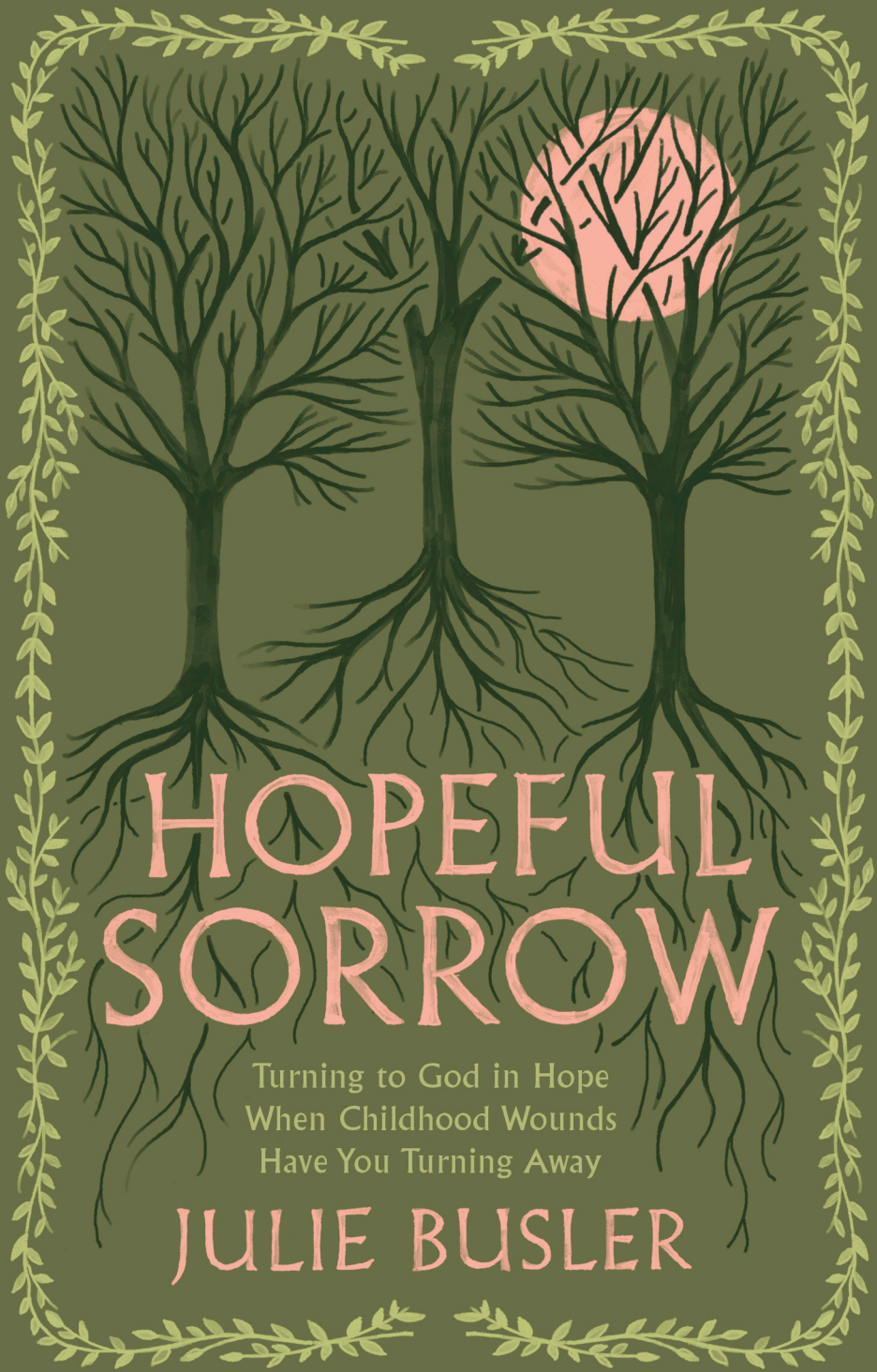
HOPEFUL SORROW
Turning to God in Hope When Childhood Wounds Have You Turning Away
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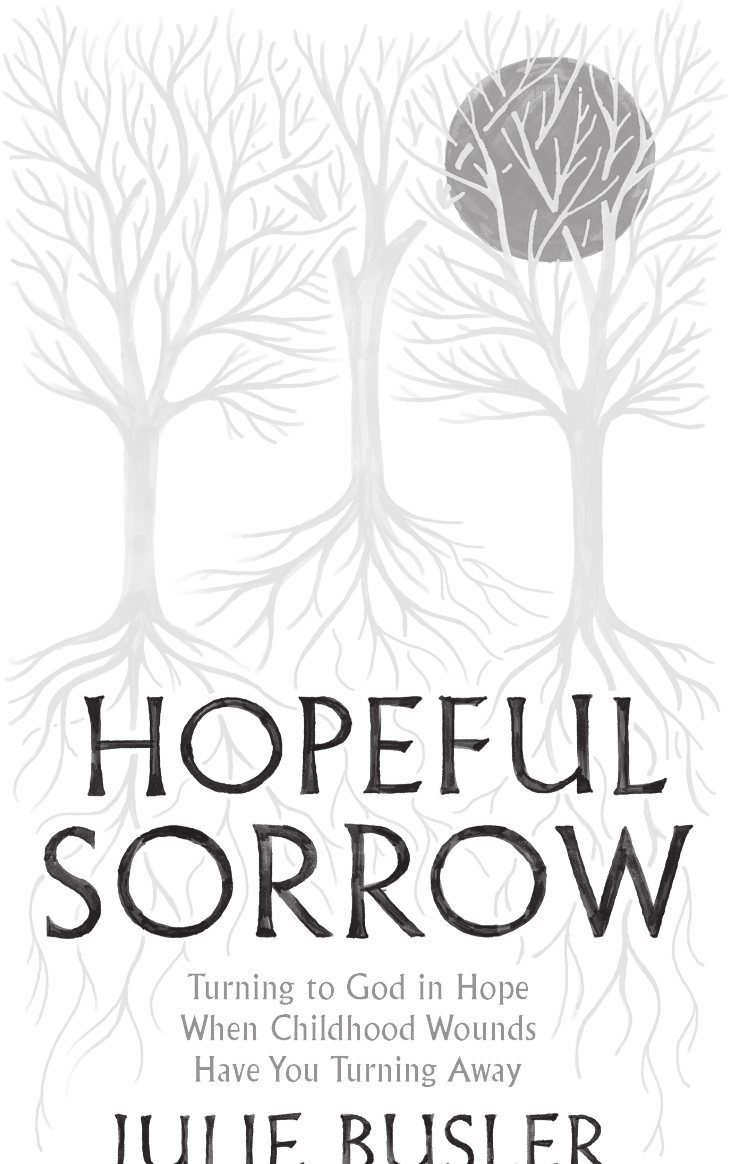

