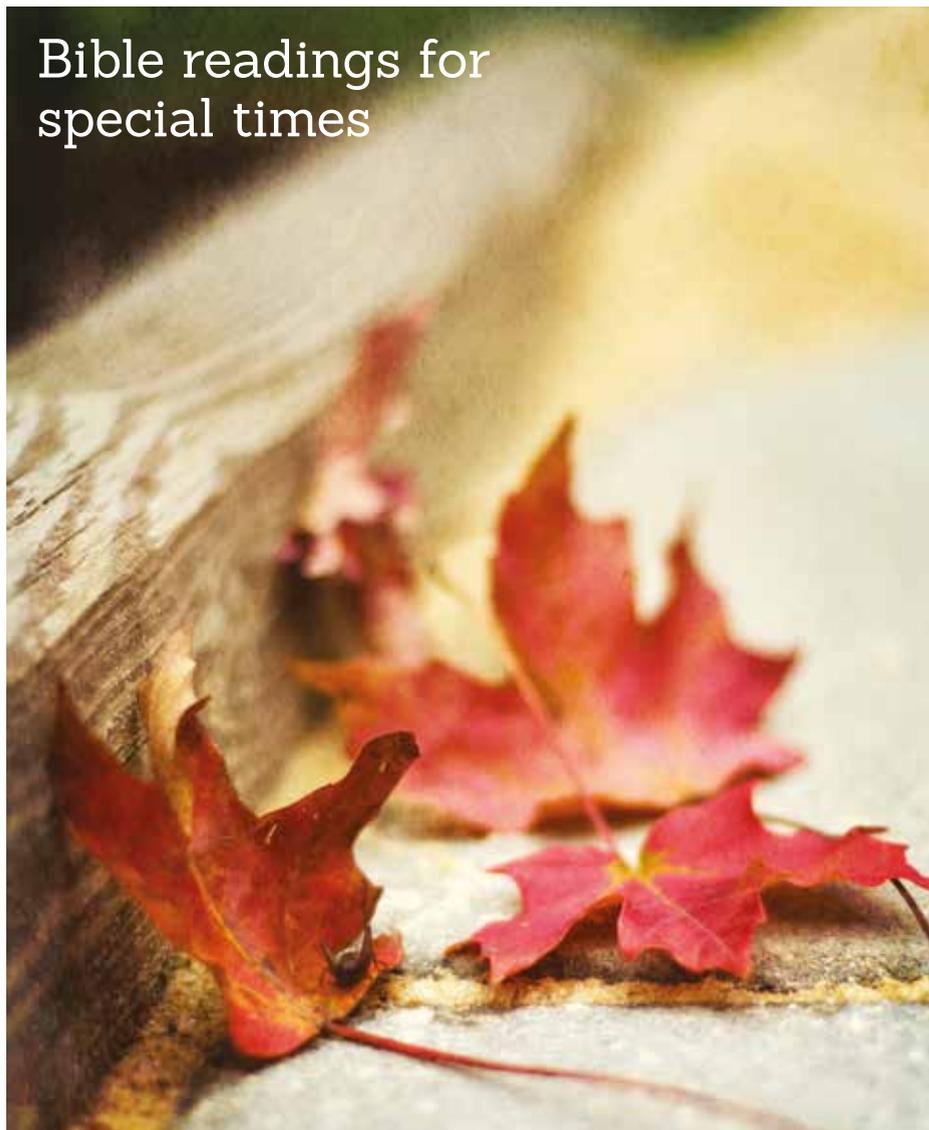


Bible readings for
special times



Bereavement

Jean Watson

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15 The Chambers
Abingdon, OX14 3FE
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700
Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk
Website: www.brf.org.uk
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Introduction

My heart goes out to anyone who has lost a loved one. This book is for you. I wrote the first edition some years after my husband's sudden, untimely death. Since then there have been more bereavements in my family—those of my elderly father and mother after their long, slow, sad declines and that of my sister-in-law from a tragic form of dementia contracted while she was in her 50s. Those four bereavements and losses were very different from one another and were differently experienced by everyone involved, depending on our relationship with the deceased, and on our own unique personalities and situations.

