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**Companions on the Road to Emmaus**

# A Grief Support Group

Based on the book  
*On the Road to Emmaus: A Travel Guide through Grief*  
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## Facilitator's Guide



Welcome to *Companions on the Road to Emmaus*! Thank you for taking the lead in facilitating a group to help others work through their grief. Your role in the support group is crucial and will be much appreciated by those who join you on this journey.

### **The Purpose and Design of This Group Guide**

A small group that meets on a regular basis can provide a safe and supportive environment for grieving people to find hope and healing. This guide offers a way to structure a grief group. Sessions 1–6 will

- provide a basic introduction into the experience of grief,
- help to develop a sense of community among the group members, and
- help participants engage with their own grief process.

During the six weeks, participants will be encouraged to read the entire book *On the Road to Emmaus: A Travel Guide through Grief*. No one is expected to have read the book prior to starting the group experience.

An important key to understanding and experiencing healing on the road to Emmaus is *intention*. God is the one who heals, certainly, but the “magic” for the grieving person begins when he or she makes a decision to engage with the grief process. It’s my hope and prayer that through reading the book and supporting others, group members will begin to do just that. For some, these six sessions will provide what they need to move forward with grieving on their own. Others may want to continue with the group to delve deeper into grief issues. For those who wish to continue in the group experience, I provide a template to help create additional group

sessions based on segments of the book. In addition, I provide three “optional” sessions that may stand alone or be used as the core of a retreat. Finally, there is a closing session, to be used when the group is ready to disband.

Each of the six sessions and additional sessions is designed to last approximately ninety minutes. The optional sessions require more than ninety minutes each.

### **Prerequisites for Group Facilitators**

If you have not facilitated a small group before, understanding the basics of small group processes will help you to facilitate these sessions effectively. Having experienced grief firsthand in your own life will also help you facilitate. Being comfortable with your own emotions so that you are able to welcome the emotions of others is key to successfully facilitating a grief group. Every small group experience has some emotional content, but for a grief group, feelings are key—and the feelings run the gamut from anger and despair to laughter and joy. My hope is that this guide leads you to a successful group experience. If you need additional resources, I highly recommend Alan Wolfelt’s books, especially *The Understanding Your Grief Support Group Guide* (Companion Press, 2004). Or Dr. Wolfelt’s website (with its own bookstore) may also be helpful ([www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com)).

### **The Role of the Facilitator**

The role of the facilitator in these groups is not primarily to be a *teacher* of grief principles (though each session has an educational component), but to be a *model* in sharing feelings and experiences while at the same time *facilitating* the group’s sharing. Telling your own story at an opportune moment empowers others to share their stories. At various times I encourage you to express your feelings and share your story, which will enable the group to see that you struggle and have emotions. A delicate balance must be kept, however. The group needs to know that you will remain the facilitator even in the midst of talking about tough things. And you need to balance the time. Be candid, but brief, so that group members have enough time to share their stories.

If you welcome and honor the expression of feelings, questions, and concerns, the group will become more comfortable with each other as they share. People who are grieving often carry a host of confusing emotions—and the facilitator must be prepared not to be intimidated by those emotions. At the same time, clarify with the group that this is *not* a therapy group, although some may find it beneficial in a similar way. If someone in your group *needs* or *wants* therapy, please be ready to refer that person to resources that can recommend competent therapists. Your job is to keep the session moving in the right direction and gently redirect someone who is dominating the conversation, giving unsolicited advice, or otherwise obstructing the natural

flow of the group's interaction. For those who seem shy or quiet, you may want to gently or quietly check in with them to see if they want to vocalize feelings or observations. Some participants may choose not to speak at all, because they are absorbing what they can in their own ways. Asking a direct but nonthreatening question to draw them out may be appropriate, but avoid pressure and honor everyone's input.

## **The Group**

The optimal size for this group is six to twelve people. More than twelve makes sharing difficult for those who are less assertive and may not allow sufficient time for everyone who wishes to share. Fewer than six could make those same people feel a little too much in the spotlight. Good candidates for this group are people who have experienced the recent loss of a loved one. Be aware that many people are not ready to join a group until several weeks or months have passed since the death occurred. A few may seek such a group opportunity right away. Extend the invitation; let the invitees self-select; don't push anyone to join who is not ready. At the same time, you may find that someone wants to join the group, but his or her needs are such that individual attention is more appropriate (e.g., if an emotional disorder has been diagnosed previously in the person, if the person comes to meetings under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or if the person has expressed suicidal intentions). Have resources on hand to make appropriate referrals.

You also may find that someone will ask to join the group if he or she is *anticipating* a loss (a spouse is dying, for instance). This guide has been written specifically for those who have already experienced a loss. Generally speaking (and if resources allow), I believe it's best to provide a separate group for those who are still in the caregiver position.