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When Childhood Wounds
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To my future grandchildren and great-grandchildren.
Breaking cycles is hard, but you are worth it.
I love you already.

This book is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical or mental health advice. Always consult your doctor or a licensed professional regarding your health.

If you are experiencing thoughts of self-harm or suicide, seek help immediately. Call or text the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988, call 911, or go to your nearest emergency room.

Here are some additional protective actions you can take as you read this book:

1. **Talk to a Trusted Friend, Family Member, or Pastor:** Share your thoughts, feelings, and struggles with someone supportive and compassionate.
2. **Journal:** Write down your thoughts to process emotions.
3. **Read Alongside a Therapist:** Read and discuss this book with a counselor for personalized care and support.
4. **Practice Self-Care:** Engage in activities that reduce stress and honor God as a way to promote well-being.
5. **Stay Connected to Community:** Avoid isolation by maintaining connections with supportive people, and participating in church activities.
6. **Create a Safety Plan:** Work with a professional to develop a plan for managing difficult emotions or crises.
7. **Limit Access to Harmful Tools:** Make your environment safe by removing self-harm means.
8. **Pray and Seek God's Guidance:** Bring your struggles to God in prayer and lean on His strength.
9. **Read at Your Own Pace:** Take your time reading this book and processing what you learn.
10. **Read the Bible:** While this book is intended to encourage your faith, it is no replacement for the Word of God.

Contents

Joy HAS LEFT
OUR HEARTS;
OUR *dancing*
HAS TURNED
TO *mourning*.

LAMENTATIONS 5:15

INTRODUCTION

Finally Honest

My therapist once told me she's had clients anxiously pick at the couch's green velvet seat buttons until popping them off altogether, and this time I stopped my fidgety fingers just short of being added to this statistic. We were discussing my past, and as if out of nowhere, "I just don't want this story anymore" flew out of mouth, interrupting her with a fiery passion. Hearing my feelings out loud was uncomfortable, to say the least. As I glanced up at her, unsure of how she would react, tears blurred her face.

I hated my story, but voicing that deeply felt frustration felt foreign. Like a shaken-up soda can, I exploded when her questions opened me up. Tumbling into a dark hole of embarrassment, I realized she wasn't reacting like I thought she would. She calmly and compassionately looked at me, allowing my words to overtake the wisdom she was sharing, and held space for me to love God while simultaneously not loving my story.

There was no correction, because no correction was needed.

I didn't understand at the time, but that moment in therapy became a turning point in learning to turn toward God in my grief. Hearing my confession felt like two steps back, but in hindsight, I

was running full speed ahead toward healing. You can't heal from that which you refuse to deal with, and to deal with something, you must first admit it.

