come to our minds while we pray

- passages of scripture that come to mind
- circumstances of our lives
- thoughts and opinions from trusted friends and loved ones

Of course, just because something comes to our minds or hearts doesn't necessarily mean it is from God. We have to use wisdom and discernment to determine whether something is from God. Some things we can do to help our discernment include:

- comparing what we think we've heard to the teaching of the whole of Scripture. (God will never say something to us that is in conflict with the clear teaching of the Bible.)
- assessing whether what we think we've heard would produce in us the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22-23).
- asking for the input of trusted Christian friends and loved ones.
- asking God to confirm the truth of what you think you've heard (or to let you know if you got it wrong). Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit "will lead [us] into all truth" (John 16:13), so we can trust the Spirit to guide us over time.

As you and others in your congregation work through this guide, our prayer is that you will experience God's love and grace in new and transformative ways. Our hope is that you would experience God's comforting presence and voice and grow in even deeper connection with him.

# 1. ACKNOWLEDGING OUR GRIEF

You might be wondering what grief has to do with changes or transitions connected to your church. Isn't grieving what we do when someone dies?

In fact, grief accompanies all kinds of loss, from large things (like the death of a dear loved one) to smaller ones (like changing schools or moving to a different neighborhood). Every change involves loss, and every loss creates grief. Grieving what once was helps us to accept what now is and move forward into the future with hope in God.

There are many kinds of losses that a church might experience when going through significant transition. Losing a pastor is a major example of loss—one that can feel more painful if the pastor had served the church for many years or if his or her departure was unexpected or due to difficult circumstances. Sometimes certain changes in a church's priorities, vision, or direction can cause people to leave, or perhaps they leave because their own views have changed and no longer fit with the values of the congregation. This can create grief over the loss of the relationships or of what was known and familiar. Even changing the church's governance or ministry structure can cause the loss of cherished roles in the day-to-day life of the church. These are just a few examples of many scenarios that can bring about grief in the life of a church.

Wherever there is loss, there is grief. So whether you are excited about the changes taking place in your church or fearful about the direction it is going, grief will be present. If the changes are unwanted, you might need to grieve your disappointment at what has happened or the "glory days" of how things used to be. If the changes are welcome, you still might need to grieve past hopes that went unfulfilled or good things that had to be let go.

**Take a moment to journal or discuss:** *What changes has your church experienced or is your church experiencing right now? What losses are involved with those changes? Which of those losses affect you the most, or which do you feel most strongly?*

## Accepting Grief as Part of Life

### Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-4.

The writer of Ecclesiastes makes a bold statement in these verses: that life offers experiences of both joy and sorrow, and so there are times when grieving is the right thing to do. Yet often we feel like grief should be avoided or at least gotten through as quickly as possible.

Sometimes we think grief signals failure—failure to have anticipated the problem or controlled the situation; failure to trust in God’s plan or find the good in all situations; failure to have had enough faith to have kept the unwanted from happening.

If we feel like grief reflects failure, then we’ll try to avoid or deny it and end up plodding through our days with false positivity while our hearts remain heavy or broken. The passage from Ecclesiastes shows us that God offers us another way.

*Take a few moments to ask God to show you how you have experienced or thought about grief in the past. Did you view grief as necessary, to be avoided, unfortunate, or fruitful? Write down anything that comes to mind.*

*Reflect on the losses you’re experiencing amid the transitions in your church. Do you think you’ve allowed yourself to grieve? Why or why not? Ask God to show you if there are things you need to grieve that you haven’t yet.*

### Closing prayer

Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on what God showed you in this time.

*What is something you’ve learned that you’re grateful for? Make a note of it here, and then thank God for what he’s showed you.*



*Ask the Lord if there is one action he might be inviting you to take as a result of what you've learned. Jot down what comes to mind, then ask God to give you grace and guidance as you live out that action.*

*Share with God anything else that is on your mind or heart before closing your prayer with these ancient words:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

## 2. EXPERIENCING GRIEF

Entering into our experience of grief can be intimidating, frightening, or just plain hard. Most of the emotions we associate with grief are not pleasant ones, so naturally we may resist feeling them. Sometimes we don't want to experience our grief because we're afraid of what might come up if we do—memories, feelings, or experiences from the past that can seem overwhelming.

The good news is that God understands all of that. He knows what it feels like to grieve. (Remember, Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died!) God also promises to be with us in our grief; we never have to experience it alone.