## **The Setting**

Provide a safe environment with comfortable seating arranged in such a way that everyone can face one another to relate easily to one another and to the facilitator. A circle, oval, or square arrangement can work, and the distance between people should be sufficient enough to respect personal boundaries, but not so great that the environment lacks intimacy. Lighting should be adequate for reading, but somewhat subdued. Lighting a candle to represent the light of Christ and playing soft music in the background as people arrive can help people feel at ease. Refreshments are optional—often people who are grieving have diminished appetites. Food should not be the focus, but it can be an effective icebreaker depending on the group. I suggest that if you provide refreshments, they be available as people arrive. Having water and tissues available signal basic “comforts.” Name tags should be provided unless group members are already well acquainted.

## Getting Started

If you have already read *On the Road to Emmaus*, you are ready to get started! Otherwise, that's your first assignment. If you have determined that you meet the facilitator requirements for the group, the next step is to recruit a group. Otherwise, you may want to first recruit a co-facilitator. For instance, if you have good experience as a facilitator of small groups but no personal experience of grieving someone close to you, bringing in a person who has walked the road to Emmaus and who understands the process from experience may be helpful. The reverse is also true. Your own experience with grief may lead you to want to form a group. If you have not facilitated a group before, find a person to partner with who has. If you are creating this group through your church, get permission through the appropriate channels and begin to advertise the group in church bulletins, newsletters, and signboards. Also consider sending a personal invitation (letter, postcard) to anyone in the congregation who has suffered the loss of a loved one in the past year or two. Meanwhile, read through the session outlines and begin to plan your times with the group.

## Overview of the Sessions

Each of six discussion sessions will follow essentially the same outline, intended to take approximately ninety minutes each. Session 1 has a slightly different beginning since the assumption is that the group will begin reading the book *after* the first session, and also because there are some group-building tasks to do that will not need to be done in future sessions. In session 6 I reversed two of the components because of the nature of the discussion and the transitional nature of that session. For optimal group development and personal benefit, I recommend that the first six sessions be held weekly. Consistency and frequency are important for the group to develop trust, get to know each other in this context, and coalesce as a group. If you continue beyond the six weeks into additional sessions, the sessions could continue weekly or less frequently as the group desires.

## Session Outline

### *Responding to the Reading Assignment (10 minutes)*

(times are approximate; adjust as needed)

This is an opportunity to answer any questions that may have come up in the reading, or to address any specific concerns or struggles a group member may be having. It's also an opportunity to gently encourage people to actually do the reading. In the midst of busy lives, people often feel they don't have time to do homework. But for those who grieve, homework is a necessity on the road to healing. It's not just about doing the reading; the reading prompts the readers to work through their grief. And grieving *is* hard work.

In a similar way, the practical suggestions at the end of each vignette (suggested itinerary) can be encouragements to “work out” the grief. I do not intend for these to be “assignments,” however. They should simply be ideas. Each person will respond differently to each practical suggestion. My hope is that something will click along the way. But this should not be made into a task. Keep it on the level of suggestion and invitation.

*Sharing (30–45 minutes)*

Specific focused questions will guide the sharing time.

*Travelogue (10–15 minutes)*

I provide suggestions and a direction for this brief teaching. Feel free to modify this depending on the group’s needs. You will notice that the travelogues get shorter toward the end of the six weeks. The anticipation is that the group will want and need more and more sharing time as the weeks go on.

In session 6, I have reversed the Travelogue and Sharing sections. This is to facilitate the transitional theme of this session. The Travelogue will lead into the Sharing portion of the potentially final session.

*Focus Verses (15 minutes)*

This section provides the biblical text and opportunity for quiet contemplation of Bible verses and other brief readings.

*Concluding Prayer (5–10 minutes)*

The prayer is an important part of the group session. It provides an opportunity for participants to voice their needs and struggles and gives them a chance to support each other through prayer during the week. It will also, I hope, open their hearts to God in new ways. To offer the opportunity for prayer requests, simply center the group and open the floor for prayer requests so any person who wishes can speak. When a moment has passed in which no one has spoken, then you, as the facilitator, can offer a simple concluding prayer, acknowledging the requests made in God’s presence and asking God’s help. (You do not necessarily have to repeat the specific requests, although participants do feel attended to if you can integrate their need into the prayer—either way God hears the requests!) Conduct the prayer request time the same way each week, with the facilitator leading the prayer. Don’t press participants to pray out loud unless you know your group very well and know that this is already within their comfort zone. This is not intended to be a lesson in praying out loud, and some who are young in the faith could be seriously intimidated by this. At the same time, you can model an ease and comfort in approaching God that will help those who may be new to group prayer.

*Assignment*

A specific assignment is given each week. One aspect of the assignment is to read part of the book. Also, a specific request may be made for members to bring a memento of their loved one (such as a picture) to the next session. Please encourage members to read and spend time thinking about the questions (and to journal if they are willing to do so) at the end of each segment.

## Companions on the Road to Emmaus

# Session 1—Leader

### **Intention and Theme for This Session**

To introduce participants to the story of Emmaus and to get them thinking about the potential for having an Emmaus experience. This session also begins to build rapport within the group through sharing and establishing covenants.

