

Preface

It will be 18 years in November 2004 since I lost my husband. It seems in some ways a long time and in other ways, it seems like just yesterday. Does this mean I have stopped loving him? Not at all. It just means that the real pain that I felt for so long has finally ceased. Does it mean my memories are gone? Certainly not. My memories of the past, both good and bad, are as vivid as if it were just last week. Does it mean that I never have times when I miss my husband to the point that tears fill my eyes? No!

There are times now and will always be, I'm sure, when I would give almost anything to be able to talk to him, have him put his arms around me and hold me, have him open the door for me to go into the church building or a restaurant, have him sit by my side at church dinners or meetings, have him at the head of our family table on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas, ask his advice about something that's troubling me or have him study God's word and pray with me.

Now, more than ever before, I am determined to go to Heaven to be with my Lord, my husband, my parents, and all those other saints who have gone on before. For the scriptures say that, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," (Matthews 6:21).

COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A SPOUSE

By: Libby Fox

There are so many things in life that come to catch us off guard and pull us down to the depths of despair. One of the most important things is to try and be ready for anything that happens. Sometimes we are blind sided as I was with the sickness and death of my dear husband. But, there are things that will help a person get through difficult times but just like life insurance, you can't buy it after the person has died. With this in mind I will tell you how I have survived the loss of my beloved husband, Jackie Fox.

I grew up in a home with loving parents. They loved each other and loved my sisters and me. They owned and operated a weekly newspaper and they worked long and hard to build that paper into something that they and the community would be proud of.

My sister and I were born newspaper brats. Everyone said we had ink in our blood. The truth is, with parents that worked long and hard, we were never in doubt that we were loved and we had all that kids require to be happy. We lived in a neighborhood where we had lots of friends and we played outside with them most of our early years. We had plenty to eat, clothes to wear, shoes on our feet and spiritual guidance from the minute we were born.

Mother was a devout Christian woman. She was one of five people who started the church in my hometown of Bolivar, Tennessee. We were taken to church every Sunday for Sunday school, worship and back again for Sunday night service. We also went to prayer meeting every Wednesday night. We attended every night of any Gospel Meeting that we had and often visited the gospel meetings of neighboring congregations of the Lord's church.

Mother was a businesswoman and well respected in the church and in the community. She gave liberally to the church and took food when someone died or helped in other ways. I remember when a family in our community lost their home and two of their four children in a house fire. Somehow my mother got copies of pictures of the children who were lost in the fire and had an artist paint pictures of the children. They were so thankful to have portraits of their children because most of their other pictures had been lost in the fire.

My dad, although not a Christian during the years that my sister and I were growing up, was a kind and honorable man. He loved his family and supported Mother in taking us to worship but many times when we were at church, he was working. I remember Mother worried about him and was concerned that something would happen to him before he became a Christian. He sometimes would go with us on Sunday nights but never any other time.

I remember when I was a teenager thinking that when I got married, I would marry a Christian so that I would not have to worry about his soul like mother worried about my

Dad. It was during a gospel meeting, when I was about 15 or 16 years old, I was so impressed with the preacher and his dedication to the Lord that I thought I would love to marry a preacher when I was grown-up.

My sister and I were born the same year. She was born January 8th and I was born eleven months and twenty days later on December 28th. We went to nursery school, kindergarten and through elementary and high school together. We graduated from high school in 1960 and because she was in love with her high-school sweetheart, she married on September 18th. Just a week later I went off to Freed-Hardeman College.

I loved my two years in college there. I had my first date with Jackie Fox that first semester on October 13th 1960. We went to see the movie, Martin Luther King, on the college campus that evening. We began to date regularly and since Jackie was preaching in Holly Springs, Mississippi on Sundays, he ask me to go with him. I did, and I remember some of those early sermons and how thrilled I was just to be there to hear them. I was 17 years old and Jackie was 19 at that time

We ate together every day in the school cafeteria and were usually together every evening in the library. I think we were together more during that time than we were even after we were married. We were allowed to go off campus on a date on Friday and Saturday nights, but only if we double-dated. Times were a lot stricter then.

I think we both knew relatively quickly that we had found the person that we wanted to spend the rest of our lives with but also wanted to finish our education. We decided that the best thing to do was to finish college before we married so we began a courtship that went on for four and a half years.

