

Uplifting Devotions for Widows

Hope ^{*for an*} *Aching Heart*

MARGARET NYMAN



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Hope for an Aching Heart: Uplifting Devotions for Widows

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Part 1

*I Can't Believe
I'm a Widow*

Why Ask Why?



Many times each day I walk past the little room in my cottage where Nate's hospital bed used to be, the place where he lay hovering between life and death for three days. Despite the exhaustion and stress of that time, sometimes I wish we were back there watching and waiting. If we were, Nate would still be with us.

I've never asked God why He let Nate die, because God doesn't usually answer our "why" questions anyway. Even Jesus, hanging on the cross in agony and asking why, didn't get His answer. When calamity comes, God has either caused it or allowed it, and He has significant reasons behind the whys. He just doesn't share them with us.

As the family faced planning Nate's funeral, my son Nelson and I sat at the dining table early in the morning. Although there was much to do, we decided to take a few minutes to think, talk, and pray. When I had entered the room, Nelson was reading the Bible story of Jesus calling to the disciples from the beach. The men had been out fishing overnight without success and were coming in, still one hundred yards offshore.

Jesus yelled for them to throw their net out once more. Without questioning Him, they did it and caught 153 large fish (John 21:11). As they happily dragged the massive catch toward shore, they saw Jesus standing by a fire and smelled the food He was cooking. What a breakfast of blessing this must have been for these hardworking men.

Nelson said, "They'd fished all night without success. Then Jesus asked them to do something that didn't make any sense. What

difference could one more toss of the net make? But they did it.” From the story, we know their obedience paid off handsomely.

Nelson and I talked about how life would be radically different without Nate. By allowing his death, God was asking us to do a new thing that made no sense to us. He wanted us to think and act differently from that point on. When Jesus shouted His fishing idea to the disciples, they didn’t shout back, “Why?” Against all human logic they threw their net over the side. We didn’t ask why about Nate, either.

Nelson and I decided that morning we’d follow God and do whatever He asked, which was to live life without Nate. Although we saw no blessing in that, we chose to believe God would surprise us, just as He did the fishermen.

[Jesus] said, “Throw your net . . . and you will find some [fish].”

*When they did, they were unable to haul the net in
because of the large number of fish.*

John 21:6

Lord, I crave answers, but you don’t always give them. Help me to accept your ways, knowing there will be blessing coming through them. Amen.

The Widow Word



I remember when the word *widow* first entered my mind. It was just a few days before Nate and I were told he had terminal cancer. I was sitting in a warm bathtub in the early morning hours after Nate had had a bad night with intense back pain. He was finally asleep, and I grabbed the chance to decompress behind a closed door.

The tub wasn't even full before I was weeping, panicking at the unknowns in our immediate future. We knew Nate had a "mass" on his liver. What if it was cancer? What if he died? What if I became a widow?

Because we'd recently moved 110 miles from my sister, my girlfriends, my prayer groups, and my church, I panicked. But God, the tender Father, interrupted that downward spiral by flooding my mind with names, friends who would come if I asked, women who were faithful to God and also to me. These names equated to good future counsel and shoulders to cry on.

When I climbed out of the tub, I felt much better than when I'd climbed in, even though the facts hadn't changed. God had spoken to my need, demonstrating again how close He was. Psalm 116:2 pictures Him bending down to listen or turning His ear toward us, both intimate pictures of His tender care. Knowing He's aware of our emotional condition at any given moment is an ongoing comfort.

My focus, and also that of Nate and I as a couple, had been riveted on health issues for many weeks, but God knew precisely when my meltdown would occur, and He was ready. I've learned He is practical

and rushes toward us with exacting sufficiency. As a doctor matches drugs to a patient's illness, so God matches aid to His children's crises.

When I was in the tub, submerged in despair, the Lord supplied a mental list of caring friends. I didn't head for a bath thinking, "Maybe God will help me there!" No, He just saw my tears, knew perfectly how to help, and did so. I believe He experiences delight in ministering to our needs, never running out of creative ways to do it. Surely new crises are ahead, but He's met me in so many emergencies that I don't doubt He always will.

As for my God-inspired group of women supporters, when I thought about each name, I realized how thorough His help really had been. Every single person on the list was a widow.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God.

*Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything
as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.*

2 Corinthians 3:4-5 (ESV)

Lord, prepare me for whatever is coming, and when it gets here, show me what to do. Amen.

Planning a Funeral



Within forty-eight hours of Nate's death, each person in the family had experienced the phenomenon common to every griever. We expected Nate to walk in the room momentarily or were sure we'd heard his voice, his laugh. Even at the store as I paid for the black suit I'd wear to his funeral I thought, "Nate will like this."

The mourning process is forced on us even before death's reality has sunk in. One minute we remember, the next we don't. Each disappointing "oh—that's right . . ." brings a wave of nausea, and then, in the midst of this misery, we have to plan a funeral.

All of us remember our first experience with death, maybe a grandparent or great aunt. We may have seen an adult cry for the first time. We sensed our parents setting us aside for more serious matters. The subdued atmosphere of the funeral home made us uncomfortable and anxious to leave.

But this time our assignment was to *plan* the funeral, not for a distant relative, but for a husband, a father. How could we?

We started with questions. What should be said? What sung? By whom? What part should family members have? Who will write the eulogy? Who will read it? What about pictures? How displayed? And flowers? What type? What cost? What about an obituary? Which papers? How should we act? What will we be expected to say? Who will come? What will we wear? And most excruciating of all, how will we choose what this man will wear in his own casket?

It's like trying to plan a wedding in three days, and of course there's no new beginning at the end of it. Instead, it's all about finishing. The finality of death pounds like a sledgehammer: he's gone, he's gone, he's gone.

But our family had no choice. Just as we dealt with the violent blows of Nate's cancer together and shared the agony of his dying moments, we stepped collectively into planning his funeral. Despite the necessary focus on his death, God led us to also discuss his new life. He'd been plucked from physical suffering and been given a pain-free existence with Christ.

We believe the Bible and therefore had to agree that coming face-to-face with Jesus in a new, joyful reality was better than anything this life could offer. Nate was "away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). Being happy for him somehow brought comfort to us.

And his funeral, it turned out, was the celebration of a new beginning after all.

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord [will] . . . bestow on them
a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of
mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*

Isaiah 61:1, 3

Lord, when I lean into despair, pull me back by your Spirit and give me joy. Amen.

He's Unavailable



Shortly after Nate died, my son Lars struck a deal with AT&T. He persuaded them to shut down Nate's cell phone without a fee, even though we were breaking the contract. Where Nate is, he doesn't need a phone—a good thing for him but not so good for his family. We twelve were the people Nate loved most in all the world, yet none of us had any access to him. Our problem was that phrase, “in all the world.” He'd left our world for another.

Scripture tells us, “We have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands,” guaranteed by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:1–5). I was happy for Nate's new life there, but being so thoroughly separated from him in this world was difficult to accept. Holding his phone in my hand made that separation painfully real.

Three weeks after he died, I decided to check his messages and texts as a way to reconnect with my missing husband, although it felt like an invasion of his privacy. We'd always trusted each other, never opening one another's mail, checking on whereabouts, or monitoring phones. But I pushed past the “never,” charged the battery, and brought up his voice mail.

One after another, callers expressed shock at his cancer diagnosis and offered to help “in any way.” Many ended with “I love you.” When Nate was sick, he found encouragement in these voices, and as I listened, they comforted me, too. Those callers will never know how valuable their short messages were to both of us.

After listening, I moved on to texts, a much harder task. Seeing the words on that tiny screen triggered something inside of me, and I started to weep:

“I’m thinking of you today and am sending my love.”

“I’m here to talk whenever you want.”

“We miss you very much and hope you can come back to work.”

“I hear things are pretty rough for you and I am praying you will get relief from your pain.”

“I just want to tell you again how very much your friendship is appreciated.”

“I appreciate you so much for all you do and for how gracious you are.”

“Please hang in there! We are praying very hard for you.”

Suddenly I had an overpowering longing to send a message to Nate, and knowing I couldn’t was excruciating.

The last text, sent the day he died, was, “Sending best wishes and prayers your way, and hoping you have a good day.” That day did turn out to be good, actually spectacular, since Nate took up residence in heaven before the end of it. But oh how I miss him.

