

“This resource is practical and insightful and offers hope to those who are often forgotten with a painful loss. This is a much-needed book and will touch the lives of many.”

—H. NORMAN WRIGHT, grief and trauma therapist, and author of ninety books including *Recovering from the Loss of a Love*

“Mark Karris’s *Season of Heartbreak* integrates the best of pastoral wisdom and clinical insights to craft a powerful and timely resource for those whose hearts ache after a painful breakup.”

—ARCHIBALD D. HART, author of thirty-three books, and dean emeritus and senior professor of psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary

“Heartbreak. Loss. Grief. Healing. Mark Karris is simply masterful in *Season of Heartbreak*.”

—TIM CLINTON, author of more than twenty books, licensed counselor, and president of the American Association of Christian Counselors

“A superb resource filled with real-life examples, deep insights, masterful metaphors, powerful practices, and contemporary research that will absolutely benefit you.”

—SUSAN MEAD, author of *Dance with Jesus: From Grief to Grace*

“Integrating faith, clinical research, and helpful tools, Karris provides the compassion, hope, and grace that you need to mend your broken heart.”

—KIM FREDRICKSON, licensed marriage and family therapist, and author of *Give Yourself a Break*

“*Season of Heartbreak* is a much-needed travel companion for those of us seeking comfort and sanity after our heart has been broken in circumstances beyond our control. . . . Mark reminds us that a broken heart is meant to be tended to, that we were created to love and be loved, and that this wild, messy journey of human relationships is one of the greatest ways God leads us home.”

—BETH ALLEN SLEVCOVE, spiritual director, and author of *Broken Hallelujahs*

“Mark Karris has been through the painful terrain of heartbreak and helped many others through it. Beautifully weaving together biblical truths and contemporary science, *Season of Heartbreak* will help you make sense of your experience and guide you through hands-on practices for moving through heartbreak to hope and healing.”

—TODD W. HALL, coauthor of *Psychology in the Spirit*, and professor of psychology and director of the Institute for Research on Psychology and Spirituality, Biola University

“Mark helps us learn to walk through grief so we can be, even in the pain, fully alive.”

—JOSHUA STRAUB, cofounder and president of The Connexion Group, coauthor of *God Attachment*, and author of *Safe House*

“When loss comes to a heart, it is wise to seek counsel from trustworthy sources. Mark’s prolific insights and suggestions offer wisdom and healing for the personal quest for relief and hope.”

—CHRIS ANN WATERS, speaker, and author of *Seasons of Goodbye*

“In this book, Mark thoughtfully, purposefully, and vulnerably uses his unique perspective to help all of us take steps toward a deeper life of hope and freedom.”

—SHAWN KENNEDY, pastor, and author of *Kingdom Come*

“I strongly recommend the passion, truth, and healing power of Jesus that flows through *Season of Heartbreak*. This book will expand the kingdom of God in your life.”

—RONALD WALBORN, dean of Alliance Theological Seminary, and creator of the *Personal Spiritual Formation* DVD curriculum, 180 Media Group

“Experiencing loss is one of life’s inevitable realities. . . . Mark Karris shows us a way forward that offers the kind of healing we all long for.”

—RICH VILLODAS, lead pastor of New Life Fellowship Church

“*Season of Heartbreak* gently guides you through the darkness of grief and suffering while providing a step-by-step road map to health. With solid biblical underpinnings and supportive therapeutic research, Mark Karris’s insights are well worth your investment. You’ll come to know healing from the true Master of relationships: Jesus Christ.”

—DONALD W. WELCH, president, founder, and CEO of Enriching Relationships, Inc.

“From his experience as a therapist and pastor, Mark Karris has written a marvelous book that offers hope for the brokenhearted. This is a must-read for anyone who has ever fallen in love only to have their heart broken.”

