



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

HEALING
AFTER THE LOSS
OF A SPOUSE:
HOW TO DEAL
WITH GRIEF



ROBERT WOLGEMUTH

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THIS HARD ADVENTURE	4
PART I: TILL DEATH DO US PART	6
PART II: THE CERTAINTY AND FINALITY OF DEATH	11
PART III: STORM READY.....	14
PART IV: JUDGMENT READY.....	24
ENDNOTES.....	32



INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THIS HARD ADVENTURE

Because you've read the title of this field guide and remember these words from wedding ceremonies, you know what these pages are about. You may have already experienced the death of a spouse. Or because he or she is terminally ill, you're about to fall into the great pit. Because of this, you're eager to know how to deal with grief and navigate the season ahead in a way that keeps you standing and honors your loved one. Right? Good. I'm glad you're here. Welcome.

After almost 45 years of marriage, I buried my wife. If you had listened carefully at about noon on November 14, 2014, at the Dr. Phillips Cemetery near Orlando, the sound you could hear as her casket was slowly being lowered into the ground was tearing flesh. Mine. This was more pain than I had known. Understanding losing a spouse Christian perspective doesn't make the initial sting of death feel any less sharp, but it gives us a place to turn.

I trudged back to my home just a few hundred yards away, and greeted a couple dozen friends who were already there with lots of food spread out on the dining room table. Drowning out the sadness of the moment in conversation with family and friends I loved, the next few hours were a blur. I recall that they were sweet, but I remember very little of what actually happened. Grieving the loss of a lifelong partner often feels like a thick fog has settled over everything you once knew.

FIELD GUIDE

Then, early the next morning, before the sun had crested the eastern horizon, I walked back to the cemetery. Stretching my legs on the trek felt good. When I arrived, there was a veritable mountain of fresh cut flowers, now beginning to wither and smell, piled up on the spot.

“What am I going to do, now? What am I going to do?” I actually heard myself whispering quietly.

For the next few minutes as you read along here, it would be my honor to have you join me in this muted conversation. When you are finding hope when your world falls apart, the questions are often louder than the answers. What had I done to prepare for that moment, and what would I do moving forward?

1

TILL DEATH DO US PART

What We Said at Our Wedding

“Repeat after me,” the parson intones, “till death do us part.” The bride and groom obey and the words are repeated.

Over the years, as a veteran of this marriage and even the death of a mate thing, the moment in the ceremony when I’m in the congregation actually makes me smile. Not in a cynical way, but actually sympathetic. More often than not, the man and woman standing before their family and friends are young and vibrant and eager. They’re at the peak of health. Dying is hardly on their radar — such a thing could not be further from their minds.

But, now that you’re a little older than those newlyweds, you’ve likely already thought about this, maybe even discussed it with your mate. Someday, you and your spouse are going to die. The death of a spouse is an inevitable reality of the human experience.

The only unknowns are, who’s going to go first and when? As you know, this actually happens. Death of husband; wives die. They breathe their final gasp often while their mate sits by, completely at a loss for what to do next.

Yucky

As the father of two daughters, many years ago my girls introduced me to the word “yucky.” This could have been spoken when the neighbor’s dog had been hit by a speeding car or when something sticky had been discovered on the smooth kitchen counter. Under stress, boys make mouth noises or sock their brother on the arm; girls get silly or speak words like this.

FIELD GUIDE

The undeniable truth is that death is real and that you or your mate are going to die. In a word, this is “yucky.” It is the beginning of grieving the death of a spouse.

It’s my story, and with this field guide, I have a chance to unpack the account of what happened to my wife of almost forty-five years. And what happened to me. The plan is to encourage you as you prepare for this painful possibility and understand what does the Bible say about death.

Nothing New Here

The first two chapters in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, paint a pristine picture of all things good. In some cases...very good. But when we arrive at chapter three, everything changes. And what we find in the remainder of Genesis, includes what bad — yucky — looks like. In some cases, very bad. Very yucky.

And one of these terrible things that resulted from Adam and Eve’s disobedience was death. Until that moment, nothing died. Everything lived and would keep living. Forever. Flowers and animals of every size and shape, including giraffes and caterpillars. At first, people had no expiration dates. Then, they disobeyed God and a horrible decree was pronounced that eventually everything will perish.

“For you are dust, and you will return to dust” (Gen. 3:19).

And the most sobering part of this God-spoken directive is that the word “you” isn’t just delivered to Adam. The pronoun is plural. We are in there — you and me. Plus, the people we have loved, the people we love now, and the people we will love tomorrow are in there. In the Bible about losing a loved one, we see this universal truth echoed. And, thanks to Adam, the process of dying begins the moment we suck in our first big swallow of air as bucknaked newborns. Like an hourglass that’s been flipped over, the sand above begins trickling below through the pinch in the middle. There’s no turning that thing right side up. We’re on a one-way trajectory. And, again, like any self-respecting teenage girl would rightly say, this is “yucky.” It really is.