**Read Psalm 139:1-6 and 13-16.**

Psalm 139 is a song of David that reflects his intimate relationship with our all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful God. This psalm reminds us that God is always with us and knows us better than we know ourselves.

*Consider the fact that God knows everything about how you've experienced the changes in your congregation. As you consider your experiences, what thoughts or feelings surface? Take a moment to jot them down. Then talk to God about what you've written.*

*Does anything else surface in your mind or heart? If so, write those things down as well.*

**Read Psalm 139:7-12.**

These verses describe God's inescapable presence and dependable leadership—two characteristics that are true not only for you yourself but also for your church.

Re-read the passage, aloud this time, and substitute your church's name or "we" wherever the psalm says "I," and "us" wherever it says "me." (So, for example: "Where shall [church name] go from your Spirit? Or where shall we flee from your presence?")

*When you hear these truths about your church, what comes to your mind or heart? How does the fact that God will be present with you and your congregation affect how you feel about experiencing grief over the changes you're going through?*

## Identifying the facets of grief

Grief comes out many ways, and it's unique for each person. Sometimes it can be hard to even realize when we're grieving, because our expression of it doesn't line up with what we think it "should" look like. It is often a mix of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual symptoms. Here are some (though certainly not all) facets of grief.

Anger	Betrayal	Defensiveness	Sadness	Numbness
Loneliness	Denial	Envy	Confusion	Bitterness
Tears	Troubled sleep	Getting sick	Muscle tightness	Headaches
Nausea	Shame	"Brain fog"	Despair	Nightmares
Relief	Frustration	Guilt	Gladness	Hurt
Resentment	Bargaining	Excitement	Depression	Hope
Acceptance	Fatigue	Questioning		

*Circle each of the responses above that you've experienced as you've grappled with your losses. Which have been the hardest for you? Which have been the most surprising?*

## Resisting grief

Grief is never fun, and so naturally we tend to resist it. We deny or “shut off” the facets of grief we may be experiencing. Some common ways we resist grief include:

- **Numbing out:** Using activities as an escape so you don’t have to feel your emotions. Activities like watching television, watching or playing sports, eating, and exercise can all be tools we use to numb our grief.
- **Busyness:** Working long hours or over-committing yourself so you don’t have time to experience grief.
- **Focusing on the positive:** Denying unwanted feelings by redirecting your attention to the “good” in the situation.
- **Serving others:** Fixating on helping others (spouse, children, clients) so you don’t have the space or time to examine your own life.
- **Rationalizing:** Coming up with excuses or explanations that help you dismiss unwanted emotions.

*Ask God to reveal to you ways you might be tempted to resist experiencing grief. Make a note of the strategies you often use to defend against grief.*

*Ask God if there’s anything he wants to tell you about how or why you might try to avoid experiencing grief. Write down what comes to your mind.*

## Closing prayer

Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on what God showed you in this time.

*What is something you've learned that you're grateful for? Make a note of it here, and then thank God for what he's showed you.*

*What is one action that God might be inviting you to take as a result of what you've learned? Jot it down here, and then ask God to give you grace and guidance as you live out that action.*

*Share with God anything else that is on your mind or heart before closing your prayer with these ancient words:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

### 3. GIVING VOICE TO OUR GRIEF

One potentially challenging aspect of experiencing our grief is knowing what to do with our emotions when they start to surface. As Christians, we tend to think that it is somehow unfaithful to fully express the hurt, pain, or disappointment that we feel. If God works all things together for good (Romans 8:28), then doesn't giving voice to our grief show a lack of trust in God?

Fortunately, quite the contrary is true. The Bible is full of examples of faithful people crying out to God in their pain. King David wept deeply at the death of his friend Jonathan. Joseph wailed loudly as he was reunited with his brothers in Egypt. Hannah cried out to God for a son. And Jeremiah was known as "the weeping prophet" for the way he conveyed God's own broken heart over Israel's sin.

#### Lament

"Lament" is not a word we use much these days, but it describes something powerful. To lament is not simply to quietly feel sad. To lament means to put words to the depth of the pain we feel—speaking it, crying out, weeping loudly, even wailing when words aren't enough.

The book of Psalms is full of examples of lament. In fact, most of the 150 psalms in the book contain some elements of lament. These psalms were sometimes read by an individual in public worship, but they were also set to music and intended for the community to sing together. Ancient Israel used the psalms to help them face crisis together, to say out loud to each other and to God how bad things really were, and to cry out for God to respond.