—JAMES P. DANAHER, professor of philosophy, and author of *Contemplative Prayer* and *Jesus’ Copernican Revolution*

“Mark Karris, with a wonderfully pastoral heart and keen clinical mind, has written a heartfelt book that encapsulates both sound theology and cutting-edge psychology in a rich and practical way. *Season of Heartbreak* is destined to help countless heartbroken Christians grieve well.”

—KATHRYN DE BRUIN, CEO of Kathryn de Bruin Family Therapy and Training, and certified emotionally focused therapy trainer and supervisor

“With a compassionate tone and pastoral heart, Mark walks us through what can be expected in seasons of grief, and how to process these powerful emotions so that the outcome is a stronger heart and a more insightful life. Many Christians struggling with the derailing pain of loss will find this a helpful guide on their dark path.”

—MARC ALAN SCHELSKE, pastor, and author of *The Spirituality of Emotions*



# Season of Heartbreak

HEALING FOR THE HEART, BRAIN, AND SOUL

MARK GREGORY KARRIS

 Kregel  
Publications

*Season of Heartbreak: Healing for the Heart, Brain, and Soul*

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*To the downcast and brokenhearted,  
and to those who refuse to allow “good-bye”  
to be the last word in their sacred life story.*





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## Preface

There was a time when I was passionately and madly in love with someone. I thought I had met the woman of my dreams. I thought she was the one, God's lovingly providential pick for me. It felt heavenly. Every time I saw her I felt giddy and had a gleaming smile on my face. When we were apart, I couldn't wait until we saw each other again. Our love felt so real. Our relationship felt so right.

We cried together, laughed together, prayed together, and played together. We talked and whispered sweet nothings to each other on the phone every night, longing to see each other the next day. We even talked about marriage. We were both Christians who loved God, and we had similar hearts for ministry. Even though there were hardships in our relationship, I thought our love would get us through and we would be together forever. But I was wrong. Love didn't get us through. For various and complicated reasons, I got dumped.

I was devastated. I found myself lost in a sea of misery and despair. My heart felt as if it had been hit by a furious tornado. I didn't know how to cope. I was not sure how to deal with all the different emotions that overtook me. Even the encouragement and advice well-meaning friends and relatives offered were not helpful in easing the pain I felt deep inside. I looked for books and resources to help me through the painful process

of breaking up with someone, but I couldn't find anything that spoke specifically to me as a heartbroken, emotional, wounded, and confused Christian.

Although growing through my suffering was not easy, I was determined to do it. So I decided to voraciously read everything I could on the subject of heartbreak and grief. I was interested in learning about my internal processes and emotional world. I wanted to find powerful practices to help me embrace grieving as a liberating spiritual discipline. I also found myself pondering deep theological questions about suffering and the will of God.

Years later, after grieving and healing from my own heartbreak, I married an amazing woman and became a licensed marriage and family therapist and ordained pastor. Since then I have worked with countless grieving and heartbroken people. Drawing on their experiences and my own, I have written the book I wish had been available to me when I needed it. I pray its contents will prove an invaluable resource to help you grieve well and heal your broken heart.

# Acknowledgments

I am truly grateful for the support, patience, grace, and love I have experienced from my incredible wife, Bianca. You have loved me into life.

I am thankful for countless friends, colleagues, and mentors for their helpful feedback, support, and encouragement. I would also like to thank the incredible folks at Kregel Publications and my fantastic editor Sarah De Mey. It takes a village.

I am deeply touched by many of the courageous clients, friends, and fellow travelers who have shared their painful, yet triumphant, stories with me.

I am also in awe of, and thankful for, God's kindness and redeeming love.



# Introduction

**D**o you remember whispering sweet nothings to the person you thought was going to be your soul mate? Do you remember holding hands with that person, feeling as if the divine bliss would never end? Did you take long walks and let magical breezes gently caress your faces on quiet spring mornings? Did you tell yourself the two of you were meant to be together—that this was the one you were destined to spend the rest of your life with? Sure there were occasions of fighting, disagreeing, and bickering, but that didn't matter because God had brought the two of you together and you were deeply in love, right? And because your hearts were surrendered to God and intertwined with one another, you thought your relationship would last forever, right?

