

REVISED AND EXPANDED

# *A Grace Disguised*

h o w   t h e   s o u l   g r o w s  
t h r o u g h   l o s s



*Jerry Sittser*

## Praise for *A Grace Disguised*

In the weeks following the devastating suicide of our son, Matthew, we were completely shattered by anguish, uncertain if we would survive, or even wanted to. The world had turned upside down, and nothing in the landscape looked even vaguely familiar. We needed to hear from someone who had also experienced catastrophic loss and could point us to genuine hope. Jerry Sittser's *A Grace Disguised* became a light in our darkness. Our copies are tear-stained and heavily underlined from many readings. The twenty-fifth anniversary edition adds rich layers of perspective to an already beautiful, comforting, and hope-filled book.

PASTOR RICK AND KAY WARREN, Saddleback  
Church, Lake Forest, California

I had been living in a wheelchair for more than twenty-five years when I entered a dark season of chronic pain. Realizing I needed help, a friend directed me to *A Grace Disguised*. At first, I thought its message was for mourners who had lost a loved one, but when I began reading, I quickly discovered that this book was for *me*. Grief and loss come in different shapes and sizes, and I couldn't be happier to see this twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of the classic *A Grace Disguised*. I have given this remarkable book to many people through the years, and I highly recommend it to you. Not only will you find deep comfort in its pages, but you'll want to immediately share it with others who hurt! Congratulations, Jerry, on this anniversary edition of your timeless work!

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Joni and Friends  
International Disability Center

Jerry Sittser has been through a refiner's fire of suffering. You'll find no platitudes in his book and no cynicism either. After enduring deep pain, he emerged with a wisdom both realistic and redemptive. A hopeful journey through the valley of the shadow.

PHILIP YANCEY, author of *Where Is God When It Hurts?*

A timeless reflection on the pain of loss and shocking beauty that comes in its wake. Jerry Sittser's powerful story is a faithful companion to all of us who know suffering.

KATE BOWLER, professor and bestselling author of *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*

I've given this classic book to countless people who are struggling through loss. My advice to them is not just to read it, but to linger on it, digest it, highlight passages, and then apply its wisdom to their own situation. The pain Jerry Sittser endured soon becomes the pathway for readers to find hope and solace—and a future. Unfailingly, God uses Jerry's words as a balm to heal hurting lives.

LEE STROBEL, bestselling author of *The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Heaven*

Our souls need stories of how other people have overcome challenges so we can believe that our own hard stories can be ones that testify to overcoming as well. When we experienced great personal tragedy, *A Grace Disguised* profoundly revealed the upside-down kingdom of God in our upended lives. This masterpiece on grief and hope continues to be an extraordinary guidebook for hurting hearts that are on the journey to healing.

KATHERINE WOLF AND JAY WOLF, survivors, advocates,  
and authors of *Suffer Strong* and *Hope Heals*

When people ask me to point them to books that are honest about grief, theologically profound, and pastorally helpful, *A Grace Disguised* is always one of my top recommendations. Jerry Sittser has experienced unimaginable loss, and he pulls no punches in this remarkable book. In response to his pain, he offers no pat answers but instead gives us a profound picture of God's surprising grace. I'm so grateful that this important book can find a new generation of readers.

TISH HARRISON WARREN, Anglican priest and author of  
*Liturgy of the Ordinary* and *Prayer in the Night*

It's rare to find a book that navigates the mystery of suffering with subtle emotional texture and wise insight from the ages—that is, with grace and truth. This is one of those books. Treasure it. Buy copies for loved ones who grieve loss of any sort. Reread it every few years to grow your own soul. There's a reason it's already called a classic. Because it is.

MARK GALLI, former editor in chief of *Christianity Today*

*A Grace Disguised* has proven to be one of those timeless books for me—a missive to be read again and again (in many respects due to its personal and meaningful tone), especially when my mind and heart feel worn from the heaviness of loss and grief that has been inevitable in my own life as a human being and also as a vocational minister who has walked with many in their darkest days. I am deeply grateful for Jerry Sittser's work, and I trust that his voice will be a guide for many throughout various seasons of lament.

