



A Ministry to Bereaved Parents and Their Families

Inviting Hope to Heal Broken Hearts

SURVIVING THE HOLIDAYS

Navigating the “Most Wonderful Time of the Year” With a Broken Heart.

Before we try to answer as many of the questions y’all have sent in as possible and discuss specific ways to remember our children during the holidays, I’m going to share a little bit about what I’ve learned about surviving the holidays after child loss.

Grief brain means that any kind of tool that helps me remember is a good thing so I’ve arranged what I’m sharing tonight as a list of P’s.

PRESSURE: There’s no way around it—the holidays put extra pressure on grieving hearts. It can come in the form of our own expectations or because of the expectations of others. Even walking through the grocery store can be overwhelming when all our hearts want to do is crawl under the covers and sleep until January.

But we can’t escape. So we have to figure out how to (1) *lower expectations*—our own and that of others; and (2) *meet whatever expectations we choose to embrace* in a way that minimizes stress, leaves room for sorrow and honors our missing child(ren) as well as the family members still here.

Here are some general principles that can make it a little easier to do that:

- ***Be gentle with yourself.*** Accept that you will not be able to do all the things you could so before child loss.
- ***Be honest with others.*** No matter how wonderful it would be if others could truly understand what it feels like to bury a child, it is not the way things ARE. So if you need something from someone, speaking up. If you don’t want to or can’t summon the energy to go to this or that, say so.
- ***Don’t let folks cross the boundaries you set up to protect your heart.*** Once you have figured out where you need to draw the line and have communicated that to others, hold fast.
- ***Be open to change.*** This will be the eleventh set of holidays for me without Dominic. Each year I’ve entered the season with certain ideas about how they will



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go, what will and won't be helpful, and where I needed to set boundaries. And every year I've made adjustments.

Remember that the holidays don't last forever. As hard as this season is, it is *only a season*. The earth turns, the sun rises and the days pass.

If you spend this time in bed with the covers over your head, January will still roll around. If you get up and participate (*whatever that looks like for YOU*) then January will also show up on schedule.

These days are just like all the rest: in the end we survive them one breath, one moment at a time.

But we do survive.

PERMISSION: As a people pleasing first born who is also a little bit of a control freak, giving myself permission to jettison traditions and expectations after Dominic ran ahead to Heaven was hard. I knew I needed to but it felt wrong.

Then I realized that all the trappings I associated with Thanksgiving and Christmas were not essential to the primary ideas embodied in both holidays.

Thanksgiving is about setting aside time to express gratitude to God for what He has done, is doing and will continue to do. **I can still manage that.**

Christmas is a celebration of the Light coming into a dark world. **This broken heart can definitely get behind that any day.**

So stripping down to bare bones was a good place to start in deciding what I was going to keep and what I was going to toss.

Some Questions You Might Want To Consider:

- What REALLY speaks to your heart about the holidays?
- How can you continue to honor that and still make space for grief?
- What can you absolutely, positively NOT face this year?

Shake off the guilt. Wash off the worry. Step free of others' expectations.



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There is no biblical imperative to celebrate the birth of Christ. None.

And there is certainly no biblical imperative to dress up the celebration with all the cultural trappings we've added over centuries. Furthermore, if you get right down to it, there is strong evidence that Jesus wasn't born anywhere near December 25th.

So if your heart cannot bear the thought of one more holly jolly song, one more hap-happy get together, one more frenzied rush to the store for a forgotten present or pantry item—*just choose to sit this one out.*

It's OK. I promise.

PLAN: The first thing I do when the calendar turns to Fall is think ahead to the holidays. I've always been like this but since Dominic ran ahead to Heaven it has become even more important.

I put down all the non-negotiables—birthdays, graduations (if applicable), Thanksgiving, Christmas and any days that family is already committed to work and travel schedules.

I highly recommend speaking to family and friends NOW. Make plans NOW. *When folks have plenty of time to make adjustments, it is much more likely they will accommodate a grieving heart's need for change.*

PREPARE: Do what you can in advance. For example:

- Buy gifts (*if you are going to exchange them*) early.
- Bake early (*if you bake*). So many things freeze well and it takes the pressure off both baking and cleaning up.
- Address/Write cards.

