

“I remember my first major crisis as a mom, realizing for the first time why God had brought a sweet mentor into my life so many years prior. She walked this path before me, and I watched her walk in faith, even though with much pain. I cannot imagine how I would have navigated my own story without her example, showing me, it was possible. Carole Leathem’s book, *Finding Joy in My Messy Life*, is one woman’s walk of faith in a crisis she never anticipated or wanted as a part of her story: the mental illness of her husband. She had no one to talk to when this occurred and understands what it is to face this journey alone. Now, she has transparently and honestly told her story, offering encouragement and practical tips to help you in your own journey of living with mental illness in your family. Share this book with others you know who walk this path. Thank you, Carole, for showing us how to face devastating life challenges and yet grow strong in Christ each step of the way.”

—Chris Adams,
Speaker, Bible teacher, writer
Retired, Women’s ministry specialist, LifeWay Christian Resources
Nashville, Tennessee

“Sometimes things occur in our lives that present problems or issues. And then there are times where the developments are so dire and unexpected, we feel crushed and unable to go on. How do we make our way through these obstacles of chaos and crisis? Carole Leathem has brought an outlook that can help many of us. In her book, *Finding Joy in My Messy Life*, she shows how one can face desperate circumstances without sacrificing love, faith, and joy. She illustrates that grace is not only something to experience, but also something to demonstrate. Though Carole never anticipated the manifestation of her husband’s mental illness, and while the journey through the situation seemed inconceivable, her candid transparency in delivering this story brings encouragement and hope to those who may be dealing with fear concerning mental illness in their family. As she says in her book, there’s a great difference between living in fear and living with fear. Mental illness has sometimes been tagged with a scarlet “M” in our minds, but Carole has brought a deeper understanding and acknowledgment of its reality. If you face these kinds of issues in your life, you will be encouraged and supported by Carole’s honesty. While certainly not

diminishing the confusion and devastation of dealing with her husband's circumstances, she shows how to strengthen your relationship with Jesus during adversity."

—Jeff Hood
Lead pastor, First Baptist Church, Fairfield, CA

"This book is for anyone who has a struggle that seems insurmountable. Carole shows us that finding joy is a process, and she lays it out step by step for us through her own experience. Whatever challenge, whatever mess you may find yourself in, Carole can help you. If you are living in circumstances that you think might ruin you, take heart: Carole's story of trusting God will inspire and empower you to choose joy and move forward in faith."

—Kimberly MacNeill
The Inspiration Lounge

"There are moments in life that cause us to come to a screeching halt. When life as we know it is turned upside down, and we are left with the decision to crumble in our brokenness and isolate from the world or to lean into the Lord and let Him start putting the pieces back together. It is in those moments we are reminded of how important it is to surround ourselves with those who will speak God's truth in our lives. In Carole's book, *Finding Joy in My Messy Life*, she transparently opens her life to give us an inside view of a woman and family faced with a crisis that so many families are facing in the dark by themselves. The subject of mental illness and suicidal thoughts is one that has been hidden far too long and needs to be brought to the light. We see through these pages one woman's journey of what it means to fully surrender those that we love the most to the Lord and how we can find joy in the journey when our trust is in Him alone. I have had the privilege of walking with Carole through most of this season. She has continued to live in the moment of putting one foot in front of the other and giving God the glory even on the darkest of days. None of us is promised tomorrow. While she would never have chosen this journey for her family, she has continued to share with all who will listen what God continues to teach her along the way. Learning to live a joy-filled life in the mess is possible, and she wants to take you on

the journey with her. So, grab a cup of coffee, pull up a seat to her table, and let the words from these pages encourage your heart. Jesus tells us, ‘I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.’ (John 16:33). Do not give up. We are in this together.”

—Lynn Bradshaw, CA
Women’s ministry director
Valley Baptist Church

“For more than four decades, I have called Bill and Carole my friends since our days as next-door neighbors in seminary. I laughed and cried my way through the raw, emotional, and turbulent roller-coaster ride of life upon which they continue to travel. This is a love story. It is a story of faith, trust, hope, and commitment. A story of courage—the willingness to bear the deep, dark secrets of the soul for all to see. As you read Bill and Carole’s journey, you will realize that this is not a story about them at all. It is a story about God’s incredible love and the gracious way in which He continues to speak into their lives.”

