

Elizabeth W. D. Groves

Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson

grief
undone

A JOURNEY WITH GOD AND CANCER



“Here is what will happen as you read this book. You will learn more about how to love those who have lost someone, you will be loosened from your own calcifying grief, you will actually enjoy more of the love of God, you will notice hope growing, and you will cry—mostly all at the same time.”

Ed Welch, PhD, CCEF Faculty; psychologist; best-selling author

“This is a painful, but hopeful book to read. For those of us privileged to have known Al and Libbie as a couple, this book is a poignant reminder of a lost friend. But it is more than that. It is also a powerful plea for the reader to take seriously the truth of the gospel and a trenchant reminder of how Jesus Christ stands with his people in even the darkest of times and will bring them ultimately through death to their eternal home.”

Carl Trueman, Author; pastor; Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“The great privilege of this book is getting an inside look, a sneak peak at a real working faith. The juxtaposition of Al and Libbie’s faith and the realities they are facing gives the book an unusual, vibrant feeling. This book is soul food at its finest.”

Paul Miller, Director of seeJesus, author of *A Loving Life*

“I will never forget Al Groves’s huge memorial service. The congregation was singing a praise song from the book of Job: ‘[God] gives and takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ Libbie’s hand was stretched toward heaven, palm upward in worship, yielding Al to God. In this book, she yields him again. These pages are a godly woman’s poignant offering to Jesus of her dearest earthly friend.”

Steve Estes, Pastor; author of *A Better December* and *When God Weeps*

“Here is a down-to-earth account of death through cancer, but written as a journey with God. It is a heart-wrenching, honest, and moving account of the joys and regrets of caring for a husband dying of cancer. Written in such an engaging style, the author enables the reader both to resonate with her pain and to marvel at the grace and mercy of God that captivated her and her husband. I read. I wept. I gave thanks to God.”

The Most Rev. Dr. Glenn N. Davies, Archbishop of Sydney, Australia

“‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ This promise of Christ is not only for the apostle Paul, as this volume so convincingly and winsomely evidences. Though written in a highly personal vein, it does not so much draw attention to the author as it does to Christ’s sustaining and sanctifying sufficiency. Here is hope and encouragement for Christians undergoing similar circumstances. *Grief Undone* indeed.”

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Deepest joy and profoundest hope is often best seen through glistened eyes. This collection of brief but exceedingly poignant reflections on the death of one of the Lord’s saints will have many readers thanking God with hearts weeping but overflowing because the subject is not ultimately Al’s death or his family’s journey through grief; it’s about how the presence of Jesus bathes even the land of darkest sorrow in light.”

Dan McCartney, Professor of New Testament Interpretation,
Redeemer Theological Seminary

“In *Grief Undone*, the reader is given the most honest and vivid picture of the walk through the valley of the shadow of death that I have ever read. There is the depth of both the valley and the darkness. But in these brief and engaging chapters there is also the constant presence of the Shepherd whose triumph over death gives the reader true comfort to believe that ‘I need not fear for thou art with me.’”

Dr. Tim Witmer, Professor of Practical Theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary; pastor

“This book offers a touching testament to the power of love over death, one that does more than merely chronicle the journey of J. Alan Groves’s battle with cancer, but that beautifully articulates the broad range of feelings, moods, sentiments, and longings his family faced throughout its long, painful ordeal. *Grief Undone* tells a tale of one family’s journey with cancer and how it sensed God’s quiet, compassionate presence at every turn.”

Rev. Dennis J. Billy, CSsR, John Cardinal Krol Chair of Moral
Theology at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary

“In this book Libbie expresses concern that she’s not very open about what goes on inside or that she loves people well. Don’t believe her. In her straightforward and down-to-earth way, she brings dying to life. She reveals the raw and the real within her own heart. She invites us into intimate moments with Al and with Jesus. We come away wanting to be a part of this faithful, loving family, and realize that in Jesus, we are.”

Jayne V. Clark, MAR, Chief of Staff, CCEFoundation

“Al Groves was a mentor and friend to many people, and now his wife Libbie draws us into their private life with a mixture of intimacy, honesty, and practical theology. The result is simply inspiring. This whole book is ‘vulnerably and excruciatingly beautiful,’ to borrow one of her own phrases, so get ready to weep, laugh, think, and reflect along with her.”