### **Welcome and Introductions**

Welcome each group member as he or she arrives. Pay special attention to those who may be shy or withdrawn. Provide name tags. Have books available for each person if books have not already been distributed.

### **Group Covenant**

The first task of any small group is to agree to a covenant. The following are group commitments that will help to make this group a fruitful one. Take time to go through each commitment, making sure that each one is understood and that the group members are willing to make this covenant.

*Sharing*—We will give each person time to share. We will hold each other accountable to stay within time limits of sharing.

*Confidentiality*—We will respect the confidentiality of other group members. Personal information shared here will stay here.

*Attendance*—We will give the group priority in our lives.

*Homework*—We will read the assigned segments of *On the Road to Emmaus*. Journaling is encouraged, as led by the questions in each section.

*Feelings*—We will welcome tears. Group members are encouraged to allow one another's feelings to be expressed without judgment.

*Advice*—We will not give advice unless asked. We will listen.

*Uniqueness*—We will not compare our grief journeys. Each one is unique!

### **Sharing**

What has brought you to this group? (Each member will take two to three minutes to introduce his or her loss.)

## Travelogue

### Introduction to Emmaus

Read or tell the story from Luke, making sure that the group understands the story in its historical setting, as well as its place in the Christian understanding of the resurrection and faith.

Then guide the group in understanding the two levels of experiencing the road to Emmaus for us:

- To understand who Jesus is and embrace his life (in other words, to experience Christian conversion)
- To understand what Jesus is doing in the midst of our grief and embrace it. The road to Emmaus has very personal implications for our experience with grief. Review Part One of *On the Road to Emmaus* so that you can informally review with them what this means, and also share how this has worked in your own life.

## Focus Verses

Before reading these focus verses, place them in context. We are only reading a small portion of this story in order to emphasize that one piece, but it's important that group members know the surrounding information as well. Don't assume that they know the story. Tell it. This is a portion of the story of Jesus raising Lazarus; note that Lazarus has died and that Mary and Martha have summoned Jesus.

Then read (or have a group member read) this passage. Observe a brief time of silence as people consider what they have heard. Then invite comments.

### John 11:31-36

*The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how much he loved him!"*

*Meditation and Reflection:* We will observe a few moments of silent meditation after the reading, and then welcome members' comments.

### **Concluding Prayer**

Say: How can we pray for one another today? We will go around the circle, and those who wish may voice a prayer need. Then I will offer the prayer to God.

### **Assignment**

- Read Part One of *On the Road to Emmaus*. My suggestion is to read one segment each day. Give yourself half an hour or more to read, contemplate, journal, and pray.
- Next week bring a picture of the loved one whose loss has brought you to this group.

## Companions on the Road to Emmaus

# Session 2—Leader

### **Intention and Theme for This Session**

The purpose of this session is to help the participants to embrace reality, painful though it is. Within the painful circumstances of life, there is hope for healing.

### **Responding to the Reading Assignment (10 minutes)**

Ask the group to reflect on anything that may have emerged from reading of Part One of *On the Road to Emmaus*. This time is intended to give people a chance to pick out segments from the reading that are pertinent to themselves—segments that may or may not be emphasized in the session otherwise. It is also a gentle encouragement to the participants to do the reading each week.

### **Sharing**

In addition to the reading, participants were assigned to bring a picture of their loved one. Invite each one to talk about the picture. For this sharing, I suggest going around the circle in order, to make sure everyone gets a chance to share. Encourage them to use the picture as a guide to talking about the relationship with the person. Be aware that time can easily get away from you at this juncture! If the group is large, limit each one's sharing time. In a group of six to eight members, five minutes each would be okay. Start the sharing yourself, and model both candor and brevity.

### **Travelogue: Reality Bytes**

*I invite you to use the following as today's travelogue, or share some of your own experiences with accepting the difficulties of life.*

The movie was about to begin. The theater was crowded and the last people were being seated. In the last row, a man was lounging across three or four chairs as if he were unaware of the crowded state of affairs. In fact, he appeared to be asleep. An usher came and tried to rouse him because they needed those extra seats. "Sir, you're going to have to leave!" he said importantly. But the man didn't stir. He did make a quiet sound that the usher couldn't quite make out, but he couldn't get the man to budge. "If you don't move," he said, "I'm going to call the police." The man didn't

move, so the police were called. The officer who came carried a big flashlight and a nightstick. He aimed the light at the man's face, and poked him with the nightstick. "What's your name, Mac?" he said gruffly. The man responded so softly that the officer couldn't hear the answer. "I said, what's your name, Mac?" And then he lowered his head to the man's mouth so he could barely hear the man say, "My name is Ted." "That's better," the officer said. "Where you from, Ted?" Very softly, Ted replied, "The balcony."

Ouch! Mom said there would be tough days. But sometimes life exceeds our expectations in that department.

Life is difficult, isn't it? I didn't make that up, by the way. That's the first line in *The Road Less Traveled*, written by Scott Peck in 1978. Life is difficult. When I read it for the first time, that line hit me like a Mack truck. I was in bed with the flu and feeling kind of sorry for myself because I knew it was a flu that was going to last for a while.