If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:

The old has gone, the new is here!

2 Corinthians 5:17

Lord, I miss my husband terribly but choose to thank you for his life. Because he’s with you, he needs nothing more. Amen.

Two Good Gifts



Man's best friend may turn out to be woman's best friend, too. A few weeks after Nate died, several of us walked to the beach at sunset. The sky was spectacular with unusual brilliance for wintertime and was the perfect background for silhouette photos. It was during the picture-taking process I had my first experience of feeling like a fifth wheel.

My son and daughter-in-law posed for one picture; my daughter and son-in-law for another. Toddler cousins got together for a third. And then there was me, newly incomplete. My dog, Jack, was the best I could do.

Jack had been a true-blue pal throughout Nate's ordeal with pancreatic cancer. The day we first heard the dreadful diagnosis, Nate was not yet able to talk about it and had escaped into sleep. As I sat quietly trying to absorb all we'd been told by a team of doctors that afternoon, the finality of his diagnosis overwhelmed me. There was no cure, no treatment to slow the cancer, and no way to avoid death. I found myself swamped by wrenching sobs of sorrow, my hands covering my face.

Jack quietly walked to my chair and whimpered. I looked down and found him gazing up at me, lovingly coming to my aid. His whimper might simply have been a take-me-on-a-walk request, but I chose to think he was concerned about me. I slid to the floor, put my arms around his thick neck, and boohooed like a woman without hope, spilling tears all over his black fur.

A person can pour out his or her deepest hurts and fears to a pet with no inhibitions. Every secret, every doubt, every response to a crisis

is safe with the animal. After a long, blubbering cry, I cupped my hands around Jack's handsome face and said, "If you could talk, I know you'd speak words of comfort to me."

Still looking directly into my eyes, he gave a little wag as if to say, "True." Even though nothing had changed about Nate, I felt much better.

The night of the sunset pictures, it occurred to me that soon all twelve family members would leave my home and return to their pre-cancer lives, and I would be living alone for the first time ever. I'd been with my parents and siblings, and then college roommates, apartment roommates, and finally Nate and the kids.

It seemed late to be starting something so radically new, but God reminded me of two good gifts: "You won't be living alone because you'll have Jack. And you'll have me."

*The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory
in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself
restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.*

1 Peter 5:10

Lord, thank you that you're a Friend who understands even better than the most loving of pets. I'm so glad you'll never leave me. Amen.

Dressed for the Occasion



After Nate died, Sundays became the most difficult day of every week. First choice was to stay in bed under the comforter, hidden away in a safe place. Going to church meant putting together an outfit, a task I couldn't always accomplish.

In my confusion over why Sundays were so miserable, I decided to look up the stages of grief, wanting to know where I was and what was next. The seven stages are denial, pain, anger, depression, turning upward, reconstructing life, and acceptance.

After studying detailed descriptions of each stage, I concluded I had a toe in all of them. Stage one, denial, occurred when I expected Nate to walk in the front door with his empty coffee mug, singing, "Hel-lo-oh!" Stage two, pain, came in church while watching couples share hymnals or hold hands. Stage three, anger, was my confusion at wondering who I could blame, knowing it couldn't be God. He'd tenderly cared for our family throughout Nate's illness and afterward.

Stage four, depression, was the reason I wanted to stay in bed many mornings, and stage five, turning upward, was the peace I felt while walking outdoors with the dog. The sixth stage, reconstructing life, occurred when I wondered which box to check on a new form: Mrs., Miss, or Ms. And the last stage, acceptance, began happening as we looked through Nate's financial records to find what we needed.

Bouncing in and out of grief stages is what defines life for a new widow, reminding me of a childhood game called Fruit Basket Upset. Participants sat in chairs forming a circle around one person. When

the person in the middle shouted, “Fruit basket upset!” everyone in the chairs jumped up and ran to a new chair. While they were colliding in the middle, pandemonium reigned. And that pandemonium is what grieving has been like for me.

Jesus is someone who operates completely outside the realm of confusion and disorder. When we go to Him with our grief, He makes sense of our chaotic thinking. I remember in Luke 8 how He came upon the mayhem caused by a demon-possessed, crazy man who had been screaming, cutting himself, rejecting clothes, and refusing to be subdued, even by chains. Jesus calmly solved each problem and brought sanity to the man and peace to those around him. He even prepared the man for worship and dressed him beforehand.

