

INTRODUCTION

When we pause from time to time to reflect on the events, occasions, and turning points that have formed and shaped us through the years, the faithful presence of God is the golden thread that weaves our life into its divine whole. And whether our perspective is one of clinical objectivity, emotional subjectivity, or one of an abandoned or tentative faith that has been shaken or stirred by the events of life beyond our control, when we take the panoramic view of where we have been and all that we have experienced over a lifetime, we discern with remarkable spiritual acuity that through every trial and triumph God is and was and shall forever be the invisible presence that is always with us, “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1:20).

A shocking succession of senseless acts of anger and aggression reflect the momentary social and spiritual imbalance in the world. It seems as if we are confronted with random acts of violence, school shootings, mass slayings, and natural disasters almost daily. Then suddenly our world is upended by a global pandemic that threatens the very fiber of our civilization. Unless we live apart from the mainstream of society, our lives are continuously affected by dire reports of tragedy and death.

As a society, we are forced to grieve more often and more publicly. At the same time, we grieve with an overwhelming

desire for deep comfort. We find that comfort as we live into the presence of God, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14).

At this moment in time, in this day and age in which we live, our lived present has an urgency attributable in large part to the agitation, noise, and insistence of social media and a twenty-four-hour news cycle. To survive the daunting challenges unique to the twenty-first century, we must notice God’s presence at work in the world. Perhaps more than ever, we desperately need a daily experience of the very real presence of God.

Within the Word of God, we discover much more than the transient comfort of the world, which can never fully satisfy the heartache of our inmost being. Rather we find the enduring comfort for which our soul yearns only in the sustaining presence of God. We are assured that God loves us, that God cares about us, that God walks alongside us in our grief, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalm 23:4 ESV).

God is present to us—here and now—in the present. When we grieve, we ask, indeed we expect that God will be here now. Our need for God’s presence inspires our most fervent prayers, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11 NIV). God meets us where we are today, not at some later time. God is never distracted, delayed, or deterred. Because we are God’s beloved children, we have God’s complete, undivided attention. God is reliable. God is perfectly faithful. God is fully present to each one of us individually and personally, “But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever” (Psalm 41:12).

The presence of God is a gift to our lives, a gift of pure love that is unearned, unmerited, and undeserved, a present that fills our soul and makes us whole. When we receive a hand-crafted gift offered from the heart, we admire it, we

appreciate it, we value the thought, time, and effort put into its creation and the love expressed in its giving. We are asked to do nothing more and nothing less than to receive the gift of God's presence with unending gratitude for the grace of the Giver, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

At times, our best expression of love is simply the gift of our presence. When one we love is grieving, often the only thing we have to offer is ourselves. In the very silence of being there, being present, wordlessly we express our care and support. And within our presence, there is the gift of God's presence, "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:28).

Present Comfort reflects on some of the more difficult grief issues of our day from the perspective of Scripture, including collective grief, collateral grief, survivor torment, outcast grief, unresolved grief, and reconciliation, to name a few. Perhaps one of the most complicated iterations of grief is triggered by the emotional fracture of suicide. Though *Present Comfort* offers many verses of Scripture and meditations that address aspects of personal trauma and tragedy, it does not specifically focus on the profoundly personal emotional and spiritual effect of suicide on those who survive. The book is intended to help identify and resolve many of the issues that may arise from the devastation of loss through the comfort and support of Scripture.

Like you, I have faced death in the first person. Although I am not a therapist or professional, I have immersed myself in understanding my life-changing encounter with grief since the death of my beloved husband. The hope is that *Present Comfort* will inspire spiritual insight and a deeper understanding of the presence of God to those who grieve and provide perspective for those who desire to share in the language and heart of grief. May each whisper of God's comfort be an assurance of the presence of God.

INTRODUCTION

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.
—Psalm 139:1-12

P A R T I

GOD PRESENT
WITH US



UNISON GRIEF

For those around the world who are helpless onlookers to the destruction of a global pandemic or intentional acts of senseless violence, when life-altering events occur, our first impulse is to join hands and hearts across continents and the continuum of life to grieve in unison the death of each life lost to incomprehensible devastation. Whatever our faith conviction about the power and presence of God in the world, instinctively we reach within ourselves to pray individually and as one for the comfort of each person who survives and grieves.

As media saturation inevitably seeps into every crevice of the details, the word *mass* grabs our attention: mass infection, mass attack, mass destruction. And while *mass* may describe the scope of an event, there is a gaping emotional void when victims of unbridled contagion, personal and national terrorism, catastrophic weather events, and oppression of every kind are lumped together as part of an indeterminate *mass*.

Every person included as part of a media-described *mass* is a human being, whether alive or dead. When life ends because of an inexplicable *mass* occurrence of disease or disaster, we are painfully reminded that each individual has a unique story, “We spend our years as a tale that is told” (Psalm 90:9 KJV). Grief defies every assumption of *mass*

because above all else, grief is individual and personal. When there is shared trauma, we are compelled to react and feel beyond the sweeping generalities of *mass* and grieve both individually and in unison the sacred loss of each human life.

We grieve as one when we hear a daughter describe the heartbreak of being able to do nothing more than look through a window because of restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of a viral infection, unable to be with her mother while she is dying alone. We hear a distraught mother say through the uncontrollable tears of a shattered heart, awash in disbelief and grief, “I don’t know where my son is,” only later to learn that he died in a mass shooting.

While it is impossible to ignore the tectonic social and moral change evident in life all around us—for better or for worse—with borderless illness and mass slayings there is a certain aggregate confusion that echoes the anger, frustration, and conflicted emotions of chaos. The psalmist David expressed his human fear, “For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life” (Psalm 31:13).

We grieve as one when we consider the ripple effect of sudden, unexpected loss on those who survive—not only family members, but also friends, colleagues, neighbors, school friends, church communities, and on and on. For each individual who dies, there are hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people whose lives are unalterably changed by the cruel, untimely death of one they know and love. With renewed reverence for life and spiritual respect for the mystery of death, we grieve as one each living, breathing soul—each father, mother, child, son, daughter, wife, husband and every other relationship of spirit and bond that connects us one to another.

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We grieve as one when we honor the meaning and value of each life made for a specific purpose in the divine order of creation, made in the image of a loving, caring God. As one we pray that God will comfort those who grieve, “both low and high, rich and poor together” (Psalm 49:2). We pray that God will give strength and courage to all those whose hearts are broken. We pray that the destructive power of a viral epidemic or willful brutality will be overcome through God’s infinite goodness, mercy, and grace.

Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the LORD GOD who helps me.
—Isaiah 50:8-9

We grieve together—in unison, as one—fortified by the comfort and strength of our faith to endure through the power and presence of God, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.
You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name’s sake lead me and guide me,

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take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.
You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the LORD.
I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have taken heed of my adversities,
and have not delivered me into the hand of the
enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

Love the LORD, all you his saints.
The LORD preserves the faithful,
but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.
Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the LORD.

—Psalm 31:1-8, 23-24