#### Read Psalm 80.

Notice the colorful metaphors for deep grief and suffering: eating the bread of tears, being mocked by enemies, feeling unprotected and exposed to abuse, being a vine that is cut down and burned. The psalm repeatedly cries out for God to restore his people. By calling God the "Shepherd of Israel," the psalmist shows that he knows he can trust God to care for him as he expresses his pain.

God longs to be that safe place where you can pour out everything you think and feel. In Psalm 80, the psalmist expresses a wide range of emotions and makes strong requests of God. We can do that, too.

*Think of the person with whom you feel the most comfortable sharing your deepest thoughts and emotions. Now imagine feeling at least as free to share with God the same thoughts and emotions you share with that person. Is that easy to imagine? Why or why not?*

*As you consider sharing your heart more openly and honestly with God, ask him if there is anything he'd like to say to you, then listen for his response. Remember that God can speak through our thoughts and emotions, through images or passages of Scripture that come to mind, through intuitions or physical sensations in our bodies.*

While not every lament psalm follows exactly the same pattern, many of them contain some or all of these elements in approximately this order:

1. an address to God
2. an honest lament to God over a painful situation
3. a reminder of what God has done in the past and proclamation of one's trust in God's character (faithful, loving, powerful, etc.)
4. a specific plea for God to intervene
5. a commitment to trust, praise, and worship God

*As you consider the losses you've experienced as your church goes through change, do any of these elements of lament stir thoughts or feelings in you? What are some things you might want to lament? Ask God to help you name what you are feeling and thinking, especially anything that is hard to admit to yourself or to God. Be gentle and patient with yourself; consider writing some phrases here to help you get specific.*

## Writing your own lament

Try writing a simple psalm of lament to express your grief over the changes your church is experiencing. Don't worry; it doesn't have to have all the elements, or rhyme,

or even sound eloquent. The value of a lament is its honest expression to God. Keep in mind that God knows your heart, and so it is safe to authentically express to him what you genuinely feel and think. Try your best not to filter yourself, but offer your truest self as a gift of intimacy to him.

1. Begin by addressing God with a name or phrase that captures who God currently is to you, or who you long for him to be to you at this time. Examples could be Father, Good Shepherd, Compassionate Counselor, Sovereign God, etc.
2. Offer an honest complaint to God about the present situation.
  - Rather than describe the details of the issue, describe your emotions about it. You might use metaphors or imagery, like “My heart is a stone, heavy and lifeless,” or “I walk with anger. Every footprint burns the ground.”
  - Include any questions you might have for God, such as “Why have you let this happen?” or “Have we not been faithful to you?”
  - Freely express to God any other thoughts or feelings that come up for you. Examples might include, “This isn’t fair,” or “I don’t understand.”
3. Remind yourself of what God has done in the past and his faithfulness to you.
  - While you may not be able to fully release the pain of the present, recall God’s past faithfulness to encourage you in this time
4. Ask God to intervene.
  - What do you want him to do? How do you want him to respond to your situation? Make your heart’s deep desires known.
5. Commit to thank or praise God in the middle of this painful season, even if the feelings aren’t all there yet.

*Try writing your psalm of lament below. Remember, you’re going for honesty, not fancy language!*



*Now, read your lament aloud, remembering that God is with you and is listening to what you say with attention and love. You may feel a little silly at first; that's okay. Sometimes hearing ourselves speak the words we've only thought or written can be very powerful. As you read your lament, what thoughts or feelings arise? Does anything surprise you? Jot those things down here, and then tell God about them. Ask if he has anything he'd like to say in response.*

*If you're using this guide in a small group, invite people to share their laments with the group—but only if they want to. After people have shared, discuss together what the experience was like—sharing your own lament with others, or hearing others' laments. Remember that others may experience different emotions than you do. Be careful not to try to judge or "fix" other people's pain; just listen with love and attention.*

## Closing prayer

Take a moment to reflect on what God showed you in this time.

*What is something you've learned that you're grateful for? Make a note of it here, and then thank God for what he's showed you.*

*What is one action that God might be inviting you to take as a result of what you've learned? Jot it down here, and then ask God to give you grace and guidance as you live out that action.*

*Share with God anything else that is on your mind or heart before closing your prayer with these ancient words:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

## 4. GRIEVING WITH JESUS

Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah describes him as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (53:3). In fact, the "Man of Sorrows" is a title that has been used for Jesus throughout Christian history.

