

“From the very first page, John Baggett draws you into a world of tragedy, faith, and hope. Masterfully intertwining both psychological and faith-based perspectives, Baggett peers into the lives of those who have struggled against all hope. Whether working through your own tragedy or seeking help for others, *Finding the Good in Grief* will bring you comfort, understanding, a sense of fortitude, and peace.”

—MARGARET PATCHETT, provost, Cabarrus College, Concord, NC

“There are times when we psychiatrists find our diagnoses and evidence-based treatment responses peripheral to a patient’s experience of loss. The questions of “Why me?” and “Did I deserve this?” take center stage. John Baggett’s broad experience has allowed him to engage these questions of ultimate meaning in a way that would allow us to recommend him as a counselor to our patients. *Finding the Good in Grief* carries its readers forward with honesty and comfort, without flinching away from the reality of pain. It is a book that belongs on every psychiatrist’s bookshelf, ready to offer at a time of such need.”

—KENNETH GILBERT, psychiatrist, Champaign, IL

“A useful, readable, practical, and spiritually and psychologically balanced book about everyday faith and personal crises, written for and from the crucible of real life.”

—JOHN FREER, psychiatrist, Hopkinsville, KY

“I found *Finding the Good in Grief* to be real, honest, and most of all theologically correct.”

—REV. DIANE R. COX, hospital chaplain, Cary, NC

“John Baggett touches tender places. *Finding the Good in Grief* fills an important gap in addressing real issues of hurting people. . . . Professional and lay care providers will want to share this book with those experiencing the pain of loss and the need for support.”

—REV. DAVID HILTON, retired minister and hospice chaplain, Lebanon, OH



# FINDING THE GOOD IN GRIEF

REDISCOVER JOY  
AFTER A LIFE-CHANGING LOSS

JOHN F.  
BAGGETT

 Kregel  
Publications

*Finding the Good in Grief: Rediscover Joy After a Life-Changing Loss*  
© 2013 by John F. Baggett

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., P.O.  
Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

The author and publisher are not engaged in rendering medical or psychological services, and this book is not intended as a guide to diagnose or treat medical or psychological problems. If medical, psychological, or other expert assistance is required, please seek the services of your own physician or certified counselor.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-0-8254-4319-0

Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 / 5 4 3 2 1

# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments* 7

1 What I Feared Has Come upon Me 9

## **STEP 1 • Trust God and Rely on Others**

2 Shock: Like Being Struck by Lightning 19

## **STEP 2 • Choose Reality Instead of Illusion**

3 Denial: It's Not a River in Egypt 33

4 Escape: You Can Run but You Will Only Get Tired 44

5 Victimism: Where's a Superhero When You Really  
Need One? 54

## **STEP 3 • Resist the Temptation to Get Stuck**

6 Questioning: Why Do You Keep Asking Why? 69

7 Anger: Who Pushed Humpty Dumpty? 81

8 Depression: Never Put a Period Where a Comma Belongs 93

## **STEP 4 • Recognize Moments of Grace**

9 Acceptance: The Road to Recovery Is Paved with Moments  
of Grace 109

## **STEP 5 • Discover New Meaning and Purpose**

10 Calling: Transform Your Season of Grieving into a Lifetime  
of Caring 125

11 Affirmation: When the Caterpillar Dies, the Butterfly Flies 138

*Epilogue* 153

*Notes* 155

*About the Author* 157



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have known several times of tragedy in my life. I have also experienced many moments of grace during my seasons of grieving. This book has drawn significantly on those difficult times and reflects my own journey of faith in the midst of them.

*Finding the Good in Grief: Rediscover Joy After a Life-Changing Loss* has also been inspired by the struggles of many others. I am especially indebted to the members of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of North Carolina who shared their personal stories with me while I was working during the 1980s on my doctoral dissertation, *Self-Stories and Coping Styles of Families with Mentally Ill Relatives*. I am grateful as well for the insights I have gained over several decades from other members of support groups, class participants, and individuals I have counseled.