Jackie was a year ahead of me in school. Freed-Hardeman was a two-year college at that time. He had to transfer to another school for his junior and senior years. Jackie's mother was a widow who had been left with five children and was not able to help with the cost of his schooling. He was putting himself through school with the money he earned from preaching on the weekends so he had to find a job that would help him continue his college education.

I went with him to his mother's that summer, and we went to Cookeville Tennessee where he talked to the elders at the Willow Avenue Church of Christ about being their youth minister. It just so happened that one of the elders wives had known Jackie's father when they both growing up in Jackson County, Tennessee. She just adopted Jackie on the spot. Jackie's father was also a preacher and a farmer whose life had been cut short when he died of Bright's disease at age 38.

Mrs. Bennett, the elder's wife, was so thrilled to have the son of a man that she said was *the best man she had ever known*. She really did treat Jackie like her own son. As long as he lived, the Bennett's continued to think of Jackie as a son. Jackie accepted the job at Willow Avenue church and began his work there with the congregation immediately. He worked with them for three years.

The next year I transferred to David Lipscomb College, and since I was only 1½ hours from Cookeville at that time, Jackie would come down on Friday evening and get me and I would go to his mother's house in Crossville, or stay with the Bennett's on the weekend. We would go to the events that the youth were having at the church and be at worship on Sunday where Jackie would lead singing and sometimes preach in place of the local minister, Glen Killom. Jackie was never satisfied though to be youth minister. He wanted his own pulpit and to preach full-time.

Jackie graduated in 1964. He was required to attend an additional year in college because he changed his major from Bible to education. After graduating, he applied to be the full-time preacher at the church in Holly Springs, Mississippi, where he had preached when he was going through Freed-Hardeman. They readily accepted him back and he began his work there in June of '64. He continued his education at Harding Graduate School in Memphis where he received his Master's Degree in Bible. I finished college that same year, and I went back to work on the newspaper my parents owned, working there until Jackie and I married on Valentine's Day, 1965.

We had a beautiful church wedding at the church building in Bolivar and then we settled down to begin our life in a one-bedroom furnished apartment in Holly Springs. Jackie was making \$50 a week and our apartment cost us \$50 a month. However, as most young couples are, when they begin life together, we were so happy and busy that we didn't care how much money we had.

We knelt down beside the bed that first night we were married and prayed to God to let us be faithful servants and to help us to be good to each other and to others for as long as we live. Little did we know that our marriage would only be for 21 years?

I can't tell you how much my parents loved Jackie. I used to say, jokingly, they loved him more than me. We took several vacations in the summer with Mother and Daddy. We always had our nightly devotions in the motel room. Mother was delighted to be a part of this and Daddy was impressed more than we realized because it was after our trip to California in the summer of '68 that Daddy was baptized into Christ. He made the comment that Jackie had been such a big influence on his life and that Jackie made living a Christian life seem so easy and enjoyable. Of course, we all knew that my mother's faithfulness is what had brought him to the Lord, but he still loved and appreciated Jackie.

We worked with the church in Holly Springs for seven years. Jackie preached and we both taught classes. I began to teach school in the fall of 1965. My take-home pay was \$250 a month. Now my visiting with Jackie in the daytime was, over but we visited people at night and on weekends. Jackie wanted to visit in the home of every member of the congregation at least once during the year, and he continued that practice as long as he lived. I can remember Jackie saying that the best time to talk to people about the Lord was when they had just had a new baby or when there had been sickness or a death in the family.

One thing that I can remember telling Jackie was how important a person's name was to them. I had grown up in a newspaper family and had always been taught to get people's names spelled right and to use their name often when talking to them. It was for this reason that after we moved to Decatur that Jackie walked around with the pictorial directory in his hand, memorizing the names and faces of the members at Austinville. By the end of the first month, he knew the congregation by face and name. This was a labor of love for him because he loved all people and wanted them to love him.

We had many bible studies through the years and usually used the Jules Miller filmstrips when studying with people. People were always warm and kind to us, and it was thrilling to see the ones we were studying with come to Christ and be baptized. Every study we had produced a new Christian and it was for that reason the importance of having as many studies as we could. We would have people over for supper and then study with them. Later we might play cards or just visit with the couple. We always tried to become friends first, then people would see how much we cared about them and this would produce a new Christian each time.

Angie Williams and Laura Welsh were our baby-sitters when we moved to Decatur, and they kept our children many times when we were conducting studies with people here. These were two of the finest young ladies that we could find to watch our children and the love and influence they had on them was wonderful.