Charles Clayton, Director, Oxford Leaders Ltd; Chief Executive,
Primary Care Trauma Foundation; Former Executive Director
of World Vision International

“Libbie Groves invites us into her personal valley of death to help us see, hear, and feel *how* God comforts and strengthens his precious children. Instead of advising us how to avoid painful feelings, Libbie shows us how God walked her through the full range of human emotions that accompany the loss of a loved one in Christ. Our strong Savior disarms death, helps us face grief head-on with a sweet and certain hope of resurrection, and generously gives us himself in our deepest sorrow.”

Barbara R. Duguid, Author of *Extravagant Grace*, Biblical Counselor,
Speaker

“Having followed and loved the blog Al and Libbie published during Al’s illness, I wondered how any narrative could be as riveting. But in this book Libbie masterfully weaves the blog’s inspiring messages into a story of love, courage, and humor. It is a model of how to walk the path of suffering while staying connected to God as the source of strength.”

Amy Givler, MD, author of *Hope in the Face of Cancer: A Survival Guide for the Journey You Did Not Choose*

“If you want to see the gospel in action, then retrace the steps of an ordinary family’s bittersweet journey into the valley of the shadow of death. Bitter and tear-filled, for obvious reasons. Yet sweet and faith-filled, as they walk through the darkness, with eyes focused on the hope of resurrection and open to see the surprising ways God comforts them when facing the final enemy. Painful but profoundly encouraging!”

Douglas Green, PhD, Professor of Old Testament,
Westminster Theological Seminary

“We struggle to give words to our experience of grief. In this book, Libbie has done a great service to all pilgrims who have laid another in the grave to await the resurrection from the dead. This is certainly a book to read slowly, prayerfully, and in conversation with others. It is deeply human and deeply heavenward at the same time. Read it and taste comingled grief and renewal. Just as the Psalms tell it and Al would have wanted it.”

Michael Kelly, Professor of Old Testament,
Westminster Theological Seminary.

“Anyone facing this path of loss and uncertainty could benefit from the generous openness of a wise and loving friend whose confidence in the Lord’s faithfulness and constant presence has been forged in similar circumstances. Here is such a friend.”

Dr. Ruth Marshall, Biblical Counselling UK

“In this memoir by Libbie Groves about her husband’s death and her life beyond, she provides the reader many simple reminders of God’s presence in dark times. However, the meditations from Al may have been my greatest delight. His observations about Psalm 22 and 23 alone are worth the price of the book. But read on, and see how God continues to meet Libbie in grief, joy, and most of all, the hope of heaven.”

Philip G. Monroe, PsyD, Professor of Psychology & Counseling,
Biblical Seminary

“In *Grief Undone*, Libby recounts her husband Al’s battle with cancer and her subsequent journey as a widow and single mother. The book is an honest, encouraging read that doesn’t minimize the heartache and agonizing pain of losing a loved one even as it testifies to the sustaining goodness of God and the hope of glory that lies ahead for Christians.”

Erika Moore, Professor of Old Testament Studies and Hebrew,
Trinity School for Ministry

“*Grief Undone* is heart-breaking—bringing me to tears as I walked through the 89 accounts of God’s faithfulness to my great professor-mentor-friend, his wife Libbie, and their family; heart-warming—exhilarating as I saw how God’s people celebrate his goodness; and heart-probing—daring me to face grief head-on in a whole new way. *Grief Undone* is extraordinary!”

Michael Phua, Rev., PhD, Associate Professor, Singapore Bible College

“This book not only allows us to journey with Libbie, Al, and their kids through the valley of the shadow of death, it pointedly drives us to the hope of resurrection we have in Jesus Christ. It is this hope that our dear friend Al Groves cherished even in the face of death.”

Dr. Hulisani Ramantswana, Senior Lecturer,
University of South Africa, Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies

“*Grief Undone* is an invitation to and an offer of a model by which we too can learn from the Lord enough to trust his loving heart and be able to stare any perturbing circumstance in the face courageously and see beyond it to the triumph of Calvary. I heartily recommend this book to anyone who lives in this fallen world with all its disappointments and tears.”

Rev. Cephas T. A. Tushima, PhD, Associate Professor of Biblical
Studies, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Jos ECWA Theological
Seminary

Grief Undone

A JOURNEY WITH GOD AND CANCER

Elizabeth W. D. Groves



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For Al,

my husband and friend,

who lived justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly with his God.