The Lord wants to do the same for us widows, bringing order to our confusion and calm to our emotional extremes. He offers Sundays as a special day to pull in close to Him. And He’s even willing to help us choose our clothes.

*You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.*

Psalm 30:11

Lord, when the emotions of grief become chaotic, please wrap my life in your peace. Amen.

Trying to Remember



Nate was a man who enjoyed a regular routine. He would leave the office at the same moment every afternoon, climb on the same train, and drive from the station to our house within a minute or two of the same time every evening.

He also delighted in the same bedtime routine, and part of that was doing something for me. Knowing I liked to have water at my bedside, he'd fill a big glass and set it on my nightstand. When I saw him walking toward the bedroom with that glass, I'd always say, "Oh, you don't have to do that. I can get it."

But he'd say, "I *want* to do it."

After we learned of his cancer, he continued the water glass ritual. Our bedroom at the cottage was upstairs, and those fourteen steps became more and more difficult for him. Even after he should have been gripping the railing, he carried my water instead. I wept knowing it would soon end.

With my head on the pillow, I thought of how Nate's faithfulness mirrored God's, the One who never forgets to meet our needs. The biggest difference is that human frailty insists faithfulness eventually end, while divine help never does, not for a married couple and not for a widow. "You, Lord, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you" (Psalm 89:8).

Nate began his bedtime routine earlier as the cancer wore him down. I'd climb on the bed with him each evening to read e-mails and cards until he fell asleep, and then I would go downstairs to continue

the evening. When my bedtime came, I'd step quietly into our dark room and head for my nightstand, carefully feeling for the water glass. Without fail, it was there.

I remember the night I tiptoed in after midnight, comforted by Nate's deep breathing. I felt for my water, and for the first time in years, it wasn't there.

The next morning I thanked him for bringing my water each night, explaining how I felt for it in the dark, telling him that the glass represented his faithfulness to me. I didn't mention it hadn't been there the night before. Both of us knew his escalating pain and fatigue had permanently ended that part of his routine.

After that I tried to remember the water myself but never could. I still felt for it but then would remember and head back to the kitchen. Eventually, though, I learned the new routine, which erased a sweet reminder of Nate's loving care. Remembering the water glass was a mini-forgetting of him.

And for a widow, that's how it goes. Remembering, forgetting, remembering, forgetting.

*We remember before our God and Father your work produced
by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance
inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

1 Thessalonians 1:3

Lord, help me to remember the blessings of my marriage, and teach me how to be a blessing to others. Amen.

Rearranging the Past

When someone we love dies, we spend a great deal of time looking back. If we've been at the bedside as death arrived, we go over and over those final minutes. Watching someone die is distressing and the memories can't be dismissed by a quick act of the will. Looking back feels like honoring the loved one who's passed away, which in turn helps the one who's still living.

I've gone over the hours and minutes leading up to Nate's death again and again, mentally combing through the details. Something in me longs to dwell there for a while longer, knowing eventually my heart will leave for good. Though my mind will remember the facts, the sadness will one day be gone.

I find myself wanting to rearrange those significant events and conversations like a chef wants to put a messy spice rack back in order. Of course I know reorganizing the past is fantasy, but how do I swap looking back for moving forward?

Lately my grieving seems more strenuous than in those days immediately after Nate died, as if a scab covering a wound has been pulled off and the injury must begin healing all over again. Experts tell us we are moving through the grieving process well when we stop reliving those last days and the death scene, replaying instead memories of the good times before the disease arrived.

Was I slipping backward?

When I sought God's counsel, He responded by bringing a verse to mind: "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for

the Lord” (Psalm 27:14). He was saying, “Healing will come, and I’m going to tend to it. Please be patient.”

Recently I had a dream that let me know where I am emotionally. It seemed like a movie, and Nate and I were both in it. We were hugging, and then both stepped back to look each other in the face while holding hands. We continued back-stepping, letting go, without making any effort to stop ourselves. Neither of us seemed frustrated or distressed as the gap widened. Eventually we stepped back so far, both of us dropped out of the scene entirely.