Molly was born after we had been in Holly Springs five years. Jackie and I prayed from the beginning that we would be good parents, and that we would raise our child to love God and put Him first in her life as we always put Him first in our own.

When Molly was two years old we moved and began our work with the church at Old River Road in Nashville, Tennessee. It was during this time that Alan was born and our family was complete. We felt we were the most blessed parents in the world to have two beautiful and healthy children.

We always had nightly devotions from the first day we married, and after our children came along; we included them when they were old enough to understand that we were worshipping God. We were parents who believed that children were shaped in their beliefs from an early age. We began early to teach our children the Bible stories about Adam and Eve, Noah, David and others in the scripture. We always taught them how Jesus loved them. We worked hard for our children to be good examples in their attire and in the manner of life. It was not always easy for our children but they accepted our teaching because they always knew that we loved them and we wanted all of us to be in Heaven together some day.

We knew that God would only give us about 18 years to give our children the training that they would need to help them survive the temptations, hardships and call of the world. They have been a wonderful blessing to us and finally to me when their daddy was gone.

When our summer intern program began, it was such a joy for Jackie to help to train young men to be gospel preacher. For five years we had a college student to come

and work with Jackie in the summer months of June, July, and August. Each day Jackie would take them with him to the hospitals. He would take them to visit in the homes of members. He helped them to plan events for the youth of the congregation and asked them to prepare sermons that they could use when they became preachers with their own congregations.

I was just the cook, but during those summers I cooked and I cooked and cooked. Alan and Molly were only six and eight when the interns started coming, but they were an important influence on all our lives and friendships were formed that continues to this day.

We worked with the church here at Austinville for ten years when Jackie came down with what he thought was the flu. He went to Dr. Steve Chandler who gave him antibiotics and cough syrup. We naturally thought he would be fine in a week or so. However, when the fever and cough did not go away, he went back to Dr. Chandler and after an x-ray examination, we found out that Jackie had a mass in the middle of his chest. A biopsy was performed at the end of January 1986 and it confirmed that he had Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma. We were sent to a cancer specialist in Huntsville and Jackie began chemotherapy.

The shock of finding out that Jackie had cancer was overwhelming. We went down on our knees again and prayed that God would spare Jackie's life and see us through this hard time. I had seen my mother go through the last year of her life, some eleven years before this time, taking chemotherapy and enduring the hardship that it brings. I spent the last month of my mother's life with Daddy and her, helping to care for her. Molly was in kindergarten so Jackie's mother came and stayed with them and helped get her ready for school each day and also cooking and cleaning.

Shirley Bishop looked after Alan. And oh how blessed I was to have a mother-in-law and a Christian sister to stand by us during our work at Austinville. We prayed and prayed that the treatment Jackie must take now would work and that he would not have to suffer.

During the next five months the tumor shrank and we were encouraged. The congregation, our families and friends, even people that we did not know prayed for Jackie to get well. He had surgery in July to determine if there was any cancer cells left. The doctor said that the tumor was gone and that he would not need any more treatment. However, when he went back in a month the tumor was back and as big as an orange and nothing seemed to slow down its growth.

We were sent to Vanderbilt Hospital in Nashville where Jackie could possibly receive a bone-marrow transplant if the doctor thought there was a chance to save him. Jackie went through massive doses of radiation and a bone-marrow transplant. We were sent home and made an appointment to go back in a month. A month later I had to take him to the emergency room at Decatur General because he was running a high fever. They told us they were sending us to Vanderbilt. Jackie was transported by ambulance to Nashville.

Bud and Bobby Surles drove me to Vanderbilt behind the ambulance. When we arrived at the hospital Jackie had to be put on a ventilator because his lungs were covered with cancer. He lived just two more weeks.

Jackie's mother, sister, brother and my dad and stepmother were with me when Jackie passed away. Many people, both family and Christian friends from everywhere came to the hospital to see him while he was ill. There were hundreds of get-well cards and "praying-for-you" cards, flowers, food and other offering of love.

I kept thinking that God could turn this around if He wanted to, but finally we had to give him up and be resigned to God's will. All during this difficult eight months I prayed as hard and fervently as I knew how. I could not believe that God would take Jackie when he was a preacher and was doing His work. He was forty- five years old and had two children who were 13 and 15, who needed him and I could not see how I could make it without him. My love, my partner, my soul mate was sick. What do I do? What was I to think? I prayed hard and often, in fact, I don't think there was five minutes that passed in the day that I did not ask God to spare Jackie's life. I knew God's will would and must be done. I could not use those words, "not my will but Thine be done."