DREW HYUN, pastor of Hope Church Midtown,  
founder of Hope Church NYC, and network  
champion of Emotionally Healthy Discipleship

Also by Jerry Sittser

*A Grace Revealed*

*When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer*

*The Will of God as a Way of Life*

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

*A Grace Disguised*

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*To Diane and Jack—  
blood is thicker than water,  
and faith is thickest of all.*

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*Preface to the 25th  
Anniversary Edition*

**T**his book tells the story of a terrible accident that took the lives of my mother, Grace; my first wife, Lynda; and a daughter, Diana Jane. It also tells the story of what happened in the years that followed. I survived the accident, as did three of my children who were, at the time of its occurrence, very young. Over the course of the next twenty years, I raised them (with the help of the community of faith) and then released them. They are all in their thirties now, married and with children, and doing well.

It is a peculiar experience to have adult children. They lived in my home for years while growing up; we did life together—laundry, meals, sports, music, board games, vacations, homework, play, songs, prayers, reading aloud, and so much more. I know them well. But they always were—and still are—*other*. Now, as adults, they have all set a course for their lives, pursued vocations, chosen life partners, made many friends, and committed themselves to causes that

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matter the most to them. I exercised some influence, to be sure. Still, *they* made those decisions, not me. They are my children, but they do not belong to me.

Neither does *A Grace Disguised*, which I wrote twenty-five years ago. A few years after the accident, close friends encouraged me to write a book on loss because they believed, after the many conversations we had together, that I had an obligation to the larger community to turn my private thoughts into public good. They told me I had something worth saying.

The first draft of the book was short, consisting of little more than theological reflections on suffering. It was all head, but little heart and no story. My friends urged me to tell the story too. They said it had to be personal; it had to have heart; it had to speak to loss as people actually experience it. Their advice prevailed and changed the nature of the book into something more like a memoir.

Over the years, *A Grace Disguised* has done well and sold steadily. It has been translated into some twenty languages. It will probably outlive me. I have heard from readers around the world. Sometimes I have to find a translator to read their letters.

I wrote the book. But it does not belong to me. A few years ago, I was flying from Denver to Seattle. Sitting in an aisle seat, I happened to overhear a conversation between two couples, complete strangers to each other, about a book one of them was reading. It was obvious that the other couple had already read it. That brief exchange before takeoff led to a long conversation about the book, as well as about their personal experiences of loss.

## Preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition

The book was *A Grace Disguised*. Of course they had no idea who I was, and I chose not to identify myself. I discovered then that once a book makes its way into print, it no longer belongs to the author. It becomes like a child who has left home.

In 2020, Carolyn McCready, an executive editor at Zondervan, and I discussed the possibility of issuing a 25th anniversary edition of *A Grace Disguised*. I had to read the original book in preparation for this new edition. I chose not to change it, sensing deep in my spirit that it had to remain as it was. I suppose I could have improved it. After all, what can't be improved, except some masterpiece, like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony or Michelangelo's *David*? I am not capable of producing such a masterpiece! Still, the original seemed sacred to me, a finished work, though not a perfect one.

I did decide, however, to add to it. Chapter 16 ("Looking Back, Looking Ahead") reflects on what trauma and loss look like after thirty years, and chapter 17 ("To the Community of Faith") speaks to the caregivers—friends and family, pastors and mentors, chaplains and therapists—who support their loved ones during and after a loss. Those two additions also mention in passing what has happened to our family over the past twenty-five years.

I have had the privilege of working with three exceptional editors at Zondervan. Ann Spangler served as the editor of the first edition of *A Grace Disguised*; Sandra Vander Zicht the editor of the second edition, as well as several of my other books; and Carolyn McCready the editor of this, the 25th anniversary edition. I cannot say enough about these three extraordinary women. They are competent and full

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of grace. The team at Zondervan has demonstrated these same qualities. Several friends read through the new chapters and offered useful comments: Diane and Jack Veltkamp, my sister and brother-in-law; Jayme and Erinn Koerselman, my nephew and niece; Katie Wisenor, Dick Mandeville, and Craig Lammers, all good friends; Jim Edwards and Adam Neder, fellow scholars and writers; and of course my wife, Patricia, always the first reader of everything I write. These editors and friends have turned the discipline and craft of writing into a pleasure.

