

WHERE IS GOD IN OUR GRIEF?

A booklet excerpted from
EITHER WAY, WE'LL BE ALL RIGHT
An Honest Explanation of God In Our Grief

BY ERIC TONJES



*Either Way, We'll Be All Right: An Honest Explanation of God In
Our Grief* by Eric Tonjes releases June 2021 from NavPress. ©2021
NavPress. More information at navpress.com.

Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved.



It is destructive to lock our grief away in a closet, but we will also be destroyed if we let it rush in all at once.

Walk slowly, leaning on Jesus.

Eric Tonjes



Grief is unavoidably hard.
However, it is still possible to walk through it
in ways that are better or worse for our souls.

Grief is unavoidably hard. However, it is still possible to walk through it in ways that are better or worse for our souls. The choices we make about how to move through grief, like the choices we make about quality of life, can make a real difference in how we experience the present.

One of the dangers of discussing “how to grieve” is that people misconstrue it. They are looking for strategies to solve our sadness. This approach is enormously destructive. No one’s aching heart can simply be “fixed,” and those on the outside should be especially sensitive to how little they understand. However, not talking about these practical considerations is also dangerous. Grief itself can be a destructive force. So while the shadows may linger, we can also lean on a few practical ways to seek as much light as we can in the valley of shadow.



My spiritual journey has been enhanced
by the wisdom of the saints long dead.

The Means of Grace

My spiritual journey has been enhanced by the wisdom of saints long dead. They often offer wells of insight modern Christians sometimes miss. One of the ideas in such older works is the “means of grace”—the ways and places where we should expect Jesus to show up. These things don’t give saving grace—we have that already if we are in Christ—but they help us believe and experience God’s love. One of those old documents, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, summarizes the idea like this: “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.” I realize that is dense, but read it carefully. God has given us “outward and ordinary means” through which we receive the benefits of our salvation. These means are his “ordinances”—the activities we commonly associate with religion. [Westminster lists Scripture, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and prayer.](#)



Our hearts desperately need to taste God's salvation.

In our everyday lives, we often get confused about the purpose of these activities. We think we do them because they make God happy or because we're earning something from him. We treat them like religious hoops we must jump through to please him. Nothing could be more wrong. We don't do these things for God. Rather, God gave these things to us. They are the spiritual food God provides to nourish and strengthen our souls.

We especially need these means of grace during grief. Our hearts desperately need to taste God's salvation. In the good times we might be able to coast on our latent spirituality, although even then we're probably fooling ourselves. When suffering leaves us cold and isolated, pretenses of independence desert us. We need resources outside of ourselves. At the same time, grief makes it hard to find the energy to use them. Reading Scripture, praying, gathering with the church to receive the sacraments—these activities take effort. It is hard enough to get out of bed in such seasons. How in the world are we supposed to pursue spiritual disciplines?



God shapes us through our spiritual practices, even when we don't feel it.

The tragic irony is that we can easily slip into spiritually destructive cycles. We feel distant from God. Because of this, we don't engage with the tools God gives us to experience his presence. And then we feel even more distant, and even more discouraged from doing the things that bring him near.

Navigating that struggle is tricky because it can easily turn into another snake-oil sales pitch. There will be times when you open the Bible and feel like you get nothing out of it. There will be times when you pray and your words seem to bounce off the ceiling.

But there will also be times when God will burst forth in life-giving power—and we won't have those moments without struggling through the dry ones. More than that, God is shaping us through these activities, even when we don't feel it. Not every spiritual meal is a feast, but the calories we get from even the blandest-tasting session at the table sustain us.

As an evangelical pastor writing to many who are within that tradition, I want to especially recommend the sacraments here. Most evangelicals have at least a vague sense of the value of reading Scripture and prayer, even though we might



The Lord's Supper is a place where we get to meet with Jesus.

not be especially diligent in doing either. We feel less comfortable with the Lord's Table. I find this deficiency especially tragic because the Supper is a place where I have come to find God powerfully present. It is a proclamation of God's love and welcome to the saints. It embodies the sacrifice of Jesus, his broken body and spilled blood speaking comfort to us. More than that, it is a place where we get to meet with him. Jesus is our host at the table, the one serving us the meal. He is there with us through the Holy Spirit, just as he was with the first disciples, speaking to them his promises and feeding them in his love.

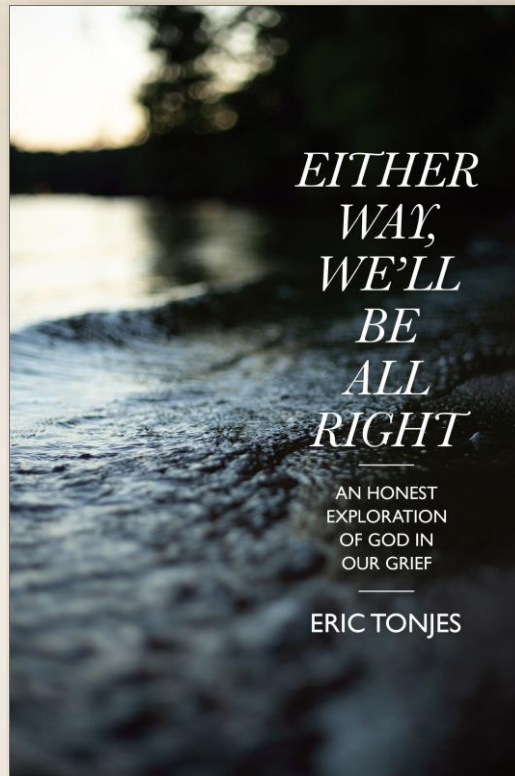
Perhaps the sweetest thing about the sacraments is their solidness. They are physical seals of promise. Grief can throw our perceptions out of whack. We can struggle to feel like God is near. However, when we drink the wine and eat the bread, God is ministering his love in concrete form. As surely as the elements slide across our tongues and down our throats, so surely has he bled and died to redeem us and hold us.



The sacraments highlight why the church is important.

The sacraments also highlight part of why the church is important amid grief. Again, we sometimes get the wrong idea. We focus on gathered worship either as a duty we are supposed to perform or as an experience we are supposed to enjoy. Both miss the mark. The main purpose of worship is our formation. Biblical worship is centered on and contains all the means of grace we just mentioned. It involves the Word read and preached and soaked up through the lyrics of biblically rich songs, it involves prayers of confession and intercession and praise, and it involves the physical signs and seals of God's love in the waters of baptism and the meal we share.

Now, even as I say all of that, I need to make this clear: We should not turn the means of grace into a further source of guilt. Many Christians carry an enormous amount of shame in these practices. In sorrow, such guilt can be especially discouraging. Instead, let's receive them as an invitation. Don't give up on them. Tenaciously cling to the bread, the wine, baptism, prayer, the Word. God shows up in these places, and we so desperately need to take every opportunity to meet with him.



Available at NavPress.com or wherever books are sold.

Coming from a jumbled place of agony and assurance, *Either Way, We'll Be All Right* is a journey through the darkness in hopes of finding light on the other side.



Can you say with assurance, Either way, we'll be all right?

Learn what this pastor and his wife discovered
as they walked a difficult journey together
through suffering, grief, and loss.

START READING