As a chronic pretender, or performer you might say, she saw my honest pain rather than my persona. I wanted my insides to match my outsides, but that cognitive dissonance was a learned behavior programmed in childhood. Yes, I had started living a more authentic life after a few years of working with her; however, there was still an element of secrecy I felt enslaved to—secrecy with God, even though I believed He knows the thoughts of man (Ps. 94:11). Because I believed that true faith wouldn't look at the Most High and express hatred for the circumstances His sovereignty allowed, my words felt wrong. I felt wrong.

But wrong beliefs can be unlearned, and while emotions are a gift to be celebrated, they can make things appear contrary to the truth. Proverbs 16:25 says, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death." The path of pretending to be at peace with my story seemed right, but this was leading me toward death. Not eternal death, for I was a child of God, but the death of authentic relationships, death of inner peace, death of flourishing securely with God, death of my fruitfulness, and even physical death because my hidden pain was making that option more appealing with each year that slipped by.

But why do we live as though protesting our confusing and difficult circumstances to the God we love and trust is frowned upon at best, unholy at worst? The Bible is teeming with protests from the faithful, including Jesus himself. Pretending to love your horrific story is not holy. Holiness is seen in submitting to God even when you wish your story was different, for it was Jesus who famously prayed in the garden, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me—nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

But how can you submit to God, or rather accept and yield to Him as the author of your days, and still have the ability to tell Him you don't like His plan? What I've come to believe is that submission and silence are not mutually exclusive. You can accept God's plan and yet still tell Him the agony you feel within it.

A cathartic release happened through my confession in that dimly lit counseling office nestled in the heart of Oklahoma City. Putting voice to my anguish meant my therapist bore witness to my pain, challenging the isolation I felt within it. It was as though she linked arms with me in my sorrow, showing me the sweetness found in lamenting pain and confusion in the context of Christian community. This created a healthy attachment to her which challenged the unhealthy attachments from my childhood, helping me learn with wobbly legs that security with fellow believers can transfer to security with the Father. In her presence, I acknowledged my once deeply covered emotion that seemed in opposition to the promises of God, which meant I had taken the first baby steps in emerging from it. Her maturity of faith coupled with her applause of my authenticity caused me to pause and consider the goodness of my lament rather than the shame in it. Not only did God know my struggle, He invited me to cry out in it, to call it what it is.

As I've pondered that moment, I've also thought about the hard, sometimes confusing stories of the faithful that we all know and love in the Bible. I imagine Abraham didn't want to sacrifice Isaac. I know Moses didn't want to leave his mother who nursed him, and surely her heart shattered as he left. I know Job hated his children dying. Hannah's infertility caused her distress. Naomi deeply grieved losing her husband and sons. I'm positive Noah was distraught at the sound of people drowning. There is no way Esther loved being orphaned. While courageous, surely Daniel didn't enjoy being thrown in with lions. How could Mary Magdalene have liked

being possessed by demons? There is no way Paul loved the multiple shipwrecks in his story. And I can't imagine John loving his exile.

Many of our Bible heroes offer gut-wrenching laments throughout Scripture, such as Naomi who lamented by saying, "Don't call me Naomi. . . . Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty. Why call me Naomi when the LORD has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy upon me?" (Ruth 1:20–21 NLT). Her words expressed faith, for if she believed God had truly abandoned her, she would not have ventured back to Bethlehem in search of the provision she heard He was pouring out on His people. She spoke truthfully about God, acknowledging His control of all things. She didn't turn away from Him in the midst of her bitter grief, but rather moved toward Him as she went to Bethlehem. And miraculously, she didn't hide her trauma, and it was her bereft condition that led the women in Bethlehem to ask in shock, "Can this be Naomi?" (v. 19).

It's Naomi's story that leads me back to my own. I left for the mission field of Turkey at the age of thirty, beaming with joy, only to return to Oklahoma, begging for death after a harrowing hospitalization in a Turkish psychiatric hospital. Suicidality had stolen my ability to pretend my pain didn't exist. I imagine those who saw me wondered, "Can this be Julie?"

Before Naomi made the trip back to Bethlehem, her husband and both sons died, and one of her two daughters-in-law left her to return back to her home and gods. Naomi knew overwhelming loss, and like her, loss seemed to overwhelm me. I don't love that my mom died from cancer. Emotional neglect by a dad who died by suicide feels unfair. I still struggle with the birth trauma that ushered in my new calling as a mother. I hate that I shoved the sorrow down and pretended I was okay because I didn't realize I could voice it. And I can still feel confused as to how a good Father

could let this all happen. The repercussions of unresolved grief have been extreme, certainly playing a part in the suicidal ideation that took over my mind for decades. However, through a careful study of Scripture, as well as utilizing resources such as evidence-based therapy, which I believe to be a common grace from God, I have found healing and hope in the most unlikely of places: *lament*.

