

On My Knees, Bible in Hand

This title comes from a conversation I recently had with a friend who had experienced a long-term caregiving situation similar to mine. Now that both of our husbands are gone, she asked me if I ever looked back and wondered how I did what I did for so long.

My answer was immediate and emphatic. I didn't even have to consider the question. I told her I knew exactly how I did it. I did it on my knees with my Bible in my hand.

Caregiving is hard. It's the kind of hard that leaves you wondering if you can go one more day, take one more step. It was the hardest thing I've ever done.

This booklet is intended to encourage those who find themselves giving long term care for parents, spouses, special needs children or other loved ones. I hope to shine a light on the best resource we can ever have for tough situations — God’s Word. My Bible truly became my life preserver in a sea of hurt.

Let me be clear. This is not about how I (by myself) learned to cope. This is about how God taught me to cope, and even appreciate the trials that came my way. I can’t emphasize that enough. All the glory belongs to our Heavenly Father. If you read this and don’t seek Bible answers for your problems, I have failed.

That being said, you need to know a little of my background in order to gain the full impact of what I’m about to say. I was married for 36 years to an amazing man named Jeff Armstrong. His personal story would fill the pages of a book (and hopefully, one day it will) but the short story is that he developed rheumatoid arthritis as a child and the effects followed him throughout his life. So much so, that the final 9 years of his life were spent, first in a wheelchair and then, totally bedfast until his death.

I became his sole caregiver, 24 hours a day and seven days a week. You may be in this very position yourself or you may fear that your life is headed in

this direction. In either case, you are probably reading this because you agree with me that caregiving is hard. Sometimes it takes more than the love you have for the person in your care. Sometimes the only thing that makes you stay is your love for God.

In the following pages I want to share some of what God taught me through my experience. It is my hope and prayer that you will find something here that will give you strength, hope, comfort, perspective or whatever it is you need in this moment. I have referenced scriptures that spoke to me when I needed them but I urge you to read God's word for yourself. Passages that leaped from the page at me in my distress may not do the same for you and vice versa. The important thing is to pray for answers and then let Him speak through His word, guiding you to what He knows you need.

I've tried to address specific emotions that are common to the experience. In each topic I've included my thoughts and passages that helped me work through the emotional aspect of caregiving. Remember that my support scriptures may not be your support scriptures. You'll need to let the Word speak to you.

Here are some final thoughts before I delve into the specific topics. Most caregiving resources will

advise you that you must take care of yourself first in order to care for anyone else. That may be true but I know one thing is certain. You must take care of your spiritual health to survive the experience with no regrets. You can survive and even thrive spiritually if you continue to pray and read your Bible, allowing God's word to guide your heart. I found that the best time for me was after going to bed when all was (usually) quiet. But other times may work better for you. Just be consistent.

Surprisingly, it didn't seem to matter what part of the Bible I read. Old Testament, New Testament, Gospels, Epistles, or Prophets — I have found strength in all of them. It's a wonderful thing when you read a passage that you've read or heard many times in your lifetime and you suddenly see something new. But that is the beauty and the depth of God's word.

One other thing I did that I found helpful was to keep a thanksgiving journal. Each day I found and recorded something to be thankful for. It might be an individual who had been especially helpful that day or it might be something I found in God's creation (like a bunny rabbit in the yard) that made me smile. But there was something every single day.

I found at least two passages that seem to link peace with thankfulness (Philippians 4:6-7 and Colossians 3:15). Need peace? Try counting your blessings.

My prayer for you is that you will find untapped resources to assist you in your ministry of caregiving.

Sorrow

When a loved one is struck with a sudden catastrophic illness, accident or even diagnosis, often the first emotion that strikes is sorrow or grief. We grieve for the life that we will no longer have together, the plans and dreams that will no longer come to fruition or the relationship that will inevitably change. Your great expectations are lost. You experience loss even though your loved one is still alive. After the fall that put Jeff in a wheel chair, I knew I had lost my husband as I knew him. My world would change forever.

This feeling may never completely go away. It is essential to find solace somewhere. Often, the very one on whom we've always relied is the one who needs comfort and understanding now. Where do we turn?