—Glenn Prescott
Professor of Ministry Leadership
Gateway Seminary of the SBC
Ontario, California

Finding Joy in My Messy Life is a true-life story about author Carole Leatham’s past five years of surviving her husband’s mental battle with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Carole, the eldest of four, gives great history about her upbringing. She speaks about her parents’ marriage and divorce, her father abandoning the family, his verbal abuse specifically towards the mother and Carole, dealing with the negative effects of being fatherless, and moving forward to marrying her husband Bill. It is such a great read that I will not go into great detail. You must read it for yourself. However, I will say this: Carole’s story reminds me of my mother’s story. To make a long story short, my mother’s parents got pregnant with my mother at the age of 14 and ended up marrying young. Like Carole’s father and his struggle with being verbally abusive, my grandfather was sexually abusive and molested my mother in her early preteens. Like Carole, my mother

had to overcome the struggles that came along with the abuse. You may ask, why do I mention Carole in relation to my mother? Carole's story of being fatherless, abused, hopeless, alone, and fearful gives her strength for the next chapter of her current situation. That chapter involves the mental health struggles of her husband Bill. No, it is not easy to deal with such a thing; however, Carole gives great detail in not giving up, researching, asking, looking, and constantly praying. Not many people are comfortable sharing their struggles. Why? Because of what others might say and how they will react. People can be very discouraging and negative. Carole shines a great light on her struggles to bring awareness and to help those who struggle with the same thing but do not have the courage to ask for help. *Finding Joy in My Messy Life* is inspiring, encouraging, and motivating. I pray this book opens your eyes to mental health and life struggles and gives you the tools to help fight it."

—Charlin Neal

Worship leader, vocal producer

"Twenty-plus years ago, Carole L., Carole C., and I were on our way home from an event, when I told Carole L. that God was going to use her to make a difference in the lives of many through her speaking and writing, after hearing her speak at a church event and reading her blogs. She has a way of bringing to life situations and circumstances that resonate and capture the heart of people. And it is this gift that God has and will use in Carole to bring an increased awareness to one of the most challenging healthcare conditions—mental health—in a way that will resonate and bring hope to many. In this book, *Finding Joy in my Messy Life*, Carole transparently shares Bill's and her trials, her imperfections, the messiness of various situations, her doubts and weaknesses and yet in the midst of it all, she shares how God's Holy Spirit has comforted her, directed her, and given her the strength to keep going onwards and upwards. She reveals how God met her in the eye of the storm of Bill's mental health condition and the various manifestations, how He is guiding her through this mental health turbulence, and how He is taking the messiness of her various experiences with Bill, family, friends and even adversaries to bring to life. Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to

his purpose for them.” Through it all, Carole’s love for God and hope in God shines through, even during the most difficult times. We pray that God uses this book, her speaking engagements, her ongoing blogs, and all that she does dealing with this and other challenging subjects, to bless and bring hope to many. And we pray that Carole will continue to be a reflection of God’s love, grace, and mercy to all.”

—Elizabeth Oyekan, PharmD, FCSHP, CPHQ
Vice President at Precision
CEO at Meds on a Mission
Author on leadership and healthcare topics

“*Finding Joy in My Messy Life* deals with a subject that many may not want to discuss or feel comfortable talking about—mental illness. Carole shares how she faces each day with her husband’s anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. With her transparency, she opens the door for people to understand how not only the person with mental illness, but their spouse, needs understanding, acceptance, and love. Carole has questions that many have: *Why is this happening to him, to us? I can’t do this. I feel so helpless. Where are You, God?* Listen to her heart as she shares the answers God gave her and is giving her. Her dedication to God and her husband will inspire you to seek the most of your relationship. She uses everyday events to find answers to her questions by relating them to God’s Word. Her perseverance will challenge many to seek help. This book will open your eyes to the need for helping others. To try to understand them in their time of need. It will also encourage you to stand with those you know and give them support, even if you may not know how. Carole’s book gives insights into how to help the person and their spouse and family. *Finding Joy in My Messy Life* is not only a book to just read, but one to keep handy at a moment’s notice.”

