

*Loss and Grief:
One Size Fits All*

By Kit Coons



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I remember the day clearly. For everyone else, the day was just like any other. For me, that day changed my life. My husband Drew and I had tried one more attempt at an in-vitro fertilization procedure. The procedure completed, we drove home in silence. Our home had always been a source of comfort but going through the front door brought no reassurance. I found myself pacing around each room and all around the yard, but I couldn't find anywhere to hide. At that point I didn't want life to continue, so I went to the closet, crawled in and closed the door. Maybe if I just hid long enough it would all go away? Or maybe I could emerge from the closet, begin the day over and get another chance to make my dreams come true. You see, the attempt failed again, and I couldn't cope with the reality that seven years of trying had not given us the children of our hearts.

Some of you reading this may be thinking I'm sorry for the struggle this woman has experienced trying to have children, but I don't really need to read any further. After all, I'm single, or have a house full of kids, or are past that season of life. Let me ask you to reconsider. Everybody has something to grieve no matter what his or her circumstances.

We all experience grief. It comes in different forms, but life is filled with grief. Sometimes we reserve the word grief for the major traumas of life; losing a spouse, the death of a child, or major illness. But I believe we grieve whenever we feel we have lost something. Whether the loss is another human being or the dream of something unfulfilled; loss is real.

I see grief all the time. Perhaps I'm talking with a friend and she tells me things aren't going very well. Her mood is sullen. She has no joy in her life. As we talk further I usually discover something she feels she has lost; a friendship, a project at work, or even the vacation that she couldn't take this year. She is overwhelmed with a feeling of loss and that's exactly what grief is. My friend needed to allow herself to grieve, we all do.

What I've experienced is that once I understand my emotions then I can begin to acknowledge and work through them. I believe many of us are unaware we are in a state of grieving. If we realized, we would move through our emotions and get to the other side of grief. Our feelings of loss may never completely go away, but they don't have to over shadow our lives.

Have I convinced you that my solutions have potential worth for you? I hope so, because I'm going back to my story now as an example. Please come along. I think we can grow together.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

One of the results of grief in my life is developing the ability to comfort others. Once you suffer you don't forget. I know what the pain of loss feels like, having a dream go unfulfilled, and I also know how to get to the other side of grief. Scripture teaches us we can comfort others in any affliction, because of God's comfort in our life. A large step in my recovery came by not giving in to the idea that others can never know how much I've suffered. God taught me that pain, to a large degree, is generic.

When I endured infertility treatments, I had thought that unless someone experienced the same situation, they couldn't possibly understand my pain. When I continued to think that I was the only one who could understand my pain, I couldn't move forward. I almost became prideful, because the suffering itself gave me an identity. I thought hanging on was all I could do. I accepted the victim label.

That perspective offers no hope to move through our grief. I had trapped myself into giving up on victory, escaping from the pain. But once I began to realize others could understand the depths of my pain, I began to process my grief. I could then accept the comfort of others. When someone has experienced overwhelming pain, what brought him or her to that point doesn't really matter. The pain could have been the loss of a job, the loss of a loved one, or the loss of the dream of a family. Overwhelming, gut-wrenching pain is the same. It's generic. That's why the scripture assures that we can comfort others in any affliction with the comfort with which we have been comforted.

However, I don't mean to say that we all process our grief the same way. Drew processed his grief about not having children much differently than I did. I learned that I needed to respect his process of grief. Having the attitude that my way was better than his or that he couldn't understand my feelings ended up isolating us from one other. And even though we grieved very differently, each of us found victory at the end.

We all face loss and pain. The source can be the large traumas of life or the smaller losses that built up and hurt just as much. If those losses go undetected, they will over time steal all the joy out of life.

We need to recognize the losses and then allow ourselves to grieve. Acknowledgment is always the first step in healing. Now when I'm feeling discouraged I look to see if there is something I feel like I've lost. My emotions are

often aware of the loss long before my mind is. Once I've understood, then I can take steps to process my grief.

