

By Cherie Brown

Today it may seem impossible to believe that you will ever feel any other emotion than concentrated distress, and having spent seven years of my life feeling the same emptiness, I know the futility of trying to convince you otherwise. If you are like me, you are reading this because you just need to know that someone has survived the loss of their spouse and has done so without losing their mind.

When I couldn't find a Christian book written to give widows strength and hope, I returned to my Bible, opened the concordance, and methodically researched the word widow. As I read the familiar portrayals of the women listed, I found that Ruth, Naomi, and Oprah were all widowed.

Ruth made an uncompromising surrender, and her life shows us an example of God's rewards for such decisions. Naomi not only lost her husband but also lost her sons. She suffered the death of her entire family, yet her love for Ruth and her godly wisdom made it possible for the both of them to have a successful future. Oprah returned to her family instead of following Naomi and Ruth, but her life is a biblical model that reveals the comfort that is found in returning home after your spouse's death, especially for young widows.

After my second husband, Dennis, died, I poured myself into my work. I was the president of the credit union, and I taught biblical financial classes. My schedule was filled months in advance, and I had a seminar scheduled in Philadelphia two weeks after his funeral. Although I was sure the church would understand if I canceled, I believed I should keep my commitment. I made the trip in a blur, but I remember that it was an excellent seminar, and the hosts were very grateful. The next month I became saturated in God's Word as I was privileged to minister at the Sunday morning services at my church. This message brought me strength and hope, and I taught that you can trust in the Lord. Still the enemy would bring distress to me.

As I studied the Book of Ruth, I recognized that Naomi too was distressed. The first chapter in the Book of Ruth acknowledges that Naomi was left of her husband, and then she was left of her two sons. When I researched the word left, I discovered that the Hebrew translation is "sha'ar", which is defined by Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible as to leave (as a gift). Although Naomi remained behind as a gift, she did not feel that way. She encouraged her daughters-in-law, who were also widows, to leave her. When she returned to Bethlehem-Judah with only one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, she told her old friends and neighbors, "Don't call me Naomi; call me Mara. Naomi signifies pleasant or amiable, but all my pleasant things are

laid waste; call me Mara, bitter or bitterness, for I am now a woman of a sorrowful spirit.” (See Ruth 1:20)

I understand Naomi's distress, but when Ruth suggested a course of action to get food for both she and Naomi, the unhappiness about her life changes were brought to an end. Naomi obviously realized she was to be used by God to instruct Ruth. She had to pick herself up and choose life. And when she did, the natural and spiritual council Naomi provided set the stage for the union in marriage for Ruth and Boaz.

Relief from Physical Grieving

About a year after Dennis died, my granddaughter came to live with me. She needed a place where she could be settled, and I obviously needed someone to care for.

Another purpose for living was delivered to me in the delicate package of a soft-spoken, bright-eyed eleven-year-old. She was then and still is my joy. We studied together, we read together, we took rides, we cooked, and we lived. My children were in college, and the quiet house welcomed the excitement and energy of this parcel of sound carried by my granddaughter.

Like Naomi, I was given the privilege of ministering to my family, and God used the circumstance to help me through my grief and force me to choose life.

While researching this book I read a study on bereavement from the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR). Research done in the study showed that the stress from bereavement has and can result in a chronic illness. I read this after Dennis had been gone eighteen months. I had been suffering from what I called “mourning sickness” for a year, and it had gotten so bad it was taking me to my knees.

I visited my doctor, and after the customary tests, the doctor discovered I had gallstones and kidney stones. Mental stress induces endothelial dysfunction. Basically, this occurs when the blood vessels' ability to dilate is impaired and the blood vessels are unable to respond properly to changes in blood demand. The condition can increase the risk of heart-associated illnesses.

Other chronic illnesses have been connected to the stress associated with grief. I was reminded of this information when I heard the doctor's diagnosis. His solution was to remove my gallbladder, but I decided that a change in my lifestyle was warranted instead.

So I made his suggested lifestyle changes. His instruction was to exercise, eat right, and get plenty of rest. So, I increased my exercise, started proper eating, and changed my bedtime to 10:00 p.m. My health changed so fast I don't even remember when the pain stopped. When I chose life, I recognized a number of things that happened.

First, I had to follow instructions. Disappointment has a way of making us stubborn. Somehow we think that because we hurt so badly, we should not be required to do anything that we don't feel is good for us. We develop a protective behavior that is indicative of someone who is alone,

a behavior that is reserved for people who have no one else to take care of the areas of their life once reserved for their spouse.

When it was suggested that I have surgery, I behaved that way. Thankfully, I chose right when my doctor told me to change my lifestyle and I followed his instructions.

Obedience Brings Hope

Ruth followed Naomi's instructions, and her benefit resulted in security for them both.

In 1 Kings 17 the account of the widow of Zarephath is recorded.

"Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, the widow woman was there gathering of sticks: and he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink. And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand. And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die. And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son. For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth. And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah" (1 Kings 17:9-16).

This widow, like Ruth, followed instructions and was not only sustained during a great famine but also provided for herself, her son, and the man of God. The resistance that we seem to develop for orders as part of our survival process can provide protection, but we also must beware that rebellion can destroy our future and our hope for a better tomorrow.

We understand well how the widow of Zarephath must have felt. It has often seemed easier to eat our last meal and die than to continue to live a sad and disappointing life without our loved ones. But, oh, let me tell you, emotions cannot hide God. Often the weakness of our sorrow will blind us to the truth that we have might, but if we hear a word from the Lord, a word that comes and informs us that God will sustain us in our personal droughts, we will endure.

When the endowment of essential strength, much like rain in Elijah's time, has been gone so long, we are willing to take the last bit of power we can generate and just give up, but God will send us instructions. They usually come through the man of God, and they always come by the Word of God. God doesn't want us to give up. He wants us to take care of our self, and He has commanded us to choose life. As I end this chapter, look at what Deuteronomy 30:19, (emphasis added) says:

I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you LIFE and death, blessing and cursing: therefore CHOOSE LIFE, that both thou and thy seed may live.

Having had her own personal brush with death while mourning the loss of her husband, Cherie made the commitment to live. Her search for hope and permanent relief from the pain and confusion led her to the realization that not only would she live, but she would thrive.

The Widow's Might is the chronicle of her spiritual endurance during her recovery from the loss of her husbands. This survivors' guide was born out of her inability to find answers anywhere else but in the Bible and the desire to make available to others a practical approach to overcoming and understanding the grief of those who suffer a loss.

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