

Sunlight through a Veil of Tears

Some happenings in life bring changes that can deeply affect a person and be difficult for a long time. The early death of a spouse or parent is one such life changing, extremely difficult, and even incomprehensible trial. It can affect a person throughout his or her lifetime. Eventually, even in these struggles, God gives acceptance and understanding that He is the giver and taker of life—even through anguish and loss, His work is made manifest. All in all, the believer knows and wants to believe God's Word, which promises, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5).

In this Home and Family feature, believers have shared poignant and revealing thoughts about the very difficult trial and struggle they have experienced in losing a spouse or a parent to death. They also recall how God blessed and cared for them, and how He still cares for all those who today struggle and deal with this situation. Most of all, may God encourage us all to look toward the heavenly reward—eternal life in heaven—where all sorrows, all temptations, and all sins will be forgotten, where only unending joy remains. In coming *Voice of Zion* issues, the Home and Family feature will include writings on, among other topics: Loss of a spouse/parent through marriage/family breakdown; Dealing with the death of a child; Elders' cares and eldercare.

All I Could Pray for Was Strength

I was married for two years and three months when my life change inconceivably. I had an adorable 18-month-old daughter and was seven-months along expecting my second child, when my husband died suddenly.

Lannon was killed in a tragic semi-pedestrian accident. I was graciously given time to be with him on the street, as he lay injured awaiting the ambulance. I never dreamed it would be the last I would see him alive and talking. At the hospital the doctor said that he didn't make it; I thought my world ended. I had no idea how I was going to get through that day much less the next day.

Death is final, as we all know, but when there is no warning, it takes on an even greater enormity. The shock is likened to 100 elephants standing on you, and the needed strength to stand up and walk seems impossible to summon. Nevertheless, with the help of family and friends holding me up physically, mentally, and spiritually, I was able to move forward.

Newly married, together we had just started to create our life's dreams and plan our future. After Lannon died, it took a long while to start creating my own dreams and future. I have compared it to writing on a chalkboard. As a couple, we filled the board with so many dreams and plans. When he died, it felt like I was staring at an empty board. All we had written to do together—as a couple, as parents, was erased. It took a couple years for my life to settle into singly taking care of my two babies, doing other daily tasks. That was about all I could handle, and quite frankly, that was all I cared about.

Gradually, I began to think about tomorrow, next week, and even beyond. I knew I was in a better place mentally when I began to "write" on my chalkboard. I wanted to create a good home for my daughters, so I began remodeling my house. I wanted to give back to the community, so I helped in cleaning up my small town. It felt good to volunteer on the First Response Team and serve on city council. I was blessed with the means to buy some rental houses and provide homes for people who needed a temporary home. I was writing my own dreams and desires, and it felt good.

My children have gone through the stages of grief as they have grown. I don't have a psychology degree, but I have

learned that even though my girls never knew their father, they have grieved his death and his absence in their life. When they were 4–6 years old and comprehended reality, they cried many nights for him and knew he was gone and not returning. Those were very difficult moments for me, too. Lannon had been gone for almost four years, and I had dealt with my own emotions, received acceptance. As my youngest went through that process, it all came rushing back for me too, and I had to again accept and be strong for them. I have told them that he is their angel-father, and though he is not here with us, God is our Father and we are even more blessed because of that. They don't comprehend how special they are—for widows and the fatherless truly are precious to God—but someday they will.

Dealing with school issues has been good, as we have stayed in a small community and a small school system. The teachers have been extremely supportive and know these girls only have mom at home. I struggled with being supermom for a few years and realized it was an artificial expectation. The girls didn't know any different, it was just in my mind to try to be mom and dad all in one. It was exhausting and unachievable. I finally accepted after some counseling that what I felt I could do in a day's work was enough. I didn't need to be so hard on myself for not doing everything, being everywhere, and still trying to do my most important job as mother.

God had blessed us with life insurance that I knew would carry us for a while. I was able to take a few years off of work and stay home with the girls and try achieving some sort of balance while learning single parenthood. God has also blessed me with a believing employer that has understood my situation and has been supportive when I needed time off.

Many forget that single parents have no adult support at home, and lots of outings require a babysitter. I would love to say I took my kids everywhere and never hired a sitter, but I needed some time away from them. Being the only adult day and night, day after day, is exhausting. The kids get tired of just you, and both need a break—maybe just for mom to go for a walk. Offers to watch the kids, mow the lawn, or do any of the household chores are so appreciated.

Life can also be very lonely. I am so thankful for my kids, but sometimes adult company is so fulfilling and needed. The spiritual support and friendship that fellow travelers can offer gets us through day to day.

