AFTER THE ASHES

A 30-DAY DEVOTIONAL FOR REBUILDING YOUR LIFE AFTER LOSS

LEAH STIREWALT

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After the Ashes: A 30-day devotional for rebuilding your life after loss

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Published by ATA Publishing

Hickory, NC 28602 https://aftertheashes.co

ISBN: 979-8-9820872-0-1

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For my fellow rebuilders who are still sitting in the ashes, you are not alone. I wrote this with you in my heart, mind, and prayer.

For my children (Anna, Josiah, Katerina, Benjamin, and Austyn) and bonus children (Amy, Justin, Caleb, and Aaron) who taught me that rebuilding is never done alone, I love you all!

For the One who never left me and loves me fiercely despite me, the Builder of my faith and the Rebuilder of my life, this book is all because of You.

In memory of Chris and Joel. Their faith has now become their sight.

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To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

— PSALM 61:3, KJV

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Before you turn to Day 1 (Chapter 1), I'd like to tell you a little about how this book is put together, so you know what to expect and can make it your own.

These thirty days are gathered into four movements. *The Ashes* meets you in the raw beginning, when the loss is still close, and very little makes sense. *The Long Dark* walks through the heavy middle stretch, that season when everyone else seems to have moved on while you're still trying to find your footing. *First Embers* watches for the small signs of life that start to flicker, sometimes before you feel ready for them. *Rebuilding* turns toward what comes next, slowly and honestly, at whatever pace your heart can manage.

Each day opens with a passage of Scripture, followed by a short reading drawn from my own story of loss and starting over. At the end of every entry, you'll find reflection questions. Please don't rush past them. Those questions are where this book stops being mine and becomes yours.

In the print edition, I've left room for you to write. Some days end with plenty of open space on the page, while

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others leave only a few lines. For the days when your thoughts need more room, you'll find note pages at the back of the book. If you're reading on a screen, a simple notebook works beautifully. Write a single sentence or fill two pages. Write a prayer, a memory, or a question you're angry about. There are no wrong answers here.

You're welcome to read one day at a time, morning or evening, whichever fits your life. If you miss a day, or even a week, just pick up where you left off. Grief and trauma keep their own calendar, and this book is meant to walk beside you rather than hurry you along. If a particular day feels too tender right now, it's okay to skip it and come back later.

Your loss(es) may look nothing like mine. Maybe you buried a spouse, watched a marriage end, or lost a home, a career, or the life you thought you'd have. Whatever brought you here, you have a place in these pages. I write as a woman of faith, and I hope you'll sense God's nearness as you read, but you don't need to have everything figured out to begin.

Take your time and be gentle with yourself. I'm so glad you're here.

With hope,
Leah

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PART I

THE ASHES

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1

THE SECOND GOODBYE

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." — Psalm 34:18

The first time you bury someone, the grief experience is like visiting a foreign country.

You don't speak the language, you don't know the customs, and some stubborn part of you believes — because you have to — that you'll get to go home when it's over.

The second time, you recognize the airport.

I knew what was coming. I knew the casseroles would arrive and then eventually stop. I knew there'd be a stack of paperwork that I didn't care about, and could barely read at the time. I knew which night would be the worst one, and roughly when the phone would go quiet. I had a map this time. Most importantly, I trusted in my ability to manage this second journey along Grief Road with relative ease. Not to diminish the seriousness of losing another husband to death, I felt like I was an "expert" at widowhood this time.

That map — it didn't help the way you'd think. Knowing

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the terrain doesn't make the fall shorter. If anything, there's a particular cruelty in grief arriving fresh in a body that already knows exactly how long this is going to hurt. The first time, I was lost. The second time, I knew precisely where I was — and I still couldn't get out.

If you've experienced deep loss or another tragedy more than once, you know what nobody says out loud: experience is not the same as relief. Surviving the first time is not a skill that transfers cleanly. You are not "better at this." You are just here again. I can recall numerous times, however, when I tried to convince myself that because I'd been down this road before, I was experienced and would be a better "griever" this time around. I was wrong.