And beyond the Garden of Eden, and throughout the Bible, and all of recorded history, there’s more that’s been written about death.

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

For example, the man Job, from the depths of his own despair, affirmed this to be true: “Anyone born of woman is short of days and full of trouble. He blossoms like a flower, then withers; he flees like a shadow and does not last” (Job 14:1–2). This provides context for what does the Bible say about losing a loved one.

A flower “does not last.” A brilliant and more than adequate metaphor for death, right?

Even in his most beloved, genteel psalm, David assumes life’s end. He doesn’t open this subject in the Shepherd’s Psalm with “just in case” or “maybe,” rather he begins the death phrase with the words, “even though.” It’s as if there’s no choice in the matter — because there isn’t.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley...” (Ps. 23:4)

So, because death is inevitable, after the foolishness, the defiance, the shortsightedness of Adam and Eve’s disobedience way back in the Garden of Eden and the consequential result, as I said, the Bible includes the stories of men and women dying. From these accounts you and I can learn a few important things and find Bible verses about death of a loved one. Here’s one of my favorite examples.

Circle Up, Men

Jacob — also known as “Israel” — was a very old man nearing his finish line. The full account of his life is a Hollywood movie script if there ever was one. Unable to see any longer, the feeble patriarch called for his son, Joseph, and his two grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Jacob gathered them onto his lap and spoke. Joseph bowed low before his dying father. What a tender scene.

Then Jacob blessed Joseph and said, “May the God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel who has delivered me from all harm—may he bless these boys. May they be called by my name and the names of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and may they increase greatly on the earth.” (Gen. 48:15–16)

FIELD GUIDE

Then Jacob gathered his twelve sons, and who knows who else may have joined them? His task was to do with all of them what he had just done with Joseph and Joseph's sons, instruct and bless them.

"When Jacob had finished giving charges to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed, took his last breath, and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 49:33).

Even though these words were written thousands of years ago, when you and I think deeply about them, they still pack a punch. Jacob, even though very old, is very alive, enough to speak to his children. Then he lays down, curls up in a ball, and expires.

After You — Who Goes First?

As you read these words, the fact of your eventual death may be highly disturbing. I get that. In fact, perhaps as a precursor of my own death, I've always lived with a sense of caution in nearly everything I do. You may be different, throwing yourself into life, tossing discretion to the wind. Skydiving, rock climbing, and high-speed motorcycles may be an inseparable part of your world. That's good. Not me.

Much of my genetic anxiety about danger and death comes from a terminal case of acrophobia. And, although I know that heart disease is the leading cause of death in the world, falling comes in a respectable second. This is especially true for folks like me, older than fifty. I found this fact on the World Health Organization's website. And just in case you're not sure what is meant by "a fall," the United States government bureaucracy has taken the time to spell it out in a single, helpful sentence:¹

"A fall is defined as an event which results in a person coming to rest inadvertently on the ground or floor or other lower level."²

This is exactly why I'm afraid of heights. It's the potential of falling — and dying because of that "coming to rest inadvertently"³ — that creates that empty knot in my stomach even at the thought of finding myself at the top of a twelve-foot extension ladder or hiking a narrow mountain path along the edge of a deep canyon. I even move to the inside lane when driving over a tall suspension bridge. You can never be too careful, right? This physical fear is nothing compared to the weight of how to cope with the loss of a spouse.

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

If you're a therapist or if you took Psychology 101 in college (and consider yourself something of a qualified advice-giver), you may be thinking about hosting an intervention for my phobia. I'm envisioning walking into a room, unsuspectingly filled with my friends who have gathered for the purpose of helping me face and, perhaps, overcome my fear of heights. In the center of the room is an 8-foot step ladder.

The spokesperson tells me that the purpose of the intervention is to help me deal with and, perhaps, overcome my fear of heights. Then he tells me to climb the ladder to the second-to-top rung (there's a sticker up there that warns against stepping on the very top rung.) while my friends watch and try to encourage me.

Silly scenario, right?

Since, in so many cases, falling equals dying, what if, instead of anxiety about heights, my paralyzing phobia was death? What if the thought of dying freaked me out? Not surprisingly, like acrophobia is the single word that defines that height fear, there's a name for this death fear: thanatophobia. This fear often surfaces when grieving the loss of someone close.

Perhaps the next few pages will help with this fear by offering Biblical comfort for widows and widowers.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. How would you describe your thoughts about death? Do you give it much thought at all?
2. Read Hebrews 2:14–16. How should the work of Christ affect our feelings and thoughts about death?

2

THE CERTAINTY AND FINALITY OF DEATH

Yes, He's Dead

It was the first time I had seen a dead body. I was only ten or eleven years old. My family had taken our annual pilgrimage to Winona Lake, Indiana, where my dad was involved in Youth for Christ's annual conference.

The little town in north central Indiana featured a world-famous conference center and a lake. It was here I learned to swim, though not by my own choosing. Standing on the long pier, my oldest brother pushed me into the water that was well over my head, figuring sheer terror would do the instructing. Through the treachery of the event, I floated to the surface and swam.

