

Women's Bible Study of Autumn Ridge Church

Women in Transition– Fall 2007

Anna: Faithful Widowhood Luke 2:36-38

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Today's topic of widowhood is one I think we all want to avoid thinking about, hoping it won't happen to us. We stuff it in the back of our minds with other unpleasant things and like Scarlett in "Gone With The Wind", when she was faced with great difficulties, said, "I'll think about it tomorrow."

Personally I don't want to think about losing my husband even though statistically that is a strong possibility. Women on the average live 4-5 years longer than men. Whenever you visit a retirement center or nursing home you see the great majority are women, there are very few men.

Losing one's mate of a few years or many, many years is one of life's most devastating experiences. When you are joined in marriage you become one flesh and if you lose your spouse, it's like a great part of you is gone. Friends and relatives who were widowed have told me it's hard to explain to someone what the experience is like unless they have gone through it. So today, I will share the personal experiences of others who have experienced this great loss as well as the emotional, physical, and spiritual comfort God has given them.

On a personal level I can share about my grandmother, whose name, coincidentally, is Anna; my mother, Eunice; and my mother-in-law, Violet. All have been role models to me of faithful widows, who continued to live on and serve God for 30 years or more. My mother is still living and at 98 ½ resides in a Living Center in Nebraska.

In this room today I know we have a number of widows who have experienced this devastating loss. But as we discuss grief and God's grace and comfort, I would like us to broaden our thinking to include other losses in our personal lives and the choices we make in responding to them.

WHAT IS OUR RESPONSE TO LOSS IN OUR LIVES?

So many of you here today are young and in the prime of life and possible widowhood is not in your frame of thinking. But have you experienced a painful crises or devastating loss, such as the loss of a parent or a child, a baby or a miscarriage; the loss of your health—either a chronic condition that limits your activity, or a disease like cancer that requires painful treatments and drains your energy in your daily life; or the loss of a job or position directly affecting your financial situation; or the loss of all your personal possessions and home. You

probably all are acquainted with someone from the flood area around Rushford who literally lost everything, their business, their home, their clothes and possessions. Maybe you know someone in the California fires who has experienced great loss. These are all life changing experiences. How would you respond in any of these devastating circumstances?

When we have a crises experience we have a choice in how we respond. We can respond in anger and bitterness—blaming God for allowing this to happen in our lives. We can choose to turn our backs on God and wallow in our self-pity. We can choose to please “self” and get caught up in the emptiness of the world accumulating things which have no lasting value. OR we can choose to desperately hang on to God in our crises, knowing His character and His faithfulness.

These are a few of my favorite verses.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 *“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”*

Psalm 100:5 *“For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.”*

Hebrews 13:5 *“...God has said, ‘Never will I leave you ; never will I forsake you.’”*

Beth Moore in her book “Praying God’s Word” took this verse and turned it into a prayer. *“You, O God, will never leave me. Never will you forsake me. You are the only absolute guarantee I have in all of life. Help me cling to the one thing I can never lose.”* She made another prayer from Psalm 55:22—*“I choose to cast my cares on You, Lord, and You will sustain me.”*

Even though our circumstances may be life-changing and turn our world upside down—we can hang on to God who never changes.

Malachi 3:6 *“I the Lord do not change”*

Hebrews 13:8 *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”*

God is faithful and will see us through the most devastating of circumstances and provide for our needs. Now let us look at some widows in the Scriptures and see God’s loving care and provision for them.

WIDOWS OF THE BIBLE

The Hebrew law made special provision for widows and also for orphans. Widows were often overlooked by men, so God had a special concern for them. Psalm 68:5 “*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.*” In the early church there was the concern to provide for the widows (James 1:27) and one of its earliest examples of charitable work was the daily distribution of money to needy widows (Acts 6:1). Paul in 1 Tim 5:3-10 gives the church some detailed instructions in caring for the widows.

Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give the people these instructions, too, so that no one may be open to blame. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.”

Widows in Bible times who had no children or extended family to help provide for them were very vulnerable and often quite poor. By contrast today, widows have financial provision through social security, often their husband’s pension, life insurance, possibly some savings, and Medicare if they are old enough. Young widows though, often have to go back to work to support their families. We will discuss a little later what we can do as the body of Christ to be of help to the widows in our own congregation.

Now let’s look at our Scripture passage for today.

Anna---Luke 2:36-38---A Woman of Faith

“There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was 84. She never left the

temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them (Mary and Joseph) at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Anna was a wife to her husband a short 7 years and never remarried. Because she didn't have a family to care for, she devoted herself to the Lord and delighted in being in his presence. God provided for her as she ministered at the Temple and rewarded her faithfulness with being among the first to welcome the baby Jesus, the Messiah.

