



FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Caring for Widows by Rebekah Jordan Gienapp



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The Bible encourages us to care for the widows in our communities. Why does Scripture pay special attention to widows? How have the experiences of widows changed over time? How can the church respond to their needs?

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Widows in Scripture

In **Deuteronomy 24:17**, God prohibits taking a widow's cloak as collateral for a loan. The chapter continues in **verse 19** by commanding farmers to leave food in their fields so that widows, orphans, and immigrants could pick the leftovers. In the **Psalms**, God is described multiple times as a defender and helper of widows. In **Mark**, Jesus denounces the scribes because they "cheat widows out of their homes" (**12:40**). In all, there are more than 80 direct references to widows in the Bible.

Even a quick read of these texts gives us a clear understanding about why widows are mentioned so often in Scripture. They were one of the most socially and economically vulnerable groups in biblical times. In fact, the Hebrew word for "widow," *almanah*, comes from the root word *alem*, which means "unable to speak."

Like other surrounding societies, Jewish culture at this time didn't allow women to speak for themselves. Instead, their male relatives possessed the legal authority to speak for them. Because widows had lost the male relative who served as their protector and provider, they were at particular risk of poverty, hunger, and ostracization. Those who were also without sons were at even greater risk.

Although Scripture provides some protections for widows, God's people often forgot to pay attention to their care. The Law, the Prophets, and the Gospels therefore frequently call for justice on behalf of widows, along with other groups of marginalized people, especially orphans and immigrants.

Despite these calls, the Bible doesn't always see widows as powerless. In **Luke 18:2-8**, Jesus tells a parable about a bold widow who refuses to stop pleading her case before an unjust judge. The early church even established an order of widows, referred to in **1 Timothy 5:9-16**. In a 2006 article, Christian bioethics professor Cathleen Kaveny points out that these widows had important responsibilities, which included visiting the sick, prophesying, and helping to receive repentant sinners back into the fellowship of the church.

REFLECT:

- Before reading this section, did you realize how many biblical passages referenced widows? Does that surprise you? Why or why not?
- What kinds of fears and troubles do you think women in biblical times might have faced once they were widowed?
- How would you sum up the Bible's understanding of widows and how they should be treated?

Financial Challenges for Widows Today

While a lot has changed for modern widows, especially in the United States, they continue to face a number of challenges. For instance, losing a spouse still leads to financial challenges for many women. According to a 2015 *New York Times* article, the typical widow in the United States sees her household income decline by 37 percent after a spouse dies. In comparison, men who lose a spouse are hit with an income drop of 22 percent. The assets of widows also tend to decline faster than widowers. Since women typically live longer than men, they must also stretch their finances to cover a longer time frame.

When Janice Eiler's husband died, she was surprised to find they weren't in the stable financial state she had imagined. "We had not sat down and planned," Eiler said. "We should have done it in our 40s, but, you know, you just get lazy."

In some parts of the world, widows today face legal and financial problems that have much in common with widows in the Bible. When interviewing dozens of widows in Zimbabwe, the organization

Human Rights Watch found that many women were forced off their land after their husbands died. A 58-year-old Zimbabwean widow named Deborah was harassed and threatened by her in-laws, who tried to take the land she had worked for over 40 years. Other widows reported that courts sent documents about their land disputes only to their male in-laws, who would then keep information from them that caused them to lose their cases. Deborah was able to keep her land through help from a legal aid organization, but many widows aren't able to get that kind of support.

REFLECT:

- Why do you think there continue to be more financial hardships for widows than for widowers in the United States?
- Does hearing about widows like Deborah help you understand biblical passages about widows in a different way? Why or why not?

Social and Emotional Challenges

Frustratingly, the immediate legal and financial consequences of death can get in the way of the grieving process. Bea Schwartz's husband had done many things to prepare their finances in case he died first, but Schwartz still found herself overwhelmed. "You can't take even a few days to process what's just happened to you because the business demands taking care of, and the business is not simple," she said.

