

**Grief Journal**  
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Dr. Walbourn teaches, “We must grieve the painful losses of the past seasons of our life before we can effectively embrace the present and the future.” To grieve or mourn is to express sorrow. We grieve because of loss. Grief is an unavoidable part of life and needs to be expressed in healthy ways. I have experienced numerous losses related to infertility as well as the loss of the marriage I expected to share with my husband.

Discovering my infertility and navigating treatment in order to have biological children was a long, difficult and painful season. My husband and I planned when we married to wait at least five years to start a family so we could enjoy being married without children for a time, both graduate from college, purchase a house, and ensure he earned enough money to allow me to stay home full time and care for our children. After 5 years of marriage we decided to start a family. Six months passed without success so I consulted a doctor. She suggested a few preliminary tests and to my shock, my fallopian tubes were non-functional. IVF, in vitro fertilization, was the only possible path to pregnancy. Utterly ignorant regarding IVF, I attended an informational meeting. I remember sitting and listening, feeling my dream of having a baby was practically unattainable. Everything about the process sounded terrifying: Injections, doctor visits, blood work, and an exorbitant cost for each IVF cycle. In spite of my fear, we decided to proceed with IVF. Over the next four years I underwent two surgeries and completed four cycles of IVF attempting to get pregnant. I also taught school full time so this added another challenge. Blood work needed to be done early in the morning before my work day began and the numerous doctor appointments squeezed into my schedule. Out of necessity, I learned to give myself subcutaneous injections and my husband learned to administer the intramuscular injections. With each failed cycle, it was harder to hope. By the fourth cycle, we had spent all of our savings and my paychecks all went towards IVF costs. Our doctor did not want to continue treatment. I have since learned infertility doctors are very concerned with their statistics and my failure to get pregnant was not helping hers. I have never forgotten her parting words at our last appointment. She said, “Sometimes it is just nature, sweetie”. We had trusted her and done everything she suggested for five years, had no baby and she dismissed me with a casual comment and no empathy.

I was an immature Christian during the years I underwent infertility treatment. I believed infertility to be a punishment from God. I did not know God and imagined he was in general displeased, disappointed or downright angry. I prayed but only for “big things” and thought I should deal with most of life without “bothering” God. I taught at a very large elementary school and was surrounded by women having babies with seemingly no effort. My sister became

pregnant twice accidentally during this season and she was not married. Family and friends knew we were trying to get pregnant but this made it hard as we had to answer their questions and tell them when we had another failed cycle. After five years of IVF failures, I was furious with God. How could he be so unfair? I had done things the “right” way. We were married. We had a responsible plan. If infertility were punishment, had I not suffered enough?

After being dismissed by our doctor, we were uncertain of our next step. One day a stranger commented that she liked my car. Oddly, I truthfully replied that my husband bought me a sports car to drive while going through infertility treatment because, as he joked, we would tempt fate by having a car so unsuitable for a family. She was also struggling with infertility. She shared the name of her IVF specialist who practiced in another state. I scheduled a phone consultation with her doctor. We decided to try IVF one last time. Within a few months, I began another cycle of IVF and finally flew to this doctor’s office to have two embryos implanted. We waited the usual two weeks before we found out if we were pregnant. I did everything I could to NOT have hope. If I could convince myself I knew it would be another failed attempt, perhaps it would hurt less. When the nurse called and said I was pregnant, offering congratulations, I did not believe her. I insisted she double check and make certain she saw my name and was not mistaken. Five years and five IVF cycles and we were finally pregnant.

Our first child, a boy, was born in 2001. Our second son was born in 2003. Our first daughter was born in 2005 and our twins, a boy and a girl, were born in 2007. All of our babies were conceived through IVF with the help of the same doctor. In all, I completed nine cycles of IVF. We moved several times during these years. When we moved to Tennessee, we joined a new church. I also became involved in a Christian homeschool community. I chose to homeschool our children because I wanted them to have a Christian worldview. I also felt as God had relented and finally allowed me to have children, I needed to be the perfect mom and try to deserve them. I put incredible pressure on myself to do everything above and beyond what I perceived the average parent would do. In fact, I judged other moms negatively for feeding their children unhealthy food, for leaving their children with sitters, for choosing public school, for failing to have a scheduled nap time, for not maintaining a tidy home, or any other “lack” I perceived in their parenting. I loved these years when my children were all young. I spent every day with them and enjoyed them immensely. They were well-cared for and dearly loved. But it was hard work. My perfectionism would not allow me to ask for help. I was driven to be a “super mom”. When he was home, my husband helped because he loved the children and enjoyed them, not because I asked.