I follow a spiritual practice once I receive the first copy of a book I have written. I bring it to the chapel at Whitworth University (where I have taught for thirty years), place it on the Communion table, reflect on the process of writing it, thank God for the opportunity and for the people who helped along the way, and then release it to God. In the end, the book, flaws and all, belongs first and foremost to him. I pray that this 25th anniversary edition will honor him and contribute to his redemptive work in the world.

## *Preface to the First Edition*

**T**his book is about catastrophic loss and the transformation that can occur in our lives because of it. What I have written has grown out of my experience, but it is not exclusively about my experience. The book is like a painting that has become more than the scene that inspired it. Once I started to think about my own loss, I found myself exploring a new world of meaning that opened up before me. I began to ask questions and to find answers that proved to be both satisfying and unsettling.

As I reflected on the story of my loss, which I will tell shortly, I learned that, though entirely unique (as all losses are), it manifests universal experience. Sooner or later, all people suffer loss, in little doses or big ones, suddenly or over time, privately or in public settings. Loss is as much a part of normal life as birth, for as surely as we are born into this world, we suffer loss before we leave it.

It is not, therefore, the experience of loss that becomes the defining moment of our lives, for that is as inevitable as death, which is the last loss awaiting us all. It is how

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we respond to loss that matters. That response will largely determine the quality, the direction, and the impact of our lives.

This book is not intended to help anyone get over or even through the experience of catastrophic loss, for I believe that “recovery” from such loss is an unrealistic and even harmful expectation, if by recovery we mean resuming the way we lived and felt prior to the loss. Instead, the book is intended to show how it is possible to live in and be enlarged by loss, even as we continue to experience it. That is why I will emphasize the power of response. Response involves the choices we make, the grace we receive, and ultimately the transformation we experience in the loss. My aim is not to provide quick and painless solutions but to point the way to a lifelong journey of growth.

Loss is like a terminal illness. There is nothing we can do to spare ourselves from such sickness, except perhaps put it off for a while. But there is another sickness that we can heal—the sickness of our souls. In matters of the soul, I do not want to treat symptoms, but heal the illness itself. If we face loss squarely and respond to it wisely, we will actually become healthier people, even as we draw closer to physical death. We will find our souls healed, which can happen only through suffering.

Friends urged me to write this book after many long conversations. I was not inclined to write anything after my loss, though I did, for my own private reasons, keep a journal of my experience and what came of it. If anything, I recoiled from the idea of telling my story to the public. But my friends suggested that my experience was not the point. It was my

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reflections on the experience that were valuable to them, for they believed that those reflections transcended the experience and showed promise of helping others. Obviously, their opinions prevailed.

Though I offer vignettes of my story throughout these pages, I decided to write a book about the universal experience of loss rather than my own particular experience alone. I wanted to use restraint about my own story for the sake of my privacy. I also wanted to guard against drawing so much attention to my story that I neglected to explore the universal issues to which all of our stories of loss point. Besides, I am not sure it is entirely possible to communicate the utterly devastating nature of one's suffering. Some experiences are so terrible that they defy description.

Still, I feel compelled to say at the outset, however inadequate my words, that what has happened to me has pressed me to the limit. I have come face-to-face with the darker side of life and with the utter weakness of my own human nature. As vulnerable as I feel most of the time, I can hardly call myself a conqueror. If I give the impression that I think myself heroic, perfect, or strong, then I give the wrong impression. My experience has only confirmed in my mind how hard it is to face loss and how long it takes to grow from it. But it has also reminded me how wonderful life can be, even and especially in suffering.

Writing this book has turned out to be meaningful but not cathartic. It has not exacerbated the trauma, nor has it helped to heal it. Keeping a journal over the past three years did that. Still, I found myself enriched by rereading my journal and by reflecting on what has come out of my experience

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and how I have changed. This book is the product of that reflection. It is the happy result of a bad experience.

Yet writing this book has not mitigated my sense of bewilderment and sadness. The help it may bring to others does not justify the loss or explain the tragedy. My suffering is as puzzling and horrible to me now as it was the day it happened. The good that may come out of the loss does not erase its badness or excuse the wrong done. Nothing can do that.