People forget that losing a believing spouse is also losing a friend to visit with, and most importantly, an escort in faith. Single people are freer than single parents to go and socialize.

Additionally, at the time of Lannon's death, there wasn't anyone I knew who had experienced the same tragedy. There were a lot of listeners for whom I am so grateful. Nevertheless, nobody could say they understood exactly how I felt, and could cry with me. Only recently has that happened in my circles, with another young sister in faith losing her husband of only a couple years. It was like I could finally let go and grieve completely. We knew and understood exactly how each other felt. We both knew the loss and the future that was taken from us. We didn't even need to complete our sentences and we knew what the other felt. We felt the pain death had brought but also shared joy in the knowledge that our husbands had attained the victory.

I remember praying a lot. All I had the strength to pray for was strength itself. My prayer just repeated itself. "Please God, give me strength." I didn't ask for strength in any particular areas; it was in all things needed to survive and raise my girls—to get through the day and the night.

It wasn't easy going to some camps, though perhaps I should have. I found it very difficult to attend functions where the dad's role or the importance of fathers or husbands was discussed. There, all that went through my mind was that this is all on my shoulders. I pray for more support for single parents in God's kingdom—chances to share with each other and know we aren't alone would be so uplifting.

The night Lannon died, a believing aunt came to me and said, “God’s ways are not always our ways.” That has been so comforting to me over the years. It serves as a gentle reminder I knew I needed to hear, because God is our maker. He is the giver and taker of life. He created us and He will take us from here when it’s our time. Even though I wasn’t ready to let Lannon go, I knew God had called Him home. It gave me power to accept His will. Heaven is closer—my children and I now have an anchor there. I feel blessed for this, as his victory through Christ strengthens faith and helps us strive toward the goal of eternal life.

I know that it’s difficult to know what to say to one grieving such a loss. The most powerful thing is to show your support and to be there. Prayers and being remembered at that time is what carries us through. The right words are difficult to find as we try to put ourselves in the grieving one’s shoes. Some people have said they can’t imagine losing their spouse and that’s true, but it probably isn’t the best thing to say to a widow or widower. The grieving one couldn’t imagine it either, and that thought only makes the situation seem even more insurmountable.

When my girls got older and took interest in things I didn’t have background in, it was very nice when others stepped in. Some of their uncles took them hunting, fishing, and camping. To have a male figure in their life is so important. We were able to spend a few winters with grandma and grandpa in Arizona, and my girls bonded with grandpa, and that is very special. I am thankful that they have had such father figures.

When we experience death close to us, we attain a deeper appreciation for even the small things in life. It is my hope and prayer that someday I can give back to those who have supported and helped me in many ways. They, too, may need something someday, and I want to share their burdens where I can. We have a good God who will take us to our heavenly home one day.

Janelle Lake

Insights Decades Later

I was 15 when my father lost his memory. At that time there was no medication for Alzheimer’s, nor did we much understand what was going on with him. He was admitted to a care facility for the mentally disabled. That was difficult for us, but the fact that he didn’t even recognize his own family made his having to be there somewhat easier for us. After five years of living in his own little world, God called him to heaven’s home. During the painful waiting period, no one wanted to take a phone call at home, fearing that it was from the hospital.

Now, decades later, I realize how difficult it must have been for my mother. She was in her 50s when her husband lost his memory totally in a few short years. I remember how one day my mother asked me to go see if father had lost his way on his daily walk. I found him less than a quarter-mile from home, looking around like a total stranger. I couldn’t believe that my strong, wise father couldn’t find his home—something that a less than 10-year-old child could easily do.

After my father passed away, or in fact, already during his illness, mother had to be both parents. Having my own children go through adolescence, I see how much both male and female parents are actually needed in that process. I feel strongly how much my mother tried to bring us up as a believing parent does, but oh how she must have missed the support of her husband, my father.

Thinking of my childhood family, I thank God for allowing my wife and I to raise our own family together. I pray for God’s care for the grieving and that we would all remember to support those who are left to raise their children alone.

Eternal Perspectives Carry across Time

It will be 50 years this July since our mother died of brain cancer at 42 years old. I was 11, and my four sisters and seven brothers ranged in age from almost 17 to barely three. Fortunately, our dad was a faithful loving father, to whom God had given an abundance of patience and the heart and ability to care for us.

When I think back to that time and the half-century since, I realize how much the loss of a parent in childhood colors the rest of one's life. Naturally, it presents many family challenges, sorrows, and longings, but it can also bring an early focus to things bigger than the everyday, to matters of eternity.