Lament is "a crying out in grief,"[1] and just like grief, lament is not tame. It can be wild in its wailing or weeping, complaining or mourning aloud, but it comes back to a place of hope and trust in the character of God. Lament is the hopeful song sung in the dark night of the soul suspended between our permitted pain and the promises of God. It's a grace of God given to us in the midst of the *already* and the *not yet*. It's voicing the heart's pain while waiting to see its purpose. Believers lament because life can often present in opposition to our God who is good. When circumstances appear to clash with God's promises, lament is an invitation for struggling children of God to keep calling on their Father to do something, to act on their behalf. Sorrow is expected during our sojourn on earth; however, when hope marries sorrow, you see a godly lamenter who is steadfast in seeking God's answers and help when action on His part seems delayed.

For me, it has taken a messy journey through grief to see my need for lament, and the moment God revealed to me that I was finally understanding this important song of sorrow happened to be on that same green couch in my therapist's office. As one who was emotionally ill-equipped and delayed in navigating the wilderness of grief, my therapist often interjected phrases into our conversations like, "This is grief," to help me recognize its presence.

When I cried and complained that I didn't have a mom, she said, "This is grief."

When I expressed how life isn't what I expected, she said, "This is grief."

When I was angry that my dad chose to die, she said gently, "This is grief."

The more I recognized grief, the more confronted I was by my lack of understanding in how to grieve in a godly way. An honest way. A hopeful way. Until one day when God gave me a real-life moment of learning what He had already been opening my eyes to in Scripture: *lament*. I arrived at therapy with a tender heart that had tumbled back into being acutely aware of my grief through being triggered. I sat on her couch and exclaimed through tears, "How long will it feel this way?" And although not explicitly stated, my settled belief in the sovereignty of God implied my cry was directed toward Him. My anguished question was immediately interrupted by the Spirit's clarity. I sat straight up and said, "This is lament." I was practically learning, yet not quite absorbing, what the Lord would eventually place on my heart to share with you. That moment in front of my therapist wouldn't be the last when my frustrated cries in her office would be highlighted by the Spirit as lament.

I can assure you that I have lived sorrow—I still do every day—but I can say with certainty that the gift of lament is a lifeline. Your sorrow may persist, but there is a hopeful way to turn to the Father in the midst of it, because that's what lament is—a turning. Depression may seemingly take your face in its hands as if to say, "Look at me," but lament is choosing not to cooperate. Lament is fighting the temptation to turn away in despair by turning toward the Father who rescues you because He delights in you (Ps. 18:19). The depression may persist, but your focus on God offers hope in the midst of that pain.

And that is what we all long for: hope in our sorrow.

Lament gives dignity to our suffering and fosters attachment to the God you love in the midst of a story you don't. Your grief is not meaningless, for it's through sorrow that we learn lessons that

aren't learned any other way. Even the psalmist said, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word" (Ps. 119:67). Through the Lord, the unwanted experience of grief can be the most beautiful gift hidden within black wrapping paper. What may appear to be delay on God's part is working for your good; however, because He knows the pain of waiting, He invites you to lament. And through lament, we join those in the Bible with difficult stories whose pain was a pathway to grasp who God really is.

Abraham learned his God provides. Moses learned his God delivers. Job learned his God controls all things. Hannah learned her God hears prayers. Naomi learned her God redeems. Noah learned his God saves. Esther learned her God is sovereign. Daniel learned his God protects. Mary Magdalene learned her God heals. Paul learned his God strengthens. John learned his God wins.

And I have learned that God is the God of hope.

Pain and hope coexist in believers, for pain highlights the sustaining power of hope in Christ, and hope fosters endurance in the midst of pain. And right there in the middle is where you find lament. If you resonate with David who once said, "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long will I store up anxious concerns within me, agony in my mind every day?" (Ps. 13:1–2a), I hope you'll continue on this journey with me of learning to lament while also considering what may be hindering you from practicing it. And may you one day say alongside other sorrowful, yet hopeful saints, "But I have trusted in your faithful love; my heart will rejoice in your deliverance. I will sing to the LORD because he has treated me generously" (vv. 5–6).

PART 1

Lament

CHAPTER 1

Permission to Grieve

"My eyes have grown dim from grief, and my whole body has become but a shadow."