Benilda Pacheco found that after she lost her spouse, she experienced a separation from other people like nothing else in her life. "Unless you talk to another widow, no one really understands you."

New York Times columnist Jane Brody said that after her husband's death, she felt an urgent need to get projects done around the house. While others told her those things could wait, she knew the impact of each accomplishment on her own feelings of empowerment.

Another aspect of the grief many people experience when a spouse dies is the loss of touch. After

her husband's death, Laurie Burrows Grad craved his touch the most. Burrows Grad encourages us to ask widows if it's all right to give them a hug. "Even a gentle squeeze of her hand or a pat on the back will be of more use than anything you can say," she writes.

REFLECT:

- What can we do to ease the emotional burdens of people who've lost a spouse?
- What are some of the cultural and social expectations that can get in the way of allowing widows to grieve and heal?

Caring Faith Communities

How can churches support widows in our congregations and in our communities? First, we can begin by looking at the pastoral care we offer to those who've lost a spouse, especially after the first few weeks following the death have passed.

Are our programs and small groups truly welcoming of single people (of all ages), or are they primarily geared to couples? Many widows may find it hard to return to their social circles, including those at church, when they're the only ones without a spouse.

Do we think of widows as potential leaders, like the order of widows in the early church? Or do we primarily look to those with spouses as potential leaders?

If we listen to Scriptures about widows, we must also be concerned for their security. This includes speaking up against injustice that leaves women more economically vulnerable than men, both in the United States and around the world.

REFLECT:

- How does your congregation care for widows and people who are grieving?
- How does the community in which you live care for widows and people who are grieving?

Widowers

While Scripture focuses primarily on widows because of their social and economic vulnerability, God certainly desires for us to care for all people during their time of loss.

Women tend to be left in more difficult financial situations after the loss a spouse than men. When it comes to matters of health, however, it seems that men who lose a spouse are more likely to be at a disadvantage. A study by the Rochester Institute of Technology found that men are one-third more likely to die after being recently widowed. Professor Javier Espinosa, who led the study, says, "When a wife dies, men are often unprepared. They have often lost their caregiver, someone who cares for them physically and emotionally, and the loss directly impacts the husband's health."

Although precise statistics aren't available, men are also more likely to remarry after a spouse's death than women. Some of this may simply be demographics and the fact that since women tend to live longer, there are more eligible, age-appropriate women than men.

On the other hand, some sociologists believe it may be because of differences in how men and women grieve their losses. These researchers highlight that women are more cautious about a new relationship, while men often place a higher value on finding someone who can help them with organizing their life and providing companionship.

REFLECT:

- Think about men and women you know who've lost a spouse. Did you notice differences in their experiences of how they started over with their lives?
- How do you respond to Javier Espinosa's statement about men often being unprepared for the death of their spouses?

Core Bible Passages

The speech Naomi made to her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, clearly defined the dangers widows in that time faced (**Ruth 1:6-18**). Because Ruth and Orpah were still young and childless, Naomi prayed that they would find husbands who could provide them with security.

Since Naomi was too old to bear children, she was unlikely to remarry and was likely bound for destitution. However, Ruth was determined to stay with her and promised that she would allow Naomi's people to become her people and Naomi's God to be her God.

In **Luke 18:1-8**, Jesus tells a parable about a widow who won't stop demanding justice from a judge who has no fear of God or respect for people. Tired of her repeated visits, the judge finally grants her case so that she will leave him alone.

Many Christians will recognize the story of the widow's mite from **Luke 20:45–21:4**. While the text is often used as an example of generous giving, some biblical scholars point out that the poor widow's gift must be understood in light of Jesus' criticism of scribes who devour widows' houses. These scholars believe that when Jesus says that she has "from her hopeless poverty . . . given everything she had to live on," it's a further criticism of a religious and social system that exploited widows.

REFLECT:

- Why do you think Ruth decided to stay with Naomi rather than returning to her own people, where she might have more easily remarried?
- What lessons do you take from the stories of the widow demanding justice and the poor widow's gift? Do you see any parallels between the two?