The stories in the following chapters were constructed from bits and pieces of the lives of real people who have touched my life over the years. The main story lines reflect the actual life crises of specific persons, but the individual characters and narrative events used to convey the stories generally have been composed from the journeys of more than one person, with names and identifying information altered to protect anonymity. Most of the dialogue is fictional and is intended to serve the dramatic purposes of the chapters.

In bringing this book to fruition, I have been blessed with some wonderful manuscript readers: Rev. Diane Cox; Dr. Margaret Patchett; Sarah Gustafson; Diane C. Baggett; Rev. Ron De Genaro; John Freer, MD; Rev. David Hilton; Rev. Dr. Jack Good; Rev. Charles Sensel; and Kenneth Gilbert, MD. Each provided invaluable comments that have

made this a much-improved book from the initial draft. In addition, my friend of many years Michael Miller, as he did during the writing of my first book, *Seeing Through the Eyes of Jesus*, once again spent many hours doing fine editing as well as providing substantive suggestions. It is difficult to imagine this final product without the assistance of each of these distinguished readers.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this book to my wonderful wife, Diane, the love of my life, who worked with me on this project every step of the way. Not only have her personal times of tragedy and moments of grace inspired insights in these pages, but she is an amazing grief counselor whose talent, training, and experience have been an invaluable resource.

JOHN F. BAGGETT

*January 2013*



# WHAT I FEARED HAS COME UPON ME

*What I feared has come upon me;  
what I dreaded has happened to me.*

JOB 3:25

The thing you feared, the thing you hoped would never happen, has come upon you. Do you think you will ever forget where you were, what you were doing, or the way you felt at the time? Do you remember asking yourself, “Is this really happening?” Did you pray for God to make it not so? And then, as the awful truth penetrated your heart, did you cry out, “Why, God? Why did you let this happen?”

The worst thing that ever happened to me did not happen to me. It happened to my son, Mark. In his teen years, Mark was a gifted and talented young man with a bright and promising future. On many occasions he expressed the desire to do something worthwhile with his life, and he often spoke of preparing himself for a profession that would help other people and make a positive contribution to society. I shared his idealism and his dreams. But when he was seventeen, within a few weeks, everything changed.

Mark began to act strangely. He laughed at inappropriate times. He spent long hours in his room talking loudly and incoherently. He sometimes approached me with wild eyes to rant about a friend having used mental telepathy to give him a heart attack. And just when I thought

things could not get any worse, they did. Mark began to have episodes of violent anger. He broke things and punched holes in the interior walls of the house. It was all bizarre and frightening. At first I did not know what to think. I suspected he might be on drugs. But I soon learned that my son had experienced the onset of schizophrenia, a brain disease that stole his personality and changed him forever. Though I did not know it at the time, the tragedy of Mark's schizophrenia would forever change me too.

After the onset of the disease, the son I had known no longer existed. In his place was another very different son, one who occasionally reminded me of the old Mark but was nothing like him most of the time. I grieved the loss of the child I had known for seventeen years. Anxiety and anguish filled me as I came to grips with the troubled soul who took his place.

Over the next few years, in response to my son's illness, I experienced at various times the stages of grief that Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross identified in her book *On Death and Dying*. After the initial few days of emotional shock at the onset of Mark's illness, I underwent, as so many grieving persons do, periods of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, along with what I believe to be other stages not identified in the Kübler-Ross model. These were not neatly defined, progressive steps in my season of grief but messily recurring moods and behaviors.

Although my grief was profoundly personal, it was not unique. To live in this world is to be touched by loss. *Grief is a universal experience*. People everywhere feel emotional pain and struggle to understand their suffering.

Furthermore, while in my grief I felt like I was on a dark and lonely journey, I was not the only one in emotional pain over the change in my son. Family and friends were also feeling the loss. *Grief is a social experience*. When a personal tragedy happens, it almost always happens to a group of people, even though it may affect some more harshly than others and even though individuals may cope with it in profoundly different ways.

