

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

# A HOLE IN THE WORLD

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FINDING HOPE IN  
RITUALS OF GRIEF  
AND HEALING



# Introduction

## QUESTIONS



What is a ritual to you? What is your belief or understanding about the role rituals play in the life of the individual and in the life of the community?



As you step into reading this book, what are you grieving most? What loss or experience of suffering feels most present in your mind, heart, and body?



What are your expectations going into this group discussion? What are you hoping to glean from the book and from the conversations? Are you coming into it as someone who has experienced grief and loss, or are you hoping to learn how to support those who have?

## Chapter 1: Keening (Anguish)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Jeremiah 9:17-21*



Have you ever had an experience where you instinctively and spontaneously wailed aloud? How did the people around you respond or react?



How does the Irish way of grieving contrast with the modern Western way of grieving? What would it be like to be given permission to fall apart?



What is your reaction to the idea that God and the prophet Jeremiah express deep, emotive grief and cry aloud as a response to Israel's sin and suffering?



What are some other passages of Scripture where we see God affirming disruptive expressions of emotion?

# Chapter 2: Covering Mirrors (Change)

## QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Job 1:6-2:10*



Why do you think we feel so ashamed to admit how much we are impacted by grief?



What are some of the most significant ways grief has changed you?



What do you miss the most about your former self, the person you were before your experience of loss?



How have you perceived the words and actions of Job's wife in the past? How have you heard her spoken about, and has your opinion of her changed as you too have experienced significant loss?



Is there anyone in your life who showed you miraculous grace in the midst of your turmoil and change? What was that experience like and how might you show that same grace to yourself?

## Chapter 3: Telling the Bees (Fear)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> James 4:13-16*



Do you relate to C.S. Lewis's observation that grief feels like fear? Why do you think grief is experienced as dread, worry, or foreboding?



Have you ever had an experience that profoundly disrupted your sense of control?



In what ways might the ritual of "telling the bees" help the griever process their new loss?



Why do you think superstitions played such an important role in the lives of our ancestors but are rarely practiced or accepted now?



How might acknowledging our bewilderment be a spiritually shaping experience? Is there a blessing to be found in recognition our limitations and lack of control?

## Chapter 4: Sitting Shivah (Presence)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Psalm 42*



What are some unhelpful platitudes or pretenses about suffering you were given by the church or by culture?



How would you define or describe the peace of God? Did you have any expectations about what that peace should feel like going into your experience of suffering? Were those expectations disrupted or confirmed?



In what ways has suffering changed your perception of God? How has it changed your relationship with God?



Why is it so difficult to ask for help when we are struggling? What are some practical or helpful ways that people have shown up for you in your grief?



How might churches and communities of faith do a better job of acknowledging grievers in their rhythms of prayer and worship?

## Chapter 5: Casseroles (Body)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Isaiah 25:4-9*



How does the image of Jesus in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane speak to you? How did Jesus experience grief?



What are some ways you have noticed grief, trauma, or stress in your body?



Why do you think we tend to pay more attention to our emotions and thoughts in grief rather than our bodies?



What role does food play in the life of the community? What are some memories you have of food being served at a funeral or given to a grieving family? What about foods served at celebrations?



Why do you think God chose a ritual that involved food (communion) as a way for us to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus?

# Chapter 6: Post-Mortem Photography (Memory)

## QUESTIONS

### *Scripture Reading -> Psalm 88*

✦ How has your memory of a person or situation changed over the years? As your distance from the relationship or experience has grown, have your emotions or opinions shifted or evolved?

✦ Why are we tempted to idolize people after they die? Why are we also tempted to villainize them?

✦ What impression does the word “oblivion” leave with you? Do you have dreams, hopes, expectations, or relationships that feel lost in the oblivion?

✦ Have you ever experienced “disenfranchised grief” or grief that is ignored or belittled by society? This may be a miscarriage, a breakup, or loss of health. How might we do a better job of recognizing these losses as a society?

✦ How does it comfort you to know that God knows, loves, and remembers all of His creation?