Job 17:7

Mom

"I have cancer," my mom calmly confessed as I leaned on the scratchy yellow couch behind me. As a child, I was old enough to know there was a problem, yet not mature enough to understand the nature of it. Tears were absent from her face, but children are skilled in sensing, and I knew something was wrong. I felt conflicted as she nonchalantly admitted she was sick and then went on with her housework. Grief, a "deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement,"[1] was what I felt; however, having no concept of grief, its intrusion was unsettling. In the days following my mom's life-shattering news, I got glimpses of grief, yet my parents' lack of emotional expression regarding her diagnosis translated to my young mind that pretending to be happy was just what you do. My inner pain was not validated by seeing their pain expressed. I suspect this led my eight-year-old mind to form the belief that my pain was wrong.

Not long after, I remember sneaking upstairs where my mom cradled my younger sister while surely contemplating what felt like a death sentence. The darkened loft in our apartment mimicked the dark sadness I felt clueless in communicating. As my eyes adjusted to the pitch-black room, I understood the movement of her body to be silent sobs. As an adult, and a mother myself, I now see the grief that must have flooded her like a tsunami. While she didn't tell me, I assume she was grieving the loss of what her life would be, the physical changes that were on the horizon, and possibly even death itself. I compassionately accept she did the best she knew how, but I also wonder if she thought by hiding her grief, she was being a loving shield for me.

What if I had been taught about grief by a mother who cried next to me rather than hidden from me? What if, instead of being my shield, this had been the hopeful, yet sorrowful way I learned to say, "But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head" (Ps. 3:3)? I can only speculate, but I do think about these things as I try to raise my own children in an emotionally healthy way, grieving my lack of emotional health in childhood, yet compassionately respecting my mother who loved me the best she knew how.

In my teenage years, my mom's agonizing wails, reminiscent of a horror movie soundtrack, traveled to my basement bedroom through the air vents. She may have been lamenting her lot in life to the Lord, for the word *lament* in Hebrew means to wail, but I don't know for sure. What I do know is that my mom was in pain, most likely physical and definitely emotional pain. Parental concealment of emotional expression translates any wail of pain as something to be withheld from others. And withhold I did.

My learned behavior regarding pain was validated in the ballet studio. I was enrolled in ballet when I was three years old after weeks of twirling throughout our home wearing my favorite white

petticoat. I not only loved ballet, but became known for it. I spent summers training with renowned companies such as American Ballet Theatre, Juilliard, and the Boston Ballet. But here's the problem with ballet: You are trained to give off the appearance of effortless beauty. Bloody toes and aching muscles were covered by satin pointe shoes and exquisite tutus. I was trained to gracefully dance with a pleasant expression on my face, completely withholding anything I felt so as not to ruin the experience of those I was performing for. Ballet is really just a creative form of people-pleasing. My whimsical movement on stage during lightning-speed footwork would transform into dry heaving in the wings at times. What a picture of masking pain in public while having grief-stricken panic attacks behind closed doors. I loved ballet, but it came at a cost. Ballet embodied cognitive dissonance, and the hours spent perfecting my art in the dance studio further hindered me in embracing my humanity.

Eventually, I believe my mom knew her end was approaching. Grief expert David Kessler wrote of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, MD, "the mother of a movement that began to make grief a real conversation,"[2] that Elisabeth always said, "Listen to the dying. They will tell you everything you need to know about when they are dying. And it is easy to miss."[3] And I almost did. I was packing for my upcoming trip to Boston, where I would be dancing for six weeks after my freshman year at the University of Oklahoma. My mom uncharacteristically walked into my room and sat on my bed. Through long overdue tears, she abruptly said to me, "I'll never meet my grandchildren." Her heartbreaking disclosure validated what Elisabeth believed to be true. This was my dear mother finally showing me her grief. Being grief-illiterate, though, I pushed my pain away internally with unfortunate ease. I was only given a week in Boston before my final conversation with her over the phone brought news that there was nothing else the doctor could do.

She was given three months to live.

With her being sick most of my childhood, you'd assume I knew cancer would claim her life. Her concealed battle, though, meant news of her imminent death sent shockwaves through my heart. Her phone call was my unwelcomed introduction to anticipatory grief. My life multiplied much like the cancer cells killing her. I was operating in two worlds; one that still felt relatively normal, because life with her in it is all I knew, yet there was another world where I would have no mother, and I was trying to come to terms with what living in this strange land would mean. Generally, grief is thought of as a focus on what has been lost, however anticipatory grief maintains its focus on the loss ahead. It's within this tension that lament, a crying out to God in the midst of pain and confusion, attaches your heart in honesty and hope to Him, trusting His help will come. Today my faith-filled protest, while anticipating loss, would sound something like:

> *"How long, Lord, is this cancer going to ravage her body? Why haven't you healed her yet? You would get the glory if you would. Are you really going to take away my mom? Help me, for I can't live without her. But I will trust in you, for you are faithful and I believe you will help me."*

However, having no personal relationship with Him at the time, not only was the idea of honestly telling God how I felt ludicrous to me, but the word *lament* was simply not in my vocabulary. She died in the days following my arrival home, and while she was wide-awake in heaven, I metaphorically felt wide-awake in hell.