I remember sleeping on the floor in Huntsville Hospital beside his bed and standing at the window at night at Vanderbilt Hospital and praying that God would spare his life. I would think, all that Jackie wants to do is serve you Lord, please don't, please don't take him.

During all this time, Jackie was optimistic. I remember kneeling down in front of him one day and saying, "Jackie, if anything happens to you, I don't know what I will do." He smiled and said, "Don't worry Libby; I'm going to be all-right."

I had a card on the mirror in the bathroom where I dressed each morning to go to school and it read, "Call upon me in the hour of trouble, and I will deliver you and you will glorify my name", this thought is from Psalm 86:7, and 12.

We continued our family devotionals as long as Jackie lived. We would read scripture and then try to go to sleep. I remember reaching and feeling of Jackie during the night many times to see if his temperature had come up and he would say, "I'm ok, Libby." He was not physically ok. His mouth and hands were covered with blisters. His hair had fallen out, he vomited and had diarrhea until he was so weak he could hardly walk. Yet during all of this, his spirit grew stronger and he never wavered in his trust in God. He even wrote two sermons while he was sick that he would never preach.

When we buried him on Thanksgiving Day 1986, I felt as if my world had ended. I was completely overcome with grief, not just for me, but also for Molly and Alan. I cried and prayed, "Lord... help us through this time of grief."

Jackie had spent years trying to help others raise their children to be Christians and he was denied the opportunity to finish raising his own. I cried and prayed, "Lord...give

me and my children strength to face each day and help me to finish raising the children the way Jackie and I had planned, and please, Lord...increase my faith in and love for you.”

His mother, sister and brothers were grieved beyond words and I could only offer the assurance that someday we will all be together again. And I cried and prayed, “Lord... increase my faith in and love for you.”

I had to go back to the church building and sit in that same spot I had sat in for ten years listening to my beloved husband preach God’s word and see someone else filling that pulpit that I felt was his. I cried and prayed, “Lord...help me to be supportive of this new minister, his family and his work, and please Lord...increase my faith in and love for you.”

Two months after Jackie was buried, I received a letter from the IRS and it stated that I was going to be audited. I couldn’t believe it. However I went to the IRS office and got all my records in order and presented them to the man there and he informed me that I would owe an additional fifteen thousand dollars in back taxes. This on top of the hospital bills that I was trying to pay off at Vanderbilt and Decatur General hospital was an astounding blow. I cried and prayed, “Lord help me to pay off my debt and help me to realize the material possessions are so unimportant and please increase my faith in and love for you.”

During all the time when Jackie was sick and afterward, the church at Austinville was so good to us, supplying food, money, cards, letters, and most important all the prayers. Louis and Shirley Bishop took over the raising of our children while we were in Vanderbilt Hospital that last month of Jackie’s life. What can I say about these two wonderful people. They got the children back and forth to school, fed them, took them places to get their minds off what was happening in their lives and brought them to Vanderbilt to see their dad on weekends.

Even now my children think as much of Shirley as they do any member of their own family. When Louis passed away, it hurt us just as much as if he were our own flesh and blood. Shirley has truly been a blessing in my life, my children’s lives, and the loves of many others.

During the next few months after Jackie’s death, cards and letters came and people visited and expressed their sympathy to the children and me. But the literal pain I felt inside would not be eased. I suffered as if I had a terrible illness. It was called, “a broken heart.” I knew in my heart that Jackie was in a better place, but I was so lost without him. My whole world changed forever. All I could do was cry and pray.

The children and I continued our family devotionals each evening but tears were numerous as I remembered the happy times that we had when we *all* sat together and read from God’s word and prayed together. My son, Alan, used to say, “Mom is the only person who will cry when the Three Stooges are on.” This was because when I would start laughing, many times my laughter would turn to tears. The two emotions are so interlinked.

I have to admit that I did wonder why God did not spare Jackie’s life. Was he not serving Him in the pulpit and ministering to the people around him? Was he not a good

husband and father? Was he not a loving son and brother? Were not my children so in need of their dad to guide and love them? Were not thousands and thousands of prayers offered up begging God to spare his life and let him continue his work?