The loss of a beloved person—family member or dear friend—is the main focus in this little book but I know that there are many other varieties of bereavement and loss which disrupt people's lives and cause emotional pain: the death of a pet; the loss of a job; having to uproot from loved people and places; life-threatening or life-limiting illness or disability.

In one of the best books I have read on suffering, now sadly out of print, Peter Kreeft writes: 'We lose little bits of life daily—our health, our strength, our youth, our hopes, our dreams, our friends, our children, our lives—all these dribble away like water through our desperate, shaking fingers.' He adds: 'The only hearts that do not break are the ones that are busily constructing little hells of loveless control, cocoons of safe, respectable selfishness to insulate themselves against the tidal wave of tears that comes sooner or later' (*Making Sense Out of Suffering*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1986).

That said, I would like to add that there is hope and help for us as we encounter life's traumas, pain and losses. While it's true that there are differences in the way people experience these, there do also seem to be emotions and landmarks which are common to many, and I focused on some of these when I wrote the first edition of this book. I believe this material is still helpful and relevant now as I write this introduction to the new edition.

The process of grieving and mourning is helped when you find you can identify with what other people have felt and thought; it is even helped

when your response is along the lines of: 'No, that's not how it is for me. My feelings/thoughts are like this...' 'Good' grief is about being totally real about who and where you are in your pain and trauma; 'good' mourning is about processing your feelings, thoughts and experiences, in private and with a friend or friends you can trust, until they become an accepted part of yourself and of your past, present and ongoing story.

If you are hurting, I hope and pray that you will be supported as you find your own pathway through grief. If you are wanting to get alongside someone else as they grieve and mourn, I hope and pray that you will have or develop the necessary understanding and sensitivity.

A thousand doors

When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into the bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his people.

Jacob died after a long life, having said and done all he wanted to and being surrounded by family and friends. But that's certainly not everyone's experience. As Philip Massinger, living in the 16th century, wrote, 'Death has a thousand doors to let out life.'

If you have been bereaved, I wonder by which 'door' death entered to take away the person you loved. If our loved ones live to a ripe old age and die peacefully, or if death brings an end to their suffering, we can be pleased for them, however sadly we miss them. Our feelings are very different if death comes in a way that we find devastating—as a result of a crime, an accident or neglect, for instance.

Because my husband's death during surgery was so unexpected, an inquest proved necessary and this returned a verdict of 'death by misadventure'. Shock and unreality gripped me. I remember thinking and saying out loud many times something like, 'This can't and shouldn't have happened—but it has. I can't believe it, but I must.'

Perhaps you are feeling numb and even wanting to stay that way so as to block out the unacceptable events. Opening up to a trusted friend, or getting our feelings down on paper, can be ways of helping us 'get real' about how our loved one died.

Lord of all the doors of life and death, I come to you, just as I am...

Waves of pain

Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.

What words or phrases express the psalmist's feelings? He was in distress, grief, anguish; he felt weak, overwhelmed, worn out: he experienced physical and psychological pain.

Bereaved people at different times have come up with an enormous variety of words to describe how they feel: numb, unreal, disorientated, shattered, heartbroken, alone, angry, empty, hopeless, purposeless, vulnerable, insecure, inadequate, churned up, relieved that the suffering and strain are over...

C.S. Lewis also identified fear, weariness and a sense of waiting for something to happen. For me, this feeling that life was on hold had a double aspect. There was the desperate hope that life would return to pre-bereavement normality and, paradoxically, the dread realisation that it wouldn't, *ever*—indeed, that the next terrible thing was only a phone call, letter or ring at the doorbell away.

Some people may even start to wonder whether they are going mad; others may not feel quite so battered by their emotions. Either way, I am sure that what you are experiencing is quite normal. Facing our feelings—all of them, however painful and troubling they are—is a necessary part of 'good' grief, 'healthy' mourning. Only so can we recover and grow.

But that's jumping ahead; for now, it's a matter of weathering those waves of pain moment by moment, drawing on all the inner and outer resources we can muster.