Grief was inescapable, and felt as though it really would kill me. Despite her drawn out illness, I didn't foresee her dying. "At an early age we momentarily anticipate that we can lose our parents. In our minds the thought is there, but denial helps us by telling us that it

will happen to someone else's parents."[4] Days before her death, I was told she would die, but then I kind of didn't think she would. And then she did. I would never be the same. My mind was consumed by a concoction of thoughts—reminiscing over the beautiful days as her daughter, contemplating what I wish she had done differently, reliving the horrifying last moments of her life, and then also my terrifying future without a mom. The words of C. S. Lewis, in his beloved book *A Grief Observed*, feel as though they were written about me: "I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief."[5]

She died in June.

We buried her in July.

I was back in college come August, pretending nothing had happened.

Dad

I stood stoically as loved ones offered me their condolences in the foyer of the mortuary following my father's funeral. I was an adult, as it had been a handful of years since we buried my mom, but even in my twenties, I felt the soul loneliness of orphanhood. The funeral attendees' warm tears were a tangible expression of the swelling sorrow that I felt trained to hide. My secret grief with my mom was the dress rehearsal for the performance of my life in concealing traumatic grief over my dad. No matter what was happening inside, my outward expression mimicked that of a ballerina—graceful and unscathed by pain. It was as though my emotions had been disconnected at best, but more accurately, locked away in a coffin, buried six feet below me. I didn't know how to articulate it, but I knew intuitively that appearing immune to grief, while burying my last remaining parent after his death by suicide, was weird.

Grieving my dad was confusing. He was my dad; I loved him and longed for him. Yet my lifelong yearning for the affection and attention I failed to receive from him left me bewildered at my sadness. I suppose I was also grieving what I never had, and while I can compassionately see that my dad gave me all he was capable of giving, I still wish it had been different. I grieve that it wasn't. What I now see with clarity was hidden in a tangled-up mess that I was able to ignore for a season. However, I've learned the hard way that grief ignored is a poison of sorts. Decades passed before I would begin to unpack that particular moment in the foyer, but that moment of discord in my soul would later catapult me into a journey characterized by hopeful sorrow. My sorrow has been held fast by hope as I've learned to understand grief, recognize complications within it, cry out to God in the midst of it, and walk in a state of loss adjustment.

Everyone Grieves

Secured by the original sin in Eden, grief is a tie that binds humanity together. It does not discriminate and is the natural response to losing what we know and love. Although the terms *grief* and *grieving* may be used interchangeably at times, they aren't quite the same. Grief is the emotion felt following loss, and while it may come in waves of varying strength, it lasts a lifetime. Grief feels shackled to you with no keys in sight; it's a shadow you cannot escape, a choke hold that won't let go.

Now raising my mom's grandkids she never got to see, I still feel grief when they do something I know she would have loved. In a world ready for you to move on from your grief, you may feel shame for lingering sorrow. Shame over grief, though, leads to concealing and complicating it. The truth is, we eventually adapt and learn to live with loss, but we never stop feeling some degree of anguish. Even years after loss has occurred, and your life has morphed into

something meaningful again, there will be moments where the most minute reminder floods you with sadness. You keep going with a smile on your face; however, it's imperative that we normalize ongoing grief as the universal human experience.

While grief, though eventually tempered, becomes your lifelong companion in the wake of loss, grieving is a process. It has a trajectory. It's a journey that may include some or all of the well-known five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The journey, though, will look different for each of us because grief is an individualized experience. The stages of grief have evolved since they were first introduced to the world and have been misunderstood at the same time. "They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people experience, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives."[6] While not a neat road map with linear stops along the way, learning of these stages is helpful and hopeful in that they provide us with a framework for learning how to live after loss and for grasping grief's unpredictable terrain. You may skip around or alternate between various stages, or not experience certain stages altogether. Rather than a prescription for how to grieve, they should be viewed as a way to describe what grief may look like.

In considering various stages of grief, I suppose I was in denial during that disconnected moment in the foyer, for the initial response to overwhelming loss is often paralysis from shock or emotions running numb. "The denial is still not *denial of the actual death*, even though someone may be saying, 'I can't believe he's dead.' The person is actually saying that, at first, because it is too much for his or her psyche."[7] Perhaps denial was protecting me from an onslaught of emotion that was too much in the aftermath of my dad's suicide, but it wasn't long before things took a turn for the worse. Having lost one parent by natural causes and the other

by choice taught me that grief can come in various shades, causing one to veer off the path of what is considered healthy grieving onto a more complicated one. I had veered. I was lost in a sea of complication, and it nearly cost me my life.