It's easy for us to think that, as the Son of God, Jesus would have been immune to normal stresses like being tired or hungry—not to mention the emotions that can shatter our human hearts. Yet the gospel stories show us a person who was touched by all the same trials that we go through. Jesus got tired, was hungry, felt betrayed, and was disappointed. Even if he knew a positive outcome was coming in the future, he still felt the pain of the present. Often he shared his emotions with those around him; he entered into their grief, and he let them see his.

Jesus grieves with his friends

**Read the story of Lazarus in John 11:1-44.**

*Take a moment to imagine yourself in this story. Imagine that you are one of the people who have come to console Mary and Martha at the death of their brother. In your mind's eye, observe Jesus. What do you notice about the way he experiences the death of his friend Lazarus?*

*Now picture the interaction between Jesus, Mary, and Martha. What do you notice about how Jesus responds to these grieving women? How do you feel toward Jesus in this moment?*

*Imagine this same Jesus sitting with you as you bring to mind some of the painful losses you've experienced in your church's transition. What do you say to Jesus? How does he respond? Record your thoughts, feelings, or impressions here.*

## Jesus suffers and wrestles with God

When change and loss happen they can challenge our beliefs. We may know something intellectually (God loves me, God answers prayer, God heals, God protects the faithful), but we feel something different in our hearts. That conflict between what we know and what we experience can add to our pain.

Feeling distant from God or frustrated with him is normal in the Christian life. Having strong faith doesn't mean never doubting God, questioning, or feeling confusion, disappointment, or grief. In fact, as we acknowledge and work through these things with God, our relationship with him has the potential to grow even deeper and stronger.

Jesus himself wrestled with God in prayer at Gethsemane just before his death. Mark's gospel even tells us that Jesus was "sorrowful, even to death" (14:33-34). And, in one of the most gut-wrenching scenes in Scripture, Jesus calls out in agony from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Without losing a shred of his deity, Jesus' body writhed in pain and his heart was completely broken with sorrow. Jesus felt forsaken.

*Take a moment to picture Jesus wrestling with such pain and grief. What is it like for you to see Jesus being so vulnerable? Are you surprised? Comforted? Unsettled? Talk to Jesus about whatever you are noticing or feeling.*

*How might Jesus' experience of grief and to suffering help you acknowledge whatever pain you're feeling in the midst of the changes happening in your church? Try to explore those feelings now, writing down any phrases that come to mind.*

## Welcoming Jesus into our grief

Just as Jesus was very open with his disciples and friends about his own emotions, he invites each of us close to share our hearts with him. Prayer can seem like a separate formal religious activity we do in certain settings, using special words. But any

conversation with God is prayer, and the more raw and intimate it is, the more beautiful it is to God.

*Imagine Jesus sitting with you, maybe over a cup of coffee. He asks you what has gone on or what is going on at your church. How do you respond? Do you gloss over the hard stuff and put a brave face on? Are you glad he asked, do you wince a bit, or both? As you tell him the story, his eyes are warm and patient. His brow furrows in concern, and he says, "That is so hard to go through. How are you doing with all this?"*

*Take as much time as you want to be with Jesus as you respond to his question. Then take a moment to listen to what he might have to say to you. Jot down anything you hear below.*

## Closing prayer

Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on what God showed you in this time.

*What is something you've learned that you're grateful for? Make a note of it here, and then thank God for what he's showed you.*

*What is one action that God might be inviting you to take as a result of what you've learned? Jot it down here, and then ask God to give you grace and guidance as you live out that action.*

*Share with God anything else that is on your mind or heart before closing your prayer with these ancient words:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

## 5. HOW GOD SHAPES OUR HEARTS THROUGH GRIEF

When we go through a difficult time—like a loss or transition—our prayers often focus on what we’d like God to do about our situation, or what God wants us to do in the situation. Those are both important things to care about. But in every situation, there is something else that God cares about, too: our hearts.

Our hearts—the core of who we are, including our mind, emotions, and will—are constantly being shaped and molded by what we experience. The question is, who or what is doing the shaping? If we are intentional about offering our hearts to God, opening ourselves up to him, then the Holy Spirit will shape us into people who more and more come to reflect the image of Christ.