## Chapter 7: Sympathy Cards (Words)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Proverbs 16:21-24*



How is lament worship? How are we agreeing with God and affirming truth when we lament? Why do we shy away from lament as a form of worship in the church?



What are some of the most unhelpful things people have said to you in the midst of your grief and loss?



Why do you think people were more comfortable using direct language about death in the past? Why do we avoid it now?



What are some helpful and comforting words people have shared with you in the midst of your grief and loss?



How might a griever show grace to the condoler? How might we, together, embrace the awkward, disorienting, humbling nature of suffering and death?

## Chapter 8: Wearing Black (Candor)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Job 16:15-21*



Did you find the strict mourning dress codes of the Victorian era surprising, upsetting, or inspiring? Would you have found the expectations and timelines helpful or frustrating, confining or liberating?



Did you expect grief to have a timeline? In what ways did your suffering follow that timeline and in what ways did it upend it?



What are some of the unexpected emotions you experienced in grief?



What is the fine line between being vulnerable in your sadness and being an exhibitionist? Is there a difference in needing attention versus simply needing to be seen? How has the world of platform and performance brought on by social media helped us be more open about our grief? How has it hurt the way we personally process our emotions?



Why do you think the rituals of grief in the Old Testament mirror the rituals of repentance? What is the relationship between repentance and grief?

## Chapter 9: Tolling the Bell (Endurance)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> James 1:2-5*



How do you respond to the medieval belief that demonic forces were especially prevalent at the time of a person's death?



What does the word "closure" mean to you? Is it a helpful term? Does it offer any insight on the experience of grief?



How has the progression of grief been different than you expected? Are there ways in which The Five Stages model have been true to life? Are there ways in which it has been inadequate to describe the experience of grief?



Can you describe some experiences in which your grief was unexpectedly triggered?



What has grief taught you about perseverance? What are some points of light, provisions, or sign-posts that have kept you moving forward on the long, winding path of grief?

## Chapter 10: Funeral Games (Joy)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Ecclesiastes 3:1-14*



Do you think of God as being emotional? Why or why not?



Do the games, tricks, and jokes of the Irish wake seem irreverent to you? How does the anguish of keening contrast with the levity of funeral games? Is it possible to practice both in the same space?



Why do you think the writer of Ecclesiastes commended the enjoyment of life as a response to all the disappointment and disillusionment he faced?



Why are we tempted to categorize our lives as either good or bad? Why is it so difficult to embrace the concept of both/and?



Has your experience of suffering increased your capacity for joy? If so, in what ways?

## Chapter 11: Death Rooms (Mortality)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> Psalm 90*



Growing up, was your home a place where death and suffering was acknowledged and discussed, or was it ignored or avoided?



Do you find it comfortable or uncomfortable to be present in cemeteries? Why or why not?



What are the benefits of outsourcing the process of death and dying to the hospital and funeral industry? What are some of its drawbacks? What have we lost in this outsourcing and what have we gained?



Scripture often calls us to bear in mind our own mortality. What wisdom is there to be found in remembering the limitations and brevity of your own life?



Have you ever experienced humiliation as a response to grief? Why do you think death generates that kind of reaction?

## Chapter 12: Decoration Day (Honor)

# QUESTIONS

*Scripture Reading -> 2 Corinthians 1:3-7*



What are some ways that you choose to honor the memory of what or who you have lost?



What are some things you would like your loved one to know about how you've changed since they died?



What aspect of your grief journey are you most proud of?



How is the tradition of Decoration Day a gift to the griever? What purpose does it serve for the community?



What has been your expectation around the experience of comfort? How does knowing that the word parakalon is better translated as “strengtheners” change your perspective of what God’s presence in grief can be like?

## Afterword

# QUESTIONS



How do the habits of faith sustain us in times of trial?



In your opinion, is the church a destroyer of rituals or a preserver of rituals? What role might the church play in showing the world how to grieve well together?



What was the most significant realization or comfort you experienced while reading this book?