Those days had some built-in societal cruelties that are unimaginable today. As an 11-year-old, I wasn't old enough to visit my mom in the hospital, hence I only saw her once or twice in the last six months of her life. That was after she was transferred to a hospice-type care facility. Grown ups didn't explain things to kids very adeptly in those days, but our dad did prepare us when it was apparent that mom would not get well.

I remember when I asked dad if mom was ever going to come home, and he told a living room full of kids that it looked like "mama would not be coming home again." After her passing, during one family discussion, when one of the kids expressed the wish that we could have our mom back, he started to say that heaven is such a wonderful place, that we wouldn't want to make mom come back. His honesty won out, however, and he admitted that he too would have her come back if he could change things. Somehow, though, we together learned acceptance and were given an eternal perspective—the hope of reunification, the assurance that mom was safe due to Christ's sacrifice, that her life and love still had purpose and effect though she was only present in our hearts and memory.

I believe we share the sense in our family that our loss bonded us together like we may not have without that experience. Some kind of unplanned oral history project arose from the void. Memory matters! We talked about her, our lives before her illness, her hospitalization, the place she died, our last whole family gathering at her bedside on Mother's Day 1965, about the funeral, the cemetery, etc. Later on we dealt with Mother's Day craft and card projects at school with no mom to deliver our work to, visits to her grave, and so on. Even the youngest ones in our home got a sense of mom.

Nevertheless, one of my biggest regrets is never getting to know my mom as a grownup man. Even there, though, her close friends later shared thoughts about her. I remember one of her dearest friends telling me how mother took their shared confidences, indeed this friend's confessions with her to the grave. How mom had been a listener when she needed her. This gave both a pleasing glimpse into my mother's nature, but also a longing for the mother that I would have wanted to visit with, perhaps spill my heart to.

Fortunately, God gives escorts. In addition to the dear earthly father He provided, God's congregation also cared for us. Sweet memories linger of believers who visited our home, took an interest in us, provided material and spiritual guidance, even took us to their homes, farms, cabins, or on vacations with them. They corrected, cared, prayed for, and watched over us. "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

Paul Waaraniemi

Yearning Mingled with Joy

It occurred to me, as I sat down to express some random thoughts on how the death of my beloved spouse of 44 years has affected me, that what I say now, four years later, will be far different from what I might have said shortly after her passing, or even a year or two later. I find this intriguing, for only now am I able to look back with some sense of objectivity and see changes in myself—emotional, attitudinal, mental and spiritual—that I was only dimly aware of at the time. Others close to me seemed to be more aware of these than I, and they addressed them, in love, as they were occurring. I listened, but to myself I often thought, “We’re not on the same page at all; they have no clue what it’s like.”

More specifically, and finally more objectively, here are some aspects I’d like to share with others. Emotionally I became fragile to a depth I had never before experienced. I felt as though my inner being consisted of active volcanic glass that would explode, shatter into fragments at the slightest word or thought. Instantly. Anywhere. Anytime. In the beginning, I could not always keep these private, yet I did not want to distress others with my personal sorrow and grief. Slowly, however, the power of these eruptions receded, so that when I was occupied with physical work or in the company of others, I no longer had meltdowns. When alone it was still a different matter for a long, long time: random memories, odors, sounds, songs, photos, and just the deathly silence itself in the now empty home would trigger them. But slowly, slowly I began to notice that these were no longer colored by deep sadness and grief, but by an aching, melancholy-loneliness, later by a yearning tinged with happy memories, and now by thankfulness, and deep-seated joy that we had shared so many wonderful years. It feels good to genuinely and freely laugh again. Earlier, this was far from me. It feels necessary, good, and natural to project the love I had for my spouse onto others. I still miss her deeply, daily, but the catch-phrase of the day is to feel “balanced.” Today I think I do.

As I have always been an optimist, looking back I am somewhat surprised to realize how my attitudes had taken a tumble for a while. Out of some closet they tumbled: “Why me?...Poor me!...What did I do to deserve this?...What’s the point of anything anymore?...I don’t wanna go anywhere!...Nobody ever comes over; they still have a life to live...” and so on. I knew full well these were bad attitudes, yet they tried and tried to press in on me.

I fought them off in three ways: First, I deliberately worked hard, physically, so that I would not have time to think but to just concentrate on what I was doing. Second, I forced myself to get out of the house, to go visiting relatives and believing friends —anything to avoid those interminably long, silent evenings alone at home talking to the walls. Third, I escaped. Oh yes, that’s what it really was, though I often expressed other motivations for my extended getaways to Arizona and Finland, and my long trips here and there in my RV. As I did these things, I began to enjoy them more and more; instead of going through the motions I began to live again! I was eventually able to shut the closet door.