**Read Psalm 139:23-24.**

Often, experiences of transition and change create rich opportunities for God to shape our hearts. Taking the time to intentionally ask God to show you what is present in your heart and inviting him to work in it can be difficult, but it can also be extremely fruitful. When we open our hearts up to God, he will help us to see all of what is in us—the good and the bad, the broken and the whole. We can look honestly at ourselves with God, because God’s love for us is not dependent on what we find in our hearts.

### Temptation and sin in the midst of grief

The pain of grief and loss can be hard to navigate. While grieving itself is certainly not a sin, there can be many temptations to sin lurking in the experience of grief. Some of the common temptations in grief include:

Blame (of God, self, or others)	Despair or Hopelessness
Bitterness/resentment	Gossip/unwholesome talk
Comparison	Isolation (from God or others)
Controlling behavior	Rationalization
Critical or judgmental spirit	Self-pity
Cynicism	Unforgiveness
Denial	Unrighteous anger

*Ask God to help you identify any temptations that you have felt as you've experienced the changes happening in your congregation. How have those temptations shown up in your own heart, or in your interactions with others? Make note of what God shows you here.*

Remember, experiencing temptation itself is not sinful. (Even Jesus was tempted!) It's when we give into that temptation, through our thoughts, words, actions, or inactions that we sin.

*Ask God to gently help you identify any ways that you may have given into temptation and sinned as you've experienced loss in your church. Remember, God does not point an accusing finger at us; he kindly helps us identify our sin so that we can receive forgiveness and healing.*

*When you've identified any sins, imagine yourself sitting with Jesus. Tell him about your sins. Picture him listening to you with kindness and compassion. Ask Jesus for forgiveness, and imagine him saying to you, "I forgive you. Those sins are wiped away forever." Ask him to help you resist those temptations in the future. Make a note here of anything you feel or experience as you pray.*

### **A Note on Unforgiveness**

Unforgiveness is an especially powerful temptation during times of transition. With change and loss often come hurt—whether intentionally or unintentionally inflicted. It can be extremely hard to forgive people who have hurt us. Yet refusing to offer forgiveness not only damages our relationships but traps our hearts in bitterness and resentment as well.

If unforgiveness is a temptation you've identified in yourself, you may want to read through *Appendix A: Praying Toward Forgiveness in Times of Transition*.

## Growth and goodness in the midst of grief

When we open our hearts to God, he doesn't only want to show us our sin and brokenness, but he also wants to show us what is good, whole and beautiful in our hearts! These things are evidence of the work that God has already done in us, so we can celebrate them, give God thanks for them, and ask him to continue to grow these things in our hearts.

### Read Galatians 5:22-23.

In this passage, Paul lists aspects of the fruit of the Spirit—the things that grow in a Christian's heart as a result of the Holy Spirit's living in that person.

Love	Joy	Peace
Patience	Kindness	Goodness
Faithfulness	Gentleness	Self-control

*Ask God to show you which of the aspects of the fruit of the Spirit he is currently forming in you. Where do you see these traits showing up in your life, especially as you experience this transition in your church?*

*Which aspect of the fruit of the Spirit would you like to see more of in the midst of this transition? Tell God about that desire. Ask him if there is anything in your heart or your behavior that is contrary to the quality. If God brings anything to mind, confess it and ask for forgiveness. Then ask God to form the contrasting fruit of the Spirit in your heart instead.*

## Closing prayer

Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on what God showed you in this time.

*What is something you've learned that you're grateful for? Make a note of it here, and then thank God for what he's showed you.*

*What is one action that God might be inviting you to take as a result of what you've learned? Jot it down here, and then ask God to give you grace and guidance as you live out that action.*

*Share with God anything else that is on your mind or heart before closing your prayer with these ancient words:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.



## 6. HOPING IN GOD IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF

Think about the difference between reading someone's resume and sitting down and talking with that person face-to-face. The former lets you know *about* the person; the latter lets you actually *know* the person. One of the incredible things that God can do in our grief is to help us move from knowing *about* him to actually knowing him. Our grief offers us the opportunity to experience God firsthand, know him more deeply, and thus develop greater faith and hope in him.

### Hope in a God who dearly loves us

Often when we're grieving, we look for hope—hope for our circumstances to change or hope that we will finally feel relief from our pain. These are perfectly valid things to hope and pray for. But we can't control how others will act or how God will work in the situations we find ourselves in.

