

## Finding Healing After Tragedy or Loss



 Christopher News Notes

**T**RAGEDY AND LOSS ARE, UNHAPPILY, FACTS OF LIFE—EVEN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. Live long enough and someday an illness, the loss of a loved one, or a major unexpected change will affect us. As followers of Christ, we know that our own crosses await us. But along with suffering comes hope.

That hope is born from the promises of a Savior who defeated death, and who assured us that in His Father's kingdom, every tear would be wiped away and

every wound would be healed by the divine physician. Getting to that healing can be difficult, especially after experiencing a tremendous loss. Thankfully, we have spiritual guides who have walked those paths to help us on our journeys.

## The Pain that Accompanies Tragedy

There's no sense in denying that loss and tragedy leave painful wounds. C.S. Lewis, the renowned Christian apologist, experienced his own crisis of faith when his wife, Joy, died. He published *A Grief Observed*, a book of journal entries showing the raw honesty of dealing with the pain and shock of the death of a beloved.

Writing in the book's introduction, author Madeleine L'Engle contemplates Lewis' journey through grief in light of her own experience with the death of her husband and how it challenged her faith: "The true consolations of religion are not rosy and cozy, but comforting in the meaning of the word: com-fort, with strength. Strength to go on living, and to trust that whatever Joy [Lewis' deceased wife] needs...is being taken care of by that Love which began it all."

Grieving any kind of loss is a process. It doesn't happen quickly, and it certainly occurs in stages. Taking the time to let that process unfold is part of grieving properly. Try to rush things too quickly, and unresolved issues can come back. St. Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century saint, once said in a funeral sermon, "Let the widow mourn deeply. Let her perceive the loss that has been inflicted on her."

No stranger to loss, St. Gregory was unafraid to acknowledge his own grief in public and, in so doing, helped others who were lamenting. Yes, he believed in the ultimate triumph of Christ over death. But he knew that in this life, the pain of that separation was real and undeniable.

*"It is of the very essence of Christianity to face suffering and death not because they are good, not because they have meaning, but because the resurrection of Jesus has robbed them of their meaning."*  
—Thomas Merton

## God Mourns With Us

The problem of pain is one that has vexed mankind for generations. How can a perfect God, who knows and loves us, allow for pain and suffering? We can almost never make sense of that while we're going through it, or sometimes even years after. In those cases our confusion has to be offered back to God in the hope that all will be made right and revealed in the end.

No matter what, a God of love surely doesn't rejoice at our sufferings. Bishop Kallistos Ware, writing in *The Orthodox Way*, states: "Our misery causes grief to God; the tears of God are joined to those of man... 'Love makes others' sufferings its own,' states the *Book of the Poor in Spirit*. If this is true of human love, it is much more true of divine love. Since God is love and created the world as an act of love, God does not remain indifferent to the sorrows of this fallen world."

It can be a comfort to know that our Father, though perfect in every way, mourns with us when we endure a tragedy. In fact, through the Incarnation and crucifixion of Christ, God intimately knows human pain and suffering. That knowledge, and the union of our sufferings to Christ's, has given many strength and comfort. The acknowledgement that this is not a perfect world, and that we were made for eternity, is the first step of acceptance that leads to healing.

Anthony Ray Hinton thought he would never find healing after his mother passed away from cancer. Hinton had been on death row in Alabama for many years for a crime he didn't commit (and for which he was eventually exonerated). But his mother, who embodied love and kindness, had always believed his claims of innocence. Without her there, he wanted to give up on life and considered hanging himself in his cell. But suddenly, he heard his mother's voice in his head saying, "I didn't raise no quitter!"

Hinton jumped up in bed, shocked at what he was hearing. As he recalled in his Christopher Award-winning memoir *The Sun Does Shine*, his mother's

voice continued, "This isn't your time to die, son. You have work to do. You have to prove to them that my baby is no killer Now you wipe them tears and you get up and you get in service to someone else. There's no time to be crying about yourself. There's no cause to be listening to the devil's voice in your head telling you that nothing matters. It all matters. You are my baby, and you matter more than anything in the world."

