



*The*  
**UNDISTRACTED  
WIDOW**

**LIVING FOR GOD AFTER LOSING  
YOUR HUSBAND**

**CAROL W. CORNISH**

*The Undistracted Widow: Living for God after Losing Your Husband*

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# INTRODUCTION

Marriage is the most intimate of human relationships. When that relationship is severed by death, intense sorrow follows. I was surprised at the uniqueness and depth of this grief. Over a period of five years, I also lost my father, my mother, my aunt, and my father-in-law. None of these losses, however, compared in intensity to the grief of losing my husband.

My husband died in the late fall, and I distinctly remember being surprised when spring came that I was still alive. I never thought I would make it through the winter. I don't mean that I was suicidal, but each day was so hard that I thought I would just wear out. Now, several years later, I can tell you with full assurance from the Scriptures and from my experience that God can bring you to a place of contentment. You can faithfully endure the winter of your grief if you lean on the Lord for all you need. It is my fervent hope and sincere prayer that this book will encourage your hurting heart and uplift your soul.

The loss of one's husband can be disorienting. Christian wives often are accustomed to living every day responding to their husband's leadership and, consequently, his absence creates a huge vacuum. We Christian widows must embrace the comforting reality that Christ was and still is the head of our home. We need to learn moment by moment, day by day, to live not on our own but in response to Christ. Our husband is no longer here to fulfill his leadership responsibility, but the Spirit of Christ will continue to provide leadership in our home.

John Angell James, writing in the nineteenth century, noted the availability to mourners of general works concerning consolation in affliction, but he lamented the lack of any work prepared to particularly comfort widows. This observation was the inspiration for his book entitled *The Widow Directed to the Widow's God*.<sup>1</sup> It is an excellent work but challenging to read due to archaic language and an antiquated writing style.

Many contemporary books address the subject of suffering and grief

## *Introduction*

in general. I found some of them helpful. I found it wearisome, however, to sort through them, trying to make application to my particular suffering after I was widowed. The effort to do so seemed Herculean in the exhaustion of grief.

I've long been accustomed to putting my thoughts on paper. In addition, my counselor training emphasized the writing of plans to work out strategies for overcoming problems. So, it seemed natural when I faced the monumental task of adjusting to life as a widow to write it all down and fashion a plan for myself. My plan grew and grew and my notebook got so full that I couldn't get the large-ring binder to close. Over the last several years, I've turned repeatedly to this material to find comfort, courage, strength, and hope to go on from one day to the next. The book you now hold in your hands grew out of that plan. I long for you to find in the following pages readily available comfort, compassionate understanding, and real hope.

I want to tell you enough of my story to assure you of my empathy with your grief. But then I want to step aside and point you to Christ, for he is able to come alongside you by the presence of his Spirit. He cares for you. He wants you to know him better. Times of deep sorrow can produce in us a profound sense of loneliness, but if we set our eyes of faith on Christ and seek to know him in the midst of pain, he will give us a clearer vision of who he is and who we are in him. The Lord Jesus Christ can give us confidence in him so strong that we can face anything because he is with us.

Someday the torrent of tears will slow to occasional trickles. Someday the pain in your heart will fade. Someday you will look back and see how far God has brought you. May this book help you to find true comfort and real strength to keep walking with the Lord for his glory and your good as you reach toward that day.



## **BEGINNING, ENDING, AND BEGINNING AGAIN**

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; . . .  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn,  
and a time to dance.*

ECCLESIASTES 3:1–2, 4

The discomfort in his right side started late in the summer. Since several family members had wrestled with gallbladder troubles, my husband assumed he was facing surgery at worst, diet changes at best. As his pains persisted, we went to a surgeon who ordered tests but was not alarmed at the symptoms. Follow-up appointments got delayed several times as the surgeon faced serious health problems of his own. Finally, after the third delay, we switched surgeons. This doctor took a more serious and aggressive approach to the problem.

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE END**

Chest X-rays, MRIs, CT scans—the data was collected and the unthinkable climbed to the top of the pile of possibilities. Lung cancer! My husband had never smoked. A tumor the size of a golf ball was present in his right lung. Other smaller tumors were splattered over the lining of the lung like slush on a windshield. Shock is too mild a word for what we felt when we got the news in a phone call. We sat together, held each other, and sobbed.

A biopsy confirmed the diagnosis as adenocarcinoma. My husband

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underwent surgery in mid-January, and a difficult postoperative period began. Though we were told his pain would last six to eight weeks, he was in pain for the rest of his life—eleven months. The oncologist held out hope that he might have two years left to live or perhaps even longer. The day my husband died, two hospice workers visited him in our home, one in the morning and one in the early evening. That same day he was able to walk a short distance, talk to people visiting, and endure various treatments. But around 6:00 p.m., I noticed some troubling changes. I took the hospice nurse aside and pointedly asked her if he was dying. She responded that he was not actively dying, but five hours later he was dead.