Jesus, could it really be true that my pain is your pain (Isaiah 53:4)? Help, Lord!

Wednesday

MATTHEW 5:4; ECCLESIASTES 3:1, 4b

Maps of mourning

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

There is... a time to mourn.

I was given these words from Matthew 5:4 in a sympathy card and at first my response was, 'If given a choice, I'd rather be unblessed and not mourning—thanks very much.' Later on, I thought long and hard about the kind of mourning that led to being comforted.

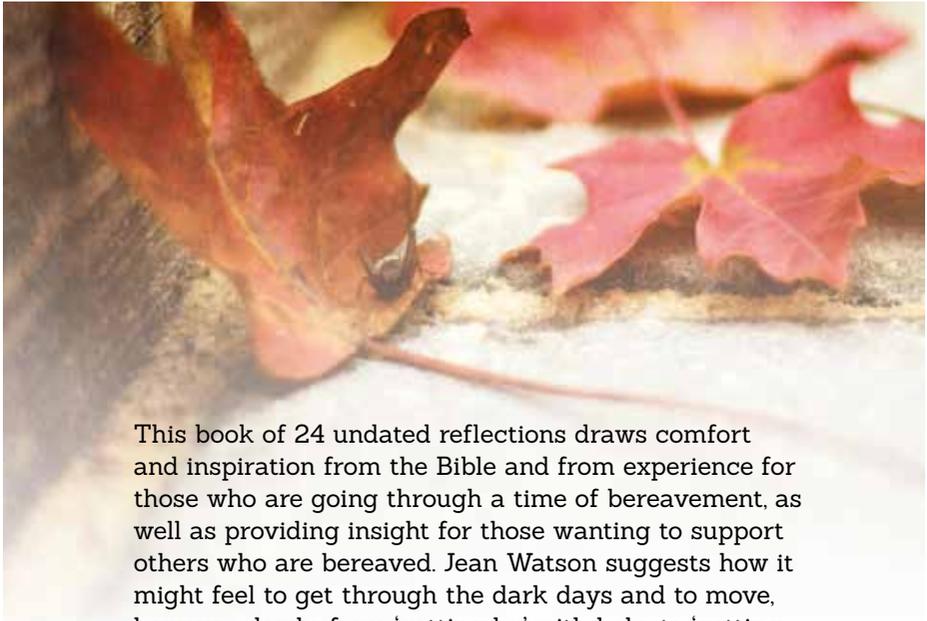
Different words and images are used to convey mourning: a process, a journey, a rollercoaster ride (without the fun), a tunnel, an illness... and each probably contributes something to our understanding of the experience.

Some people find it helpful to identify stages in what might be considered good, healthy mourning. One map of mourning, if I can put it like that, highlights the following: shock; yearning and searching; withdrawal and apathy; anger and protest; the phase of mitigation—a kind of finding; the gradual gaining of a new identity. A chaplain who worked in a hospice and home of healing identifies four main watersheds: unreality—'I don't believe it'; reality—'I can't bear it'; adjustment—'What can I do to handle it?'; and moving on—'I feel better but I'll never feel the same again'.

These and any other models should never be set in concrete. Not everyone experiences the same sort or sequence of 'stages'. Shock and denial are more usual in the earlier days and weeks after death, but they can also occur before death—when the diagnosis was first learnt, for instance.

Our progress through mourning is likely to be back and forth and up and down. But as long as we are moving in the right direction, things will get better.

Lord, this is where I feel I am in my mourning...



This book of 24 undated reflections draws comfort and inspiration from the Bible and from experience for those who are going through a time of bereavement, as well as providing insight for those wanting to support others who are bereaved. Jean Watson suggests how it might feel to get through the dark days and to move, however slowly, from 'getting by' with help, to 'getting a life' in which living with loss goes alongside the gains in terms of new insights on faith and life and a greater ability to empathise with others.

Jean Watson has written devotional books and biographies as well as books and teaching material for children, and is a member of the *Day by Day with God* contributor team (BRF/Christina Press). Her writing on bereavement is informed by her many experiences of bereavement and by getting alongside other bereaved people.



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