It was around that time when my day at the lake included witnessing something that involved the death of a spouse, specifically a married student. It was his last day on earth. What I remember was his panicked wife yelling for help, men dashing to the spot where he failed to surface, and after a few minutes, pulling his body from the water. I ran to get a closer look. Straining to see, I looked at the graying frame of the man. I was close enough to see that it looked like his eyes were open. This part of the experience is what haunted me for a long time as I began to wonder what does the Bible say about death.

Yes, She's Dead

When I was asked to write this field guide, my qualification to do so was not something I had pursued. My ticket to ride on this train was watching my wife die. In late October of 2014, my mate of almost 45 years passed away—or as I always have preferred to say, “stepped into heaven.”

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

My daughters, Missy and Julie, were sitting with me next to Bobbie's rented hospital bed, awkwardly plunked down in the middle of our living room. Enid, our faithful hospice nurse, was also there. Enid had taken Bobbie's blood pressure. It was very low. She then tried to take Bobbie's pulse. At first, Enid told us it was faint. Then she told us there was none.

"You don't feel a pulse, do you?" Bobbie queried. "No, Miss Bobbie. I don't."

Then Bobbie asked for the head end of her hospital bed to be lowered. She rolled toward me, reached out, took me by the shirt and said "I love you so much." She sighed deeply and died. Grieving the loss began in that very breath.

"Is she dead?" Missy asked the nurse. "Yes," Enid said evenly.

I reached toward Bobbie's face and gently closed her eyelids. Then I sat for several minutes watching as Bobbie's body slowly turned gray. After two men from the funeral home arrived, my daughters and I stepped out while they lifted her from the bed. This was the start of my journey of dealing with loneliness after the death of a spouse. We stood encircling the gurney, took each other's hand, and sang a song we had sung a thousand times:

Good-bye, our God is watching o'er you.
Good-bye, his mercies go before you.
Good-bye, and we'll be praying for you.
So good-bye, may God bless you.⁴

When we finished, I offered a short "thank you" prayer for her life. I was now a widower. This was the death of a spouse in all its quiet, heavy reality.

Bobbie Goes to the Hospital

Like so many each year, it was cancer that captured her at 64. The journey began in 2012. I wish I could describe what I felt that day; it is scorched into my memory. This visit began a thirty-month journey of grieving the death of a spouse even before she was gone.

What I'd like to say is that walking through the door of death with my wife nearly eliminated my fear of the same. Bobbie showed me how to die

FIELD GUIDE

without shaking her fist at God. Despite the shameful rigors of chemotherapy, there was no complaining. I'm glad you've joined me on the adventure of this guide about how to cope with the loss of a spouse—the death of your mate and, someday, your own.

It's My Turn

In January 2020, I visited a dermatologist for a “little nothing pimple-like thing” on my earlobe. One week later, the doctor called. Her diagnosis was unvarnished: “Robert, you have melanoma cancer.”

At once my mind was transported back to the consultation room where I first heard about my wife's cancer. Now my number was up. I had a track to run on—the one Bobbie had laid down. I told my new wife, Nancy, while we were waiting for a flight to Mexico.

Incredibly, ninety days later, I was diagnosed with another, completely unrelated cancer: lymphoma. Now it would be time for chemotherapy, attempting to stem the cancer cells without killing the host. But the path through this frightening forest had been cleared. My late wife had shown me exactly how to do this. Watching her face death, I learned much about the stages of grief from a Biblical worldview and how to face the end with grace.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Have you lost anyone close to you? How did the Lord sustain you through that? What did you learn?
2. Have you witnessed anyone else go through loss faithfully? What lessons did you take from what you saw?

3

STORM READY

Having lived in the Sunshine State for seventeen years, I grew very familiar with weather forecasts that included that spinning hurricane icon. Watching this little red rotating icon on your computer when you live in the north is interesting. But when you live in its path, it's a lot more than that. It's terrifying.

When your precious mate is diagnosed with a terminal disease, it's like that spinning hurricane thing headed for your neighborhood. It's serious. Can I let you in on what that actually looked like living in the "path" of hurricane Bobbie? And what you might be able to learn from my experience? If you and I were enjoying a cup of coffee at your favorite hangout and you had just discovered that your mate was really sick, based on my experience, here's what I'd suggest as you begin grieving the loss and preparing for the storm:

1. *Bathe your journey in prayer.*

Bobbie and I married in 1970. Our first night at the lovely Hay Adams Hotel in Washington D.C., I gave her a heart necklace with the promise that our lives would be laced with prayer. Sitting on the edge of the bed, we both resolved that when trouble came our way, we would default to inviting the Lord into the situation. For almost forty-five years we did pretty well at this.

If you're married, and even if you're both physically well, my encouragement to you is to learn how to pray when you are grieving a spouse or facing the prospect of loss. This does not need to be a long, drawn-out survey of the mission field (as important as that is), it can simply be an expression of your gratitude to your heavenly Father for his goodness, his provisions, and his mercy. And the gift that is your spouse.