The thing is, I have never quite gotten over that one sentence—life is difficult. And that's because of what he said next. He said that most of us think that life *should* be easy, and that's why we don't always do so well with the challenges that come to us. Life *ought* to be easy. Now Peck didn't go this far, but I'm going to: Christians, especially, think that we ought to have it easier simply because we're Christians. After all God loves us, Jesus died for us, and we are his followers, so things ought to work better than they do. Good things ought to happen to good people.

When it works the other way, when life is difficult, we get frustrated, we get depressed, and some of us get downright cranky.

But Peck is right. Life *is* difficult. Look at nature. Very few things in nature come through life unscathed. Everything gets nibbled on or torn by hail or ripped apart by the wind, or beaten down by the rain. Mosquitoes draw blood from people, birds eat mosquitoes, cats eat birds. Most living things have parasites living on them. Even some parasites have parasites.

Life is difficult, and that's true even when things are moving in what seems to be the right direction. Watch a butterfly emerge from a cocoon. It's not easy, is it? Think about a seed deep in the earth, swelling with moisture, pushing hard through the earth, only to face the harsh elements of sun and wind, and the careless foot of the gardener when it emerges.

Life is difficult. Watch Jesus walking to Jerusalem with a bunch of people who love him but just don't get it. Look at Jesus, arrested, interrogated, and strung up on the cross.

*Difficult* is not what we want, but it's what we get.

I believe that something else is lurking behind our reluctance to accept the fact that life is difficult. What's lurking is a theological struggle about who we are. We are human beings. But we are not necessarily comfortable with that identity. Being human means that we are vulnerable: we can get sick, we can get hurt, we can make mistakes (really big mistakes), and we can die.

I think one of the things that appeals to people about being a “religious” person is the fantasy that by being religious or by being a Christian, one somehow can rise above this human thing and not be so vulnerable, not be so weak. But that *is* a fantasy.

Like Adam, we are molded from the earth. From earth we have come and to earth we will return.

It is when we get our *theology* straightened around—that God is God, and we are not—that amazing things begin to take place.

### **Focus Verses: 2 Corinthians 4:7-11**

Encourage members of the group to read the following Bible passage and the Serenity Prayer aloud. Then pause for a few moments of silent reflection before the group shares comments about the reading.

*But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh.*

Serenity Prayer: See page 13 in *On the Road to Emmaus*.

### **Concluding Prayer (5–10 minutes)**

Say: How can we pray for one another today? We will go around the circle, and those who wish may voice a prayer need. Then I will offer the prayer to God.

### **Assignment**

Read Part Two of *On the Road to Emmaus*.

## Companions on the Road to Emmaus

# Session 3—Leader

### **Intention and Theme for This Session**

Grief is an emotional journey. But our culture does not tend to encourage the open expression of feelings. Our goal in this session is to turn the tide a bit and help the participants to accept their feelings and begin to learn to express them.

### **Responding to the Reading Assignment**

Encourage group members to share their thoughts and/or questions that have come up through the reading. Some may have opening thoughts that simply come out of their experience with the week. That's okay, too.

### **Sharing**

Encourage the group to share their answers to these questions. If there are some in your group who are still shy about sharing, gently encourage them to respond to the second question. Be sure to give affirmation so they will feel good about sharing again.

- How did you learn how to grieve? What, if anything, do you need to unlearn?
- What are some nonmaterial things that your loved one gave you that you will continue to treasure throughout your life? (For instance, Ed gave me a love of fly fishing and Labrador Retrievers.)

### **Travelogue: Learning to Grieve**

In this travelogue I'm not so much concerned with teaching people *how* to grieve as I am with wanting people to learn *to* grieve. Healing starts with giving oneself permission to grieve. I grew up in a family that did not encourage the expression of feelings. I learned to stuff my feelings instead of acknowledging them to myself or to anyone else. So when I experienced losses as a young person—in particular the death of my father—I tried not to grieve. I tried to get past it quickly and move on. But it's not that easy. My grief hounded me until sometime years later I went to a counselor who helped me to give myself that permission. That made all the difference. You have read some of my experience in *On the Road to Emmaus*. I also describe this experience in my book *Turning Points* (Judson Press, 1997), pages 10–11 and 74–75. Feel free to tell or

read my story, or tell your own. Some in your group may still feel like they need to just “get over it.” Our culture certainly promotes that perspective. The group will appreciate hearing that it is *good to grieve*, even though it does not *feel* good.

Caution the group about the negative impacts that can occur if people do not grieve: chronic depression is one. Psychosomatic illness is another. Be clear that “psychosomatic” does not mean “it’s all in your head.” It means that our emotions are not detached from our bodies. Stuffing your grief can make you sick.

Also remind the group of the destination: Emmaus is a place of healing and renewal. You can get there only by embracing your grief. There are no shortcuts.