What God taught me:

1. This is a very human emotion. You are not the first to feel this. (Ps 6.6) “I am weary with my sighing; every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears.” I did this quite often. I had to be strong for Jeff during the day but alone at night was a different story. It was comforting to know godly people had felt the same way throughout history.
2. God knows and cares about each tear. (Ps 56.8) “Thou hast taken account of my wanderings; put my tears in Thy bottle; are they not in Thy book?” What a comfort to know God sees each tear.
3. God comforts us and has left His people to comfort us as well. (II Cor 1.3-4) “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” There were so many Christian friends who always asked about me as well as Jeff. I often received cards of encouragement, too. Accept support and encouragement from

friends. This is one reason that God gave us the blessing of friendships.

4. Angels are ministering to our needs unseen. (Heb 1.14) “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” I don’t know how this works but there were times when I could almost feel the presence of angels offering comfort and sympathy.

God cares about you.

You can survive this.

Anger/Resentment

We may become angry at our sudden change of circumstances or, as the days turn into weeks, months or years, we may build up resentment and bitterness. Even worse, we don't know with whom to be angry. We can't be angry with our loved one. It's not their fault and they probably carry enough guilt about being a burden that we don't want to add to their distress. We're afraid to be angry with God (even though He knows our hearts). So we find no outlet for our anger and it just grows and grows.

Sometimes we internalize the anger and it results in depression. I suppose that is what happened to me after a few years. I did not feel sad but had absolutely no energy. My doctor prescribed a mild anti-depressant. I resisted the idea but found that it helped. Faith in God does not mean we can't also look for medical solutions. I took it until after Jeff's passing.

As you can see, anger is not good for you. While it is a normal human emotion, it does not help our peace of mind or our loved one's situation.

What God taught me:

1. Anger is not productive and usually causes more harm. (Jas 1.20) "For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God."
2. Anger steals energy and strength that you desperately need right now. (Prov 25.28) "Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit." Just like an exposed city, uncontrolled anger leaves us open to dire consequences.
3. The difference between feeling "bitter" and feeling "better" is the letter "I." When you take "I" and "me" out of the equation you can change your perspective. Caregiving requires selflessness. Think of the Apostle Paul's words when he traveled to Jerusalem knowing that suffering awaited him. (Acts 20.24) "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify

solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” Paul’s ministry was spreading the gospel. Mine was caregiving but I tried to apply the same attitude.

Choose to let go of the anger.

If caregiving is the ministry God has given you (and we often don’t get to choose our service) then get “self” out of the way and focus on the task before you.

Self-Pity

So often when difficult times come to us we want to ask “Why?” “Why has this happened to me or my loved one?” or “Why would God let this happen?” We begin to feel sorry for ourselves and angry at the unfairness of it all.

These are natural human reactions but we are doomed to frustration if we continue to think this way. Most of the time we will never know the “why” and it wouldn’t matter if we did. It would not change our situation. And self-pity will only lead you down into a pit (pun intended) from which there is no escape.

That’s because “why” is the wrong question!

Wouldn’t it be more beneficial to ask “What?” “What can I learn from this experience?” or “What is God trying to develop in me?” or even “How can this help me to grow as a Christian?” My personal fa-

favorite is “How can this bring me closer to God, my Heavenly Father?”

You see, once we begin asking the right questions, we can begin to benefit from our experiences. We can feel productive again. We can see the progress in the pain. My relationship with God grew exponentially once I was forced to face my human frailties and rely on Him.

What God taught me:

1. Don't look for answers that you cannot know. God is God and we are His creatures. Just accept this, as Job finally did. (Job 42.3) “Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.” God is the Creator. Who are we to question His purpose?
2. God may have a purpose which we will never understand in this earthly life. But He has the power to bring about whatever He wishes, regardless of our human understanding. (Job 42.2) “I know that Thou can do all things and that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted.” We don't have to understand His purpose for His will to be done.

3. Choose to benefit from tough situations.
(Jas 1.2-4) “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Choose to grow.

Choose to run toward God.

This is a sample of the material contained in
On My Knees, Bible in Hand:
A Spiritual Survival Guide for Caregivers
by Cherri Armstrong
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