Unfortunately, many of us eventually find out that is not always the case. In fact, love can suck! No, it really can. It can suck the life right out of us, especially when it leaves us with torn, battered, and shattered hearts in its aftermath.

Miraculously, there are people in the world who have never had their hearts broken by betrayal, affairs, unforeseen personality clashes, and irreconcilable differences (but I can count their number on one hand). There really are people who fall in love, give their hearts to someone, and sail off into the sunset while singing praise songs to God. I think that is wonderful.

*Season of Heartbreak*, however, is not intended for those who have happily sailed into the sunset. It is for those whose sails have been tragically torn and who are unable to mend them. It is for those who gave their all for love and now feel as though the sun will never rise again. It is for those who can't boast about a one-hit-wonder lover. This book is for those who have been left in agony to pick up the remnants of a tender heart. *Season of Heartbreak* is for the heartbroken who doubt themselves, who doubt God, and who wonder if they will ever love or be loved again.

This book is meant to fill the gaps that well-meaning friends, family, and church communities try to fill with their advice and support. No one is to blame when the advice turns out to be ill fitted, but good advice is crucial and those who care about us are not always equipped to deal with our world-shattering loss. Those spending time with us every day tend to underestimate the complex web of disillusionment and grief we suffer. Fact is, shallow responses can simply add to our pain—dare I say “trauma” for some? “There are plenty of other fish in the sea.” “Cheer up. God has someone better for you.” “Be encouraged. God will work it out for the good.” While these responses may all be true, they offer little consolation to heartbroken people.

*Season of Heartbreak: Healing for the Heart, Brain, and Soul* is a practical guide to healing and transformation for those whose hearts are broken after the loss of love. *Season of Heartbreak* combines spiritual, theological, and psychological research with practical real-world experiences. It is designed to help heartbroken people navigate through the unknown—and sometimes disorienting—territory of grief, heal from pain, and ultimately let God use their experiences to transform their lives. Although this book can be a powerful resource for all types of grievers, it is primarily for those whose hearts are broken because a dating or marital relationship has ended. It is also a helpful tool for counselors, pastors, and family members who



want a refresher course on heartbreak, grief, and helping hurting loved ones.

*Season of Heartbreak: Healing for the Heart, Brain, and Soul* is written with the assumption that emotional and spiritual health are deeply connected—integral—to life’s journey. Peter Scazzero, who wrote *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, says, “Emotional health and spiritual health are inseparable—[and] will amount to a Copernican revolution for many in the Christian community. It is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.”<sup>1</sup> And part of the aim of this book is to help you gain emotional and spiritual insights, skills, and practices that will help you grieve well now and remain to serve you throughout your life’s journey.

This book is divided into four parts. The content of the first part, “Grieving Processes,” is just what it sounds like—the process and nuances of grief. It begins with defining terms such as *grief* and *loss* and then discusses common experiences as a way to help you normalize and understand your own oftentimes chaotic grieving process. This section also examines the patterns of grief, the nature of hurt, the power of emotions, and the avoidance of pain (shock absorbers), and it ends with the final transition—letting go.

The second part, “Grieving Pathways,” discusses vital relational pathways with God, others, and self as you grieve the loss of love. It also looks at obstacles and debris that can block those pathways and keep you from having future life-giving connections.

The third part, “Grieving Practices,” discusses real-world spiritual practices you can engage in to help you heal, grieve, and take ownership of your journey through heartbreak. We will explore diverse practices such as grieving, journaling, weeping, self-compassion, traveling with others along their pathways, forgiving, and other practices to help you successfully progress toward healing.

The last part, “Grieving Ponderings,” comprises cultural and theological reflections that inform, educate, and inspire new ways of looking at the sacred art of listening.

Are you grieving a broken heart at this very moment? If so, will you let me—someone who has crossed the minefield of heartbreak, someone equipped to guide you safely to the other side—reach back and offer you my hand? My sole purpose in writing this book is to provide a powerful, life-giving resource that will help you not only survive your season of grief but also thrive and be transformed. Please know that you are not alone.