Our passage tells us that Anna was a “prophetess”. What does that tell us about her? In both the OT and NT the term is used for women as “prophet” is for men. Some other women in the Bible who had the title “prophetess”, were Moses' sister Miriam, Deborah (Judges 4:4), Hulda who brought God's word to King Josiah (2 Kings 22:14), and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9). A prophet or prophetess was someone who had a very close relationship with God. They did not necessarily predict the future (foretelling), but were especially concerned about bringing God's word, His truth to the people for encouragement (forth telling). In the early church, the gift of prophecy is one of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to strengthen and encourage the believers (Romans 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10).

Anna made the choice to devote her life to God and live at the temple, “worshipping, fasting, and praying day and night” (vs 37). Through her close relationship with God He revealed to her that He was sending the Messiah and she would see him in her lifetime. God's promise to her was a truth that sustained her and kept her focused on the future. We don't know when God revealed to her this promise of seeing the Messiah, but she probably waited for its fulfillment for many years—maybe 50, 60, or more years. She may have seen many young couples come to dedicate their infants to God and wonder---could this child be the one? When Mary and Joseph come to present Jesus at the temple, God lets Anna know the promise is fulfilled, they are holding the Messiah. Verse 38 says she “gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel.”

God was faithful and kept His promise to Anna. We are so privileged in our modern day to have the entire Bible that is brimful of God's promises for everything we might experience.

I am sure each of you have favorite passages that have blessed and encouraged you through the years. I hope you are marking your Bibles and putting a date by verses that have been exceptionally meaningful. It's a great “faith-builder” to go back and look at those marked verses and remember the incident,

how it encouraged you and showed you God's faithfulness. I have one passage in my Bible that has 14 different dates by it and always gives me encouragement.

Bible Truth---GOD IS FAITHFUL TO ALL HIS PROMISES

Psalm 145:13 *"The Lord is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made."*

Application: In your situation has God given you a scripture or promise to sustain you and encourage you while you wait for the answer to your prayer? Will you stand firmly on His faithfulness like Anna?

Let's look at God's love and provision for a widow in the OT.

Widow of Zarephath---1 Kings 17:7-16—Trust and Obedience

"Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. (God says to Elijah), 'Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food.' So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, 'Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?' As she was going to get it, he called, 'And bring me, please, a piece of bread.' 'As surely as the Lord your God lives,' she replied, 'I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.' Elijah said to her, 'Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land.' So she went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah."

Because of the drought, a Gentile widow and her son expect to die from lack of food. But God sees the need of this widow and causes Elijah, an Israelite prophet, to come to the widow's home. Elijah challenges her faith by requiring the widow to use the last of her food and prepare him a meal. He promises her that she

won't run out of food—her jar of flour will not run out nor her jug of oil be empty throughout this drought.

Will she risk having nothing for her last meal or trust that Elijah's God will provide for her and her son? Each of us face a similar choice: Can we trust God when we are our most "needy"? God might challenge us to give our all, but He always gives back in abundance.

This widow's faith in Elijah's God strengthens her and she obeys his instructions. God rewards her trust and obedience and she experiences God's grace and blessing for herself and her son.

Illustration: A number of years ago the Lord used the story of the widow of Zarephath to teach me to trust Him with my needs.

Have you ever had a time in your house when most of the major appliances broke down and either had to be replaced or repaired, all at the same time?? Plus you had a number of doctor and dentist bills, insurance, etc. that required payment and your long planned vacation was just a few weeks away? When this happened to us I began "fretting" and "stewing" about how our budget could handle all this and our vacation too. God brought to mind this story of the widow and spoke to my heart. If I trusted Him and followed in obedience and put each appliance and repair, each bill that needed to be paid into His hands, there would be enough—the bank account would not run out. God proved once again that trust and obedience do bring blessing. Our financial needs and my emotional needs were all met and we had a good family vacation besides.

God sees our needs, whatever they may be—physical, emotional, or spiritual, and is concerned about every detail of our lives. Psalm 139 tells us how God knows us so intimately and cares for us so deeply. He wants us to trust Him with every part of our lives whether large or small so He can meet our needs and bless us.

Bible Truth---GOD SHALL SUPPLY ALL YOUR NEEDS

Phil 4:19—"My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus."

Application: Will you trust God with your needs today whatever they may be? Will you follow in obedience whatever He shows you so He can bring you blessing?

Let's look at one more OT story of widows and how God provided for them.

Naomi and Ruth---Ruth 1-4---Love For God and His Provision

In this beautiful story we see Naomi and Ruth's love for God and His provision for them. You will remember Naomi loses her husband, Elimelech, and her sons both die, leaving her alone with 2 daughter-in-laws Ruth and Orpah who are now widows as well. After 10 years in Moab Naomi decides to return to Israel and encourages her daughter –in- laws to return to their homes and families. Orpah goes back to her home, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi.