When our twins were born in 2007, they were two months premature. It was a traumatic birth for us all as I hemorrhaged and had to have an emergency c-section. By the time I was out of surgery, all of the blood in my body had been replaced with donor blood and I awoke feeling desperately ill and weak. I was not sure if the babies were alive until a nurse brought me a photo

of them taken in the NICU. It was miraculous all three of us survived. The twins stayed in the NICU for a month. Each day I spent half of the day at home with my older three children until my husband picked me up on his lunch break and took me to the hospital to stay with the babies until he came back to the hospital at the end of his work day. We arrived home after dinner, spent time with the kids, bathed them and got them to bed only to repeat the routine all over again the next day. I never felt I was doing enough during this time even though I worked at my full capacity. If I were at the hospital, I felt I was neglecting the kids at home. While at home, I worried about the babies in the NICU.

I don't know how we would have survived this season without our church family. We had been members less than 2 years and were not well-connected. It still amazes me how well they served and loved us. All of our family lived out of state and although my mom flew in to help, she postponed knee surgery to do so and was not able to get up the stairs or do everything alone to care for three children. My church family brought meals, washed and folded clothes, came over to play with the older children, cleaned the house, and even made my bed. I desperately needed help and they showed up. We were so grateful and it changed the way I viewed church family forever.

My faith began to grow, albeit slowly, during the time my children were young. I felt so loved by my church that after the babies were home, I became more involved. I had no idea how to study my bible but I began picking out verses and writing them on note cards to try to memorize. I used all Christian curriculum and taught the children God loved them even though I wasn't aware he loved me as well. I did not know of the Holy Spirit during this time but had encountered Him. When I hemorrhaged with the twins, my husband was understandably upset. It would have made sense if I had panicked as well. There was no way to stop the bleeding and I needed to get to the hospital immediately. However, I felt strangely calm and clear about what needed to happen. I remembered which hospital had a level 3 NICU and told him he needed to drive me there instead of calling the ambulance because the babies would need the NICU. I remember driving to the hospital and feeling as if a warm blanket were laid over me. I experienced a feeling of well-being and peace totally out of place for the situation. I told my husband repeatedly not to be afraid that I knew we were all going to be OK. I had him call the ER to appraise them of my situation and let them know we were on the way. It was a 17 mile drive and every single traffic light was green. At the hospital, I felt removed from all of the turmoil around me. A nurse asked me if she could pray for me. She was visibly upset but I still was not afraid. The doctor on call just happened to be the neonatologist, the best in the region. This was the Spirit, present with me when I needed Him most, arranging circumstances to save me and the babies but I did not know who he was at the time.

After the twins were born, the peace and calm I experienced on the way to the hospital was gone and forgotten. Life was crazy. With the stress and work involved in learning how to

manage life with five children under the age of 6, I did not really process the experience with the Spirit on the way to the hospital for years. I forgot the extraordinary peace and how amazing I had felt. The first 6 months were a blur. I learned to do the next task and not think about how tired I was or wonder if I could maintain the grueling routine. Premature babies require different care than full term babies. I kept track of when they ate, their temperatures, and the number of wet and dirty diapers they produced. I fed them every 3 hours, around the clock. They were unable to nurse so I pumped all of their milk, meaning I never slept for more than an hour or so at a time for months. I found a book written specifically for homeschool moms with large families which taught me how to make a schedule accounting for every hour in the day so I could make certain we fit in school, play time, naps, chores, meals etc. I scheduled what I needed to do every minute of the day and did it. It was hard but I would not lower my expectations of myself. God had given me all of these precious children. I would be the same mom with five as I was with three. When the twins finally reached a healthy weight at about 5 months old, life became a little easier. They could safely sleep for longer stretches and I switched them from bottles to regular breastfeeding. This meant I could sleep a little more. With each passing month, their routine began to be more like that of full-term babies and life felt less intense. However, when the twins were almost two, my husband accepted a new job in Pittsburgh. He started working there immediately and I was home alone during the week with the kids and a house to sell. I watched a Dave Ramsey video on how to sell a house quickly and followed his advice exactly but our house lingered on the market. We lived like this, my husband coming home most weekends while I was alone with the kids during the week, for over a year. As we could not sell the house, we finally decided to move to a rental house in PA and hope the house would sell more readily unoccupied. I was angry with God again because I was doing what I believed to be the right thing, following a wise plan, and working hard on behalf of my family but without the desired results. How could he think it right to keep my family separated and leave me home alone with the children?

The journey from infertility to having five children represents over 12 years of my life. I experienced many losses: The loss of the plan I had for having a family. The loss of the ability to have children naturally. The loss of time with my husband. The loss of the marriage I wanted. The loss of being the wife I expected to be. The loss of having a scheduled birth and seeing my babies when they were born. The loss of living near my biological family. The loss of having full-term babies. The loss of a sense of control, however false it was. The loss of leisure time. The loss of freedom. The loss of time to think and reflect. The loss of my identity. All of this happened and I did not process or grieve anything in a meaningful way until after we moved to Pittsburgh.