What if there is a different kind of hope, one that is not dependent on changing circumstances? A hope that is not a hope *for*, but a hope *in*? That is what the Bible promises: that our greatest hope is in *God himself*. We do not merely hope in God's ability and willingness to take action in our circumstances, but we place our hope in who he is. No matter our circumstances, we can learn to trust in and be comforted by his faithful presence and unchanging love for us.

Psalm 33:20-22 says, "We put our hope in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for our hope is in you alone." (NLT)

This passage reorients us to who God is to us, and it reminds us that He is the One in whom we are invited to place our hope and trust. It's also striking that the Psalmist not only acknowledges the Lord's unfailing love, but asks to give us an experience of it surrounding us.

*In the midst of the grief of this transition, are you experiencing God's love for you? Spend some time talking to God about this.*

- *If you have experienced feeling loved by God, consider how that has impacted the way you've gone through this time of loss and change. Ask God if there's anything he'd like to bring to your mind concerning his love for you in this season. Thank him for giving you the experience of his love.*
- *Sometimes we go through seasons in our lives where it's more difficult to experience God's love for us. There are various reasons for this, but this doesn't mean that God loves us any less; it just means we're not having the felt awareness of God's love right now. If this is your experience, talk to God about how his love seems to you right now. Share with him how you wish he would make his love know to you. Then take a moment to listen for anything he might want to say to you.*

## Experiencing God's love through his character

Sometimes we can come to experience God's love by reflecting on who God is, as revealed in his character. Below is a list of some of the aspects of God's character that are shown to us in Scripture.

Almighty (Isaiah 9:6)

Comforter (2 Corinthians 1:3)

Counselor (Isaiah 9:6)

Faithful (Deuteronomy 7:9)

Forgiving (Psalm 99:8)

God who sees (Genesis 16:13)

Healer (Exodus 15:26)

Helper (John 14:16)

Immanuel, God-with-us (Isaiah 7:14)

Peace (Isaiah 9:6)

Provider (Philippians 4:19)

Rock (Isaiah 26:4)

Shepherd (Psalm 23)

Strength (2 Samuel 22:33)

Trustworthy (Psalm 33:4)

*Consider the list above. As you are going through this transition in your church, which of these aspects of God's character have been particularly meaningful for you? How has God demonstrated these traits to you? How has experiencing these aspects of God affected the way you're experiencing the changes in your church?*

*Are there any of God's character traits that you would like to experience more of? Take a moment to tell God about that desire. How do you think that experiencing God in these ways might make a difference in your life?*

*Now, ask God if there are any aspects of his character that he would like you to experience more of. Jot down anything you hear him say or bring to your mind. Remember that God can speak through our thoughts, our emotions, intuitions, images or passages of Scripture that come to mind, or even physical sensations in our bodies. As you go through the week ahead, take time to notice whether and how you experienced this aspect of God.*

*As we experience more of God's love, we grow in our capacity to hope in him. This is true for us not just as individuals, but also as a community. God wants your congregation to grow together in your hope and trust in him as you experience more of his love.*

*Ask God whether there is an aspect of his character that he wants your church to experience more of in this season of transition. Note whatever he says or brings to your mind. As you go through the days ahead, take time to notice how God might be demonstrating this aspect of his character within your church. Share these experiences with others so they can be encouraged in their knowledge of God's love.*

*What difference might it make in your church if you personally grow in your ability to put your hope in God? How might it affect the way you worship, how you interact with others, and how you reach out to the community around you? Talk with God about these things, telling him your desires and listening for his responses. Ask him to shape you and your church in these ways.*

## Closing prayer

Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on what God showed you in this time.

*What is something you've learned that you're grateful for? Make a note of it here, and then thank God for what he's showed you.*

*What is one action that God might be inviting you to take as a result of what you've learned? Jot it down here, and then ask God to give you grace and guidance as you live out that action.*

*Share with God anything else that is on your mind or heart before closing your prayer with these ancient words:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

## 7. HOW GRIEF MAKES GROWTH POSSIBLE

Because we experience grief over the *loss* of things, we tend to associate grief with the *end* of things. Yet grief can also signal the possibility of new beginnings. When one thing dies, it can create the space for a new thing to be born.

### Death and Resurrection

**Read John 12:24-28.**

Jesus says these words to his disciples during the last week of his life, shortly after he entered Jerusalem to the crowds' cries of "Hosanna!" These few sentences show us a lot about what was going on in Jesus' heart and mind during his last days. He knew that he would suffer and die at the hands of the authorities, but he also knew that his suffering and death were not the end of his story.