*Grief is also a normal experience.* It is a mistake to believe grief can be avoided if we have enough strength of character or enough faith. When we suffer a loss, whether we are among the strong or the weak, whether our faith is small or great, we naturally experience grief, not as a sign of weakness but as a manifestation of our humanity.

*Grief is as necessary to emotional healing as physical discomfort is to bodily healing.* Without pain, for example, we likely would not protect physically injured parts of our bodies long enough for recovery to occur. Similarly, the pain of a season of grief can serve as natural protection for our emotional injuries until they have time to heal.

*The experience of grief is an integral part of life's spiritual journey.* Whether we consciously realize it or not, the stages of grief are charged with emotional and spiritual significance, reflecting not only our changing relationships with our losses but our shifting relationships with God as well.

*We have navigated the journey of grief successfully when we have reached acceptance.* Acceptance makes it possible for us to heal, to carry on with our lives, and ultimately to complete our journeys. As with physical injuries that disfigure and disable, emotional scars may last a lifetime. Nevertheless, once we have embraced and affirmed our new realities, we are able to feel emotional and spiritual peace once more.

As I struggled with my son's illness, acceptance took a long time coming. I think this was for two significant reasons. First, my emotional energy was being constantly consumed by grief as well as taxed by the daily stress of caring for a seriously disabled family member. Second, my son's illness threw me, a person of faith, into a crisis of faith.

I always had known that bad things can happen to people of faith and to those they love. But in my heart of hearts, I must have believed for a very long time that as long as I remained God's faithful minister and servant, God would put a shield of protection around my family. After all, as a young pastor I had answered God's call and moved from the familiar security of rural Tennessee to spend thirteen years in Christian ministry in three of the most challenging, crime-ridden inner-city

neighborhoods of Chicago. Twice I had been caught in the cross fire between rival street gangs. My family had experienced rocks with threatening notes attached to them come crashing through our windows. We had lived through the riots that followed Martin Luther King's death, a home invasion, and the discovery of a dead body lying against our garage. Surely, I reasoned, if we had survived all of those things and if I continued in God's faithful service, then God and I had a deal: he would not let anything bad happen to me and those I love most.

The tragedy of my son's illness shattered my illusion of invincibility and laid bare the inadequacy of my naïve faith. I found myself journeying through a dark spiritual night, struggling with a new lucidity about life, and feeling overwhelmed by sadness. In the midst of my grief, my faith was tested profoundly as I struggled with an unwillingness to face and accept the reality of my son's condition.

The nineteenth-century Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote in *The Sickness Unto Death* of the ways in which "unfaith" manifests itself at differing levels of consciousness when one is faced with life's difficulties. As I reflected on my own journey, Kierkegaard clarified for me that *the stages of grief are far more than a natural healing process; there are mortal temptations within each one*. We can make choices, whether consciously or unconsciously, that either delay healing or prevent it altogether. By making poor choices in our coping strategies and by continuing in a stage of grief when it is time to move on, we can stray from the healing pathway and find ourselves in spiritual crisis.

With God's help and some assistance from Kierkegaard and others, I finally recognized that, for the most part, spiritual failure characterized my journey through the grieving process. This realization launched me on a quest to find a more adequate faith. While some of the emotional scarring brought about by my son's illness never would be removed, in time I received the grace to accept the inevitable and to undergo a spiritual renewal. I was led to respond to a new calling from God and embarked on a new ministry as an advocate for mentally ill persons and their families.

The five steps contained in this book are lessons learned from my journey and the experiences of many people of faith who struggled as I did and who, by God's grace, rediscovered joy after life-changing losses. The steps correspond to the main sections of the book.

*Step 1: Trust God and Rely on Others* emphasizes the decision not to attempt the journey of grief alone, but to seek comfort, strength, and guidance from God, and to allow other people to help us in our time of need.

*Step 2: Choose Reality Instead of Illusion* points out the dangers of living in denial, the hazards of pursuing various forms of escape, the risks of falling into victimism, and the possibility, with God's help, of facing the truth of our losses with courage and hope.

