

Daily Treasure  
Journey to Christmas – (Christmas Grief Relief)  
Week 4, 12/3/23  
Sunday

When Christmas is Not the Most Wonderful Time of the Year  
Sharon Betters

Today's Treasure

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion— to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.*

*Isaiah 61:1-3*

Dear Friends,

It's The Most Wonderful Time Of The Year, It's the Hap-happiest season of all... except... when it's not.

Harry Connick Jr.'s merry lyrics sharply contrasted with the sad tears and unending ache in my chest that accompanied me every minute of every day in the days leading up to our first Christmas without our sweet youngest child, Mark. Christmas was on our minds even the night of his death. On our way home from the hospital that hot July night Chuck grabbed my hand and whispered, "Christmas, what will we do about Christmas?"

We know many who read and listen to Daily Treasure are deeply grieving, whether from the loss of a child, a spouse, a relationship, a life-long illness, or a life you didn't choose. Your grief runs deep and the holidays amplify your sorrow. This week's devotionals are designed to help prepare you for Christmas in the darkness of your grief. And for those of you who are not in deep grief, it's our hope you will be better equipped to understand your friend's broken heart and how to come alongside her.

In the early years after Mark's death, the anticipation of the holidays often felt worse than the holidays themselves. Thirty years later, I experience joy in this "most

wonderful time of the year" but not because it's the hap-happiest season of all. Because for many it's not. About two weeks before Thanksgiving I began to feel disorganized, disconnected, and emotionally edgy. Responding to irritations patiently is more difficult. Anger and impatience vie for top billing in situations that don't normally rattle me. And every year Chuck reminds me, "Sharon, your root problem is grief. You miss Mark and the holidays crack open the door for sadness to make an appearance."

Over the past few years, my extended family's grief has deepened. My sister and her family continue to search for ways to create joy when an empty chair reminds them my brother-in-law is gone. Two of my siblings each lost a child this past year. Memories of preparing for Christmas with my dear friend, Diane bring tears not only for myself but for her dear husband and children whose godly and beautiful matriarch is gone from this earth. Each year brings more losses and the freight train of sorrow still surprises me with its ferocity and power.

One reason the holiday season is so difficult for grieving Americans is that marketing gurus tap deep into our core need for community and family. The most effective ads are those that imply healthy, conflict-free relationships. Thanksgiving and Christmas are ready-made opportunities for stirring up our God-given hunger for peace and whole families.

Divorce, broken relationships, childlessness, loss of a loved one, financial disaster, singleness, conflict-filled marriage, illness with no end in sight - none of these fit the "hap- happiest time of the year" template so all of those ads magnify the holes in our own broken lives and push us to try our hardest to create the illusive feelings of belonging and being needed.

The anticipation of our first Christmas without Mark amplified his absence. Like so many broken people, I wanted to jump from November 1 to mid-January. Yet, somehow, I knew this first Christmas without Mark was the most important Christmas of my life. Such truth exhausted me yet also drew me to use what little energy I had to search for the "riches stored in secret places" designed to help me experience Christmas in a life-transforming way (Isaiah 45:2-3).

And so, my grieving friends, I want you to know - before you give into the desire to skip Christmas, understand - that Christmas is for those who mourn, for those who grieve.

Christmas is for those of us who mourn and grieve because Jesus conquered the very things that create such sorrow in our hearts. Ironically, when viewed through a grid of

pain, the Christmas story can cultivate and nurture the seeds of hope and redemption our God planted on that first Christmas. The darkness, the blood, and the death surrounding the birth of Jesus can serve to make His light even brighter for those who are desperately seeking their way on this black pathway of grief.

As we start the Month of December, I'll share a few journal entries I wrote the first Christmas without Mark along with some "grief relief" moments, both practical and spiritual, that helped turn my heart toward Jesus when every breath was an effort. I hope those of you who are anticipating Christmas as the happiest time of the year will pray for those who want to pull down the shades and sleep through the next month because every Christmas tradition, trinket, decoration, or song heightens the deep longing for what was, for something more. I'll offer you some life-giving treasures of encouragement you can give to grieving friends, and practical ways to help turn their hearts toward Jesus. In the meantime, I invite everyone to listen to Preparing for Christmas in the Darkness of Grief, a conversation between Chuck and me. (<https://markinc.org/help-and-hope/2016/4/30/preparing-for-christmas>)

Friends, Christmas is for those who mourn.

Treasured by Him,  
Sharon

#### LIFE-GIVING ENCOURAGEMENT

For those who mourn: give yourself permission to experience Christmas differently and start thinking about how to navigate the potential emotional minefields. Ask the Lord to give you glimpses of the "joy to the world" Jesus brings.

For a grieving friend: Encourage your friend to start thinking through how she will spend the month of December, including decorating, traditional activities, Christmas Eve, and Christmas Day.

Christmas Grief Relief Resource: We don't know what we don't know. My friend, Vaneetha Risner knows grief and shares how to help the hurting during the holidays. <https://www.vaneetha.com/journal/what-the-hurting-need-at-the-holidays?rq=grief>

Christmas Grief Relief Resource: Preparing for Christmas in the Darkness of Grief, a conversation with Chuck and Sharon Betters: <https://markinc.org/help-and-hope/2016/4/30/preparing-for-christmas>

## PRAYER

Lord, may we find a path through the holidays that helps us focus on the monumental birth of our Savior and how His birth gives us hope in the middle of deep sorrow.