It's Complicated

Being a suicide survivor was never in my plans, and it can be confusing how the Lord could allow it to be. Unfortunately, I am not the only one who's been forced to join the dreaded group of those left behind, and sadly, I won't be the last. While suicide is preventable, it remains a leading cause of death in the United States, meaning each one of you reading this has been affected by suicide in one way or another. Grieving suicide is horrible and may involve feelings such as anger, betrayal, and shame, just to name a few.

The perceived abandonment tied to the intentionality of my dad's death pushed me into disorienting, complicated grief, also known as prolonged grief. While experts still seek clarity on prolonged grief, and if it is best to be labeled a disorder, in 2022 prolonged grief disorder was added to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR), a medical reference book used by doctors as a guide to help diagnose mental disorders. The entry states: "Prolonged grief disorder represents a prolonged maladaptive grief reaction that can be diagnosed only after at least 12 months (6 months in children and adolescents) have elapsed since the death of someone with whom the bereaved had a close relationship. Although in general this time frame reliably discriminates normal grief from grief that continues to be severe and impairing, the duration of adaptive grief may vary individually and cross-culturally."[8] This struggle may include a deep yearning for your loved one as well as a preoccupation with thinking of them. Other symptoms may include disbelief regarding the death; avoiding reminders

of your loved one; excruciating, emotional pain; difficulty continuing or reengaging in relationships with others; and even struggling to plan the future. Complicated grief is savage. It's debilitating.

Suicide bereavement, along with grieving other types of traumatic deaths that are sudden, unexpected, and possibly violent, often leads to complicated grief, and it may include elements such as shock, bewilderment, and even a change in fundamental beliefs. "Those who have been bereaved by suicide may have symptoms of post-traumatic stress. If the person witnessed the death or found the body, they may suffer flashbacks or nightmares. This can also happen even if the person did not see them, but cannot stop imagining what happened—and imagination may be worse than reality."[9]

It is in these moments that turning to God in your grief, confusion, and questions through lament is essential to holding onto faith, even when circumstances are unbearable and unbelievable. Lament gives you permission to wrestle with that which is hard to wrap your mind around while still holding onto God's promises as if your life depends on it. And your life very well may depend on it. Initially, the signs and symptoms of normal grief and complicated grief may appear the same; however, over time, those of complicated grief linger and worsen whereas in normal grief, they fade.

Complicated grief is like being stuck in quicksand with no way out; the heightened state of mourning prevents healing. Processing through complicated grief may require the help of a trained professional, especially if there are thoughts of suicide involved. And while the exact causes of complicated grief remain unknown, it is believed that it may involve everything from your environment all the way to the chemical makeup of your body. For me, I believe my tightly clutched childhood conviction that revealing grief brought shame, so it was to be hidden, certainly played a part in my experience with complicated grief. I also did not know there was a hopeful way to cry out to God in the midst of persisting sadness over a complicated

relationship with the loved one I lost. My dad's death happened after I accepted Jesus. I understood God to be sovereign and I did believe He loved me. I had faith that Jesus freed me from sin's grip, and I prayed. However, there was a richness lacking in my relationship with God, for not only did I fail to voice the complicated mess of thoughts that held my mind captive, but I thought telling God my true feelings was wrong. Essentially, I was still performing. I performed for my parents, I performed for audiences, and now I was performing for God. But God doesn't want our performance, He wants our hearts, complicated emotions and all.

In my story, complicated grief did not stand alone as the only mental health struggle. Not always, but complicated grief can most certainly coexist alongside depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as was the case for me. Although it would be nearly two decades following my dad's suicide before a mental breakdown and hospitalization would ensure I finally received the help I needed, I believe my struggles of major depressive disorder and PTSD had been prevalent for years, only further complicating the grieving process. The DSM-5-TR continues its entry, begun earlier: "The course of prolonged grief disorder may be complicated by comorbid posttraumatic stress disorder, which is more common in situations of bereavement following the violent death of a loved one (e.g., murder, suicide) when grief for the bereaved may be accompanied by personal life threat and/or witnessing of violent and potentially gruesome death."[10] Compared to those grieving nonviolent losses, there appears to be an association of prolonged grief disorder symptoms and suicidal ideation. Isolation, stigma, a lost sense of belonging, emotional distress, and avoiding reminders of the loss all carry a higher incidence of unhealthy behavior that is suicidal. My desperation to understand my dad's death collided with confusion as to why I cared so much about the man who abandoned me. This

unhealthy obsession with all that had conspired invited suicidal ideation to the party.

