

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR *Real Life*

72. Christmas and Grief: How to Make It Through

You are listening to episode 72 of the Encouragement for Real Life podcast, titled Christmas and Grief: How to Make it Through. Merry Christmas and welcome to this episode! I'm glad you're here, friend. In this season commonly termed, "the most wonderful time of the year," for many of us it is. But some years the season can be emotional, difficult, sorrowful, and not so wonderful. How do we make it through Christmas when we're struggling just to make it through the day, or the next hour? In this episode we're looking at the hope available to us in this season when it is not the most wonderful. We will find encouragement for our real lives right now when we experience grief and loss during the Christmas season. So, let's get to it.

I know what it's like to grieve at Christmastime.

I've been there, and looking back, I don't remember a whole lot. Yet, a few things stand out to me, and in this episode I'm sharing some memories from previous posts.

This, I remember vividly. It was just five days before Christmas.

My family and I were sitting in the first-row wooden church pew of the church I grew up in. Goodness that wooden pew was cold. The sanctuary before me was elaborately decorated with a brightly lit Christmas tree, a beautiful manger scene, and some of the most stunning red Poinsettias I think I've ever seen! It was breathtaking.

With such beauty before me, this should have been one of the most special moments of Christmas ever. You'd think so, but this was not a special day. Because I was saying goodbye to my mother at her funeral.

I mean, who buries her mother just five days before Christmas?

When the rest of the world is rockin' around the Christmas tree and making their lists and checking them twice, how is one supposed to mourn the loss of her best friend during what's supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year? When others are decking their halls and trimming their trees and enjoying all the season has to offer, how in the world do we make room for grief and loss? For a casket and death and sorrow? Just five days before Christmas? How does any of that even begin to make sense? How in the world can we make it through such heartache in the season to be jolly?

Merry is not how I would describe that Christmas.

Mom passed away on December 16, 2006, sixteen years ago. Time has passed quickly, and it doesn't feel like sixteen years have passed since that day. But the days immediately following Mom's death were a blur. I can't remember much. Mom had been ill for a few weeks, but we never dreamed she wouldn't be here for Christmas. At least I didn't. But she fought and fought and had been through more than any of

us really knew. She told me the night before she died that she was ready to "fall asleep and let what was supposed to happen, happen." And she did.

We planned the services and made necessary decisions one must make with the death of a loved one. Choosing the flowers, a casket, and scriptures to be read at her funeral. My, those days were painful, yet I remember my physical body feeling a weird sense of numbness. Eating was a chore and sleep was difficult to find. I'm thankful my brothers and my husband and children held me up when I couldn't myself.

I remember asking God, *why? Why so close to Christmas?*

Couldn't You have taken her any other time than this? Because Christmas has always been my favorite. Since I was a little girl. Christmas was always full of family, food, and so much fun. My parents always made the holiday special, even when money was tight (however, we never knew when money was tight). The interesting thing is, I don't remember the gifts, I remember the time together as family. And that's what made it even more difficult losing Mom so close to Christmas. Christmas would never be the same without her. And it hasn't.

Our children were 12 and 9 years old, and they dearly loved their grandma, and were grieving in their own ways. I remember all of us crying as we opened presents that Christmas morning. How do we put on a happy face when it's just too painful to smile? We shed tears through Christmas dinner, and we held each other throughout the day. This was our first Christmas at home by ourselves, ever. Because we always spent Christmas a Mom and Dad's. But with both of them gone, this change of tradition was difficult in itself.

Will we make it through Christmas without our loved one?

One less plate at the dinner table. One less present under the tree. And one less smile, laugh, joyful presence. That absence is greatly felt during the holidays. No doubt, the first Christmas without our loved one can be especially difficult. Life isn't the same without him or her and we wonder how will we ever make it through? How do we carry on when we don't feel we can without our loved one? I had never felt such heartache before as I questioned these myself.

But looking back now, what helped me make it through that season was my faith. I could feel God's presence close in those difficult days, and believe He showed up in ways I didn't expect and bless us in ways I couldn't have imagined. God showed me He was with me and He cared. Even though my heart was still broken.