That other-worldly experience gave Hinton the hope and courage he needed to act as a beacon of light to his fellow inmates. And he continues to share his story of faith, forgiveness, and justice to this day.

## How to Heal

Healing from a major tragedy is something that must unfold over time. There is no "schedule" for when that can begin, but with prayer, support, and guidance, God can help heal even the worst of losses. Father Joseph Esper, writing in *Saintly Solutions to Life's Common Problems*, points out that: "The saints learned a certain solace through service—in responding to the needs of others, they found it easier to bear their own sorrows."

We Christians know that nothing worth doing comes without prayer. But how can we begin on the long road of healing? Writing in *Aleteia*, Father Michael Rennie of St. Louis outlines a five-step practice based on St. Ignatius of Loyola's spiritual exercises. The steps are: Seek Enlightenment (enlarge our perspective); Give Thanks (dwelling on a positive experience can help provide emotional breathing room); Know Your Emotions (and work towards understanding where they come from); Be Responsible (break the cycle of acting out); and Be Ready for Tomorrow (each day, resolve to do your best).

Archbishop Fulton Sheen writes of the importance of facing our pain and offering it to God, to begin healing. "The two facts of healing in the physical order are these," he said. "A physician cannot heal us unless we put ourselves into his hands, and we

will not put ourselves into his hands unless we know that we are sick.”

That recognition and handing ourselves (and our situations) over to God is the first step of hope. Father Esper writes, “A healthy response...requires a willingness to trust God and to move forward, one day at a time. Because God is the author of life [He can] help us find purpose and value in life, even in the midst of intense grief.”

In 2004, Sister Ave Clark, O.P., was driving her car in Queens, New York, when she was hit by a runaway train. “I wound up in the hospital for almost a year, learning to walk again,” she told The Christophers.

During her recovery, Sister Ave wrote a story called “Bird with Two Broken Wings,” which she shares in her book *Heart to Heart Parables*. As the title suggests, it’s about a bird who forever loses the ability to fly and sinks into a depression about it. For anyone dealing with a disability of some sort, this story offers a life-changing message.

Sister Ave said, “When I wrote it, I think I was that bird at that time. And I think we’ve all been that bird, where something happens in our life, like an accident, an illness, or some tragedy. We wonder if we can get up again. When the little bird loses both wings, it starts to realize it’s grounded. It’s not doing the normal things that it used to be able to do. It starts to realize it has to adapt to this new space in life, otherwise it’s not going to be able to exist. So, the little bird goes on a journey,

and it finds challenges, yes, but it finds also... the gift of acceptance. We accept this new space or place in life. Sometimes it could be a dark space, but if we accept it, I believe then we find the light.”

Prayer and trust in God can be difficult after a loss or tragedy. But we must continue to ask for God’s help, even in our doubts. Like the father in the Gospel who cries out to Jesus, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief!” (Mk. 9:24), we can bolster our faith by asking God to deepen it.

## Helping Others

For someone who is going through the difficulties of a loss, personal help is one of the best gifts you can give. Those who have experienced difficulties know how powerful it is to have someone to lean on, or someone who can say, “I’ve been where you are. I can tell you it gets better.”

An important part of finding our own healing is using our experiences and challenges to help others. Not only does it help the person who is suffering turn outwards (a critical element in healing), but it allows someone else to benefit from your difficult experiences. That can make some good come from a tragedy, even if it’s small.

Ultimately we reach out to help one another because we know the pain the person is going through, and as Christians, we know that our hope is in Jesus. He who is truth, is true to His word—and He assured us that in His Father’s kingdom every wrong would be made right. That is our hope and our future, and the candle we must hold out for ourselves and for others when we go through difficult times.

  
**“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”**

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*“Before the fall, Adam shed no tears, and in the same way there will be no more tears after the resurrection from the dead, when sin has been destroyed. For pain, sorrow, and lamentation will then have fled away.”*

—St. John Climacus