—Charles C. Woods
Pastor, director of missions, author

“Within Christianity, there is often a lack of acknowledgment concerning mental illness; however, mental illness has no bias. It does not see culture, ethnicity, personality, appearances, intelligence, socio-economic background, skin color, religious affiliation, or occupation. Many have

agonized in silence, and many more are experiencing anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation as you read this. In her book, *Finding Joy in My Messy Life*, Carole Leathem has brought light to a dark subject within the church. Writing with extraordinary candor, she shares her personal experience regarding relationships, love, and life after her pastor husband was diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. Carole invites you into her ‘messy’ life by sharing her honest, transparent, and real-life struggles, as well as the truths she discovered about herself, mental illness, and her very real relationship with Jesus Christ.”

National Suicide Prevention Hotline: (800) 273-8255

—Teresa Hood, MA
Registered Associate Marriage and Family Therapist
Children’s pastor, First Baptist Church, Fairfield, CA

“One of the blights on the modern church is our stubbornness in addressing the mental health crisis—not just of our congregations, but of our clergy as well. Nearly every individual, couple, or family I counsel and serve has some level of depression, anxiety, or other mental health issue affecting their daily lives; this is not a rare or distant predicament, but rather the ever-present reality for so many of our brothers and sisters. This book is a bold, honest, and encouraging step in the right direction. Through this book, Carole is on the leading edge of openness and transparency in the struggles so many of us face. Her story is one of entrenched generational pain, persistent love in the face of daunting challenges, following God’s call into uncharted waters, and ongoing victory in Christ. For these reasons and so many more, this book is for everyone who either loves someone struggling with mental health issues or seeks to be an agent of change in our deeply broken world.”

—Ty Barksdale
Pastor, Valley Baptist Church

*Finding
Joy*

IN MY MESSY LIFE

*Finding
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CAROLE LEATHEM

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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022.

Toll-Free (844) 2REDEEM (273-3336)

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ISBN 13: 978-1-64645-259-0 (Paperback)

978-1-64645-260-6 (ePub)

978-1-64645-261-3 (Mobi)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2020923444

To Bill—

I handed you my whole heart the moment I saw you,
and God whispered,

There he is, that's your husband.

Love is about facing everything together.

We are finding joy in our messy life by holding on to God
and loving each other,

even when things don't turn out as we plan.

Life is an adventure, and I am happy to share every moment
of my journey with you.

I fell in love with you the moment I met you.

I have loved you every moment since.

I will love you every moment we have yet to live.

*Consider it a sheer gift, friends,
when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.
You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open
and shows its true colors.*

*So don't try to get out of anything prematurely.
Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed,
not deficient in any way.*

*If you don't know what you're doing, pray to the Father.
He loves to help.*

*You'll get his help, and won't be condescended to when you ask for it.
Ask boldly, believingly, without a second thought.*

James 1:2-5

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Foreword

Let me start out by saying, I have read the manuscript, and I am supportive of Carole in sharing our story. Neither of us knew that the events that occurred in 2015 were going to challenge us as the greatest trauma in our life together. We had no idea the depth of confusion that would occur for both of us when I began to suffer from anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Throughout much of our marriage, Carole has been a motivating speaker, impactful leader, inspired risk taker, and encouraging storyteller. She has always been open about her faith in God and the challenges in her life, beginning with her early years and being abandoned by an abusive alcoholic father. She has continued this transparency by sharing about the painful journey we have walked through these past five years together. She felt led by God to put our story in print, so I encourage her in the hope that her openness, transparency, and honesty will help those who read it.

Carole and I are both committed to the truth that we are partners for life and that our common faith in God will empower us to work our way through life together. A commitment to our faith and to respecting our uniqueness has been the foundation for our relationship. I have always said, “I want to get to the end of my life with a real faith and a blessed marriage,” and that is what has been happening for forty-four years with Carole.