Though the dream upon awaking made me sad, it was a slice of real-time life. Reality tells me Nate is gone from my sight. Yet when I relive those last weeks, he seems vaguely visible again, as if I’m being blessed with a quick visit from him. I know God plans to help me step back from those days of sorrow just like in the dream, after grief has been spent. But for now, I’m content where I am.

*Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion
because of the greatness of his unfailing love. For he
does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow.*

Lamentations 3:32–33 (NLT)

Lord, even though I’m not healed of my grief, I’ll wait patiently, knowing you’ll bring healing in your good time. Amen.

Without Insurance



Nate would have been appalled. Without realizing it, I had been running around without health insurance. I went over the handlebars on my bike and had a full head scan and twenty-one X-rays in the emergency room without coverage. Two weeks later, at my annual ob-gyn appointment, I found out about it when the receptionist said, “Did you know you don’t have insurance?”

Two months prior I’d signed up for a policy with a new company (after several accumulated hours on hold) and pulled the insurance card from my purse to prove it. The woman stared at her computer, bringing up my accounts with my previous company and my new one, and concluded I was wrong and she was right. Apparently there was a three-week gap between the end of one and the beginning of the other.

Dumbfounded, my first thought was, “Nate would never have let this happen.” Although I’d asked what seemed like hundreds of questions in the process of switching insurance, apparently I’d neglected the most important one: “When does it start?”

Becoming impatient, the receptionist said, “If you keep your appointment today, you’ll have to pay for everything yourself.” I’d waited three months to get in and needed a prescription renewal, so I agreed.

The doctor spent forty-five minutes with me, kindly taking time to ask questions about Nate and my new life without him. I left her office in a daze, mentally calculating the cost of my lengthy appointment. I walked right past the girl at the desk and out the door.

An hour later, my cell phone rang. “Did you leave without paying, after you promised you would?” the girl said, beyond irritated. “I need a credit card number immediately.”

The charge was \$432, a bill I would never have had to pay if Nate had been managing our insurance. Spending the next day on hold with the insurance company’s telephone Muzak, I grew angry with myself for such a failure.

Scripture says, “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9). I knew that but was frustrated over my extreme incompetence. How many other expensive mistakes would I make before I learned to do everything Nate did? Was it even possible to learn all I needed to know?

We widows dip in and out of aggravation, disappointment, and gloom as we tackle new, unwelcome challenges. But God has called us into widowhood and will equip us to travel through it. I’m helped by thinking of myself as an apprentice on a new job. God is my all-knowing, infinitely patient Instructor, and He wants me to succeed.

And there’s more good news. He’ll never put any of us on hold.

*The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.*

Ecclesiastes 7:8

Lord, please train me to do everything Nate did, or lead me to others who are willing to help. Amen.

Chiseled in Granite



This morning I woke to the music of rain on my roof, thankful it wasn't one year earlier. On that day, a few hours after Nate's death, we were still reeling while struggling to plan his wake and funeral.

In remembering that chaotic time, I recall none of us gave a thought to a cemetery gravestone. As it turned out, that didn't get done for a year. Today, however, I followed the instructions given by the cemetery representative and e-mailed our choices to him, surprised at how difficult that chore turned out to be.

Nelson had sketched a rough drawing of the stone we wanted, adding Nate's name (and mine), along with dates. Having decided to match my father's family headstone nearby, selecting a design wasn't difficult. But it was very hard tapping out the text for the stone. I made one mistake after another, my shaky fingers acting like they'd never touched a keyboard.

Requesting names on a gravestone is serious business, origin of the expression "carved in stone" to represent permanency. Once the letters and numbers have been chiseled into granite, that's it.

I checked and rechecked my short e-mail, making endless corrections. Digging out the photo of Dad's family headstone, I studied it with new eyes and unexpectedly felt connected to the carved list of long-buried relatives. Except for my parents, I'd not met any of them.

Dad was only twelve when his father bought the plot of graves in 1911 for their twenty-month-old baby, who'd died of pneumonia. I remember him describing that sad wintertime funeral in the cemetery, after which Dad's parents had to suffer the additional pain of sketching out a gravestone for their little one.