When we moved to PA, it was as if God put me on a fast track to “grow up” into a mature follower of Jesus and to receive healing from so much I had experienced. I think of it as the season of “everything new”. We were in a new city, ended up in a new church of a new

denimoniaion, signed up for a new bible study called Community Bible Study, made new friends who were believers, and best of all, I began to hear God in an entirely new way. I remember the Sunday when I heard God speak to me through the message. The pastor said, “Church, it's OK if you are angry with God. He can handle your emotions. He gave you your emotions. You can talk to him about your anger”. I looked around the room to see if anyone other than me found this idea shocking. I could be honest with God? I could tell him how angry I was about all of the hard things in my life? I began to listen intently on Sunday mornings and experienced teaching in a new way. It was as if God were weaving messages into the sermons that were specifically directed to me. I studied the bible and it seemed like a brand new book. I realized how little I knew of the bible and wanted to know more. I started going to the women’s gatherings at church and making friends who loved Jesus. I learned about the Holy Spirit. I was no longer a nominal Christian but a growing follower of Jesus.

After the Spirit began to get my attention and lead me, there are four things which were significant in helping me process and heal from losses. First, I began seeing a Christian counselor. Second, I learned how to sit and process pain with the Holy Spirit. Third, two specific friends served as peer mentors and showed me how to follow Jesus. Fourth, I participated in Empower.

I first sought counseling in the hopes it would help my marriage. My husband refused to go after our third appointment, citing counseling nonsense and a waste of his time. What really happened is the counselor asked him hard questions and he was not willing to be honest. It turns out God planned the counseling for me. It was not what I expected it to be and had to face some hard truths and recognize lies I operated from. One hard truth was regarding my marriage. Our relationship had been changing and declining since the birth of the twins. My husband withdrew emotionally following the near loss of me and the twins. His job was also extremely stressful. He had no interest in talking to me, in hearing about my life, or in spending time with me. It seemed he only cared about the work I could do for him, managing the house and children, and sex. I felt like a dog expecting to be kicked when he came home. He took out his stress by being short and sarcastic and sometimes derisive about how lucky I was to just stay home all day. I tried repeatedly to tell him how he made me feel. His response was some variation of, “That is your problem. I can't help how you feel. You need to quit being so sensitive and man up”. He told me I was selfish and self-absorbed because I “complained” about things that didn’t matter (my feelings, marriage). He said our marriage would be fine if I would just be happy. Basically, he wanted me to be grateful to him, do my job and anything he asked without question and keep a smile on my face while doing so. I spent years reading books on marriage and trying to fix mine. It wasn't until counseling I realized one person can not rebuild a marriage. The first hard truth I had to face was that my marriage was incredibly unhealthy. My husband was angry and controlling while I lived with zero boundaries. I didn't even know what a boundary meant. There was a lie I believed about myself behind this lack of boundaries. The lie was that I was not good

enough and needed to work harder than anyone else to make up for this deficit or I would be rejected. When my husband told me I was lucky he married me, it strengthened the lie. He would “joke” that I would have turned out just like my sister if I hadn’t married him and this also confirmed the lie. I did not believe my counselor was correct in her evaluation of my marriage for months. She suggested two books for me to read. One was about angry and controlling men, the other was *Boundaries*. Slowly, I began to see the truth. I wept all night when I finally admitted the true state of my marriage. From there, I could gradually begin to heal. My counselor told me in so many ways how much God loved me. She taught me to process pain in the presence of the Holy Spirit by journaling. I wrote pages and pages to Jesus, pouring out every emotion within me. He responded through songs, scripture, friends, teachings, and two significant dreams which affirmed my worth to him and showed me how much he loves me. I took my journal to counseling sessions and processed some entries with my counselor. I also learned to set boundaries in my marriage with her help. It took time and was not easy but was worth the effort. I am still married but my marriage is changed. It is not the marriage I want but is one I can live with. I can not change him. I can only change myself. Counseling also helped me learn to operate out of my identity as a dearly loved daughter. This altered how I parent, how I interact with people, how I present myself, how I view losses and pain, as well as what I want to do with my life. I began to see myself as someone with worth that was not tied only to my job performance as a mom and wife. I began to see myself as God sees me.