Mentally, I was befuddled, unable to focus, to concentrate, to create. For four years I had cared for my ill spouse and then 13 days after a doctor’s diagnosis of cancer, she was gone. I just could not grasp it; I struggled to understand and to accept. My mind seemed to whirl about in a void. Caring for my wife had never been a problem; not having her to care for was. She was no longer upstairs resting, no longer in the kitchen, the living room, the basement. She was nowhere. The house was eerily silent. There was no comfort therein, not even in the refrigerator.

I battled loneliness and depression. Everything seemed to be “on hold.” I did my best to function normally, but after three years people began to say to me, “It’s nice to see you laughing again,” or “Sure is nice to see you back to your old self.” Only then did it enter my consciousness that my inner struggles had temporarily affected my personality.

Finally, and this I find hardest to share, I found my spiritual life being challenged to an unprecedented extent. It didn’t happen right away, but perhaps two to three years later. I began to think that I no longer had any purpose in life, no future

to look forward to, no family of my own to care for. When I'd fall into sin, I doubted whether I was even truly a believer anymore. Yet I did not want to leave God's kingdom. I wanted to believe. But these doubts surprised me, shook me, scared me. I'm not sure how they were driven away—well, yes, I know that it was fundamentally by believing the gospel, by hearing and listening to God's Word, and by the love and support of family and friends in God's kingdom, but there were other factors, too.

One of these was by a gradual yet dramatic shift in attitude and perspective. Although I agreed, and could "see" that for my spouse to have received her reward in heaven and been released from potentially many years of illness and struggle here on earth, only much, much later was I able to wholeheartedly embrace this fact. In our marriage, we had always loved, cherished, and put the other first. When I was left alone, my focus had turned inward, perhaps simply because she was no longer there. Only me. Alone now. I was inwardly angry when someone would say, "She's in a better place now." I couldn't agree; I felt that her best place was still here at my side where God had placed her. I was able and willing to care for her, to love her, to comfort her. She was mine. Lately, however, I have been given the insight to see things somewhat more clearly. Now, I thank God that He loaned me such a wonderful spouse for so many years and that He was so gracious to her in taking back His child to be with Him in heaven.

Other factors were the gradual improvement in my mental health, the corresponding improvement in physical energy, and the returning joy of life all brought on by the healing power of time. Earlier, I had hated another one of those platitudes that well-meaning people would say, "Time heals." No, I would think, you have no idea how deeply this cuts. I really feel that I have been torn in two, and you think time can fix that? Well, time is elastic, and for me it stretched toward the fourth year before I could consciously feel significant healing occurring. But I can now assert that time has definitely worn away the sharp edges.

Sometimes the balm wears thin and the ache returns. Sometimes, though rarely now, the glass still splinters. Mary Anne will always be secreted away inside my heart. But I cling to the line of the song I had inscribed onto her tombstone, "Joy in heaven, joy, everlasting joy." I want to share it with her one day.

Wayne Kallio

Joys Doubled, Sorrows Halved

There is a saying that a joy shared is doubled and a sorrow shared is halved. After being childless for 10 years, God blessed my husband Ralph and me with a little girl. We could feel that others shared our joy and welcomed her, too. Then when she was nearly three, her father was called home after several months of illness. Even through grief I could feel the sympathy, prayers, and support of others.

My little child had several busy mothers who took her in when I worked, and I could often visit in their homes when I was done for the day, often even staying for supper. She was able to have playmates and I was able to have grownup fellowship at the end of the day, something parents crave and need. Family and friends included us in their holidays, visits, and outings such as picnics, going to the zoo, and many other events. Thus, my daughter was able to experience homes with believing fathers and children—something I wasn't able to give her—and I had dear escorts.

When I look at others who have lost loved ones, one of my wishes for them is that they, too, have someone with whom to remember those they have lost. My little girl talked about her dad every day for a year, remembering little things

like lawnmower rides, sharing popsicles and cheese puffs, going in the truck with him—and wondering where he was. One day she asked me, “We can still be happy, can’t we, mom?” What a good reminder that was for me. She needed a happy parent. And we had the best reason to be happy.

Ruth Roiko

An Anchor in Heaven

Brandon and I were both twenty-three when he was killed in a work accident. Our girls, Gretchen and Ivy, were ages two and six months at the time. Brandon’s traumatic accident at work happened on July 15, 2013, and he passed away within hours. I and some family members were blessed enough to be able to say goodbye, sing some songs, and preach the gospel to him one more time before he took his last breath. The suddenness of it all left me in a fog of simply trying to put one foot in front of the other.