Many people have contributed significantly to the publication of this book. The acknowledgments I make here so briefly to honor them are like a round of applause at the end of a brilliant performance of a Mozart opera. My praise falls so far short of the greatness of the service to which it points. These people are dear friends who have done more than read parts or all of the various drafts of the manuscript. They have invested themselves into my life. Not only what I have written but also who I am is a product of their love and concern. It is a privilege to acknowledge my indebtedness to them.

I have heard many moving stories about loss over the past three years but have decided to tell only a few of those stories here. I am grateful to Leanna, Steve, Joanne, Andy and Mary, and Jeff for their willingness to tell their stories to me and to give me permission to use them in the book. Their courage, endurance, and wisdom have helped me far more than I can express.

Linda Lawrence Hunt, Steve and Kathy Pederson, Forrest Baird, and Martin E. Marty played a special role in encouraging me to write the book. Dale and Kathy Bruner,

## Preface to the First Edition

Terry and Suzette McGonigal, Judy Palpant, and Dave Bast brought theological perspective to the book. Rachel Johnson, Glenna Shubarth, and Janelle Thayer, all therapists, lent their expertise in psychology to the manuscript, while Leonard Oakland and Howard and Pat Stien added their literary sensibilities to the project. Terry Mitchell did a superb job of editing the manuscript before the book ever fell into the hands of the editors at Zondervan. Once I started working with Zondervan, Ann Spangler, senior acquisitions editor, showed sensitivity to both who the author is and what the author writes. And Verlyn D. Verbrugge, senior editor, touched up the manuscript at just the right points.

Ron and Julie Pyle, Todd and Monica Holdridge, Dale Soden, and Steve and Richelle Mills, all close friends, assisted in shaping the ideas of the book through many long conversations. My mother-in-law, Minnie Dethmers; my sister-in-law, Judie Koerselman; and other family members on my wife's side became partners at a distance as we learned to live with circumstances that none of us wanted. My dad, Gerald, was faithful in calling and in correspondence, though he lives a great distance away. My three children, Catherine, David, and John, never once looked at the manuscript, but they played a major role in bringing vitality into my life when I most needed it. For a time I think they kept me alive; now they keep me going.

No one has contributed more to me and to the writing of this book than my sister, Diane, and my brother-in-law, Jack, who spent hundreds of hours talking with me about most of the ideas contained in this book, who read every draft of the manuscript, and who have invested so much of

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themselves in my children and me. It is rare and wonderful when family members are best friends. I have had that experience with Diane and Jack. I dedicate this book to them with gratitude and affection.

Chapter 1

*The End and the Beginning*

*You know as well as I there's more . . .  
There's always one more scene.*

Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.*



Catastrophic loss wreaks destruction like a massive flood. It is unrelenting, unforgiving, and uncontrollable, brutally erosive to body, mind, and spirit. Sometimes loss does its damage instantly, as if it were a flood resulting from a broken dam that releases a great torrent of water, sweeping away everything in its path. Sometimes loss does its damage gradually, as if it were a flood resulting from unceasing rain that causes rivers and lakes to swell until they spill over their banks, engulfing, saturating, and destroying whatever the water touches. In either case, catastrophic loss leaves the landscape of one's life forever changed.

My experience was like a dam that broke. In one moment I was overrun by a torrent of pain I did not expect.

Lynda, my wife of nearly twenty years, loved to be around her children. Each one of them was a gift to her because, after eleven years of infertility, she never thought she would have any of her own. Though she earned a master's degree in music from the University of Southern California; became a professional singer, choir director, and voice coach; and served church and community, she could never entirely let go of her longing for children. When she delivered four healthy children in six years, she was overjoyed. She relished the wonder of motherhood.

In the fall of 1991, Lynda was teaching a unit of home-school to our two oldest children, Catherine and David, on

## The End and the Beginning

Native American culture. She decided to complete the unit of study by attending a powwow at a Native American reservation in rural Idaho. So we piled our four children into the minivan on a Friday afternoon to drive to the reservation, where we planned to have dinner with the tribe and witness our first powwow. My mother, Grace, who had come to visit us for the weekend, decided to join us on the excursion. At dinner we talked with tribal leaders about their projects and problems—especially the abuse of alcohol, which undermined so much of what they were trying to accomplish.