### **Focus Verses: Matthew 5:4; Isaiah 55:8-11**

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

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

“Holy Darkness” (the song)

For “Holy Darkness,” you may refer the group to the printed lyrics in the book on pages 50–51. Or better yet, get a CD with the song on it and play it for your group. Hearing the song is very powerful. It’s available online through [www.spiritandsong.com](http://www.spiritandsong.com), which is a division of OCP (formerly Oregon Catholic Press). The song can be found and listened to (streams directly from the page) online at [www.spiritandsong.com/musicondemand/songs/8047](http://www.spiritandsong.com/musicondemand/songs/8047). If you would want to download the song, the site directs you to iTunes.

*Meditation and Reflection:* We will observe a few moments of silent meditation after the reading, and then welcome members’ comments.

Be sure to give adequate time for the Scripture and the song to sink in. Don’t be too quick with your own reflections, lest the participants give way to your thoughts instead of plumbing their own depths. If need be, ask gentle but nondirective questions, such as, “How did you feel during the song?” or “What part of the song spoke to you?” People who really absorb the meaning of the song may well shed some tears. This will be a good opportunity to model acceptance of expressions of grief.

### **Concluding Prayer**

Say: How can we pray for one another today? We will go around the circle, and those who wish may voice a prayer need. Then I will offer the prayer to God.

### **Assignment**

- Read Part Three of *On the Road to Emmaus*.
- Next week bring an item of memorabilia, something that you have kept because it belonged to your loved one or because it reminds you of him or her.

## Companions on the Road to Emmaus

# Session 4—Leader

### **Intention and Theme for This Session**

The road to Emmaus is a long one, but there are strangers along the way who help us along. Our purpose in this session is to discover the value of these strangers as we identify three important tasks that need to be accomplished along the way.

### **Responding to the Reading Assignment**

#### **Sharing**

- Talk about the item you brought that is reminiscent of your loved one.
- Who are some of the strangers you have met along the road who have helped you in your grief? What characteristics have made these people special? (Do they know how special they are to you?)

#### **Travelogue**

Describe the tasks to be accomplished on the road to Emmaus:

- Embrace the loss.
- Reorganize your life.
- Live into God's future.

By way of illustration, it would be most helpful to tell your own experience with each of these tasks, especially your struggles. Every time you acknowledge your own feelings and struggles, it helps the participants of your group to gain confidence in sharing their own. We are all on a journey, and in many respects all three tasks are continuing assignments that we carry with us through the rest of our lives.

Also, review the idea of the strangers on the road—also known as “Jesus with skin on.” Encourage them to think about the people who have been there for them in their grief, as that is one of the topics for sharing.

I hope that by now the group will feel comfortable with sharing and that they are reading and interacting with the book. If both of these things are happening, feel free to shorten the travelogues and maximize the sharing times.

### **Focus Verses: Psalm 23**

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.*

Patient Trust: See pages 76–77 in *On the Road to Emmaus*.

*Meditation and Reflection:* We will observe a few moments of silent meditation after the reading and then welcome members' comments.

### **Concluding Prayer**

Ask: How can we pray for one another today? We will go around the circle, and those who wish may voice a prayer need. Then I will offer the prayer to God.

### **Assignment**

Read Part Four of *On the Road to Emmaus*.

## Companions on the Road to Emmaus

# Session 5—Leader

### Intention and Theme for This Session

This session is about hope. Healing will come!

### Responding to the Reading Assignment

#### Sharing

Share your answers to one or more of these questions:

- What's something that you have to do now because your loved one is not here to do it for you?
- What strengths or abilities have you discovered in yourself since your loved one died?
- Where have you experienced hope recently?

### Travelogue: The Light at the End of the Tunnel

*When you come to my personal information in this travelogue, feel free to substitute your own story if you wish.*

I want to talk to you about the light at the end of the tunnel—to assure you that there is one (and it's not a freight train!). But first I want to read a portion of Hebrews 11:

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. . . . All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (vv. 1-3, 13-16)*

When someone dies, people often make the comment that he or she is in “a better place.” That is true—he or she has reached the “heavenly” city noted in Hebrews—but those who are left often feel as if they are in a much worse place. The goal of grieving is for *you* to come into a better place—that is, Emmaus. Have you made it to Emmaus yet? In the section “Are We There Yet?” I made the comment that Emmaus is not a place on the map, nor is it a particular emotional state of being. It’s the place where you meet and recognize God’s work in your life. Emmaus is the place where your past and future come together. You are reconciled with the past, and you welcome the future—God’s future.

I want to encourage you at this point to develop a kind of hospitality toward the newness and the future. To reach forward to a new normal that is full of hope simply because God is in it.

Doing so is not easy, even when the future has obvious benefits. Eric and I found each other on the road to Emmaus, for instance, yet even our being together is a reminder of loss. Sometimes I find myself dragging my feet (at least emotionally) about moving toward the future, because that means leaving the past further behind. We have plans of building a house together, and when that happens, we will sell his house and my house. We will find a new normal in that house. It is comforting to be where we are now, living with the two houses, because we don’t have to let go of either one. But the day will come when we have to let go of both of them and move on. That for me is a physical symbol of the inner reality that we all deal with when we move forward.

