

A FIELD GUIDE FOR MEN

At the Graveside

What to say to the grieving, and what to leave unsaid

Jake McCluskey

Most men freeze at a funeral. Not because they don't care. Because they're standing there hunting for the one sentence that will fix this, and there isn't one. There never was.

That hunt is the actual problem. You reach for something big enough to match the moment, and reaching is how a good man ends up saying something that wounds instead of helps. He didn't mean to. He just couldn't stand the silence, so he filled it, and the wrong words came out because that's what fills silence when you're scared.

This isn't a script to memorize. It's what I wish every man had in his pocket before he walked up to a casket.

1. Presence beats words

You don't need a profound sentence. You need to be in the room. Grieving people remember who was standing next to them far longer than they remember what anyone said. Your face, your hand on a shoulder, your body taking up space next to theirs, that's the message. You showed up. That's the whole sermon.

2. Show up, then keep showing up

Everybody comes the first week. The house fills with casseroles and cards and men saying "let me know what you need." Then the funeral's over, the out-of-town family flies home, and by week two the driveway is empty again. That's exactly when it gets worse for them, not better. The shock has worn off and the actual absence has moved in. Put a date on your calendar for four weeks out. Show up with no reason. That's the visit that matters most and the one almost nobody makes.

3. Bury these platitudes forever

"Everything happens for a reason." "God needed another angel." "At least he's not suffering anymore." Every one of these sounds like comfort and lands like a slap. They rush the grieving person past their pain to make you feel less awkward standing in it with them. "Everything happens for a reason" turns a death into a math problem. "God needed another angel" isn't even true, angels aren't glorified people, and it makes God sound like He robbed a family to staff heaven. "At least" is the worst word in the English language to put next to a grieving man's loss. There is no "at least" that helps. Cut it out of your vocabulary at a funeral. All of it.

4. "Jesus wept" gives you permission to just grieve

"Jesus wept." That's the whole verse, two words in the NASB (John 11:35). Jesus knew He was about to raise Lazarus from the dead. Minutes away. He wept anyway, standing right

next to the tomb, watching Mary and the others cry. He didn't skip the grief to get to the miracle. That's your permission slip. You don't have to rush anyone past their tears to get to the hope. Jesus didn't. Weep with the man who's weeping. Paul says the same thing plainly: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). That's the assignment. Not fix. Weep.

5. Say his name

People go quiet about the name. They're scared saying it will remind the widow of her husband, remind the mother of her son, like she could possibly forget. She hasn't forgotten. What she's noticed is that everyone around her stopped saying his name like he never existed. Say it. "I keep thinking about the way David used to laugh at his own jokes before anyone else did." That sentence is worth more than an hour of careful small talk that avoids the one word she needs to hear.

6. Be specific, and do the thing without being asked

"Let me know if you need anything" puts the work back on a person who can barely get out of bed. Don't ask. Decide. Mow the lawn on Thursday and don't ring the doorbell. Show up with paper towels and toilet paper, the boring stuff nobody thinks to buy when the world's caved in. Take the kids for the afternoon so she can sit in the quiet house alone if that's what she needs. A specific, concrete act tells a grieving man you actually thought about his life, not just his loss.

7. The hope you can offer without cheapening the loss

Here's where a lot of men reach for false comfort, and I want you to be careful. You don't know the eternal state of the person who died. Neither do I. Don't stand at a graveside and hand out certainty you don't have. That's not comfort, that's a guess dressed up as good news, and it can wound a family badly if it turns out to be wrong or if they know it isn't true.

What you can offer is this: grief with hope isn't the same as grief without it. Paul told the Thessalonians, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Notice what that verse doesn't say. It doesn't say don't grieve. It says grieve like a man who knows the story isn't over, not like a man staring into a hole with nothing on the other side. You can say that much and mean every word of it. Point the hope at the man standing in front of you, not at the person in the casket. His own hope in the risen Christ can be certain even when another man's standing with God is not, and the Judge of all the earth will deal justly with every soul (Genesis 18:25). That's real hope, and it costs you nothing to be honest about what you don't know while you say it.

8. What to do when you have no words at all

Sometimes you'll stand there and nothing comes. Good. Let nothing come. Job's three friends did the wisest thing in the whole book before they opened their mouths and ruined it: "Then they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (Job 2:13). Seven days of silence. Nobody criticizes them for that part. Sit in the silence. Don't rush to break it. A man sitting next to another man's grief without trying to talk him out of it is doing something, even when it feels like doing nothing.

The verses to have ready

Keep these four where you can find them. Not to recite like a formula, just to have ready in your own heart when a man needs to hear that someone bigger than you already understands what he's carrying.

- **John 11:35** "Jesus wept."
- **Romans 12:15** "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."
- **Psalm 34:18** "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit."
- **1 Thessalonians 4:13** "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope."

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