The thing is, the hope of Christmas became even more real and special to all of us that year. And, even though it was the most difficult time in my life thus far, strangely, I look back now and see it was also one of the most blessed.

When someone is hurting or brokenhearted, the Eternal moves in close and revives him in his pain.
Psalm 34:18 VOICE

God was close and revived me in my pain.

How will we make it through?

Grief is unique to each one of us, and we experience it in our own way and in our own time. So, there's no perfect, or right, or quick way to walk through it. It just takes time, and grace, and patience. And lots of leaning on God (at least from my perspective).

As I think about how we were forced to adjust to Mom's absence in our lives that year and how difficult it all was, I recall a few ways that helped me make it through that season and beyond.

We tried new ways to celebrate Jesus' birth, and were open to beginning new traditions without Mom that Christmas. Some we let go of, and yet some are still now ones we enjoy each year.

I let myself be sad. This was big for me. Because I thought I needed to hide my emotions from my children. To be strong for them. But I allowed them to see I was human and that grieving is a healthy process of working through heartache and loss. Give yourself permission to be sad, too.

I let people help me. This also was big for me. I'm wired to be independent, and I like to do things myself. But I learned by letting go and allowing others to help me, my burden was lifted and I could just focus on what was most important in that season.

I got super close to Jesus. I drew near to Him and spent time with Him. Some days I prayed for strength. Other days I asked Him to help me breathe because my chest felt so heavy. Yet other days I invited His presence as I sat alone and cried. I picked up my Bible more during those days and found reading through the Psalms helped infuse hope into my heart. I found it interesting how my closeness to Jesus impacted how I celebrated His birth.

I cared for me. This is so important, I later realized. But I allowed myself to just "be" most days. I gave myself grace when I forgot things. I showed myself compassion when the tears flowed. And I gave myself permission to love myself with no expectations or assumptions. Learning to care for and love ourselves is a beautiful gift we can give ourselves every day.

I'm sorry if you're grieving the loss of a loved one this season. I wish I could take away your pain. Please remember God is with you in your grief. I am praying He reminds you of that. May He comfort you and fill you with His peace.

God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort! Matthew 5:4 CEV

Christmas ushers in hope to our hurting hearts.

Friend, I remind you, Christmas is our hope. If Jesus would never have come to earth as a baby, and if He wouldn't have taken my sins and the sins of everyone else who believes to the cross that day on Calvary, and if He wouldn't have risen on the third day, I would never be able to see Mom again. But because He did, I will one day see her. I will one day see her healed and whole. And not only that, but we will be together in the presence of Jesus. That reality gives me such hope. And I pray it gives you hope in your situation this year too.

Christmas isn't about all the stuff we often make it about, is it? It's about a baby, the Messiah, coming to save the world. This is the hope we have as we grieve loss at Christmastime. I pray God encourages your heart with this truth today.

All these years later, I still miss Mom. I know she's safe with Jesus. I'd give about anything to be able to tell her one more time how much I love her, and to give her one more hug. And to ask her all the things I

either forgot to ask or didn't know then to ask. Mom was the strongest, kindest, gentlest, most loving woman I knew, and I'm grateful to be her daughter. A smile comes to my face as I think of how proud she would be today of her grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Goodness, I can't wait until I see her again someday.

Come on over to our private Encouragement for Real Life Community on Facebook where we are discussing this a little further. You'll find this space to be full of encouragement and hope. The link to this group is in the show notes. I hope to see you over there!

If you found encouragement and hope in this episode, please share it with a friend who could use some encouragement as well. Also, your rating and/or review helps others find this as well. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast so you never miss an episode.

It's not about just making it through the season, this is about living hopeful in every season.

This season might not be the most wonderful time of the year for you in the world's eyes, but maybe this Christmas will be a turning point for you, like Christmas of 2006 was for me. When we allow Jesus to fill us up with hope and promise, well, that can change everything. It may just make it the most special season of all. We'll not only make it through the grief and the holiday, we will experience the true meaning of the season which will carry us through the whole year.

I invite you to remember this in the days to come. Jesus is with you. After all, He came to earth for you. Is there any better gift? Thank you for joining me today. God bless you!

Julie Lefebvre