FIELD GUIDE

This season of your mate's illness promises to be a challenging one — what better way to face it courageously than with the promise of your heavenly Father's intervention and companionship? This will make a huge difference to you — both of you.

2. *Cut back on the news.*

The expression, “there's nothing good on TV,” fits perfectly here. “Stressed” is likely going to describe you and your mate's demeanor. You both are dealing with things you have never faced before. And, in case you have not noticed, there's nothing “good” about your news feed, whether it comes on your phone, your computer, or your television.

You've always prided yourself on being informed, but with the doctor's diagnosis, this might be a good time to set that aside, daring to move ahead without all the headline news. Your mate will likely be thankful for the peace.

3. *Turn on the music.*

I'd like to encourage you to find something to fill the empty spaces in the air. As you know, on YouTube, you'll be able to find wonderful, seamless music to fit your mate's taste. Replacing the harrowing noise of “All The Ugly News Tonight,” will be the ambiance of sounds that will actually lift your spirits. What a good idea, right?

If you and your mate can enjoy similar music, keep it playing as much as you can. Even last night, my wife, Nancy, and I were talking about how to spend our evening. It was a Saturday. College football games were either finished or inconsequential to us. The news was the same-ol-same-ol. So, I pulled out my laptop and clicked to YouTube. For the next few hours, we regaled in the kind of music we love. Even though, for now, both of us are enjoying good health, this was a sweet spirit-lifting, bonding time. Money in the bank, if you know what I mean.

Bobbie and I did the same in the final months of her life. Because she had a lovely singing voice and I could harmonize, we'd sing. When our children and grandchildren visited, we did this together. In fact, I have a video stashed right here in my computer of Bobbie singing a duet

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

of “Jesus Paid It All” with our granddaughter, Abby.⁵ This was just weeks from her death.

4. *Lean into your church.*

God’s house is as important as the hospital or clinic where your mate gets treatment. Actually, it’s more important. Like swarming crows on a June bug, there’s just something about believers when “prayer requests” are spoken. They pounce. The last thing you want during this season is wondering if anyone cares. In general, Christians are highly-skilled “carers.”

Once chemo had begun and Bobbie’s beautiful dishwater blonde hair hit the floor, she was hesitant to go to church. Anticipating full-on love and support for her, I encouraged her, bald head and all, to come with me. Our church did not disappoint. Yours won’t either.

5. *Find a trusted confab of friends for your suffering mate.*

This is a conjoined twin to the previous one. Surround your mate with same-gender friends. Although reluctant to say “yes” to this, Bobbie signed up first to attend, then to lead, twenty or so women in Bible study. This became a lifeline for both of us. These friends offer Biblical comfort for widows and widowers even before the final goodbye.

These friends were like a safety net as Bobbie swung wildly on the trapezes above. Their words, their cards, their prayers were all priceless.

At this point let me say something important about friends and visits. Some visitors are encouraging. Others are, frankly, toxic. You’re officially the crocodile in the moat and sometimes this is not a pleasant responsibility.⁶ At one point, as Bobbie was nearing the exit ramp, she told me that a particular visitor really dragged her spirits down each time she visited. So, I asked this person, as graciously as I possibly could — not in Bobbie’s presence — to not visit any more. Even though this conversation was extremely hurtful to the recipient of the news, I had to put any relational concern aside. I was the doorkeeper and Bobbie’s comfort was a priority. It needs to be for you as well.

FIELD GUIDE

6. *Keep your close friends and family posted.*

For the months of Bobbie's cancer, I sent emails to friends.⁷ These gave our close acquaintances around the world a snapshot of the Lord's kindness and Bobbie's faith and witness during these months. Less than a year before she died, I wrote this to our friends: "The women in our church are truly family. They have been the loving hands and feet of Jesus, soup makers and meal bringers and prayer partners who have given gifts of time and care at every turn. We continue to be overwhelmed with the kindness of God's people."

When you take the initiative to inform your network regularly, this will cut down on what could be a barrage of questions from well-meaning inquirers who, otherwise, might become a source of distraction and frustration for you.

7. *But avoid TMI (Too Much Information).*

In your updates, although it's tempting to disclose the details of tests and scans and treatments, be careful. Yes, there is basic medical information necessary to keep everyone properly informed, but by and large, your circle doesn't need the gruesome details. They do need information about your loved one that will encourage them. You have an important role to play as the conduit here; guard the information, even troublesome medical news, with care.

8. *Find reasons to laugh.*

There's truly nothing funny about this journey, so you have to make your own fun. Laughter was one of the reasons you fell in love in the first place, and even though there are many reasons for sobriety now, please do your best to keep smiling.⁸

Maybe some of the humor we shared when Bobbie was sick was actually a little dark, but we still laughed. For example, one of the hospice doctors had abandoned "bedside manner," assuming he had ever known it. When he'd walk into our house, he didn't bother to even say "hello" to Bobbie, or "how are you today?" Without even looking directly at her, he'd ask, "On a scale of one to ten, what's your pain level?"