Learning how to sit with Jesus and process not just pain but any emotion or topic has been significant in my spiritual journey. In addition to what I learned in counseling, two specific friends have been key in my growth. Early in this season of spiritual growth, one friend asked if I would like to wake up at the same time each day and read our bibles together. We texted each other at 5:30, a quick “good morning”, and did our devotions in our respective homes. This was new for me and it taught me a way to make time with God intentional and part of my life. She also came over one day because the Spirit prompted and showed me how she prays. She demonstrated how to bring up a memory and then ask Jesus where he was in the memory. She also showed me how she sits with worship music on and spends time in his presence. She even shared her playlist. I added these practices to my journaling. Early in our friendship, another woman and I began talking about Jesus. She introduced me to Tim Keller podcasts. We listened to the same sermons and when she invited me and my children to her pool, we discussed Tim Keller’s sermons. His teaching was fresh and exciting to me and increased my understanding of my own faith. She knew so much more than I did but never made me feel foolish or ignorant. Talking about faith is still a habit in our friendship. We still listen to various podcasts and teachings and discuss them together. 10 years of friendship with both of these women has had a tremendous impact on my spiritual journey. We now serve together in church, talk often, and meet most Wednesdays just to share life.

I completed Empower in the Spring of 2020. I felt unqualified when I entered the program. The idea of graduate level work was intimidating. However, I loved the experience. The content was amazing. The lectures and books were excellent. Boundaries was one of the books assigned so I was able to learn even more about setting healthy boundaries in relationships. We had opportunities to process losses as part of our course assignments. We learned how to pray for others and about spiritual formation. At the retreat, we spent time identifying lies the enemy speaks to us. When it was time to share our lies, I could not go forward. I was not certain all of my lies were in fact lies. I had written some things about marriage and my future that really felt like the truth. Lisa Plunket and two friends from Empower prayed with me. I shared my struggles with marriage and identified the lies the enemy was trying to make me believe about myself because of my marriage during that prayer time. Empower also provided confirmation for much the Spirit had been teaching me over the previous 8 years. We learned about our identity and calling. I began to believe I could be a leader, that I did have a ministry, and that God did indeed have a plan for my life beyond being a wife and mom. I would not be attending ATS if I had not experienced Empower for it ignited a desire to learn more. I never dreamed I would go on to graduate school but I know this is part of how God is equipping me for a lifetime of ministry.

Grieving my losses has been a gradual process and done over these last 10 years. When I came to know the Holy Spirit, to have encounters with God, to experience an active and personal relationship with Jesus, my perspective on my past losses was radically altered. I can see in retrospect how God was always working in my life. I see how incredibly generous and loving he has been to me, even when I thought he was withholding what I wanted and angry with me. He provided the money and the doctor we needed to have our children. He gave an infertile woman five children when I only bargained with him for one. He was with me in the truck on the way to the ER, calming me and comforting me. He made sure the neonatologist was on call when we arrived. He spared our lives. He watched over my babies in the NICU, answered our desperate prayers while they were hospitalized. He was with my children at home during that time, loving them through the church family who came to play with them. He sent my church family to help me when I would not ask for help. He placed us in the exact community and led us to the exact church where I would learn who He really is and replace my wrong ideas about him with truth. He opened my ears and helped me understand his teaching. He placed us in Community Bible Study so I could study his word. He led me to counseling and helped me through the hard work involved. He placed Empower in my home church so I could participate. He sustains me in a marriage that is not what I want and leads me to forgiveness instead of bitterness. He calls me to meaningful ministry. He has given me the joy and love of deep friendships. He has pursued me with love: The love of the people when the twins were born, his love spoken to me by my counselor, his love taught on Sunday mornings, the love of my church community, the love of Jesus as revealed in dreams, his love as revealed in scripture and in countless other ways. Recognition of his long faithfulness, his constant presence and involvement in my life, and his

steadfast love for me changes the nature of the losses. It does not make them good but it allows good to come from them. I have great empathy for women struggling with infertility and am always willing to talk and listen. As a result of my counseling experiences, I am an advocate for counseling and connect women to counseling, often going with them for the first appointment to help them take the first step. I understand how hard moms can be on themselves and am always willing to share my struggles and to encourage women to make pursuing God a priority even when in the midst of childrearing. I no longer need to be “perfect” and find showing my flaws is a much better way to connect. God has deepened my capacity for pain. Losses and painful situations no longer have the ability to consume me. I can feel sadness about them, such as I feel on occasion regarding marriage, but I am able to let it go and focus on all of the good in my life. I have learned to look for how God is moving and present, to detect his hand at work even when circumstances have not changed. Perhaps it was the hard things in my life, the ones I could not control, which moved me towards God. I wonder if my life had gone according to my plan instead of God’s if I would have been open to the Spirit’s leading? Had it unfolded as I intended, I suspect I would have credited myself and my wise planning for the outcomes and depended on self-reliance instead of recognizing God’s blessings and learning to rely on him. Instead, I encountered God and this certainly is the ultimate good that has come from my losses. All of the “new” in my life the past ten years as well as the counseling, the friends, and Empower, are all intertwined and connected and have played a part in my healing and growth. The common thread through all of these years is the steadfast love of God.