Our two year old Gretchen thought he was sleeping. I had to tell her that Daddy’s “owies” were so big that he had to go to heaven to be with Jesus, and that Jesus has made him better. I tell them both now that Daddy loves us. He didn’t want to leave us, but that he is happy in heaven, and one day we will see him again.

I learned in grief counseling that a grieving person must take care of herself first in order to take care of anyone else. It was really tough to even care about the daily needs of life. In many ways, my girls were what motivated me to keep living. Someone told me once, “The girls already lost their daddy. Don’t let them lose their mommy, too.” That statement was life changing for me, because it gave me the motivation to keep on going.

Setting aside time each day to think about specific things was helpful too. Although it felt like my mind was constantly spinning with thoughts and grief, just knowing that I had time to think about a certain topic in a few hours helped me focus on my children’s needs at the moment. My girls and I have participated in grief counseling, which has been significantly helpful for all three of us. I would recommend counseling for anyone who is dealing with grief and is open to professional help. I’ve also had to rely immensely on the help of family, friends, and the congregation to help us through.

Nevertheless, I could not be functioning now without prayer. In the early days after Brandon died, I had no will to live. Praying for strength or comfort, and the support of so many loved ones were what got me through. Even now, seventeen months after he died, prayer is vitally important in my everyday life. When I feel so alone, I know that God is listening, and He will answer my prayers.

I would say to those who want to comfort someone who is experiencing the loss of a near one to simply be there, give a hug, shed a tear, and listen. There are no right words to say, and there are no words that will make things better. When I was deep in grief, my mind didn’t stop spinning and I needed silence to process some of those thoughts. I needed to think, but I didn’t want to be alone. Having someone who would just sit with me was so helpful. I remember one person telling me that I now have an anchor in heaven. As time moves on, I realize that this is truly a blessing.

I keep Brandon’s memory alive by using a display cabinet in my living room for some of his things. I also have some pictures around the house and albums handy. I tell my girls stories about their daddy, and they love it! At the holidays and the one-year mark after Brandon died, many family and friends gathered with me at the cemetery to sing songs and hymns of Zion. The support and the singing has been such a comfort to me as I journeyed through that first year without him.

It Felt Like Half of Me Was Cut Off

“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). When married, two become one. I didn’t fully realize what that really meant until I lost my husband. It felt like half of me was cut off. There was now a part of me missing. Each one brings gifts to the marriage that the other person may not have. You began to put those gifts together, and you unite into who the two of you become as one.

Ben gathered people around him. “Come for coffee, come visit, come for dinner.” I enjoyed putting the coffee on, setting a nice table with cute dishes, and serving food. I do not have the gift to gather people as Ben did. Our home was always full of visitors. Oh, how I miss that part of my life. I have been blessed with many children and grandchildren, who come to visit often, and I am thankful for that, but I do miss the variety of people Ben would invite into our home.

Ben had a long drawn out death. It was so difficult to see such an active person slowly have the life drawn from him. Seeing a loved one suffer in pain is heart wrenching. There were also blessings in this time, though. God is good and He took care of us. It was a time when family and friends gathered around him every day. I felt God near many times. It was a time when Ben could spend hours visiting with his children about life and faith—times we will never forget. He wanted us to sing the song “The Lord’s My Shepherd” almost every day. He continued to ask for the blessing of the gospel. We still sing his favorite song at all our special family gatherings. It has become our family song.

All of a sudden I had many doubts and fears. One day I woke and thought, “Am I believing?” I have so many doubts and fears. I was scared. Have I lost my faith? What can I do? This was the first time I realized how my faith could be taken with doubts. Now what? All I can do is go to services and believe my sins forgiven. Slowly faith found footing, and I realized, “Yes, I am still believing.”

Now how do I fit in the congregation? I have only known the couple’s world. This is very difficult for one who has lost a spouse. I began to pray a lot. I wanted to accept God’s will for my new life alone. Some days were good and some days were bad. One day a friend told me, “Jeanette, the sun will shine again.” I said, “No, it won’t.” But come to find out, she was right, the sun slowly began to come up and some days it even shone very brightly. I was able to move from the couple’s world to the singles’ world.

Believers have planned group trips to different places, and I have been so thankful that I have been able to go on some of these trips, too. Many ladies have been able to travel safely in this group setting. The trips have been refreshing, like a camp on a bus. We traveled, had fellowship, met new friends, sang songs, enjoyed services, and built memories.

I am thankful that I enjoy hobbies and crafts. I enjoy working alone and also with other ladies for many church activities and fundraisers. It has also been very refreshing to work at camps.

God’s Word summarizes my thoughts in my favorite Bible verse: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding” (Prov. 3:5). This is the life that God has given me, I must trust in Him.