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

Each time on these visits Bobbie would call him, “Dr. Death” after he’d leave the house. When she first dubbed him this way, I cringed. Then it became a landing place for humor.

Another funny moment was once when I said to her, “You know I’m really going to miss you when you’re gone.” The expected response to such a statement would surely be, “Thank you, I’m going to miss you, too.” But she didn’t say this. What I actually got was a thin smile and crickets. This was clearly because she knew that when she was in heaven, she wouldn’t actually miss me. And for me, that was perfectly all right. This dawned on us simultaneously and we had a good laugh about it.

9. *Spend time in God’s Word yourself. Every day.*

Because what I’m about to say is so important to me, and hopefully, someday to you as well, I’m going to eat up some valuable clock on this point.

Bobbie was a tenacious student of the Bible. Each morning at a very early and dark hour, she was sitting in her red chair, her Bible opened on her lap. I always admired this about her, since I was a writer of Christian books and a Sunday school teacher for many years, but I silently took a pass. She would take care of this part. In her final months, she found immense peace in Bible verses about death of a loved one and the hope of what was to come.

We purchased a wingback chair sometime in the eighties from a friend in the furniture business in downtown Chicago. Originally covered in a bright yellow fabric (Bobbie was a big fan of bright colors), its first home was our living room in Geneva, Illinois. Bobbie loved to begin each day perched in that quiet place, reading her Bible and praying. She called this chair her early-morning “altar.”

When we made the decision to move to the Sunshine State in 2000, the chair went with us. Since yellow wasn’t going to work with our new décor, Bobbie asked an upholsterer to give it a new outfit. Red was the choice and for fourteen more years this is where she found herself

FIELD GUIDE

every day at “dark-o-thirty.” Finding comfort in the Bible about losing a loved one became her daily bread.



*An accomplished painter in her own right, one day
Bobbie decided to paint an image of her chair.*

I knew that because each morning on my way to my upstairs study I'd walk past her. Whispering a habitual but friendly, “Good morning,” I'd head upstairs to my computer to get a start on my own day. Even though I fully embraced the idea of my wife spending these valuable hours in meditation and prayer, I had more important things to do. Mail to catch up on. Schedules to set. Articles to scan. Clients to call. Proposals to review. Contracts to finalize.

During parties, when our house was crowded with friends, I occasionally sat in the red chair. But this was Bobbie's chair. Of course, there were no posted rules about this, but it was her place to sit and read and study. So, I usually used other furniture and that was fine by me.

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

On the day of Bobbie's funeral and burial, our house was a busy place. Neighbors had volunteered to prepare lunch and our place was packed with neighbors and extended family. Connections, new and old, were made and lively conversations were had. Bobbie would have been delighted. Taking a page from the homes of famous people from the past that I've visited, I stretched a ribbon across the seat of the red chair from arm to arm. Even though places to sit were at a premium that afternoon, no one trespassed the ribbon. Everyone knew about the red chair and nonverbally asking visitors to avoid using it just seemed the right thing to do. Graciously, people left the chair alone, except to comment and graciously comply with the unwritten "thank you for not sitting here" ribbon.

Early the following morning, I woke with a start. For the first time in almost forty-five years, I was a single man. A widower. My new reality stared me down. But, wiping the sleep from my eyes, I knew I had an assignment. A new destination. Bobbie's red chair. Gingerly, almost reverently, I removed the ribbon, still there from the previous day's gathering, and sat down. In a voice just above a whisper, I confessed, "Lord, I've been a lazy man. I've watched my wife start her day right here with you for all these years." I took a deep breath, knowing the seriousness of this moment and the resolve of my heart.

From the red chair I said aloud, "As long as you give me breath, I intend to start each day with you." Bobbie's well-worn, One-Year Bible was on the little end table close by. I opened it and began the reading for the day marked November 15. Here is what it said that quiet morning:

Blessed be the name of the Lord
From this time forth and forevermore!
From the rising of the sun to its going down
The Lord's name is to be praised. (Ps. 113:2-3)

Imagine the power of these words: "From the rising of the sun..." And "the Lord's name is to be praised." I will forever be grateful for the Lord's sweet nudge in the silence of that morning, and each morning since. As for me, whether in the comfy brown, leather recliner in my

FIELD GUIDE

study or when traveling, in a nondescript chair in a hotel room, the peace and joy I have experienced day after day in those early morning hours with God have been indescribable.

You likely don't have a red chair in your living room or study. But you have a place to sit. To lift up your eyes and your heart — from yourself and earth's demands and problems — to heaven. And to embrace the wonder of a loving God who is eager to meet with you each day. My sincere hope is that my story will inspire you and that you'll purpose to start meeting with the Lord, reading his Word, and praying. If it does, you can thank that old red chair and my faithful, late wife who showed me what to do with it. Understanding what does the Bible say about losing a loved one starts with being in the Word where the Comforter speaks.