After dinner we strolled to a small gymnasium, where the powwow had already begun. Once again we sat with several tribal leaders, and they explained the dances that tribal members were performing and the traditional dress the dancers were wearing. One dance in particular moved me—a dance of mourning for a loved one from the tribe who had recently died. I was mesmerized by the slow, understated movement of the few who danced before us. The dance, chant, and drumbeat created a mood reflecting the sorrow that they—and now we—felt.

After about an hour of watching the powwow, several children from the tribe approached us and invited our two daughters, Catherine and Diana Jane, to join them in a dance. The boys decided to explore the gymnasium for a while. That gave Lynda and me an opportunity to learn more about the tribe.

By 8:15 p.m., however, the children had had enough. So we returned to our van, loaded and buckled up, and left for home. By then it was dark. Ten minutes into our trip home, I noticed an oncoming car on a lonely stretch of highway

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traveling extremely fast. I slowed down at a curve, but the other car did not. It jumped its lane and smashed head-on into our minivan. I learned later that the alleged driver was Native American, drunk, driving eighty-five miles per hour. He was accompanied by his pregnant wife, also drunk, who was killed in the accident.

I remember those first moments after the accident as if everything was happening in slow motion. They are frozen into my memory with a terrible vividness, like shadows etched onto a building after an atomic blast. After recovering my breath, I turned around to survey the damage. The scene was chaotic. I remember the look of terror on the faces of my children and the feeling of horror that swept over me when I saw the unconscious and broken bodies of Lynda, my four-year-old daughter Diana Jane, and my mother. I remember getting Catherine (then eight), David (seven), and John (two) out of the van through my door, the only one that would open. I remember taking pulses, doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, trying to save the dying and calm the living. I remember the feeling of panic that struck my soul as I watched Lynda, my mother, and Diana Jane all die before my eyes. I remember the pandemonium that followed—people gawking, lights flashing from emergency vehicles, a helicopter whirring overhead, cars lining up, medical experts doing what they could to help. And I remember the realization sweeping over me that I would soon plunge into a darkness from which I might never again emerge as a sane, normal, believing man.

In the hours that followed the accident, the initial shock gave way to an unspeakable agony. I felt dizzy with grief's

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vertigo, cut off from family and friends, tormented by the loss, nauseous from the pain. After arriving at the hospital, I paced the floor like a caged animal only recently captured. I was so bewildered that I was unable to voice questions or think rationally. I felt wild with fear and agitation, as if I was being stalked by some deranged killer from whom I could not escape. I could not stop crying. I could not silence the deafening noise of crunching metal, screaming sirens, and wailing children. I could not rid my eyes of the vision of violence, of shattering glass and shattered bodies. All I wanted was to be dead. Only the sense of responsibility for my three surviving children and the habit of living for forty years kept me alive.

That torrent of emotion swept away the life I had held dear for so many years. In one moment, my family as I had known and cherished it was obliterated. The woman to whom I had been married for two decades was dead; my beloved Diana Jane, our thirdborn, was dead; my mother, who had given birth to me and raised me, was dead. Three generations—gone in an instant!

That initial deluge of loss slowly gave way over the next months to the steady seepage of pain that comes when grief, like floodwaters refusing to subside, finds every crack and crevice of the human spirit to enter and erode. I thought I was going to lose my mind. I was overwhelmed with depression. The foundation of my life was close to caving in.

Life was chaotic. My children experienced intense grief and fear too. John was seriously injured; he broke his femur in the accident, which required him to be in traction for three weeks and in a body cast for another eight weeks.

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People from everywhere called on the telephone, sent letters, and reached out to help and mourn. Responsibilities at home and work accumulated like trash on a vacant lot, threatening to push me toward collapse. I remember sinking into my favorite chair night after night, feeling so exhausted and anguished that I wondered whether I could survive another day, whether I wanted to survive another day. I felt punished by simply being alive and thought death would bring welcome relief.