In the years that Ruth, a Moabite, has lived with Naomi she has learned about the God of Israel and says to Naomi, *“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”* (Ruth 1:16). Even though Naomi has grieved and suffered depression she has influenced Ruth to follow the one true God.

In Bethlehem God rewards their faithfulness and leads them to a relative's field in which Ruth can gather grain for food for the two of them. God provides this distant relative, Boaz, who by Jewish law, can eventually marry Ruth and give her a child, and a grandchild for Naomi, and they will again experience joy and a future.

God blesses the faith and obedience of Naomi and Ruth as they become the ancestors of the royal line of King David. Ruth is David's great grandmother, and through this lineage Jesus, the promised Messiah will be born. Naomi and Ruth may have thought their lives were over when they were widowed, but God had “special” plans for them.

Bible Truth—TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND HE WILL DIRECT YOUR STEPS

Prov 3:5-6 “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your steps.”

Application: Are you in an impossible situation today? Will you trust the Lord, letting Him have complete control to direct your steps?

As we have looked at these widows, we have seen a common thread among them—the attributes of strong faith, love for God, joy in serving, and an attitude of trust and obedience. These were the foundation on which their lives were built and carried them through sorrow and difficulty to go on with their lives.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM WIDOWS TODAY

Since the Bible doesn't give us details about how these widows felt emotionally and how they dealt with the challenges of losing their spouses, I thought it would be good to interview three women who have made that transition from being a wife to being a widow. They are all godly women who have applied the Bible truths we have been discussing today and are actively serving the Lord in various ways.

Karen Anderle—our own Children's Pastor who lost her husband, Mark 6 years ago to a brain tumor.

Sandy Stensland—from Autumn Ridge lost her husband, Dave almost 5 years ago to cancer.

Nan Johnson—a friend of many years who lost her husband, Doug this past summer and her pain is very fresh.

Both Sandy and Nan lost their husbands to cancer in a very short time, while Karen's husband lived for a year after diagnosis. As Nan put it, "we did have time to prepare and say 'goodbye' but it was a "severe mercy". Many women lose their spouses to heart attacks, strokes, and accidents with no warning, and at any age. Whatever way that you lose your mate it is extremely painful. In order to better understand widowhood, I asked them all a few questions.

What do you find the most challenging?

Loneliness—going places alone after doing things together for so many years and missing that companionship.

Holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and other special events with the family. The first year of making new memories for birthdays, anniversaries, etc. is the hardest.

Business affairs—making decisions by yourself, repairs around the house, taking care of your car, taxes, insurance, investments, etc.

(Karen shared a great idea maybe our church could do—her pastor made a list of a dozen men and she picked 3 who would meet with her and help her with her business questions. She said it really helped her in understanding and gaining confidence to make good decisions.)

What helped you the most in your grief?

Strong faith in the Lord sustained them.

Prayer support of family and caring friends, plus their many acts of kindness which encouraged them.

Nan, the most recent widow, said, “I know the reason I am doing as well as I am in the grief process, is because of the prayers of my caring friends. I am sad but not in despair.”

Getting involved helping others. Sandy and Karen both became active in Grief Support groups and found helping others in this process was satisfying and gave them new friends who understood how they were feeling. Sandy also works as a Mayo Hospice nurse and helps comfort those who are dying and encourages their family members.

What advice do you have for wives?

Be familiar with your business affairs and papers and the things your husband always takes care of. Know where to find things—important papers, key for safety deposit box, your will, etc. Do some estate planning—it’s important for tax purposes for you and for the benefit of your children. Some companies offer it free to the employees. Community Education may have an informational class at a nominal fee. Most importantly find someone you can comfortably work with and trust. A Practical preparation Karen mentioned was to get a funeral plot when you are healthy and well—it’s very hard to do when you are grieving. Remember to not get so busy you neglect the Lord or you neglect time with your “best friend”—your husband. Enjoy your time together!

What can we do in the church to be helpful to widows?

Be a good listener. Losing a spouse is the most important thing in their lives. Let them talk about it. A widow likes to share things about her dearly beloved. Don’t avoid talking about their loss. Go and see a new widow even if you don’t know what to say. Tell them you are so sorry and just be there for them. Your presence is very comforting. Offer to do things for them—run some errands, and if there are children still at home offer to take them to music lessons, sports practice, etc.

Hugs are greatly appreciated. Karen, Sandy, and Nan all said how much they enjoy hugs because they miss the loving caring touch of another person. Reach out to them—Call them on the phone just to chat and let them know you are there. Sandy said how nice it is to come home and find a message on the answering machine.

Remember to include them in activities---especially with other couples---they miss the male input in conversations. Possibly invite them out to lunch after church because Sundays are especially long and lonely.

Thank you to Karen, Sandy, and Nan who have shared candidly from their hearts information that will help all of us be better equipped to minister to the widows we know in our community.