Jesus knew that his death would give way to resurrection—not only restoring him to life, but also opening up the way of eternal life for all those who believe in him. This passage shows us that Jesus knew that death and resurrection did not only describe his experience—they were the pattern for what life for his followers would look like.

As Christians, our lives are shaped by experiences of death and resurrection, of losses that lead to new life. Jesus uses the image of a grain of wheat to illustrate this point. It is only when that grain of wheat "dies" by being buried in the soil that a new stalk of wheat can grow—a new stalk that will produce *many* grains of wheat. He reminds us that in every experience of ending or loss there is the possibility for something new to grow.

*As you consider the transition your church is experiencing, what are the "grains of wheat" that have fallen to the earth and died? What losses have you personally experienced? What losses have others in your church community experienced?*

*As you think about these losses that you and your community have experienced, imagine them as grains of wheat that have fallen to the ground. Then ask God to help*

*you imagine what new stalks might grow out of them. Can you identify some possibilities that the changes you and your church are experiencing might open up...  
...in your own heart?*

*...in your relationship with God?*

*...in the way those in your church worship together? in the way you relate to each other?*

*...in the way you relate to the community beyond your church? in the people you could reach out to, or the needs you could address?*

## The “both/and” nature of grief

As we allow God to show us the new life that might come out of the losses we experience, it’s important to remember that it’s still okay to feel the pain of those losses. Allowing ourselves to imagine new possibilities does not require us to deny the grief we have experienced and may still be experiencing.

Jesus’ death didn’t cease to be painful and tragic just because the resurrection happened. Rather, the resurrection redeemed the pain and tragedy of Jesus’ death. The resurrection took what had only been an ending—of Jesus’ earthly life—and made it into a beginning as well: the beginning of Jesus’ eternal reign in the Kingdom of God.

Grief, then, signifies *both* a painful loss *and* a possibility of new life. Therefore, it is our ability to sit with the “both/and” nature of grief that helps us to experience grief in an honest, healthy, and ultimately healing way.

*As you think about your experience of grief in this church transition, how comfortable are you with the “both/and” nature of grief? Is it hard for you to experience both pain and possibility at the same time? Do you tend to fixate on one or the other?*

*Take your experience of the “both/and” nature of grief to God in prayer. What do you sense God might be saying to you about it? How might the Lord be inviting you into new ways of experiencing both pain and possibility? What might it look like to hold both present grief and future hope?*

## **Glorifying God in grief**

Notice for a moment that the passage from John 12 both begins and ends with the idea of God’s glory: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (verse 24) and “‘Father, glorify your name’ Then a voice came from heaven: ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again’” (verse 28). Jesus makes it clear that both his death and resurrection reflect the death-and-resurrection pattern of his followers’ lives that are ultimately meant to bring glory to God. In our very grieving and holding onto hope of redemption, we can help illuminate the truth about God’s goodness, power, and love to the world.

*In prayer, ask God how he would like to be glorified through this transition in your church’s life. How might you and your congregation’s experiences of loss and grief help the world see the truth about God’s goodness, power, and love? How might whatever new life comes out of your losses also bring him glory?*

## Closing prayer

Take a moment to prayerfully reflect on what God showed you in this time.

*What is something you've learned that you're grateful for? Make a note of it here, and then thank God for what he's showed you.*

*What is one action that God might be inviting you to take as a result of what you've learned? Jot it down here, and then ask God to give you grace and guidance as you live out that action.*

*Share with God anything else that is on your mind or heart before closing your prayer with these ancient words:*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.



## APPENDIX A:

### PRAYING TOWARD FORGIVENESS IN TIMES OF TRANSITION

As you walk through this season of transition in your church, with all of the loss and grief it may bring, practicing forgiveness is extraordinarily important. Scripture makes it clear that as Christians, we must be in the business of forgiveness. As Colossians 3:13 tells us, “Forgive one another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.”

If we have been hurt or wronged by someone, whether intentionally or unintentionally, then we have someone we need to forgive. Forgiveness can be especially difficult when the person we need to forgive is someone in our church—a pastor, church leader, a friend or someone else we’ve trusted with the tender places in our souls.

Yet the alternative to forgiveness is to allow bitterness and resentment to grow within our hearts. There is nothing that will destroy a church faster than hearts that are unwilling to forgive. This is why Jesus instructs us to first reconcile with our brothers and sisters in church before presenting God our offerings (Matthew 5:23-24).