Principles that process the grief of loss

1) The "Why?" question

"Maturity is the willingness to bear uncertainty and to carry within oneself unanswered questions." Elizabeth Elliott

When we experience loss our first reaction is to ask why? Why this? Why now? Why me? As we deal with the pain, we think that if we just knew why, somehow the loss would be easier to handle. But let me ask you, in most situations what reason would be good enough? We flatter ourselves when we think, "If I just knew why this happened to me then it would be okay." The truth is that no reason is good enough when we are in pain. What reason could possibly make sense of the loss of a child, being diagnosed with a terminal disease, or dealing with infertility?

A godly woman who lost her young son in an airplane accident once shared with me that even if God told her that all of Africa would come to a believing knowledge of Jesus Christ because her son died, that would not be reason enough. If we can be honest with ourselves, we might realize that no reason would be good enough. To continue to ask "Why?" prevents us from healing, like a wound constantly reopened. Complete healing will only be ours when we put this question behind us.

Instead of asking "Why?", we should ask "Whom?" Who knows all that comes into my life? Who loves me more than anyone else ever will? Who can be trusted to give me everything I need? Those questions lead us to God, just exactly where we need to be. We must be content to know that God, whose wisdom is perfect, has His reasons, even if we do not know what they are.

2) Survival Mode

Another principle I discovered is a concept called "Survival Mode." At times of loss all we should expect from ourselves is to survive, to go on with daily life. During pain, we need to give grace to those around us, as well as to ourselves. In a marriage relationship that includes picking up the slack and letting the other person heal on their own timetable. As I already mentioned, Drew and I processed our grief differently. Obviously, we don't want to encourage grief or depression for an unreasonable amount of time, but we need to learn how to put away our own

expectations of “everything returning back to normal” and work through our pain without adding more pressure to our lives.

As I was undergoing monthly infertility treatments Drew often encouraged me by reminding me that this was a time just to survive. If I did that much, he would be happy with me and God would be happy with me. That gave me the freedom I needed to put the pain behind me on my own timetable.

Comfort in suffering can be found through God and His servants. But healing requires more than immediate comfort. According to a report by Time Magazine (January 24, 2011), much of what we think about grief is misinformed. Scientific research has discredited the much-touted stages of grief and has shown that time is practically the only healer. A medical provider can treat a physical hurt to our body. Yet our body still takes time to heal. Like a physical injury, emotional hurt brought about by suffering or loss requires time.

3) Reshape your goals

Dealing with the pain of loss may necessitate reshaping our goals. New jobs, the birth of a baby, or a new home all bring positive change into our lives. Our whole focus is shifted. We see the world differently. Life will not be the same again. This is also true when we experience a loss. The difference being that the change loss brings is not planned or welcome. Our lives have been forever changed in an instant and we may need new purposes to adjust.

Our temptation is to think, “I’ll never be happy again.” One way to help us move through those changes is to set new goals. In our case, we believe that God gave us the “gift” of time and energy to invest in other families instead of our own. That may not have been the gift we would have chosen. But it is the special gift God chose for us. Drew and I needed to be willing to faithfully employ that gift in serving others. Reshape your goals around helping others, strengthening your own marriage if you are married, or developing new skills.

Drew and I had lunch with a friend who had served as a missionary in Nigeria with us a few years after we had all returned to the US. While eating we began talking about our lives since the last time we had seen one another. Linda shared about her job and home, and briefly mentioned that there was no special man in her life. She said, “I’m not going to let the fact that I am single ruin my life.” No one commented, and we continued the conversation. But later when I returned home, I thought about her statement. This came early in our seven years of trying to have children, but we had already experienced a good deal of hurt. I realized that I needed to have the same type of perspective. If we did not have children, our lives would not be ruined. My thinking changed. I made a choice. An important choice that I believe made the rest of our story possible.

A few years later I mentioned to Linda how her statement about being single had ministered to my heart. At the time she shared her circumstance, she hadn't known that we were in the process of trying to have children. When I reminded her of what she had said, she didn't even remember. Amazing! God used her wisdom in my life in a significant way without her awareness.