(Micah 6:8)

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FOREWORD

It is a privilege to introduce *Grief Undone*. The story it tells is a poignant one: how the Groves family walked together through what the psalmist describes as “the valley of deepest darkness”—what most English translations call “the valley of the shadow of death.” In this case, the shadow cast on each of the family’s lives was the prolonged sickness and eventual death of Al Groves, their husband and father.

For Al, death has already been undone and become the gateway to life with Christ. For his family, the longer undoing—of grief—continued and continues. In these pages we are allowed into their shared pain and struggles, and all the discouragements of mortal illness—but yet in the midst of it all, we can sense moments when the atmosphere of heaven prematurely came to earth and visited and surrounded their lives.

If you are a reader who knew Al, or know any of his family, there will be moments when you will choke back your emotions—or, perhaps better, unashamedly allow them to flow in quiet tears in which the ache of loss and the joy of God’s grace mingle together. If you belong to the much larger number who are introduced here to them for the first time, these pages will, I suspect, move you in an unusual way.

Al’s dying and death form the plot-line of this narrative. He died well. But death is always “the last enemy.” Its shadow falls inward and outward, forward and backward on those who love most and therefore lose most. We can never say to someone else in their grief: “I know what you are going through.” All we know is what we went through, or are going through still. But there are needs we all share—the need to know

that when we are in the dark valley the Lord really will be with us and walk us through it, however long it lasts.

Here *Grief Undone* confirms our fears, for the valley is dark and the pathway sore and difficult. But it also confirms Christ's promises: he will be with us; he will not turn us away when we come to him; he understands and will walk on with us, even when we cannot sense or see his presence.

At root *Grief Undone* is a love story—not only between a man and a woman, but within an entire family. And underneath it, surrounding it, and continuing in the ongoing story, is the love of Christ for his children, and the fact that he never, ever leaves them.

This is the story that awaits you as you turn these pages. I suspect that when you come to the end, you will be grateful the Groves family have allowed you into their lives and shared their story. Perhaps more than that, you will want to pause to renew your faith in their Lord and Savior and to rest in his love for you. That, I am sure, is what they would most want.

Sinclair B. Ferguson

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is hard to know where to start to thank so many people for their help.

This book is drawn from material on a blog that Al and I kept (www.algroves.info), although the two are substantially different, not only in shape and length but in content. Therefore it is appropriate to start by thanking Karyn Traphagen, who had the idea for that blog in the first place and who set it up and managed it for us. And Kirk Lowery who has hosted it and kept its technology updated.

Ruth Marshall patiently read my manuscript and gave me great input.

Sue Lutz was a phenomenal editor, giving me helpful and valuable direction and feedback at every point. Barbara Miller Juliani believed in this project, and the whole team at New Growth Press walked with me through the process.

Both Michael Rogers and my son Alasdair did me the favor of giving helpful feedback for my specific questions.

So many people loved us and were part of the process of the Lord “undoing” our grief. Our families and others who live at a distance loved, encouraged, and blessed us from afar. The many dear people who read the blog and wrote strengthening, encouraging comments constantly built our faith and reminded us that we were not alone. Our church family—New Life Church in Glenside, Pennsylvania—and many friends and neighbors who live nearby blessed us over and over again with service of every kind during Al’s illness and in the years

afterward. All of these people were constant evidence to us of God's tender love for us.

Al's mom and dad, Jim and Jacquie Groves, loved Al, taught him well, and raised him to be a man whose life and death are worth writing about.

Alasdair, Lauren, Rebeckah, Eowyn, and Alden offered me precious fellowship, love, faith, and solidarity as we all walked the road to Al's death together, and they have shown tender care for me in the years since. This is their story as much as Al's or mine. I could never capture in words how much their support and companionship has meant, but I think they know.

My sons-in-law, Brian and Ben, and my soon-to-be daughter-in-law, Taylor, are part of the continuation of the story and are living proof, along with my grandchildren, that Al was right—the Lord would indeed give me a rich future and would bring joy and delight into my life.

And of course, most importantly, Al, who gave me a lifetime of love. It is only because of the deep, simple, unshakable faith that God gave Al every step of the way that there is a story to tell in this book. I am so very grateful to Al for showing me what it looks like to live and die well.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2006 my husband Al was diagnosed with malignant melanoma. It had spread to his lungs, and we knew from the moment of diagnosis that there was no cure for it. Barring a miracle, it would kill him. This book chronicles our family's journey during his battle with cancer.