10. *Share select verses with your mate.*

Two months before Bobbie stepped into heaven, she told two women what she wanted me to do after she was gone. One of the women she talked to was a neighbor. The other was the wife of a business colleague. "After I'm gone," she told them, "I want Robert to get married." And then she added, "And I want him to marry Nancy Leigh DeMoss."

I knew the first part. We talked about this many times. But until she was in heaven and those two women filled me in on her wishes, I had no idea. Widows in the Bible are often shown as recipients of God's special care, and I saw that care extending to me, a widower, in this unexpected way.

So, just over one year later, in November 2015, I answered Bobbie's wish and married Nancy, a single woman, called to ministry from the time she was a youngster. Earlier I spoke of hearing newlyweds recite their vows that included "till death do us part." You'll remember I confessed to smiling about the fact that these youngsters knew painfully little about life as it really was. But now that I was getting ready to speak those words again, at age 67, the smile was no longer there. At my age, the death of a spouse—for either Nancy or me — especially me — was an ominous thing.

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

So, what could I do now, “the second time around” to bless my bride?

Early one morning, an idea popped into my head. I had my daily Bible on my lap and was reading portions of Scripture — Psalms, Proverbs, Old Testament, and New Testament clips. I’ll bet Nancy would be blessed by some of these verses, I mused. So I texted her some selections. Two, maybe three, and sometimes four verses that jumped off the page. She was sleeping when they were actually transmitted, but I knew that just as soon as she awakened, these would be there for her. Many of these were Bible verses about losing a loved one, providing a foundation of hope for whatever the future held.

A happy and grateful text came flying back just as soon as Nancy was up. This was plenty of motivation to do it again. As of this writing, we’re approaching our ninth anniversary. And, according to my calculations, I’ve sent her more than ten thousand Bible verses. And it’s been just like my wife was sitting next to me every morning. This is highly motivating, as you might imagine.

11. *Say and text “I Love You.”*

For the next few minutes, I’d like to shoot you a metaphor. There’s no need for me to check with an actuary to settle the following question: “Who will die first: Nancy or me?” Since I’m fully ten years older than she is, this doesn’t take a long time to figure out.

So, like the Bible verses that she’s “banking” in her cell phone, I’ve filled her love cup as best I can. All the time. With all my might. This is something I would like to encourage you to do with your mate while you’re both alive. That would be now, right? These three words are pure magic. Tell her. Text her. Rinse and repeat. This is a vital part of how to cope with the loss of a spouse later—knowing you left nothing unsaid.

FIELD GUIDE

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Which of these eleven suggestions do you need most to work on in your life so that you're prepared for suffering with your mate faithfully?
2. In your particular trials, which of these suggestions come easily, and which ones are hard to regularly carry out?
3. Have you considered the stages of grief from a Biblical worldview and how they might differ from the world's perspective?

4

JUDGMENT READY

Ready Is Good

You and I have adventured through this field guide together, spending a couple hours chatting. We've covered all kinds of things that I truly hope have been helpful as you serve your mate in a difficult struggle.

Regardless of your age, you and I don't know how long we have until it's our turn to hit the tape at the end of the straightaway. But like golfers on a crowded course who have decided not to waste any time to take their shot playing ready golf, my deepest hope is that you and I will be just that: ready. This readiness is a key part of how to deal with grief—preparing the heart before the storm breaks.

Think back to your school days. It doesn't matter how far back you go. It could be grade or graduate school. Junior or senior high. When you were headed into a classroom or to the panel of professors ready to hear the oral defense of your doctoral dissertation, if you believed you were ready, you were at peace.

On the contrary, there is no sheer panic like the sheer panic of not being ready. This is the fluster of terror that makes breathing difficult. The sweat on your face that shouts, "I didn't do my homework. I'm not prepared for this." It's the confidence of striding into the sanctuary for your wedding, dressed and ready. Or sitting down at a business meeting with your research completed. This wedding or this meeting did not sneak up on you. You knew all about them with plenty of time in advance to do what you needed to do to prepare.

In the late sixties, a popular West Coast-based singer/songwriter named Larry Norman penned the words to a song with a sobering theme. The setting was the second coming of Jesus Christ which, according to Scripture, will happen unexpectedly. In the twinkling of an eye. So, fitting

FIELD GUIDE

to the idea of this final chapter, the song was titled, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” The lyrics included the following:

*A man and wife asleep in bed
She hears a noise and turns her head
He’s gone
I wish we’d all been ready
Two men walking up a hill
One disappears and one’s left standing still
I wish we’d all been ready⁹*

There it is. Just like speeding up your golf game because the course is well-occupied, or readying yourself in the case of an airplane disaster, the operative word is “ready.” One of two things waits for us in our future. These are not speculation. They’re fact. And we have no choice.

The first is that, during our lifetime or later, Jesus Christ will return to earth. His physical, resurrected form will show up, just as he did on Christmas Eve. Back then he came as an innocent baby boy born to a peasant couple. But not this time. He’s not going to be a helpless, dependent newborn infant sleeping on the scratchy straw in a feeding trough. No, he’ll look more like the Apostle John describes him in the first chapter of the book of Revelation:¹⁰

The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. (Rev. 1:14–16)

Take a moment and let this image sink in. And what did John do when he witnessed this with his own eyes? He did what we will do when we see Jesus.