PAPER: *Put it on paper.* I know we are all tied to our electronic devices and those are a convenient back up but when I plot commitments on a paper calendar, I can easily spot patterns of over-commitment and make adjustments as needed.

PACE: I've had RA for 16 years. I have learned over that time that there's no point in forcing myself beyond what I know I can do well, do safely and do without paying for it for it the next day (*or week!*). It is a good model for how to manage the stress, strain and sorrow of child loss as well.



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I not only check for patterns of overcommitment in a week or month, I pace myself throughout the day whenever possible. If I know I'm going to a holiday party in the evening, I screen calls and pick up only when necessary. The rest can wait a day. I make sure to have some alone time, maybe listen to praise music (*if I need a boost*) or sad music (*if I need a good cry*).

I eat well and drink plenty of water.

PEOPLE: I'm pretty sure this is one of the hardest aspects of the holidays we all deal with. It's not easy pre-child loss and it's harder afterwards. Our family and friends just don't understand that everything is colored by the absence of our child(ren).

Here are some helpful guidelines as we navigate relationships:

- Understand that they **DO NOT** understand.
- Don't wait to alert others you need to make changes.
- Decide how to communicate your message-*remember that written words do not convey tone and can often lead to misunderstandings.*
- Acknowledge **THEIR** loss. Regardless of the relationship of other family members to your child(ren) they have lost someone too. They may not feel my pain precisely, but they feel the pain of losing a grandson, nephew, cousin and ***they feel the pain of losing who I was before burying my child.***
- Use *"I" statements*. Don't accuse. Don't bring up every bad memory from Thanksgivings and Christmases past. Start from today and say, *"I really feel like I need to do (or not do) these things this year"*. Be as honest as you can be. Feelings are not right or wrong. What we do with them may be wrong or hurtful but it is ok to express them.
- **Expect resistance.** People naturally hate change. What is helpful for you may feel hurtful to them. Stand your ground while acknowledging their feelings. *If you can, offer an alternative.*
- **Extend grace.** *Assume the best. Ask for clarification before you react.* Allow time before responding to something that hurts your feelings.

PRACTICAL IDEAS: It can't be overstated: holidays are extremely hard after loss. Every family gathering highlights the hole where my child **SHOULD** be, but **ISN'T**.



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There's no "right way" or "wrong way" to handle the holidays after child loss but here are a few practical suggestions (and we will cover lots more later in our time together).

- **Skip it.**
- **Consider traveling for the holidays.** Sometimes a change of venue-especially a calming destination that can include as many of your immediate grief circle as want to come-can be a healing experience.
- **Change how you do meals**
- **Let others do the planning/cooking/communicating.** It is perfectly alright to tell your family you just can't be the nexus of holiday gatherings this year. Don't feel guilty about it.
- **Make new traditions.** You don't have to do the "I'm thankful for..." round table if it's too painful. Get a new Christmas tree/ornaments (if you still feel like having one).
- **Observe a "Blue Christmas" celebration if offered in your community.** I'm hosting a local one in my area in early December. We will gather to remember our children with music, candles and a short devotional message.
- **Keep the same traditions.** Some families crave the comfort of knowing that even though the world feels upside down, there are still some things they can control. Especially if there are surviving siblings, this may be important. But feel free to ASK FOR HELP.

Whatever you choose to do or not do, there is no right way or wrong way.

Be gentle with yourself-this is a hard road. And a long one.

It's entirely possible (very probable!) that each year will be slightly different as your family and grief journey change over time.

PROMISES: In the end, it's the promises of God in Christ that help me hold on at this time of year just like any time of year. There are so, so many that I write down, rehearse and preach to myself.

I can rest assured that no matter how difficult this season may be, the Lord my God is with me even here, even now.



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He sees. He cares. He longs to comfort me.

God is most honored when we are honest with Him and with ourselves.

Truth in love.

That is Jesus.

And isn't that really Who and why we are celebrating?