PART I



# Grieving Processes

*This section is designed to help you understand the nature of grief and the emotional process you are going through in your difficult season of heartbreak. The aftermath of heartbreak and grief can oftentimes leave you feeling confused and frightened because you are not only moving into uncharted territory, but even worse, you feel as though you are the only one inhabiting this strange new land. With a greater understanding of the nature of grief and your emotional process, however, you will be able to reduce your suffering, diminish your feeling of aloneness, and achieve a greater ability to grieve well and heal.*



## CHAPTER 1

# Zigzag

*Even in laughter the heart may ache,  
and rejoicing may end in grief.*

—PROVERBS 14:13

When Montu opened in 1996 at Busch Gardens in Florida, it was the tallest and fastest roller coaster in the world. There are moments on that ride in which you are completely inverted, and you will experience 3.8 times the force of gravity.<sup>1</sup> At the time of Montu's unveiling, there was also a Nile crocodile exhibit below part of the track, making the ride both stunning to look at and terrifying as you plummeted toward the crocodile pit. It was truly a sight to behold and a treacherously amazing experience. Oh, and did I mention that Montu was the name of an ancient god who was known as the god of war?

It is quite common for those who are grieving a breakup to feel as if they are on an unpredictable, out-of-control, zigzagging roller coaster. While at some points along the way, people feel a profound heaviness as though pinned down by g-force, looking at the hungry crocodiles wanting to eat away at a hopeful future, at other points, they feel steady, secure, and optimistic about the journey ahead, as though rolling across a straight, smooth path.

You have experienced a profound *loss*, a literal breaking or

tearing apart of the most powerful and intimate bond a person can have. As a result of that loss, you are experiencing overwhelming grief, which entails a kaleidoscope of feelings. The deeper you have loved, the greater the loss and the more profound the grief. The grieving process you are now going through is the natural means of fully experiencing the feelings that accompany the loss so you can heal from your heartbreak, learn valuable life lessons, and with pen in hand, write the next chapter of your ever unfolding life adventure.

Even though the grieving process is normal and necessary after experiencing heartbreak, the path is not linear. Unfortunately, there is no God-ordained *Seven Steps to Freedom: An Approach to Grief After Getting Dumped* manual you can buy online or ask God to throw down with a parachute from his heavenly archives. People are way too complex and their stories and experiences are too drastically different to fit into that pre-packaged, neatly designed, one-size-fits-all approach. In reality, grieving is more like a zigzag; a lightning bolt; an up-and-down slanted, messy trail, as unique as the individual going through it.

## Examples of Zigzags

Some people get their hearts broken and shrug it off. In the beginning, they tell themselves, “I don’t care. The other person is the one who is missing out. It’s their loss.” But within a few days, they find themselves calling their exes, begging them to come back. When their exes push them away again, they resort to a nonchalant attitude, pretending their exes could only dream of being with them. That back-and-forth dance can happen a dozen times until those who got dumped finally come to a place of acceptance (or denial) and find someone else to replace their ex.

Others have a more chaotic and confusing zigzag. One minute they are bawling, curled up in the fetal position and feeling

as if their world has come crashing down. The next minute, they are furious. The next minute they are okay, cracking a smile at a joke a friend is telling them. Then back to the fetal position (that was probably me!). This cycle can go on for months. Then a year passes, and just when they think they are more stable and finally getting over their exes, they hear a love song that sends them into a spiral of grief, which could take a few hours or even days to get out of. Eventually, however, the storm clouds pass, the sun comes out in full radiance, and they are ready for the next hello.

We don't get our heart broken and then transition smoothly through meticulously mapped-out stages and phases of grief. That would be amazing if it were the case, though. That predictability would make the process so much more manageable.