United Methodist Perspective

The process of grieving a spouse's death can often take years. Yet within the church, our expressions of care often only focus on the first few weeks after a death has occurred.

Several years ago, John Street United Methodist Church in Camden, Maine, began looking at how they could care for those who had lost a spouse once the funeral services were over. Peg Moser, their pastor at the time, started a study group based on Julie Yarbrough's book *Beyond the Broken Heart: A Journey Through Grief*. Nine women who had lost their husbands participated in weekly discussions. Moser chose to carry out the study in the fall, knowing that the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays can be especially hard for people who are grieving.

After the eight-week study concluded, the congregation decided to extend care in other ways. They held a dinner one Sunday after worship, with widows and widowers invited as guests of honor. At a special worship service, those who had lost a spouse were invited to come forward to receive prayers and expressions of appreciation. The church invited a lawyer to lead sessions on estate planning and finances since these concerns had come up often during the study. The church also created a system for coordinating volunteers who could help with odd jobs or special needs a widow or widower might have.

REFLECT:

- What can your church glean from John Street UMC's ministry with widows and widowers?
- What ideas do you think would most benefit grieving people in your congregation? What ideas would you add?

Helpful Links

- The Grief Toolbox site offers a variety of articles on grieving as well as a database of local support groups: <https://thegriefftoolbox.com/>
- “The World of the Widow: Grappling with Loneliness and Misunderstanding,” a 2015 *Guardian* article that includes stories of widows who describe what bereavement has been like for them: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/05/widows-women-bereavement-spouses>
- “Caring for Widows and Widowers,” a Discipleship Ministries article talking about the work of John Street United Methodist Church referenced in the “United Methodist Perspective” section: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/caring-for-widows-and-widowers>
- “The Order of Widows: What the Early Church Can Teach Us About Older Women and Health Care,” by Cathleen Kaveny, the *Christian Bioethics* article referenced in the main essay: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13803600590926369>
- “New Widows Have Another Concern: Their Finances,” <http://tiny.cc/z4b0xy>, and “Getting on with Life After a Partner Dies,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/15/health/15brod.html>, the *New York Times* articles referenced in the main essay

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Next Week in FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Death and Dying

by Laura Brekke

Death is an essential part of the human experience, and yet it’s one of the most difficult things for people to talk about. How can we confront this conversation without fear? How should people of faith approach the reality of death?

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Opening Prayer

O God, your arms are always open to comfort the grieving. Your voice continually cries out for justice for the most vulnerable. Open our arms, our hearts, and our lives to understand the plight of widows in ancient times and today. Amen.

Leader Helps

- Open your session with the provided prayer or one of your choosing.
- Have several Bibles on hand and a markerboard and markers for writing lists or responses to reflection questions.
- Remind the group that people have different perspectives and to honor these differences by treating one another with respect as you explore this topic together.
- Read or review highlights of each section of this issue. Use the *REFLECT* questions to stimulate discussion.
- Do a Bible study. Form three teams, with each team reading one of the passages listed in the “Core Bible Passages.” Within each team, invite people to talk about what this passage reveals about what widows’ lives were like during biblical times. Ask: How is the way God views widows different from the treatment that the widow in this passage is receiving from her community? Do you think she had any allies in her community? How does this passage speak to us today as we consider the needs of widows or other vulnerable people in our communities and in our world?
- Close the session with the provided prayer or one of your own.

Teaching Alternatives

- Invite a grief counselor to speak to your group so that you can learn more about how you can be supportive of widows and others who have lost a loved one. Afterward, brainstorm a list of possible things your church can do to share with your church council.
- Invite an estate attorney or a financial planner to speak to your congregation about what they can do now to be prepared in case of the death of a spouse.

Closing Prayer

Forgive us, God, for the times when we have not heard the cries of vulnerable women who are struggling with loss and feel isolated and alone. Guide us to new ways of living so that no one in our community will feel isolated or forgotten. Show us where our actions can bring justice to widows who face poverty and pain. Make us into one family that tenderly cares for all of its members. Amen.