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17a).

And what will Jesus do and say to us, as we’re on our faces before him?

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

“Then he placed his right hand on me and said: ‘Do not be afraid’” (Rev. 1:17b).

The Apostle Paul also references this view of the Savior. He uses words we completely understand: “In a flash” and “In the twinkling of an eye.”

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. (1 Cor 15:51–52)

Or as the late John Madden would say when a linebacker leveled an unsuspecting quarterback, unable to throw a pass because he was knocked on his backside by a charging linebacker: “Boom!”

The second sure thing is that you and I will die. Like Bobbie, we will take that final breath and our bodies will turn gray and cold. This end may come at the close of a protracted illness. For you and your loved ones it will not be a surprise. Or it may happen like my wife Nancy’s father, Arthur DeMoss. On a clear Saturday morning on the tennis court with three of his buddies, at the age of 53, my future father-in-law, whom I’m eager to meet in heaven, suffered a massive heart attack, a lethal myocardial infarction. Doctors said that he was dead before his body slammed to the hard surface of the court. The death of a spouse or a father can be sudden, leaving us grasping for Scriptures for someone who lost a wife or husband to make sense of the void.

Because of the wonder of technology, as I was working on this manuscript, Nancy and I watched a DVD of her daddy’s funeral service, held on September 10, 1979. Right there, sitting on the front row next to my wife at 21 years old, were her forty-year-old mother and six young siblings. Her eight-year-old sister slept through most of it. Speakers included well-known Christian leaders and two men whom Art DeMoss had introduced to Jesus. Each speaker affirmed the relentless witness of this man’s words and life. And, in spite of the pain of the moment, they celebrated one simple fact: even as a young man in his fifties, Art DeMoss was ready. How grateful I am for this. And him.

FIELD GUIDE

Whether your death is sudden or prolonged, or if Jesus returns before you are hit by a car or get sick, in any case, only one question matters. Only one. Are you ready?

Here Comes the Judge

You may be old enough to remember the weekly comedy variety show, *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*. It ran from 1968 to 1973 and featured many up-and-coming funny people, like Arte Johnson wearing a military helmet, who's oft-repeated line with a squint, curled lip (and lisp) was, "Very interesting." Remember? Another phrase we heard almost every week on the show was Sammy Davis Jr.'s white wig and black robe and the line, "Here Comes the Judge." This was always good for a laugh.

But, speaking of "Are we ready?" a biblical element of what we're going to face after death, we will be standing before the judgment seat of God, the ultimate judge. And there will be nothing funny about it. The Apostle Paul says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive what is due to us for what we have done in the body" (2 Cor. 5:10).

What that means — if you can begin to take it in — is that when you and I stand before God we will be able to say, "We are righteous before you as your Son Jesus Christ." Now that can sound very arrogant. But if you then ask, "Well how is that true?," the answer is, "Because the only righteousness with which I'm justified is Jesus Christ's righteousness."¹¹ Because of Jesus, there's no reason to dread this judgment. There's every reason to anticipate it. How good is this? This is the core of finding hope when your world falls apart—knowing the Judge is also the Savior.

Pilgrim's Progress

My mother, a woman perfectly named Grace, read from *Pilgrim's Progress* to my siblings and me when we were little. The book is an allegory of the life journey of a man named Christian from his birth to his death, the vaunted Celestial City. Even though I admit to not remembering the portion of the book that mother read about death all those years ago, I have gone back and pulled out a few sentences that describe this in a way that ought to take our collective breath away.

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

Before arriving in this magnificent city, there was a raging river to cross. This intimidated Christian and his friend, Hopeful, but they forged ahead across the water anyway. As they are crossing the river, Christian began to sink, and crying out to his good friend, Hopeful, he said, "I sink in deep waters; the billows go over my head; all his waves go over me"...then said the other, "be of good cheer, my brother: I feel the bottom, and it is good."¹²

For me, the equivalent of "feeling the bottom" is riding on an airplane as we approach a landing in dense clouds. White seamless out the window, and then a break in the whiteness and land is spotted below. I love that sight. And that feeling. Christian felt the sandy bottom of the river with his feet and it made him feel safe. He saw land through the clouds and it made him happy. That can be you and me and our mate, headed for glory. Safely. This provides a beautiful image for the stages of grief from a Biblical worldview—moving from the deep waters to the firm shore of eternity.

Bobbie Was Ready

A few months after we said good-bye to Bobbie at her funeral, I wrote the following to the many friends who had patiently and prayerfully followed our journey. My family and I had been blanketed with an outpouring of love and kindness.

—

Closure...A Final Good-Bye...and Grateful

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; His mercies never come to an end; They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:23).