I pray that this book will be a source of encouragement to you, especially if you are on a similar journey. As you read our story in *Finding Joy in My Messy Life*, enjoy Carole’s unique style of storytelling, inspired thoughts, and sometimes painful recollections of our journey.

I love you, sweetie.

Bill

Acknowledgments

When God began talking to me about writing this book, I told Him, *I can't—the story isn't finished*. But God knows that if I wait until my mess is over, the book may never get written. He said, *Don't wait—do it now*. So I began writing, and the next week I got a call from a woman whose son had tried to commit suicide. She knew I was writing a book on this subject, and she said, “Will you please finish that book? I really need it now.” There are so many of us with loved ones who struggle with mental illness.

I have been blessed to have many cheerleaders encouraging me, praying for me, and holding me accountable to finish this book. I thank God for each one of you.

To those I love who have lost someone to suicide—God knows your pain, and I pray for you daily.

To those I love who care for someone struggling with mental illness—we are in this together. God sees you, and I see you.

To my family—Bill, Kate, Luke, Jack, LeeAnn, Tyson, Kinslee, Henry, CJ, Liam, and Brenlee—I love you all so much. You have been my biggest cheerleaders and encouragers in life. The thought of each of you brings a smile to my face and warms my heart. I have loved all of our Disney adventures, and I can't wait for the next one.

For my mom, Dottie—even in your own mess, you made sure I had a stable foundation in God so I would be prepared years later to live through my own chaos. I love you.

To my siblings, John, Trish, and Stephen—we have had so many adventures tricycles, eggs, and party-line phones. John, I am

sorry for the scar on your arm. Trish, you are still my favorite birthday gift. Stephen, you will always be my baby.

To Sandy—we may not be sisters by blood, but we are sisters by choice. I love you.

To Lynn, *my valley girls*, and the gals from Joy Filled Women—when people find out I choose to live in Bakersfield, they look at me like I am crazy. They have no idea the incredible group of God’s girls who live here. I am not crazy; I am blessed beyond measure to have each of you in my life.

To Steve and Peggy—thank you for modeling what a godly family looks like.

To Matt—you were a handful when I babysat you, but I love God’s sense of humor. Thank you for mentoring my son in ministry.

To Deryl and Brenda—I don’t even know where to begin, so I will simply say, *thank you!*

To Elizabeth, Carole, Nancy, Tammy, Kimberly, and Diane—God knew I would need each of you to help me survive these past five years, so He sent you to me years ago. Thanks for being willing to love me, cry with me, and pray for me. I love each of you dearly.

To Pastor Roger—thank you for pointing me to the Bible and to God every week.

To Pastor Andrew—thank you for being obedient. One morning you stood from the stage and said, “I don’t know who needs to hear this verse today, but here it is.” You quoted my life verse, Proverbs 3:5–6, and reminded me where my strength comes from. That morning I was in crisis and at a breaking point.

To Athena, Dori, Hannah, and the team at Redemption Press—thank you for your encouragement, hard work, and support in getting my book published. To Jennifer, my writing coach—God knew exactly who I needed to help me; I have loved working with you.

To my number one fan, Tami—thank you for encouraging me by being the first to step up and buy my book and support me.

To Kelly—when you looked at me and said, “Will you please get that book done? I need it,” God was speaking to me through your words.

To Tami, Sharilyn, Eva, Melissa, Beverly, Teresa, Greg, Stacie, Lela, Wichian, Jane, Erin, Susan, Erika, John, Dottie, Carlanne, Renee, Kimberly, Alberta, Chanh, Diane, Deb, June, Stella, Leslie, Kathy, Linda, Theresa, Judy, Veronica, Janet, Carla, Kimberly, Vince, Norna, Cynthia, Gayle, Nancy, Serena, Donna, Janet, Marcy, Gary, Nancy, Beverly, Susan, Joyce, Sandy, Sharon, Sophie, Joyce, DeLynn, Tina, Nancy, Loralyn, Lisa, Tamara, Trish, Debbie, Cherie, Vickie, Janelle, Tonya, and Sheryl—you have blessed me by preordering the book and financially supporting me. Thank you!



