

JOURNEY THROUGH GRIEF

By Chris Maxwell

The family had never spent Christmas that way before. Carolyn, whose humor normally decorated seasonal scenes, stayed in bed. Silent. Doctors and nurses had lost hope, releasing her into the care of family. Her husband, Bill, took her to their daughter's apartment. As Christmas came, Carolyn slipped into unconsciousness.

How could a family face that crisis? They did what she would have wanted. They played songs of the season. Red and green colors? Sweet food? Absolutely. They sang and prayed near a silent mother snuggled in her bed.

Two days after Christmas, Bill's tearful words gave the news: "Come see your mother. She has left us. But she feels better now."

Her life would never leave their minds. They had prayed, believing for healing. They knew that heaven brought healing, that no more chemo would be needed, that no more hair would be lost, that no longer would her voice be silent. But that biblical therapy did not remove their grief. Shifting gears from numbness to sadness to anger to denial to questions, their journey was not pleasant.

Carolyn's son, a 19-year-old Bible College student, felt tiny as he drove two hours back home. Alone. No music. No words. No Mom. Only 120 silent minutes that seemed to shout more loudly than any carolers. His life would never be the same.

Like that family, many people gather together during December facing pain. Death, illness and other personal tragedies shout above the sounds of seasonal celebration. On holiday journeys through change, people wonder if they are really alone. How can one find help for grief that seems overwhelming? And does God really see the tears of those who weep?

Dr. Richard Dobbins knows God can help in our seasons of sadness. He says, "In this life, there are some things we will never understand. The enemy can use those questions to make you bitter and to turn you away from God if you let him. But know that God is the One who can truly comfort you and give you the peace and grace to survive your tragedy."

Karen, a nurse, trusts God's care. This December will be one year since her husband's death. Karen handles the holidays by praying with honesty, remembering God isn't offended by her questions and inner turmoil. She often stays busy quilting, cross-stitching or gardening. She reads the Bible, although, she remembers, "It seemed strange to read alone." Conversations with nurses from work, friends from church and family members help. Karen says, "Talking about my husband and how he died let me deal with my grief."

Karen also found ways to encourage others instead of waiting for her own hurt to depart. She bought toys for a ministry that helps grieving children. She comforted families of patients who died. Helping others helped Karen. Reaching out, releasing feelings and receiving spiritual therapy reminded her she wasn't alone at all. Her Father would never leave or forsake her.

The family that bid their mother farewell during that long-ago Christmas has not forgotten her. But Christ's Christmas gift has sustained them.

Bill still thinks of his Carolyn, Janet and Laura never stop missing their mother. And their brother, Chris, writes articles like this one and prays for the people he pastors while still wishing his mother could watch his own three sons play sports, sing songs or laugh at her jokes.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Matthew 5:4

This family knows the Doctor who brings peace - not always instead of pain, often amid pain. Dose by dose, help and healing come through the medicine of Scripture read and journals kept and words prayed. I watched my mom, Carolyn - the comedian, the cook, the Christian example - slowly sink from cancer. Now, though I have lived longer with her gone than with her near, I still miss her. My choice? To rejoice though weeping, to release while sad, to receive by giving. That is how she would like it. Isn't that what a manger and a star and a journey of kings reminds us of anyway?

Faith and hope can flavor this year's moods. Colors and foods have deeper meanings if we eat and look while tasting and seeing the Lord's goodness, that greatest Gift of all. Unwrapping His Presence, decorating symbolism with reality, doing unto others who need us this December: all this will bring healing as we feel both hurt and hope for Christmas.

That is what Carolyn, my mother, would have me do.

That is what Christ, my Savior, can do for us and through us.

So, come. Let us adore Him. On this journey, we are not alone after all.

PRACTICAL STEPS

Counselor and writer Mary DeMent can relate to seasonal reminders of loss. On the eighth anniversary of her father's death, she offers these suggestions:

- Write about a favorite holiday memory you and your loved one shared.
- Donate flowers "in memory of" to your local church.
- Visit the gravesite. Offer flowers. Pray for yourself and other relatives or friends.
- Invite the family to share a memory they have of the deceased (you might actually learn something new.)
- Look through old photo albums/videos, remembering times together.
- Review old journal entries you wrote during the beginning stages of your grief.
- Revisit a place you went with the deceased. Remember a special time. Share your memory with someone else.
- Write about how you're feeling right now.
- What do you wish you could change?
- What do you wish you could have said or done?
- How have you changed since the loss?
- What are your fears? Hopes? Dreams?
- Through it all, maintain realistic expectations for yourself.

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