My suggestion for myself, and you too, is to embrace the future. It will come whether you are ready for it or not, and you will be a happier traveler overall if you open your heart to it. But you don’t have to leave your memories behind. They are a part of you. Bring them along.

### **Focus Verses: Romans 5:1-5**

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

*Meditation and Reflection:* We will observe a few moments of silent meditation after the reading, and then welcome members’ comments.

### **Concluding Prayer**

Ask: How can we pray for one another today? We will go around the circle, and those who wish may voice a prayer need. Then I will offer the prayer to God.

### **Assignment**

Read Part Five of *On the Road to Emmaus*.

## **Companions on the Road to Emmaus**

# Session 6—Leader

### **Intention and Theme for This Session**

This session is designed to help the participants get in touch with where they are in the journey, and then decide what steps to take next. Some will stay with the group. Others may leave and continue on the road alone. So this is a wrap-up and, for some, a good-bye. Note that I have reversed the “Travelogue” and “Sharing” sections in this lesson. This is to facilitate the transitional theme of this session. To encourage a brief sharing at the beginning, I have also included a specific question in the “Responding” section.

### **Responding to the Reading Assignment**

Ask participants to consider this question: When you think about Emmaus, what does it “look like”? You may be surprised by the answers! In a group that I led, some people saw a forest. Not many thought of it as a city. The answer to this question will begin to spark their thoughts for the more substantial sharing questions below.

### **Travelogue: I Left My Heart in Emmaus**

There’s a well-known song called “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” The idea is of a kind of longing for a place of significance, a place where important things happened. It is a place one would like to go again.

I hope that Emmaus can become like that in a way for you. Not that you will leave your heart there, but that you will always hold Emmaus in your heart as you walk forward in life.

In the book, I have talked about Emmaus in several different ways:

- As an analogy for embracing your grief
- As a synonym for hope
- As a place where you discover what God is doing in your life

Today I simply want to say that Emmaus is God’s gift to you. It’s a place that is always there for you if you will pack your bags and go there. The invitation is always open. I pray that you will always find it when you seek it.

## Sharing

- Take a few moments to consider our time together, your reading and meditating, and your journey to Emmaus and beyond. Review the questions on the last two pages of your reading assignment.
- Also consider again the three tasks (turns) in the road to Emmaus:
  - Embrace your grief.
  - Reorganize your life.
  - Live into God’s future.
- Tell us your story again, this time emphasizing where you are now in relation to Emmaus. Are you still on your way to Emmaus? Have you been there and back again? (What did you discover there?) What do you still need?

Focus Verses: 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.*

*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.*

*Meditation and Reflection:* We will observe a few moments of silent meditation after the reading, and then welcome members’ comments.

## Concluding Prayer

Ask: How can we pray for one another today? We will go around the circle, and those who wish may voice a prayer need. Then I will offer the prayer to God.

## **Assignment**

Be sure to allow some extra time for this segment. As a closing exercise, ask the participants to indicate whether they want to continue on with the group or depart and continue on their own. For those who are leaving, give opportunity to say good-bye. Be sure to thank them for their participation and wish them well.

# A Template for Additional Sessions



Sessions 1–6 are designed to provide a basic introduction into the experience of grief, to develop a sense of community among the group members, and to help the participants to engage with their own grief process. After six sessions, some group members may be ready to move up the road on their own. Others may want to continue with the group process and go deeper into grief issues.

For those who wish to continue, I have provided a template to help you to create additional group sessions based on segments of the book. For each group session, choose a segment of the book to delve into more deeply, and use this template as your guide. By now you know the members of your group and can fine-tune the sessions based on their needs and based on your unique setting. I would suggest the following segments of *On the Road to Emmaus* as being particularly well suited to this approach:

- A Road Map for the Journey
- Embracing the Journey
- A Spiritual Journey
- A Road with Many Forks
- Disarray
- Ambushed
- Blue Christmas
- Hope
- Reconnecting
- Five Personal Profiles (Margie, Eric, Dan, Elaine, Michelle—combined into one session)

## Template for Additional Group Sessions

### Check-in

You may design specific questions for the opening check-in time, or simply allow the group members to share informally. By now they have gotten used to interacting in this group, and you may well find that they have come with agenda items to discuss.

### Sharing

Use the “My Travel Journal” questions from the book that you have chosen as the focus for this session.

### Travelogue

Review the information shared in the chosen section of the book.

### Focus Verses

Choose a Bible verse or passage that you think will help the participants focus on the subject at hand and will point them to God’s healing love.

### Suggested Passages:

#### Hope and Encouragement

- Psalm 130
- Isaiah 55
- Mark 4:35-41
- Romans 8:18-39
- Ephesians 3:14-21

#### Anger and Rage

- Psalm 13
- Psalm 27
- Psalm 137

#### Guilt

- Psalm 51
- Isaiah 53

#### Despair/Burnout

- 1 Kings 19
- Isaiah 40 (especially 27-31)
- Isaiah 54
- 2 Peter 5:7-11

#### Prayer and Thanksgiving

- Psalm 116
- Romans 8:26-27

### Concluding Prayer

### Assignment

Let the participants know what segment of the book to review for the next session.