I wanted an answer and I searched the scriptures.... I knew that the answer to the question had to be in the Bible. I had read Psalms 118:17, 18, which says, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD. The LORD hath chastened me sore, but he hath not given me over unto death." I had prayed this would be true in Jackie's case. But it wasn't. I had read the scripture in Matthew 7:7 that says, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you." I had read in James 5:14, "*Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save the sick and the Lord shall raise him up...*"

I had read daily on my bathroom mirror, "Call upon the Lord in the hour of trouble and he will deliver you and you shall glorify his name." I had asked, I had knocked on God's door and I had sought healing for my husband. What was I to think now?

Now I need scriptures that would tell me my prayers and the prayers of so many others had not been answered the way that we ask. I even asked myself if we were being punished because we had done something wrong or failed to do something we should have done. But deep down I knew that suffering is not God's punishment for sin. The righteous suffers as well as the wicked.

In I Peter 4:12 the scriptures says, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trials you are suffering..." Even the righteous Christians of the first century were surprised, or confused, at their suffering. So the first part of my healing was the realization that, "God is not punishing me." But I know He cares for you and me. He wants my full-undivided attention and moreover, He wants our love, our heart, and hurt.

God cares that we hurt. I-know-that. God is not cruel or uncaring. He is involved in every phase of our lives. God demonstrates his love for us in this: "While we were sinners, Christ died for us," (Romans 5:8). For over thirty years God was separated from His son who came on a divine mission from His home in Heaven to this cruel earth. His son was abused, mistreated, and even horribly killed. God has demonstrated his ultimate and complete love for us by giving His life to us through Jesus Christ, his only son.

You know Jesus loved us enough that He stretched out His arms and died on the cross thus proving His love for us. We must know also that God loves us enough that he gave the dearest one He has for us. Surely we must know God does not want us to suffer and hurt.

God understands our hurt. He knows how we feel every moment. He knows the suffering, the sleepless nights, and the despair we suffer. We must remember that in the flesh He walked this earth and experienced the pain of this life; disappointed when friends turned on you, betrayed by one close to you, loss of a loved one, excruciating suffering, separated and yes, death. Jesus knows our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). During the short life of Jesus he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears (Hebrews 5:7).

Although I knew all of this, I was still hurting and it would not seem to console me. I knew that millions of people are living with the same or worse hurt. They too knew the pain and

anguish. Even surrounded by crowds, I felt alone with my hurt. But I knew I was not alone, but my Heavenly Father was with me.

Someone pointed out the verse to me during this time of grieving that reads, "...but the God of all grace, who called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10). *I read the scripture and I thought, GOD HIMSELF, WILL RESTORE ME.*

I continued to look for answers and solution to the pain and loneliness that I was feeling. I felt like I was not myself but just half of what I had been before. I felt there would never be real joy in my life again. As Paul said in, 2 Corinthians 1:8 that he "despaired even of life." I certainly could identify with this feeling.

Jackie and I had lived our lives to this point with one goal in mind. We wanted to go to Heaven and take as many with us as we possibly could. So I read 2 Corinthians 4:8, 9 where Paul said, "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast (struck) down, but not destroyed;" Yet he kept pressing on. How to do this was the next question. I found the answer in Philippians 3:13,14, "... but this one thing I do, forgetting what is behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Jackie and I, in the early years of our marriage, memorized Hebrew 11 and halfway through the chapter, verses (13-16), say of the men and women of faith that, "all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were persuaded (assured) of *them*, and confessed that they seek a better country (homeland), that is an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city."

To survive this ordeal, I knew that I must keep my eyes on heaven. Life on earth is fleeting and it will soon be over. Only that which is eternal is lasting. God wants to give us His peace in place of our "instant" cure. God will keep His promise and bring relief and peace within us but it comes in His time and in His way.

Prayers and studying the scripture will bring the close one-on-one relationship with God that he desires to have with us. It may be slow at first, as it was for me, when tears would flow as I began to pray and study. God understood and was waiting on me to come ever closer to Him. Turning from God will destroy us now and in eternity. We must depend on Him. The Book of Psalms, the Gospels, the Book of Job (especially chapters 1, 2, 3, 38, 40, 41, and 42), and 2 Corinthians 1:3-11; 4:1-18; and 5:1-21 are good places to start to better understand our hurt and God's promises to us.

Therefore, in conclusion, I realize that I must grow closer to God and try as hard as possible to live within His will. When troubles are the greatest and most severe in our lives, God's grace and mercy are most bountiful. He has promised, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

I lean on God and trust Him whole-heartedly and I know that He is the one and only God; the God who keeps His every promise (Psalms 146:6).

I thank you!

Libby Fox