Keep in mind that this is *your* messy zigzag, and it will look different from what everybody else has experienced. Don't let anyone force his or her zigzag on you. Don't listen to the naysayers of grief or those who have an aversion to all things messy and emotional. Don't let people guilt you into moving on. Pay no attention to those who say, "Thus saith the Lord, 'You have grieved long enough, so move on already.'" While listening to feedback from those closest to you is important, ultimately this is your journey, with your unique timetable for grieving. You have a divinely designed, tailor-made path to healing. Only you can determine when you have walked fully through the twists and turns of the valley of the shadow of grief.

## Consequences of Avoidance

You must embark on a journey to intentionally grieve your breakup, and it will take every ounce of courage you can muster. Some decide that being intentional about grieving well is too much for them and instead take shortcuts to numb the pain.

They believe that if they go about their normal routines, then time will heal all wounds. If you decide to fight, avoid, or suppress the loss and pain of your heartbreak, you will actually make it worse.

Among the most common symptoms of grieving are what we call intrusive thoughts, which are usually unwelcome and unpleasant thoughts about you and your ex—thoughts about what happened in the past, thoughts about what you should or shouldn't have done, and anxious thoughts about the future. Research shows that the more you try to push away your thoughts and wish you were thinking about something else, the more you will have the thoughts you didn't want in the first place.<sup>2</sup> The effect is similar to me saying to you, "Don't think of a smiling elephant with polka dots. I mean it. Don't think of a smiling elephant with polka dots." And then, guess what? You are thinking about a smiling elephant with polka dots.

Pushing away and avoiding the grieving process will invariably not serve you well in the long run. The only way to grieve well and heal from heartbreak is to come to a place of radical acceptance, however difficult the road may be.

## Acceptance

Jesus suffered a heartbreak of biblical proportions. Unlike those of us who were blindsided by our breakup, Jesus was clued in to what was going to happen. His loving and deeply connected relationship with God the Father was going to be severed for a time. In Mark 14:33–36 we see that Jesus knew he was about to feel the horror of abandonment by the One he loved. He was "deeply distressed and troubled." Days before the devastating event, Jesus told his friends, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." Although Jesus prayed to avoid the impending torture, ridicule, betrayal, abandonment, and grief



(“take this cup from me”), he ultimately accepted his fate and prayed, “Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

Like Jesus, you might experience moments in which you wish things were different. That is understandable. Acceptance doesn't mean you have to like your circumstances or not wish for a different outcome. Acceptance is an inner openness to the way it really is in the present moment. I encourage you to model your response after Jesus's resilient attitude; embrace what is currently set before you, trusting that God's ultimate plan and purpose for your life will unfold.

The truth is that there is no switch you can flip or special prayer you can pray to be instantly done with the grieving process. While there are healthy practices for grieving well, there is no surefire way to pull the zigzag's ends and make a straight line of predictability and instant healing. The best thing you can do is not fight for a different outcome and come to a place where you can accept yourself, your season of grief, and your road to healing.

As you embark on this journey to understand the nuances of your unique zigzag and overall process of grief, it is my hope that you can cultivate the attitude of acceptance. You are stuck in the grieving process, so you might as well be open to it and see what you can learn from it while having a compassionate attitude toward yourself. Punching your zigzag in the face to try to knock it down or get away from it will not do you any good. Seeking to understand and accept your zigzag without denying it, as you allow God to hold your hand and gently guide you through the healing process, will produce far better results.

Like the phoenix rising from the ashes, you will rise from this tempestuous trial with a fiery love, fierce compassion, and discerning wisdom you have never known before if you accept the healing journey before you and surrender the process to God. I know, it's easier said than done. You might think that healing and growth are located in a galaxy far, far away. My prayer is

that God will grant you the serenity to accept the things you cannot change, the courage to change the things you can, the wisdom to know the difference, and the patience to wait for God's incredible transformation to unfold both in and through your life.<sup>3</sup>

Now that we have used a broad brush to paint a general picture of your grief process, let's look at some of the details and common dynamics of people who experience heartbreak.