Linda remains single and we have no children, but we share a choice that our circumstances will not determine the quality of our lives. That choice has enabled us to have a life that has been both rewarding and glorifying to God. Whatever your situation if you haven't already made a similar choice, perhaps this is your opportunity to do so.

Giving up asking the "Why?" question, healing in Survival Mode, and Reshaping Your Goals are all ways to help you process your loss. Both acknowledging our loss and then practically working through the emotions build a foundation for our hearts to heal.

Same Principles, New Loss

I remember when I first thought I felt a lump. The month was December with Christmas fast approaching. I didn't give the discovery much thought and became immersed in the celebrations of the season. In January I felt the lump again. Then I knew I needed to act. I saw my doctor. My worst fears were confirmed. "I'm afraid this lump looks suspicious. We've called a surgeon who will see you today. You might also want to get some information on an oncologist for the future."

My daily routine of activities ceased that day. Everything felt different. I entered a world of which I had no prior knowledge. The surgeon scheduled me for surgery in five days. I had to make decisions about my body I never anticipated having to make. Those decisions were frightening, confusing, and permanent. After another week, I needed surgery again. This time knowing better what the outcome would be. In a matter of two weeks, my world had been completely turned upside down. Forever changed.

While breast cancer and infertility are two very different things, the core is the same. Each is a loss that can overshadow our lives if not acknowledged and processed. Through my years of infertility God had taught me how to process my feelings of loss. I didn't need new information. I only needed to remember what I had learned and apply those same principles to this new loss. God knew I would face cancer and had already equipped me.

At first the roller coaster emotions of battling cancer quickly overwhelmed me. But I had built a strong foundation. I acknowledged and processed these new emotions of loss. The source of the emotions didn't matter, the principles still

worked. As I shared earlier, loss and the grief loss causes are largely generic. The principles that helped me process infertility worked just as well for cancer.

After hearing about my cancer diagnosis, a friend called to offer me comfort. As our conversation was ending, she prayed a short prayer that had a huge impact on me. She prayed, “Lord, help Kit to be proud of the way she handles this when it is all long over.”

God gave me two important principles in that prayer. First, the prayer reminded me this would one day be long over. It gave me some much-needed perspective. One day I would be looking back on this, no longer in the midst of grief. Secondly, she challenged me to make my response a victory. “I would be proud, in God’s strength, of how I handled this situation.” My friend was right. I can look back on that time without regret. In my case the cancer was non-invasive, and I have passed the five-year period so am considered a survivor.

However, the pain of not having children has no time limit which is true of many types of losses. As Drew and I have reshaped our goals, based on God’s unique plan for us, the pain has diminished. Will our grief ever completely go away? Will the time come that we no longer twinge when people ask how many children we have? Will our thoughts of how old our children could have been ever cease? Probably not. But we have embraced God and His plan for us. He has made moving forward possible.

Occasionally people will ask me “Kit, given your circumstances, what do you think the verse, ‘I will give you the desires of your heart’ means? Didn’t you desire to have children? Has that desire ever gone away?” In truth, I think if God were to give me the option to live my life over again, this time with children, I would gladly accept. But that doesn’t mean God didn’t keep His promise. Because the way I see that verse is God in His infinite wisdom gives us the “best, most unselfish” desires of our hearts. And more than I wanted children, I wanted to make an impact for Him. So, in my case, He did give me the desire of my heart. He has given me the ability to acknowledge and process my losses. In doing so, He has enabled my life to have an impact for Him.

We all experience loss. We all need to have a plan to process those losses. We need a foundation that will stand when those times come. The severity of the loss doesn’t matter as much as how we process the emotions we feel.

“Sometimes we don’t realize how real God is until we’ve experienced the awesomeness of His answerless presence. He knows that what we crave far more than explanations is the unshakable conviction that He is utterly, supremely God.”

Beth Moore, *Beloved, Disciple*

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