Al and I have four children. At the time of Al's diagnosis, our son Alasdair was twenty-three and had been married to his wife Lauren for a year and a half. They were living in New Hampshire. Our daughter Rebeckah was twenty-one and a senior in college, also in New Hampshire. Eowyn, our younger daughter, was fourteen and in the ninth grade. And Alden, our younger son, was twelve, in seventh grade. Al was fifty-three and serving as the Academic Dean at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, having taught Old Testament there for a quarter of a century. I was forty-eight and working on a master's degree at Westminster.

A year and a half earlier, when Al had had a melanoma scare that turned out well, he had emailed friends and family throughout the process to keep them updated and to ask them to pray for us.

When melanoma reared its head a second time, Al again emailed folks to ask for prayer. But sending multiple batch emails was cumbersome; there were always addresses that bounced and other glitches, and we inevitably missed people. Then our good friend Karyn set up a blog for us (www.algroves.info)—a novel thing at the time that turned out to be an incredible blessing. This book is different from that blog in

length, shape, and some of the content, but a substantial amount of the material is drawn from it.

Al loved and delighted in people and formed close relationships. And he had taught and impacted students from literally around the globe. So when the blog went up and the news spread that Al was dying, people from every continent, as well as local friends, checked in and followed his journey. As a result, in addition to an incredibly supportive network of local friends, we were also blessed with a worldwide community who loved and encouraged us. If you go to the blog and read the comments, you'll see what I mean.

I'm sure you can imagine the blessing that both communities—local and cyber—were to us. What was surprising to us was that people said it was a blessing to them as well! Evidently they found it encouraging to be a part of someone's day-to-day journey through terminal cancer and to read about medical symptoms and scriptural reflections, sorrow and joy, pain and glory, humdrum life details, simple faith, stretching moments, hidden blessings, and most of all how *God was with us*.

As I look back from this distance, several years later, my single, overriding impression is just that: that God was with us in every possible way. He fed our souls from the Bible. His Holy Spirit spoke to our hearts and reminded us of his wonderful promises. And he loved us through people who helped and supported us. Apparently he blessed others too, as they joined us on the journey, whether in the flesh or via the blog.

I hope that as you read these pages, you too will see God intimately, tenderly present with his people and that you will come away refreshed, encouraged, and blessed by him.

I have intentionally kept most of the chapters short, knowing that some of you who read this may be in the midst of grief.

LIFE BEFORE



1

Bookends

June 17, 1978, was a beautiful, clear, sunny day with wispy clouds and a gentle breeze. Al and I stood in Rollins Chapel in Hanover, New Hampshire, surrounded by family and friends, and pledged our love and faithfulness to each other for “as long as we both shall live.” At the reception, The Old Time Fiddlers rosined up their bows, and the square dancing began.

“You still have frosting in your mustache.”

“Do I?”

“Yup.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Always.”



Twenty-eight and a half years later, February 9, 2007, was bitterly, wickedly cold—uncharacteristically so for Pennsylvania—with an arctic wind that whipped across the snow and numbed our faces and toes. My groom, barely fifty-four, bald from radiation treatments and bearing the six-month-old remnants of a black eye from brain surgery, was just lowered into the frozen ground. Until today I hadn’t ever stayed around a burial site long enough to hear the lid of the concrete grave liner drop shut with its loud and decisive thud, but I heard it this time. I winced and wished that our children and Al’s parents hadn’t heard that sound.

He really is gone.

“Good-bye, my friend. I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

The new chapter—the solo widow and fatherless children chapter—begins.

2

The Story Before the Story

Of course there was a story before the story of Al's melanoma. Things that each of us had previously experienced, thought, discovered, or believed contributed to who we were when we learned that Al had terminal cancer.

I don't think I spent too much time during my childhood thinking about death. I recall crying and being distressed at one point about the thought that my parents could die. When I was about ten, my grandmother, who was my favorite person in the whole world at the time, passed away, and I remember being emotionally blindsided by her funeral. But apart from those experiences and perhaps occasionally wondering about what happened to people after they died, death was not frequently on my mind.

