

INTRODUCTION

I pulled off to the side of the road by Greenlake Park in Seattle. As the misting rain hit the windshield, I broke down in uncontrollable tears. While I could see young children playing soccer as parents stood nearby, I felt—but could not see—the deep ache and sorrow that had become all too familiar. While some forms of grief are the result of someone’s death or injury, or become present when something is gone or lost, this is different. This kind of grief, this invisible grief, rushes in because of something we desire but are not given, a pain that is birthed from what has never been and may never be.

This feeling can be like an uninvited guest that you expected to stay for only a day or two at most, but has now become an incorrigible roommate you can’t seem to get rid of. And if that wasn’t bad enough, this “roommate” seems to hold a certain power that’s hard to explain and most don’t understand. When you try to describe it to others, it’s hard to put a finger on. It’s not just grief, it’s invisible grief—a deep-seated reminder of what has never been and may never be.

For my wife, Laura, and me, this roommate had made a home in our lives for the past seven long years. Seven years of trying to conceive a child. Seven years of tried and failed surgeries. Seven years of watching others have children, watching them move ahead while we felt stuck in a sick and twisted time warp. Yes, seven long years of riding the month-in- month-out roller-coaster of “cross-your-fingers with eyes closed” type hope, only to be met with another gray cloud of disappointment and a new bitter dose of discouragement. What made things even harder is that we knew our desires were good. We knew what we spent countless nights praying and pleading with God for was something He actually tells us is a good thing: “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). So why not us? Why not answer this prayer? Why not fill our home with the laughter of children running around instead of this deafening, defeated silence? Although our questions felt like they were going into an old, dusty comment box that no one ever checked, it got better over time. As they say, “time heals all wounds.” After enough time passed, so did the grief...right? No. Not to be a Debbie Downer but it wasn’t like that at all. Let me explain.

When I was eleven my grandfather died; it was the first time I came face to face with death and this thing called “grief.” I obviously didn’t understand everything that was happening, but I did understand that I had lost something—more than that, someone—that I really loved. It was a sad time for me and my family, but there were also fond memories that couldn’t be taken away; there was a life well lived; there was sadness that my grandfather was gone in the earthly sense, but also peace and hope that came with knowing we would be united again in eternity.

When it comes to invisible grief and the grief my wife and I felt (and feel) towards infertility, peace and understanding are not things we can even begin to wrap our heads around. Why? Because there are no memories to think back on, no flesh and bones body to say goodbye to, no hope of seeing them again when I breathe my last because they never breathed their first. The dreams of children that share my DNA, nose, eyes, traits, will never exist. I would argue that this type of “invisible grief,” the death of hopes, dreams, and desires, is just as painful as any other human loss—if not more so. When approaching grief, many psychologists look through the lens of tangible loss of health or life. Based on this metric, researchers have found that “Prolonged grief is relatively rare experienced by about 10 percent of the bereaved.”¹ While this is true for those who have lost someone, it’s not very helpful when it comes to the death of what never was.

Unfortunately, invisible grief doesn’t come with a timer. In fact, the longer this season dragged on, the louder and heavier the grief became and along with it raw, unfiltered, brutally honest questions. Is there anyone there? God, do you even care about us? Did we do something to cause this? Are you angry with us? Are you really a good and loving God, because it sure doesn’t feel like it? Am I the only one who feels this way? Is something wrong with me?

Have you found yourself there? Do you find yourself here right now? Or maybe you know someone who’s living through and enduring the grief of what has never been and may never be. Invisible grief is the product of pain and loss that comes in many forms. For us, our sorrow was birthed out of infertility. For you or someone you know it might be mental or emotional health challenges that prevent healthy relationships or pursuits, singleness where there is a desire

to be married, abandonment and feeling the weight of those missing relationships and memories, a physical limitation that feels like it's taken your future captive, and the list goes on.