I remember counting the consecutive days in which I cried. Tears came for forty days, and then they stopped, at least for a few days. I marveled at the genius of the ancient Hebrews, who set aside forty days for mourning, as if forty days was enough. I learned later how foolish I was. It was only after those forty days that my mourning became too deep for tears. So my tears turned to brine, to a bitter and burning sensation of loss that tears could no longer express. In the months that followed, I actually longed for the time when the sorrow had been fresh and tears came easily. That emotional release would have lifted the burden, if only for a while.

Of course I had no way of anticipating the adjustments I would have to make and the suffering I would have to endure in the months and years ahead. Still, on the night of the tragedy, I was given a window of time between the accident and our arrival at the hospital that presaged, at least initially, what lay ahead for me. Because the accident occurred in rural Idaho, just outside the Indian reservation, we were at the scene for well over an hour before an emergency vehicle transported the four of us to a hospital—another hour away.

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Those two hours between the accident and our arrival at the hospital became the most vivid, sobering, memorable moments of reflection I have ever had or will ever have. I was lifted momentarily out of space and time as I knew it and was suspended somehow between two worlds.

One was the world of my past, so wonderful to me, which was now lying in a tangle of metal on the side of the road; the other was the world of my future, which awaited me at the end of that long ride to the hospital as a vast and frightening unknown. I realized that something incomprehensible and extraordinary had just happened. By some strange twist of fate or mysterious manifestation of divine providence, I had been suddenly thrust into circumstances I had not chosen and never could have imagined. I had become the victim of a terrible tragedy. I ransacked my mind for options that would provide a way out of the pain I knew intuitively loomed ahead for me and my family. In that brief window of time, I exhausted all possibilities except one. I realized that I would have to suffer and adjust; I could not avoid it or escape it. There was no way out but ahead, into the abyss. The loss brought about by the accident had changed my life, setting me on a course down which I had to journey, whether I wanted to or not. I was assigned both a tremendous burden and a terrible challenge. I faced the test of my life. One phase of my life had ended; another, the most difficult, was about to begin. When the emergency vehicle arrived at the hospital, I stepped out into a whole new world.

Chapter 2

*Whose Loss Is Worse?*

*In the last resort it is highly improbable that there could ever be a therapy which gets rid of all difficulties. Man needs difficulties; they are necessary for health.*

Carl Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*



All people suffer loss. Being alive means suffering loss. Sometimes the loss is natural, predictable, and even reversible. It occurs at regular intervals, like the seasons. We experience the loss, but after days or months of discomfort we recover and resume life as usual, the life that we wanted and expected. The winter's loss leads to the spring of recovery. Such losses characterize what it means to live as normal human beings. Living means changing, and change requires that we lose one thing before we gain something else.

Thus we lose our youth but gain adulthood. We lose the security of home but gain the independence of being on our own. We lose the freedom of singleness but gain the intimacy of marriage. We lose a daughter but gain a son-in-law. Life is a constant succession of losses and gains. There is continuity and even security in this process. We remember the losses that lie behind us, and we look forward to the gains that lie ahead. We live suspended between the familiar past and the expected future. The scenery we enjoy today gradually fades into the background, finally receding from sight. But what looms ahead comes nearer and gets clearer, until it becomes the scenery of the present moment that fills our vision.

But there is a different kind of loss that inevitably occurs in all of our lives, though less frequently and certainly less predictably. This kind of loss has more devastating results, and it is irreversible. Such loss includes terminal illness,

# ***A Grace Disguised***

**How the Soul Grows through Loss**

By Jerry Sittser

**Whether your suffering has come in the form of chronic illness, disability, divorce, unemployment, crushing disappointment, or the loss of someone you love, this book will guide you deeper into your own healing process.**

This revised and expanded 25th anniversary edition features a new introduction and two additional chapters, one which provides help for pastors and counselors.

All of us will face some kind of loss in life. But we can, if we choose, know the grace that transforms us.

**“In the weeks following the devastating suicide of our son, Matthew, we were completely shattered by anguish, uncertain if we would survive, or even wanted to. Jerry Sittser’s *A Grace Disguised* became a light in our darkness. Our copies are tear-stained and heavily underlined from many readings.”**

—Pastor Rick and Kay Warren, Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California

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