Introduction

*Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.*

—Søren Aabye Kierkegaard

When I find something that speaks to me, I write it on a sticky note and hang it on my window. This quote by Søren Aabye Kierkegaard is posted right in the middle of my window, and I read it often. As a sixteen-year-old, if I had known the path my life would take, I'm pretty sure I would have sat down like a mule and refused to take one more step. At that time in my life, I had come to know Christ and had a newfound knowledge about the direction I wanted to steer my life toward. It was impossible to go back and alter my childhood experiences, but I found myself full of hope, living forward, and dragging trunks filled with hurts, fears, regrets, anger, and rejection with me.

What is your earliest childhood memory? Mine is hearing my dad's car pull into the driveway and me running to the refrigerator to grab a can of beer to greet him with at the door. He would pop the tab, take a drink, and pat my head. If it was a good night, after dinner he would drop to the couch and fall asleep watching TV. If

it was a bad night, something or someone, usually me, would set off his terrifying rage.

I used to stand at the living room window and watch the neighbor's dad come home from work. His kids would run to his car in the driveway, and he would pick them up, smile at them, and give them a big hug. I would stand there, my eyes glued to the scene, until he grabbed the hands of each of the two kids and walked into the house. I imagined the love, laughter, and hugs those kids got. I wanted that family and their dad and his smiles and hugs. I have no memory of my dad ever touching me unless it was the back of his hand connecting with whatever part of my body he could reach at the moment.

Our family attended church regularly on Sundays, where you would see my beautiful, smart mother and my fun-loving, life-of-the-party father. We appeared to be the perfect family, yet appearances can be a dangerous illusion. Nobody knew that behind closed doors my father was a monster. My idyllic family life ended the moment the front doors of our house closed and my father's rage erupted. I learned from a very young age that the more beer my dad drank, the less of a chance his rage would turn physical.

I once asked my grandmother why my dad was so mad all the time. She said, "Carolee Lee, your daddy is a wonderful father. What are you talking about?" I learned from the experience with my grandmother that my father was a chameleon who could turn on the charm and dazzle anyone he came into contact with. My mom and I were the only ones to experience the consuming anger lurking inside him. When I look back on my childhood, I see now that I used imagination to create stories that would instantly take me away from all the pain and rejection I faced from having an abusive and alcoholic father. My silly stories, imaginary friends, and make-believe pets would irritate him into a rage of screaming, hitting, and throwing things. I wanted to be invisible like my friends.

As my three siblings arrived, life got even more chaotic. Coming home to four active children after a long day at work was more than

my dad could handle. His drinking and rage escalated to the point where he could no longer keep a job. As the oldest child, I became the self-appointed caretaker. The day my mom brought my youngest brother home from the hospital, she put him in my arms, and he became my baby. He slept in a crib in my room, and I hovered over him constantly. My mom had to work because my dad couldn't, and that meant I was often left in charge. I fell easily into the mother role. I was nine and I had a perfect little family . . . my brother who was seven, my sister four, and the baby. I became responsible for most of the cooking and cleaning. I also became a fierce protector, always putting myself between my siblings and my dad when he was in a rage. When our parents fought, I would gather the children into my bedroom and tuck the kids into my bed while I lay down on the floor in front of the closed door.

When I was eleven, my dad went on a "vacation" and never came back. The day I realized he was not coming back brought a combination of relief and guilt. Being the oldest, I believed somehow it was my fault he left. I had nightmares about what I had done to make him leave and kept asking myself if I could have done something to make him stay. Issues of abandonment and rejection became firmly cemented into my identity.

When he left, he really left, meaning no phone calls, no visits, and no birthday or Christmas gifts. He didn't help my mom financially. He simply disappeared. My mom became a divorcee at a time when the church didn't accept divorce. She was single with four children to support and trying to figure out who she was. We were the original latchkey kids left on our own far too often. Because I felt like it was my fault our dad left, I took on even more responsibility for the family.

My mom made it a priority to keep us in church. This was hard for her because the people in the church were judgmental of our family. Divorce was not common then and was considered a huge sin. As the children of the divorcee, we also felt the judgment of the church members. When I was twelve, my Sunday school teacher was

teaching on the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20. When she got to the words in verse 5 warning of “punishing the children for any sins their parents pass on to them,” she looked right at me. In front of the class, she said, “See, God punishes the children for their parents’ sin. You are hopeless. You will grow up and get divorced too.”