As a young teenager I discovered that God was real. I was enthralled with so many things about him and astonished at what he had done for me in Jesus's death and resurrection: he gave me love, forgiveness, and acceptance, made me part of a worldwide family, enlisted me in a cause that was worth living and dying for . . . the list could go on and on. But even at the age of thirteen, one of the most precious things to me was that Jesus had set me free from death. I don't mean that I wouldn't physically die, but that dying would just be a door into life with him that would be more glorious than I could get my head around. Being able to *know* that with certainty took away any fear of death I had; in fact I even started looking forward to it! Not to the physical process of dying, of course, but to living the glorious life on the other side of it. The Baptist church I attended must have focused a lot on the glories

of heaven ahead. I didn't know at the time that this was unusual, but I think it instilled in me from a young age an anticipation and excitement about being in heaven—something I have been thankful for in recent years. At the time a friend and I sometimes talked about how excited we were to go to heaven, and I think that worried our parents. But honestly, the hope of heaven made a happy difference in life here.

Al and I shared that outlook. Freedom from fearing death's power was a precious thing to both of us long before we faced his death sentence. In 1979, his grandfather died unexpectedly the day before we were leaving on a trip to visit him. Al found he had three competing emotions: *I'm so sad we're not going to see him. I'm suddenly absolutely certain that Grandpa is in heaven and that I'll see him again. And I kind of envy him in a way—that he's getting to see Jesus face-to-face.* I think Al was surprised by the envy. Perhaps it was the first time he became aware of longing to be in God's presence.

Over the years our picture of God steadily grew, and we realized more and more how majestic, glorious, powerful, good, holy, loving, and tender he was. We understood increasingly that he ruled over all things, and that sometimes he allowed—even brought—suffering into the lives of his children for a high and holy purpose. And we saw first-hand in the lives of others how he was always intimately present with them in that suffering. The longer we each walked through life with Jesus as our companion, friend, and king, and the better we got to know him, the more that quiet longing to see him face-to-face increased. We thoroughly enjoyed the many blessings of this life and were in no hurry to leave it, especially once we had children, but in the background there was always also the quiet sense that the best life by far lay on the other side of the grave.

In October of 1993, a good friend of ours died suddenly from a heart attack. He had known and walked with Jesus for many years, so we knew exactly where Ray woke up after he died. As I thought about Ray, I found that I imagined heaven in a lot more detail. I pictured Ray alive, healthy, dancing in worship, filled with irrepressible joy in the presence of the King. I also found that heaven seemed vividly real—almost more so than the world that my physical eyes saw daily.

That fresh nearness of heaven inevitably faded, pressed out by the bustle and demands of life. But apparently the Lord locked it away in my memory, ready to be revived when needed. I never guessed that I would need it because my husband was going to die.

3

Out of Danger

Melanoma is a type of skin cancer. When it is found in the top layers of the skin, it can be easily removed and poses no further threat. No chemo or radiation is necessary because the cancer is entirely gone. However, if melanoma penetrates the skin layers to enter the body, it is often deadly. It tends to travel to the lymph system, and from there it spreads to organs—most often the lungs, liver, and brain.

In 2003 Al had a spot removed from his shoulder and biopsied. It showed no malignancy. In 2004 the spot grew back. It was removed and biopsied again, and at that point the pathology was unclear. Were the abnormalities potentially melanoma or just scar tissue, and in either case, how deep did they go? In order to be certain and to remove any possibility of lingering cells, a more extensive surgery was performed, removing a patch of skin several inches long and almost an inch wide. The “sentinel lymph nodes” closest to the excision site were also removed and tested to see if any melanoma, if that’s what it was, had spread to the lymph system.

Al later told me that he would occasionally look at his hands during that time and marvel at their intricate design. He wondered what it would be like to die and not need those hands anymore, for them to be lifeless.

But the report from the surgery was that everything was clear—all the skin margins and lymph nodes. *We were so relieved!* One night a few weeks later I was sitting at Al’s desk after he had gone to bed, writing a poem for him for Christmas, which is our tradition. I could hear him breathing regularly in the loft above me, and as I looked at his glasses

folded next to the computer, I thought about what it would have been like if the report had been bad. What if Al had died and his eyes didn't need those glasses anymore? The thought simultaneously broke my heart and left me overwhelmingly grateful that it was not true.

We were all thankful to be out of those woods. Al had a routine chest X-ray in January 2005, which showed that his lungs were clear, as expected. He would continue to be monitored—several visual skin checks per year and one annual chest X-ray to confirm that the lungs were clear—but that was just a precaution. We were not really worried.