#### What forgiveness is—and isn’t

One of the reasons we can struggle to forgive others is that we feel like forgiving them means we’re saying what they have done is okay. That’s not what forgiveness means. Forgiveness means that we name the wrong that has been done and the hurt that it has caused, and then we consciously choose to let go of that wrong and hurt and release them to God to deal with. Sometimes this process is done with the individual, and sometimes it simply takes place privately in our own minds and hearts.

When we forgive someone, we are consciously choosing to no longer hold the person accountable for what they have done. Instead we trust that God will address the wrong with his perfect combination of justice and mercy. We release all judgment to God—and so we are free to forgive the person, even if they don’t acknowledge or apologize to us for the wrong that they’ve done (though certainly apologies make forgiveness easier!).

We can also forgive someone without necessarily reconciling with them. To be reconciled means to be restored to friendly relationship with that individual. Reconciliation is desirable wherever it is possible, but sometimes the wrong that has been done is of such a deep nature that re-entering relationship with that person would cause harm to our bodies or our spirits. This is why Paul writes in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Sometimes reconciliation isn't possible. But with God, forgiveness always is.

More often than not, forgiveness is a *process*. We can say the words, "I forgive you," but that doesn't necessarily mean a change has taken place in our hearts. As long as we still feel the tug of bitterness or resentment over the wrong we've experienced, we need to continue to ask God to give us the grace to move forward toward forgiveness. Whatever ability we have to forgive is a gift from the Lord—so we shouldn't be shy about asking for more!

## An Exercise in Praying toward Forgiveness

As you pray about your experience of the changes happening in your church, ask God to bring to mind anyone you might need to forgive. When offering that forgiveness proves especially difficult, the following exercise can be helpful.

This exercise asks you to pray using your imagination in ways that might be unfamiliar to you. It's okay if it feels strange at first. You can trust that God will work through your imagination to lead you toward forgiveness. If you'd like, you can ask a trusted Christian friend or mentor to lead you through this exercise.

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Begin your prayer by asking the Lord to help you in the process of forgiveness. Thank the Holy Spirit that he is with you and will guide you in your prayer.

Imagine the person who has hurt you is sitting in front of you. Share with him or her in detail how you feel about the situation and how it's affecting you. (If this is difficult, ask God to show you how you feel.) When speaking, use "I" statements rather than "you" statements, so that you're naming your experience rather than making accusations. You can speak all of this aloud, or you can write it as a letter to them.

When you think you've finished, take a moment and ask God if there's anything else that you're feeling about the situation, and then share those things too.

In a way, when someone hurts you or wrongs you, it's like they've given you an "IOU" statement—a signed document acknowledging that they owe you something, such as an acknowledgment that they've done wrong, an apology, or an attempt to make the situation right.

Imagine the person who has wronged you handing you an IOU. On that IOU is written whatever it is you think he or she owes you.

Imagine Jesus sitting with you. You have two choices: You can hang onto that IOU, or you can hand it to Jesus. Handing it to Jesus does not mean that the IOU isn't valid. It simply means that you are going to allow Jesus to handle the situation and work with the person as he sees fit. It also means that you are going to allow Jesus to give to you what the other person couldn't.

If you feel like you're not ready to hand the IOU to Jesus yet, tell him about this. Ask him to work in your heart so that you can come to the point where you're ready to give him the IOU. Be assured that this is a beautiful prayer in God's ears! God never expects us to be anywhere other than where we are; all he asks is that we open our hearts to him so that he can work in them.

If you decide you can hand the IOU to Jesus, imagine doing it. As you do, tell the person who wronged you, "I forgive you for these things and release you to Jesus."

Ask Jesus, "Is there something that you want to give me that this person couldn't give me?" Listen with your heart to what he might say. Maybe imagine him speaking to you, or giving you a hug, or simply holding you while you cry.

Remember that God can speak through our thoughts and emotions, through images or passages of Scripture that come to mind, through intuitions or physical sensations in our bodies. If Jesus shows you there is something he wants to give you—an apology, an affirmation, a reminder of how much he loves and values you—allow him to give it to you.

Reflect back over what this prayer exercise has been like for you. Thank God for what he has shown you and done in you. Ask for him to keep working in your heart with his love as you continue on the journey of forgiveness.