Today's verse doesn't promise God will spare you the second goodbye. Mine didn't get spared. It says He is *close* to the brokenhearted — near, not necessarily *fixing* the brokenhearted. And maybe today that feels like a stretch, or like the opposite of what you've experienced. You're allowed to hold the verse at arm's length. You don't have to believe it yet to keep reading it.

We don't need to begin rebuilding today. In fact, you don't need to learn any lesson. Focus only on this: you are still here, and you are not the only one who has had to walk back into a country you hoped you'd never see again.

Reflection: What did you already know was coming this time — and what surprised you anyway? *(If this is your first loss or a significant, tragic event, write instead about the one thing no one warned you about.)*

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2

SITTING IN THE ASHES

"Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was." — Job 2:13

When I lost Chris (the husband who led me to my first widow journey), I went through his things rather quickly. I remember hearing from other widows, who were many years further in their grief, that they still hadn't had the desire or courage to go through any of their husbands' belongings.

On the one hand, I second-guessed my decision to be so hasty. On the other hand, I was in a place of anger (Chris committed suicide), and I was anxious to get rid of his stuff as soon as possible. Did I regret that early decision? In part, I did. Many times, I have thought about something I gave away or sold that I wish I still had. While emotions were fueling part of my impulsiveness, it also gave me comfort to know I could stop at any time and would still be a "normal" grieving widow.

It would have been okay to simply sit. To wait. To tackle

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it another day or over the course of many days, weeks, months, or even years.

I couldn't tackle rebuilding my life in a day, either. Although, truth be told, the Type A side of me would have loved to flip a switch and have it done.

Sometimes we just need to sit. Often, we want (or need) others to simply sit with us.

We don't need advice.

We don't need help with a task list.

We don't need someone to fold the piled-up laundry.

We just need a friend to sit with us. To wallow with us in our pain. Don't allow us to *stay* there indefinitely. But for today, just be there.

We will figure out tomorrow — tomorrow.

Whatever deep loss you've experienced or whatever tragedy you've recently found yourself walking through, take time to simply be. While some initial decisions might need to be made in a timely manner (i.e., in my case, picking out a casket), most can wait. Grieve. Wail. Moan.

Rebuilding can't begin until the foundation is stable.

Reflection: Are you the type of person who gets things done as quickly as possible, or are you more of a procrastinator? Has this recent tragedy altered any of these characteristics in you?

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3

THE HONEST LAMENT

"How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" — Psalm 13:1

It's okay to question God. Ask me how I know.

Often, I question Him and still respond with truths from His word in the same breath. Example: God, why did you take Joel from me so soon? Wasn't it enough I'd already experienced the death of one husband? Now, you're asking me to go through it all over again a second time? And yet – I know from Isaiah 55 (verses 8-9) that your thoughts and ways are not ours. Actually, they are even higher or better than anything we can understand.

In a warped way, that comforts me.

I can prostrate myself before the Lord and, with as much passion as I can genuinely muster, I can lament the life I thought I would have. The one before becoming widowed the second time. (Alternatively – the one before the cancer diagnosis, the marriage implosion, the bankruptcy, the house fire – whatever changed the landscape of your envisioned life.)

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After I've poured myself out to the Lord – after I've questioned His plan – after I've acknowledged I simply don't understand Him sometimes, I can trust.

Whoa! Leah, you just finished questioning God, and now you say you still *trust* Him? I know, it sounds nonsensical. And yet I do. Resolutely. Why? Because of all that's happened in my life, and how He has always been there. He's shown up time and time again – in little things and in big things. He's never failed me. Ever. Sometimes, I don't like the path he leads me on, but His plans are always better. Always!

And so...I lament anyway. I get it all out, and then I simply trust. I wait. I know I may not ever get answers to my questions this side of eternity, but I don't *need* answers. I only *need* to know He's with me.

Reflection: When have you questioned God? Do you feel like you received answers to your questions over time? Do you consistently go to His word for answers or for comfort, even when the answers may not be apparent?