## Optional Group Sessions

The following are three optional sessions that may be helpful in deepening your group's experience with each other. Don't try these until you have become familiar with your group. Not everyone will be ready for these experiences. But in the right settings and with the right people, they can be powerful experiences. The theme for all of these experiences is the idea of being a survivor. If your group is amenable, try one or more of these either after the first six sessions or at the conclusion of the group experience. Or these sessions could form the basis for a retreat. I recommend *not* using a participant outline with them. Use the outlines provided for you, and let the individuals simply experience these sessions under your leadership. Please feel free to alter the outlines to more adequately fit your particular group and setting.

### Optional Session A

#### *Ordinary People*—The Movie

This session will take three to four hours. Get a DVD of the movie *Ordinary People*, referenced in "Survivors" in Part Four of *On the Road to Emmaus*. Be sure to choose a pleasant setting with comfortable chairs for this one. Make sure everyone can see the screen well and hear the sound clearly. Be sure to preview the movie yourself.

Before the viewing of the movie, ask the group to pay attention to their emotions as they watch the movie. Be ready with some tissues! Popcorn, other snacks, and soft drinks would be a nice addition to the evening.

After the movie, encourage the group to interact, using these questions:

- How did you like the movie?
- At what points did the movie engage your emotions?
- How would you describe each of the main characters (mother, father, Conrad) in the movie?
- How did each of them respond to the idea of being a survivor?
- Which of the characters did you relate to? Why?
- How did you feel about the counselor's approach with Conrad? Why?
- How did you feel about the ending?

Conclude the evening with prayers, as in the regular sessions.

## Optional Session B

### “The Open Boat”—A Short Story

This second optional session is for those who like to read and ponder. You don't have to be an intellectual to appreciate this story, but you do need to think! The session itself should take no more than ninety minutes, but it is essential for all group participants (including the leader!) to read the story in advance of the session. If you live near the water, you could add some interest by having this session at a marina or on a boat!

“The Open Boat” is a powerful short story that was first published in 1897. In the story, Stephen Crane fictionalizes a real occurrence in his life. It's about a journey that he shared with three other men, which none of them wanted to take and which only three survived. On his way to Cuba in his work as a newspaper correspondent, Crane and the others became stranded at sea in a small dinghy when their ship, *The Commodore*, sank off the coast of Florida. The story is a gripping tale of the thirty hours in which the men tried to fight their way to shore. It is also highly philosophical and leads the reader to consider what things in life are under his or her control and what things are not. I believe it is highly applicable to the grief experience.

It is critical that the participants read this story before coming to this session. If your group is made up of nonreaders, *never mind this exercise!* It will only be frustrating for all concerned. But for those who are willing to make the effort, it could be a profound experience. Ask them to bring their copy of the story with them to the discussion session.

The story may be purchased at Amazon.com and bookstores under the title *The Open Boat and Other Stories* (Dover Thrift Editions) by Stephen Crane. I also found an online copy of “The Open Boat” at [www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/1514](http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/1514).

### Sharing

- Tell about a close call that you had. How did you escape injury or death in that occurrence?
- If you were going to write a story about an event in your life, what event would you write about? What would you entitle your story?

### Travelogue: “The Open Boat”

- Review the plot outline.
- Discuss the fact that this is a fictionalized version of a real event. Did the story *feel* real?
- Ask the participants to share their overall impressions of the story and how they felt about the story as a whole, especially the ending. Ask them to make general comments about how the story *fits* for those who are grieving.

Some points that may be made by way of review:

- The captain is one of the four men in the boat. The others are the oiler, the cook, and the correspondent.
- The time frame of the story is approximately thirty hours.
- Not everyone survives.
- The event takes place in January.

Share the following quotes with discussion questions:

**1.** “None of them knew the colour of the sky.”

- Why did they *not* know the color of the sky?
- What *did* they know the color of, in great detail?
- In the midst of your grief, what details of life might you have missed? How do you feel about that?

**2.** “The injured captain, lying in the bow, was at this time buried in that profound dejection and indifference which comes, temporarily at least, to even the bravest and most enduring when, willy-nilly, the firm fails, the army loses, the ship goes down.”

- It seems significant that one of the four men in the dinghy is the captain of the ship that went down. How would the emotions of the captain differ from the others in the boat? Why?
- Which of the four men do you relate to most readily and why?

**3.** “A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully surmounting one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats.”

- When do you feel this way in your grief experience?
- How do you deal with the repetitive (seemingly endless) nature of the grief experience?

**4.** “It would be difficult to describe the subtle brotherhood of men that was here established on the seas.”

- In your grief, when have you found camaraderie with people?
- What has been surprising about that camaraderie?

**5.** “Shipwrecks are apropos of nothing. If men could only train for them and have them occur when the men had reached pink condition, there would be less drowning at sea.”