*Step 3: Resist the Temptation to Get Stuck* focuses on questioning, anger, and depression and warns of the perilous, seductive, and subtle desire to remain indefinitely in one or more of the stages of grief when God is nudging us to move on in order to find healing.

*Step 4: Recognize Moments of Grace* underscores the importance of identifying and appreciating the many ways God cares for us and continues to bless us even in the darkest days of our suffering.

*Step 5: Discover New Meaning and Purpose* highlights the healing we receive when we dedicate ourselves to callings born from personal tragedy, and the contentment and joy that come to us when we discover new meaning and purposes for our lives.

The most important thing for us to remember when dealing with personal grief is that we can get through it. The experience of grief, as

painful as it is, is a mark of our humanity and a sign of our spiritual nature. It is a necessary journey for those who have encountered great loss and a prerequisite for those who hope to know joy and peace again. The following chapters provide practical and spiritual insight and guidance to assist people devastated by tragic losses to trust that with God's help, they too will be able to negotiate successfully their most personal journeys.

*Finding the Good in Grief: Rediscover Joy After a Life-Changing Loss* is written for all of us who have had the illusion of protection from serious harm torn away by a terrible event. It is a guide for those who need help safely negotiating the crisis of faith that so often accompanies great loss, and finding and developing the spiritual resources to survive the darkest days of grief and suffering. It is about the willingness to learn, to change, and to grow in the midst of life's difficulties, and about emotional and spiritual recovery from the devastating impact of troubles and tragedy. And it is a testimony to the mysterious power of God through faith to transform events that are experienced as radical suffering and use them for good.

Unlike a number of works dealing with faith and suffering, this book does not attempt to comfort the grieving using abstract explanations of why bad things happen to us. Rather, it explores the journey of grief in the context of faith. In the chapters that follow, after a brief discussion of a specific spiritual struggle in the midst of a particular stage of grieving, you will find a narrative that illustrates the forms of unfaith and faith that may occur along the path to recovery. The narratives dramatize ten different faces of tragedy, each corresponding to a potential stage within the grief journey.

Tragedy takes many forms, and the narratives contained in these chapters represent only a few. But those who have experienced other kinds of personal devastation are represented here nonetheless, for all tragedies have common elements. All tragedies inflict a profound sense of personal loss and suffering.

If you picked up this book, it is likely that you too have experienced

a life-changing, devastating event or even a series of difficult losses in your own life. Perhaps you still are in a state of shock, or maybe you are struggling through the stages of your grief, searching to adapt and cope with the unwelcome changes tragedy has imposed on your life and the lives of those close to you.

At the end of each chapter, the “Your Story” section contains questions to help you apply the insights of the book to your own life. If your loss is recent, I recommend that you not only read this book but also answer these questions and discuss them with others. Perhaps you can find a reading partner, and the two of you can talk about the book chapter by chapter. Or as you proceed through the book, you may be able to share and discuss your thoughts and feelings with a pastor or counselor. Probably the most helpful way to study these chapters is in a grief-support group or a church-sponsored class in which readers can learn and grow spiritually as they journey together. If none of these is a practical possibility, I encourage you to write down your answers to the “Your Story” questions and to record other thoughts and feelings in a personal journal.

---

### *Your Story*

---

1. Read Job 3:25. What is the worst thing that ever happened to you?
2. What other unwelcomed life-changing events have you experienced? How did they change your life?
3. Look at this book’s table of contents and notice the various stages of grief identified in the chapter titles. Which stage best represents where you are today?
4. What temptations have you faced during your times of grief?
5. Read Isaiah 41:10. Can you identify some ways God has cared for you during these difficulties?





## STEP 1

# TRUST GOD AND RELY ON OTHERS

When we are experiencing personal grief, the most important thing for us to remember is that with God's help and the support of others, we can get through it.



*Weeping may remain for a night,  
but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

PSALM 30:5

*When I am afraid,  
I will trust in you.*

PSALM 56:3

*The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her  
hope in God and continues night and day to pray and  
to ask God for help.*

1 TIMOTHY 5:5

*Encourage one another and build each other up,  
just as in fact you are doing.*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:11