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4

WHAT NO ONE PREPARED YOU FOR

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." — Matthew 11:28

Sure, no one could prepare me for the logistics I'd have to figure out, the sheer amount of paperwork I'd have to tackle, or — in the case of losing a spouse — the empty side of the bed. All of those are true. All of those are hard. But for me, the most surprising thing I wasn't prepared for was how disappointed I would find myself in humanity.

At first, the people come. They really do — the phone rings, the meals show up, the cards pile on the counter. And then, not all at once but like a tide going out, it gets quiet. Their lives resume, because their lives are supposed to. And you are left in a silence that somehow feels louder than the crisis did. Not abandoned cruelly — most people aren't cruel. They're just busy, and forgetful, and your tragedy was an *event* to them while it's a *residence* to you. They went home. You couldn't. There's a particular ache in being forgotten by people who are, technically, still right there.

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I need to tell the rest of it because it's true: I helped build some of that loneliness. I stopped answering. I said I was fine because it felt easier than telling the truth, then resented people for believing me. I pulled the door halfway shut and wondered why the room felt dark. If you've done that too — and most of us have — you can name it without punishing yourself for it. From the inside, self-protection and self-isolation can look the same. We were just trying to survive.

So what do you do with a disappointment like that? Here's what I've slowly come to believe: it's a burden, and burdens have to go somewhere.

When the verse says "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened...*," I used to think it meant the obvious weights — the grief, the bills, the exhaustion. But disappointment is a burden too. The quiet, heavy kind. And I don't think God flinches from it or expects us to tidy it up before we bring it. He wants to comfort us precisely when the comfort we hoped for from people didn't come. He invites us to come near *with* the disappointment, not after we've gotten over it.

People will disappoint you. You will sometimes disappoint yourself. Neither of those is the final word on whether you are alone. You don't have to forgive anyone today, or fling the door open and trust again this afternoon. You only have to consider bringing the heaviest, loneliest thing you're carrying to the one person who never went home.

Reflection: Of everything no one prepared you for, what surprised you most? *(If your loss wasn't a death, the question still holds — name the thing you never saw coming.)*

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5

WHEN FAITH FEELS FAR

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" — Mark 9:24

I had always prided myself on a faith that held strong amid heartache and trauma. A highly dysfunctional childhood gave me plenty of practice. The first book of the Bible I ever read all the way through was Job—simply because I recognized myself in him, somewhere down in his darkest days.

And yet — I hadn't yet faced what would become my first real faith test as an adult.

After 10.5 years of marriage, my then-husband announced he thought he wanted to separate. My first question: "What do you mean you *think* you want to separate?" Looking back, he was probably riddled with angst over what that announcement would mean. He simply couldn't state outright, "I don't want to be married to you anymore."

Fast forward — we did separate. Eighteen months into that separation, I still had no idea why it had happened in

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leah Stirewalt is a writer, homeschooling mom, and the founder of *After the Ashes*, a Substack community for people rebuilding their lives after loss. Her own story includes childhood dysfunction, divorce, financial upheaval, and the deaths of two husbands, and she became a widow for the second time at forty-five, with four young, adopted, neurodivergent children still at home.

For years, Leah wrote about grief and faith on her blog, *Out of Deep Waters*, where readers first began urging her to write a book. Today she writes honestly about what it means to begin again after fifty, with faith that has been tested and has endured. Her work welcomes anyone who has lost a spouse, a marriage, a home, or the life they once expected.

Leah is the mother of five children: a grown, married daughter and four children adopted from Bulgaria and from foster care in North Carolina, as well as four bonus (step) children, four grandchildren, and one on the way. She lives in the foothills of Western North Carolina with her four youngest children. When she isn't writing, you'll find her serving as Secretary on the Board of a non-profit ministry, working part-time at a furniture consignment store, gardening, canning, baking sourdough treats, reading, rehabbing old furniture, and crafting in as many different ways as she can.

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