- How would you paraphrase this statement in more universal terms? (e.g., “You can’t prepare for everything” or “Hindsight is 20/20.”)

- If you could prepare for tragedy (be it a shipwreck or death of a loved one), how might life be different?
- What practical or spiritual steps might have helped you to be more prepared for the grief you now are experiencing?

6. “The January water was icy, and he reflected immediately that it was colder than he had expected to find it off the coast of Florida.”

- What time of year did your loved one die?
- What details do you remember that are particular to the season?
- In what way did the season impact your grief experience?

7. “It seemed that instantly the beach was populated with men with blankets, clothes, and flasks, and women with coffee-pots and all the remedies sacred to their minds. The sea was warm and generous; but a still and dripping shape was carried slowly up the beach, and the land’s welcome for it could only be the different and sinister hospitality of the grave.”

- Which man drowned?
- Were you surprised? Why or why not?
- What about your loved one’s death was surprising?

8. “When it came night, the white waves paced to and fro in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea’s voice to the men on the shore, and they felt that they could then be interpreters.”

- In spite of their loss, there is a note of triumph in this last statement. The survivors were also interpreters. Interpreters of what?
- Can you relate to this experience? In what way?
- How has your experience with grief given you a new perspective, an ability to be an interpreter?

Ask the group to share other quotes, thoughts, or questions about the story or its application to the grief experience.

### **Closing Prayer**

(All quotes are taken from “The Open Boat” by Stephen Crane, pages 225–37, in *Literature in Critical Perspectives*, edited by Walter K. Gordon, 1968, Meredith Corporation, 440 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016.)

## Optional Session C

### A Field Trip

This third optional session is a trip to the cemetery where one or more of the group's loved ones are buried. Consider my thoughts here as an idea to be developed rather than an outline of an event. The practical aspects of the event will vary greatly from group to group. Here again, know your group! Not every group will have the desire or the ability to carry off this idea.

The *idea* is simply to support each other in a very practical way, by visiting one or more of the graves of the people for whom they are grieving. All of the people in the group have been to cemeteries before, but going as a group may add to the bonding experience. Many may be frequent visitors to the grave of their loved one. If you live in a small town with just one cemetery, you may be able to visit the graves of several loved ones. In other situations, it may not be practical to visit more than one or two. For those whose loved ones were cremated, there may be special places where the loved ones' ashes are scattered.

Spend some time just wandering in the cemetery and notice names and inscriptions on the way to the graves that are special to the group members. Allow the group to lead the way. Be there as a support and an encourager. After the visit to the cemetery, it will be good to have a time of debriefing, either on that same day or another day that the group gathers.

## Concluding Session

Saying good-bye is a big part of grieving. A person's style of saying good-bye may have a great impact on his or her grief experience. As you bring the group to a close, it will be very helpful to focus on the nature of good-bye.

Throughout the weeks with this group, the participants have brought their grief and some mementos into the group. Today they will contemplate how the group has helped them and take a symbol of the group back into their lives.

There is very little substantive input from the leader in this session, except as it leads into sharing. The idea is for this session to emphasize the sharing of the group even more than in previous sessions, so that they can process the closure as well as possible.

### Opening

Ask each person to share one thing that is different in his or her life as a result of gathering in this group.

Encourage group members to think about how the various members of the group have helped them. Allow a few minutes for people to thank each other for their inspiration or encouragement or help.

### Travelogue

Have each person consider this scenario: Think about the last time you attended a social gathering. When it was time for you to leave, what did you do (e.g., sneak out, go around saying good-bye to everyone, cry, linger?). How you said good-bye is probably an indication of your "good-bye" style. Have each person who is willing talk about his or her style of saying good-bye. How has this affected your grief experience? How do you feel right now about saying good-bye to this group?

### Focus Verses: Acts 1:6-11

*Meditation and Reflection:* We will observe a few moments of silent meditation after the reading, and then welcome members' comments.

### Travelogue

Choose a way to symbolize closure with the group. I suggest finding a parting memento you can give to each group member that is symbolic of the experience. You might choose a small cross or other religious symbol of faith or hope. Or you may get more creative!

For example, purchase a bag of resin “inspiration rocks” (available from [www.orientaltrading.com](http://www.orientaltrading.com)). Each stone has a word inscribed on it, such as *hope*, *peace*, or *welcome*. Place the rocks in a bowl, and during the travelogue time, choose a stone and talk about how you have experienced that particular kind of support in your grief journey through this group. Express your appreciation of the support offered by other members along the road. Each person may take a turn choosing a stone and talking about what the group has meant to him or her. (If the particular stone selected isn’t meaningful, group members are welcome to share something else instead.)

### **Closing Prayer and Blessing**

If you have not already done so, this session would be a good time to have group members share phone numbers and e-mail addresses so they can keep in touch.

Encourage group members to each share a prayer request specifically related to the challenges they face out in the world at the present time. Also, as a way of saying goodbye, invite them to offer a word of blessing with another member or the group as a whole. Then read Psalm 121 aloud as a closing prayer and benediction.