Medical workers can try to estimate the time of death but only God knows when we will die. Approximately three hours after the hospice nurse left, my husband's pain increased dramatically. I frantically called the hospice and pleaded with them to send another nurse, but they did not consent to my request. I hung up and immediately called for an ambulance, but within minutes my husband took his last breaths. It was unreal. I am grateful to God that my husband died at home, as he wished, and not in the hospital. I saw God powerfully at work that night.

I was blessed that most of my extended family lives nearby. Having two of my sisters-in-law present when my husband died was comforting. They are sweet, thoughtful women, and it was good not to be alone. I called our son to tell him his dad had died. How utterly devastating it was to lose his father! There is something profoundly sad about hearing a strong young man cry—such a juxtaposition of physical strength and emotional fragility, a desire to be strong and a shattered heart. We were up all night.

Family members and friends provided every needed comfort during and after my husband's illness and death. One friend stayed with me for several nights immediately after my husband's death. What a comfort to be with a mature Christian woman who knew when to speak and when to be silent! She gently pointed me to the Lord for comfort, prayed with me, and reminded me of the hope we have in Christ both for this life and the life to come. In my exhaustion, it was a significant help to have someone reminding me of these things.

At the funeral service, my pastor blessed us with a message that com-



forted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable. I was thankful for his words. He didn't waste the opportunity to tell the truth of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> Then we drove to the cemetery for the graveside service. It was a sunny day but sharply cold. I stepped out of the limousine and took my son's arm. As we approached the grave, the funeral director motioned for us to sit in that place where none of us want to find ourselves—the front row—the next of kin. I could barely contain my sobs and silently prayed for strength. This was it. The body consigned to the ground. No more lingering hugs, no warm holding of hands, no sweet kisses from lips that I knew so well, no more sparkle in hazel eyes that twinkled with mischievous humor. I praise God that I will see my husband again some day. I don't know how long that will be, but God knows, and that makes it all right.

## **EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS**

Though my husband passed on, my life continued. During daylight hours I was okay, but as the sun set and the winter darkness fell around me, it seemed as if the walls moved closer together. At that time of day I was incredulous that my husband was gone. When I started to cry, I wondered how I would ever stop.

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;  
my eye is wasted from grief;  
my soul and my body also.  
For my life is spent with sorrow,  
and my years with sighing. (Ps. 31:9–10)

It helped to read aloud verses of Scripture and texts of hymns (I scarcely had enough breath to speak, much less sing). These verses from a hymn helped soothe my aching soul:

Does Jesus care when my way is dark with a nameless dread and fear?  
As the daylight fades into deep night shades, does He care enough  
to be near?  
Does Jesus care when I've said "goodbye" to the dearest on earth to me,  
and my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks, Is it aught to Him?  
Does He see?

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Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares, his heart is touched with my grief;  
when the days are weary the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus cares and he comforts. Recently, I realized that I no longer have large boxes of tissues in every room. Progress, definite progress.

Weekends were difficult to get through and still can be at times, though I do see progress there also. I need to accept a whole different rhythm to my life and to gladly accept it week by week. A friend who is a missionary in Europe and is single counseled me to start my own new traditions. By this she meant that I needed to form new patterns to my days and weeks and months and years. I understood I would need to do this in regard to holidays, but my friend showed me I needed new routines even for ordinary days.

### CHECKING OFF A DIFFERENT BOX

I was my husband's caretaker for the year he lived after his diagnosis. I watched as more downs than ups finally claimed his life. The world couldn't be without him in it, could it? We met in high school, dated through college, and married soon after graduation. I've often thought about the biblical teaching regarding the spouse of your youth. It's special, that young love, and more so as the years go by and love matures. Friends for forty-five years—friends like that don't go away, do they? Lovers for thirty-eight years—can love like that leave my life?

Yes, it can. It did. Now I'm single again. Now I'm something I never expected to be. (I should have been more realistic.) I'm a widow. The first time I checked off "widow" on a form it conjured up images of frail old ladies dressed in black, sitting in rocking chairs, and staring blankly into nowhere. It led me to recall a Dylan Thomas story. Referring to elderly aunts he writes, "And some few small aunts, not wanted in the kitchen, nor anywhere else for that matter, sat on the very edges of their chairs, poised and brittle, afraid to break, like faded cups and saucers."<sup>3</sup> I felt like I could break. Would I?