Stuck in a Loop

As days melted into weeks and then years, my thoughts remained consumed by my dad's life, my experience as his daughter, and his traumatic death. Every detail surrounding his suicide played like a well-worn VHS tape from my childhood. My mind's eye would watch the horror of his death unfold, rewind, and repeat. While outwardly engaged in life, inwardly I withdrew deeper into continuous rehearsal of every detail. I would think on the moment I learned of his death through his written goodbye with ever-growing frequency and intensity. I imagined where he sat while he composed his final words, and I wondered if he ever considered his children as he penned those goodbyes. I longed for answers where there was no hope of receiving them, and I desperately wondered where God was. I felt rejected by my dad and God alike. You hear of miraculous intervention in suicide stories, but not in my dad's. I wanted to boldly ask God why. *Why didn't you stop him? Why didn't his method fail? Why would you not give him another chance?* I did not yet have a concept of lament, so those questions remained stuck in this unhealthy loop, this process we call rumination.

Unhealthy loops of rumination are antithetical to Paul's instruction to "take every thought captive" (2 Cor. 10:5), but rumination is common in those experiencing complicated grief, Christian and non-Christian alike. Rumination was my attempt to make sense of a nonsensical death, and my attempt at preventing the experience of such a loss again. Continually thinking on my dad's death, and imagining his final moments, fueled worry within me. What if I lose someone else like this? What if I follow in his footsteps? Although connected, worry and rumination differ in

that rumination focuses on past negative events, and worry looks forward on the uncertainty of the future and possible negative outcomes. I was grief-stricken, but outwardly, I was holding it together. This grief was complicated and prolonged, lasting more than two decades. There was no anger, no bargaining, no acceptance, only depression. And deep, life-threatening depression at that.

For me, and maybe for you too, holding back from outwardly grieving out of self-preservation also meant holding it back from God. Turning inward and ruminating over my past distracted me from turning to the Father and releasing my pain. Worrying over my future distracted me from turning to the Father, knowing it was all in His loving hands. Trauma kept me in fight-or-flight and my suicidal ideation lied, telling me life would never have meaning.

Although finally receiving professional help changed the course of my life, it was abiding in Christ and experiencing a flourishing relationship with Him that brought me back to life. Connecting to Him as my life source is what transformed grief from a death sentence into a sorrowful teacher that unlocked the beauty of hope like nothing else has.

So, what is the proper way to grieve, not as the world grieves, but with hope (1 Thess. 4:13) even in persisting sorrow? Is there actually a way for meaningless expressions of agony to be transformed into faith-filled cries to God who can comfort and act on our behalf? While the worldwide church is made up of believers within their cultural norms across the globe, one similarity remains regardless of earthly citizenship. This is where we usher lament fully into our conversation. Lament is not just something to think about in the grieving process, it's the primary way a follower of Christ should grieve. It's through lament that we experience the mystery of grief coexisting with a mind captivated by Christ rather than crushing circumstances. It's how we wrestle with the pain that seems

incomprehensible, and it's the grace of God given to us so that we may grieve in a healthy and attached way to Him.

Reflection Questions

1. When were you first introduced to grief in your life?

2. Are you currently grieving a loss?

3. Do you feel that you have veered off the path of healthy grief into complicated grief?

Did you grow up feeling unloved, unseen, and insecure?

Do you still feel this way today?

IF SO, YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

OUR EARLIEST RELATIONSHIPS become the blueprint for how we relate to others later in life, including God. But what happens when those childhood relationships have left you wounded?

In *Hopeful Sorrow*, Julie Busler shares her journey through childhood trauma, emotional neglect, and grief, showing that turning from childhood wounds to God in hope begins with turning toward them in sorrow. Through the biblical practice of lament—bringing honest pain and questions to God—she demonstrates how acknowledging sorrow can lead to hope, resilience, and renewed faith.

Blending personal stories with insight from Scripture, Julie will equip you to:

- **Face and process childhood pain with hope and forgiveness**
- **Stop hiding pain and find peace in God's presence**
- **Navigate feelings of abandonment and neglect**
- **Trust God as a loving Father**
- **Break family patterns that have been breaking you**

The lens through which we see our parents naturally affects how we view God, but there is hope! We really can attach to Him as a loving Father and learn to live securely in His love.

JULIE BUSLER is a Bible teacher, author, and speaker who is passionate about helping people find hope and joy even in the midst of sorrow. As a mental health advocate, she has authored two books: *Joyful Sorrow* and *Hopeful Sorrow*. She is also a contributing author to Lifeway Women's Bible study, *Grateful*. Her heart for evangelism led to her serving as the Oklahoma president of Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) from 2020–2024. Julie, and her husband, Ryan, have four children and served as missionaries in Canada, Mexico, Germany, and Turkey.

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