Precious Family & Friends:

Since my last memo to you, our family has experienced an armful of "firsts." Thanksgiving. Christmas. The New Year. Valentine's Day. Three grandchildren's birthdays. My birthday. Many have asked how we are doing. It's a question we have answered often. In fact, the first Sunday after Bobbie stepped into heaven, I was on the phone with our Julie. "What should we say when people wonder how we are?" she asked.

FIELD GUIDE

We talked about it and reviewed several options. And then we settled on a single word. A word we have now said over and over again.

Grateful.

We're grateful. To folks who don't know Jesus, this could easily sound like we are refusing to face the facts. The painful truth that Bobbie is gone. How naïve could we be? But it is true. God's faithfulness has been sure. And certain. As our Shepherd, he takes care of his own. We are truly grateful. This is the beginning of healing from the trauma of losing a partner.

When Bobbie was first diagnosed, my family resolved that...we are not angry, we are not afraid, we are receiving this as a gift, and our highest goal is that the name of Jesus would be lifted up. Did we pray for Bobbie's healing? Yes, we did. But some of our friends—people whom we love very much—asked why we weren't "claiming" her healing. "Wouldn't it be God's will for someone like Bobbie to be healed?" they would lovingly inquire.

After thanking them for their care, our answer was this: "Sometimes people who love Jesus are, in fact, physically healed. And sometimes they are not." So, my family prayed about this. We asked the Lord, "What is Your will?"

His answer was clear and strong. Unmistakable. And wouldn't you know it, the answer came straight from his Word?

"The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (1 Pet. 3:9).

There it was. Our answer. God's will is that lost people repent and be "found"...that, as Francis Thompson wrote almost a century ago, their hearts would be captured by the "Hound of Heaven." And the reports from around the world of people being touched, inspired in their walk with Jesus as a result of Bobbie's cancer, have brought our family unspeakable joy and purpose in this journey. This sense of purpose is essential when overcoming anger towards God after losing a loved one, realizing that He can use even our deepest pain for a greater glory.

HEALING AFTER THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE

This past weekend, my children and grandchildren drove to Orlando from the Carolinas to help me celebrate my birthday. The other mission of their trip was to help me gently and lovingly remove all of Bobbie's things from the house. So, her closet is empty, the pantry is again just a pantry, and the laundry and art room, just a laundry room. This is a practical and painful step in how to cope with the loss of a spouse.

Then on a rainy and cold Saturday afternoon, we made the short trip to the cemetery where Bobbie's body has been silently resting since November. It was a moment of deep emotion. And gratitude. And closure. In the midst of grieving the death of a spouse, these moments of closure are milestones on the road to healing.

Does this mean that we will forget this remarkable woman whom our heavenly Father loaned to us as wife and mother for 44 years and 7 months to the day? No. But, because of her absolute insistence that we "move on with our lives" after she's gone, we have taken a deep breath... and are doing just that. With, of course, the absolute assurance that we will see her again. She was ready. One more reason to be grateful. Even when the question "why did God take my spouse?" lingers, we rest in the assurance of His sovereignty and her readiness.

The outpouring of love and care from you over these three years has been more than we could have ever anticipated. We have been sustained by your prayers. So, thank you. Thank you for standing with me...with us. And thank you for your encouragement as we step out in faith, eager to see what the Lord has for us now.

We love you.

Robert

—

So, why were we grateful? Because, even though the "good-bye" meant we would not see her again, this side of glory, Bobbie was ready.

My goal while I'm on this side of my own death, is to also be ready. When your mate takes this step — and someday when you do the same — my

FIELD GUIDE

hope is that you find strength in Bible verses about losing a loved one and the promise of eternal life. This is my prayer for you.¹³



ENDNOTES

1. Your tax dollars at work.
2. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/falls>
3. Doesn't our bureaucracy have a cool way of saying things?
4. Wendell P. Loveless, copyright © 1938, Wheaton, Illinois, Hope Publishing.
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itmtM0hMGLk>
6. This is why crocodiles look that way.
7. CaringBridge.org can be a wonderful way of keeping people informed and praying "intelligently."
8. Comedian Tim Hawkins has been a go-to many times for us in order to bring a smile. Here's one of my favorite riffs from this gifted guy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Xv10gHvPYo>
9. Larry Norman, copyright ©1969, all rights reserved.
10. I'll never forget the bumper sticker I saw years ago: "Jesus is coming back, and man, he's really ticked."
11. From a message by Dr. Sinclair Ferguson.
<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/will-christians-answer-for-their-sins-in-judgment>
12. John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, first published in 1678. Public Domain.
13. Portions adapted from *The Finish Line* by Robert Wolgemuth. Copyright © 2023 by Robert Wolgemuth. Used by permission of HarperCollins Christian Publishing.



THE
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The father of two adult daughters, five grandchildren, and so far, two great grandchildren, **ROBERT WOLGEMUTH** has been in the media business for thirty-nine years. A former president of Thomas Nelson Publishers, he was the founder of Wolgemuth & Associates, a literary agency exclusively representing the writing work of more than two hundred authors. Officially retired from actively involved in the business world, Robert is a speaker and best-selling author of over twenty books.