Essentially, the sorrow that accompanies any good hope, dream, or desire that hasn't come to life, or has died because it never existed, we will define as "invisible grief." But hear this...you're not alone. I know it might feel like it, and I also know this isn't a common subject or something the Christian community has really embraced or figured out how to approach. It's somewhat awkward and doesn't fit in the traditional box of "loss." But there are many walking this out. You might not know their names and you might not ever see their faces, but just like you and me, they're looking for hope in the dark. That may be why you picked up this book and it's the whole reason I decided to write it. Not because I have a PhD in the subject matter of grief, but because I've been there, sometimes I'm still there, and I don't want you to take this journey alone.

WHY ANOTHER BOOK ON GRIEF?

This is a great question and one I pondered for years. My hope in writing this is to provide new language and perspective to a form of grief that often gets passed over and even repressed. I'm tired of watching so many people struggle in silence, unsure if their grief is valid or worth someone else's time and attention (it is!). I believe invisible grief is unique enough from how we traditionally think about the topic that we could use a different approach. This book represents what Laura and I looked for but couldn't find: an honest conversation about the pain and loss from what never was and may never be, feelings that were, at times, hard to fully describe. Let me say at the start, that this book isn't going to give you all

of the answers you're looking for because, in reality, none of us have all the answers to remedy this type of pain, loss, and sorrow. This book also isn't going to offer "five ways to a better tomorrow" as if that ever really works. You also won't find any Christian platitudes here, no "God is closing a door but opening a window" or any of that nonsense that only serves as a placebo to what our heart really needs and desires: hope and healing in what most likely is the most painful part of your life.

Throughout these pages we're going to spend time considering both this invisible form of grief and the visible, beautiful gospel of Jesus. We'll look at a healthy approach to this kind of grief. We'll look to unearth and dismantle the lies about grief which we have been fed, and look to replace those with the truth of God's ability, His presence, His plans, and His goodness. We'll spend time being honest about the tension between faith and doubt, and between pain, purpose, and promise. And yes, we will rebuild. We will rebuild and redefine, not on our feelings, but on the truth of the gospel and how this good news changes everything. We will walk through biblical examples, personal stories, and Jesus' own words to help build back what's been broken down. We will rebuild and redefine identity, and we will consider what it means to live with both joy and sorrow, the importance of community, and what hope looks like as we move forward. Truth will be essential to this conversation because, at the end of the day, that's the foundation where we need to plant our feet.

I hope you don't see this book as a lecture or detached theory but more of an invitation into the living room to have an honest, heartfelt conversation with a pastor and friend who has been there and continues to be there.

There's an obvious love-hate relationship in writing this book. While I hate that I'm able to talk about this because of

the grief experienced, and I hate that you're in a position to pick up and read a book like this, I also love that in all of the brokenness and bitterness this world can throw at us, we don't have to go through it alone. I love that although the grief we feel may be invisible, God's desire to meet us here and offer authentic hope isn't. Maybe this feels like a pipe dream right now or you feel too worn out to hope again—I get it. I really, really get it. If you feel like this now or feel like this at any time walking through this book, please know that I'll be hoping for you and with you. When you feel like your faith is drying up, borrow some of mine just as I've had to borrow from others along the way. There is hope—real, lasting, unchanging hope that even the darkest night can't hide and the longest day can't outlast.

Whether you are reading this alone or with a group, I consider it an honor that you would allow me to share our story and the stories of others with you, I really mean that. Your grief is not lost on me just as I trust my grief will not be lost on you. My hope is that this honest conversation will provide clarity, encouragement, fresh perspective, new language, and a lens through which to view and interact with your grief. But my greatest hope is that you experience the unmistakable and unavoidable love of Jesus. A love that tends to your wounds and gently reminds that you are not “less than.” One that assures you that your pain is seen, your sorrow is known, and you are never abandoned. A love that promises good for you. A love that, through the pain, through the loss, through the waiting, takes you by the hand, wipes away your tears, cleans your face, and says, “Know that you are not alone and, my deeply loved child, your grief is not wasted.” This is my greatest hope, because, through it all, this is our greatest need.