I would like to share with you a letter from another widow who lost her husband unexpectedly in a tragic accident and how God lovingly sustained and encouraged her.

Joy and her husband Jack were in two separate cars, filled to the brim with furnishings for their new hill-country home where they would soon retire.....when life crashed. Joy says,

“My son Jay, walked out to meet me and Jeff, my other son, in the parking lot of his apartment that summer afternoon, and he told me that he had just received a phone call and Jack, his father and my mate of many years, was dead. It felt as though someone reached into my body and ripped out half my heart. Every nerve, feeling, emotion, and fear rose up like a tidal wave engulfing my very being. My mind could not grasp the truth of it. My body rejected it as I stood shaking in the parking lot.

Something, actually Someone, my precious Lord, took control and I began to do what had to be done. First I had to know where Jack was, then what arrangements had to be made, notify our families, and hold myself together for my sons. My physical body did the things that had to be done, but emotionally and spiritually it was as if I were watching....not participating. As my sons and I were driven from San Marcos to College Station to claim the body, the thought that came blasting into my head was, “Now what do you believe?” And then like a rushing waterfall, all the things I believed about God began to pour forth. In my mind the answers were, “I believe You are sovereign. I believe You are love. I believe all things are possible with You. I believe You are merciful....” As the characteristics of God flooded my mind, a peace that passes all understanding filled my being. To this day when everyday life seems to overtake me I begin to praise God for Who He is and life settles back into place.

As I lay in bed that night, a childhood song rang through my mind continually: “Jesus loves me this I know because the Bible tells me so.” Over and over those words so simple and yet so profoundly true soothed my soul. Today when I feel that my life cannot go forward because the dreams were shattered and the one man who made me feel whole was gone, I turn to the One God who restores me. The Psalms have never been sweeter and

God's promises more real. I found that praising God each day for who He is raises me above my circumstances I knew that Jesus Christ was greater than my pain, that He promised in His Word to be the Husband of the widow and the Father to the fatherless, and that He promised His grace would be sufficient. I have learned that His words are true and they endure forever.

I will be eternally grateful for the fact that God led me to Bible Study Fellowship where, through the study of His Word, I gave my life to Him. He prepared me in so many areas for what He knew was to come. After all the ways He had gone before me, I could not doubt His precious love. I don't even want to imagine what my life would be like now if I had not known Jesus Christ personally, and so intimately before Jack was taken. As it is, God is more real and more precious to me today than even the first time I knew Him. With God all things are possible: Even contentment as you face life without your life partner....for the One who promises to never leave us stays eternally. May His name be praised!"
(From: Beth Moore; Praying God's Word; pg 192-94)

WALKING BY FAITH

As we have seen from the experiences of all these widows, the “key ingredient” in their lives was a strong faith in God. It was the centerpiece of their lives and the “rock” which they could hang on to in their life-changing experience.

Today, may this lesson be an opportunity for us to evaluate our relationship with God. Is it mediocre, not wholehearted—primarily for Wednesday's, Sundays, and when it is convenient? Or is our relationship with God vibrantly alive and growing? Knowing God more intimately day by day through Christ, we are building brick by brick a strong foundation of faith that will support and sustain us in all of life's experiences and challenges. Will you determine today to make your relationship with God your top priority?

Women's Bible Study
Women in Transition: Anna: Faithful Widow
Faithfulness over the long haul
November 14, 2007

Intensive Study Questions – Luke 2:36-38

- 1. In Luke 2:36 Anna is referred to as a “prophetess” What does that mean (check dictionary or Bible dictionary). ? What does that title tell us about her life?**

- 2. How would a promise from God help her through this life-changing experience? Name some others in the Bible to whom God gave a promise.**

- 3. How do God’s promises in Scripture help us in the challenges and losses in life? Share some Scriptures of God’s character and faithfulness that have sustained and ministered to you in your circumstances.**

- 4. Look at some other widows in the Scriptures. How did God show his love and care for them? (1 Kings 17:3-16; Ruth 1-4; Mark 12:41-44)**

- 5. In Timothy 5:3-10 Paul gives instructions concerning the care of the Jewish widows----what were they?**

How is widowhood different today? What additional provisions do most modern women have?

- 6. As the body of Christ, how can we minister to the widows we know who have lost their spouses and help them make the transition from wife to widow easier?**

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Discussion Questions– Luke 2:36-38

1. How was the life of a widow in the Bible different from widowhood today?

2. How did Anna demonstrate her faith?

Think of widows you know ---what have you observed about their faith?

3. What can we do to remain faithful through the challenges and sorrows of life?

4. Share your favorite Scriptures of God's faithfulness and character that have sustained you in difficulties and ministered to your spirit.

5. As the body of Christ, how can we minister to the widows we know who have lost their spouses and help them make the transition from wife to widow easier?