Periods of intense grief become fewer and farther between as we learn to put our trust in God and walk by faith, not by sight. It's like driving in patchy fog early in the morning. The murkiness clears and you cover some

distance, then meet with reduced visibility again until the sun burns off the fog and the road is clear ahead. It's vital not to lose sight of the Lord as we travel this misty path. God is watching over us with eyes of empathy and love. "When we lift our inward eyes to gaze upon God, we are sure to meet friendly eyes gazing back at us. When the eyes of the soul looking out meet the eyes of God looking in, heaven has begun right here on this earth."<sup>4</sup> We need grace to set our mind's eye on the Lord and not to take it off. He knows our suffering and longs to comfort us in it. He is not distant or uncaring. He doesn't want us to travel the foggy road alone. He can and will help us in every way.

## **GOD'S INVOLVEMENT**

Widowhood is not simply a problem to be solved or a circumstance that must somehow be overcome. Because God is sovereign over all things, he is in control of our situation for his glory and our good. I found a helpful article by Geoff Thomas while searching for materials with which to counsel myself. It is entitled "Singleness." If you are newly widowed, this article may be hard to read but nonetheless encouraging. Thomas gives us a godly perspective by explaining that singleness is a calling from God:

Both marriage and singleness are callings, or vocations. The idea of *calling*, or *vocation*, is not one we often use, but it is very significant. When we view our lives as a calling from God, we believe that God has arranged for us to enter a certain state, and God qualifies us to live in that state, and God will use us in that state to bring in the kingdom of God. That is also true for the Christian whose spouse has died, and it is true for the Christian whose spouse has walked out and deserted him or her. Now you have a vocation from God to be single. That is your calling and you can live positively and productively as a single person; you were once single and glorified God by that, and then you were married and you glorified God by that and now you are single again, and that was not bad luck or chance but the will of God, a good gift from the Lord. Jesus said that anyone who can accept this gift should accept it. Let me say quickly that to be sure, no one would expect such a person to think about the advantages of singleness immediately after some traumatic event that has made him or her single, but God reigns and God keeps us all.<sup>5</sup>

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You see, the primary reason we are here is to bring glory to God. We are workers in his kingdom. This life is not principally about comfort or enjoyment as we define them but as God defines them for us.

For over twenty years, I've been ministering to women and their families as a biblical counselor. I've also been teaching women's Bible studies. My seminary education and church ministry experience were lifesavers during my husband's illness and after his death. During this time I started journaling. I emphasized in my writing those things for which I could thank God each day. By doing this I was better able to keep my eyes on Christ and on the good things God was doing during these trials. I commend the practice of journaling to you.

I hope in this book you will find blessing in the things the Lord used to comfort and encourage me. God has no favorites. What he did for me he can do for you. May your heart be strengthened and your soul soothed by God's Word and Spirit. The Lord specializes in providing comfort to those who find themselves at breaking points. I am eager to tell you how he kept me from breaking and even brought me to the point of incandescent joy in him in the midst of bereavement.

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side;  
bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;  
leave to your God to order and provide;  
in ev-'ry change he faithful will remain.  
Be still, my soul: your best, your heav'n-ly Friend  
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.<sup>6</sup>



"Most wives will taste the grief of widowhood. Painful separation is expected. What isn't expected is the persevering faith and profound devotion illustrated on these pages. Out of her deep grief and deeper faith, Carol has written a book that will comfort, guide, and encourage you as you face the day—alone, but not really alone. Yes, these pages are tear-stained, but more importantly, they're stained with the blood of a Suffering Savior who is walking with you now."

**Elyse Fitzpatrick**, author, *Because He Loves Me* and *Comforts from the Cross*

"I read Carol's book because I knew her before Rollie died. I was confident that whatever she wrote about being a widow would be clear, practical, and filled with wonderful encouragement to keep turning to Jesus, and it was all that and more. My plan was to pass the book on to a widow, which I will still do, but now I will be sure to have a copy handy. It is a one-stop book that is as relevant to widowers as it is to widows."

**Ed Welch**, counselor and faculty, The Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF)

"For the widow searching through her grief for God, Carol becomes what she suggests every widow should look for: 'a living road map,' pointing unswervingly to God's wisdom and love as revealed in his unfailing Word."

**Patti McCarthy Broderick**, Christian counselor; author, *He Said, "Press"*

"Carol fulfills her desire to comfort others with the comfort she herself has received from the Lord. She offers hope, reassurance, and practical help to those grieving the loss of their spouses. This book is truly the fruit of an undistracted widow."

**Jayne V. Clark**, Associate Dean of Students, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *Single and Lonely: Finding the Intimacy You Desire*

**CAROL W. CORNISH** was married to her husband for many years before the Lord took him home. She has been a biblical counselor for over 20 years and is a regular speaker at women's seminars, workshops, and retreats. She co-edited and co-authored *Women Helping Women*, which was a finalist for the Gold Medallion Book Award.

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