The judgment I received was not just reserved for the people of the church; people outside the church joined in too. I was responsible for getting the two youngest children to school every morning before I caught the bus to my junior high school. As I was dropping my youngest brother off at his classroom one day, his teacher said to me, with sarcasm and eye rolls, in front of the other parents, “We are putting together the Thanksgiving basket for this year’s needy family, and your family always gets it. So this year we decided to ask you what you will actually eat so it doesn’t go to waste.” I was completely embarrassed. I found out later that my brother’s teacher from the year before had asked him if he enjoyed his basket of food. He had told her that our family hated green beans and pumpkin pie, so we had thrown them in the trash. This was not true.

I put so much pressure on myself to care for my family that by the age of fourteen, I had ulcers and just wanted out. Not only did I have more responsibility than a teenager should have to carry—caring for my siblings and the food and the house—but I also had the burden of the responsibility without the authority. As my siblings got older, they realized they didn’t have to listen to me because I was not their mom. By the age of sixteen, I found myself tired, hopeless, rejected, and feeling like that was all I deserved.

I was dating a guy just like my father. We had started going to church together, and he was the life of the party. People told me how lucky I was to have such a great boyfriend. No one knew what he was really like when no one else was around. He drank, experimented with drugs, and was verbally abusive to me. The cycle was starting all over again, but I was convinced this was all I deserved. I stopped being the mom at home, gave up on school, and just wanted out.

I was ready to run away and get married because I believed no one else would love me. It was hopeless.

Despite all that, I attended church every Sunday. I was active in the youth group, but I didn't pay attention. I went because it was the one place no one expected anything of me. I was invisible. No cooking or cleaning or other responsibilities—I could just be left alone. I wanted nothing to do with God. I had heard people describe God as a father, and I knew from experience how a father would let me down. I was having none of it. I had been taught that God punished you for your parents' sins, and I knew this was unfair, so I didn't want to know God. I went to church for one reason and one reason only—to get away from my hopeless life. I am so glad that I kept going because one Sunday night, God started talking to me and I started listening.

I was sitting in church on the back pew with my guinea pig in my lap. I was doing my math homework, and I could hear the pastor speaking, but I was not paying attention to anything he was saying. All of a sudden, I heard these words very clearly, "Do you know that God loves you just the way you are? Do you know that there is nothing you have ever done, or will do, that will make Him stop loving you?" I looked up at my friend sitting next to me and whispered, "What did he say?" As my question left my lips, I heard the pastor reply, "I said, 'Do you know that God loves you just the way you are? Do you know that there is nothing you have ever done, or will do, that will make Him stop loving you?'" He finished by saying, "When are you going to stop running away from Jesus and give Him your life? He has a plan for your life that only you can fulfill, and it can start right now." I knew my life was a hopeless mess, and if I didn't change courses, it was about to get even messier. I was desperate. I wanted a real family. I wanted to be loved. I wanted to know I was important to someone. I wanted hope.

The word *hope* is defined as, "a person or thing that may help or save someone."¹ I was a girl desperately in need of being rescued.

I had never heard God described this way before, and at that moment, I decided He was my only hope. I wanted to know this God.

Our church always gave an invitation at the end of the sermon, and as the pastor started to pray, I handed my guinea pig to my friend and ran down the aisle. I stood in front of him, crying and barefoot and one big mess, when he opened his eyes. I could tell he was surprised. I said to him, “I just gave my life to Jesus. What do I do next? I want Jesus to break the cycle of abuse and addiction that has plagued my family for years.” He stared at me, then handed me quickly off to a woman standing behind me. She took me in a backroom and asked me to pray this prayer. I told her I had already given my life to Jesus, so what was next? She kept repeating I had to pray the prayer. Finally I gave in and repeated the words after her. It was kind of comical—she had her eyes closed and mine were open, staring at her. As soon as she said, “Amen,” the next words out of my mouth were, “Now what do I do?” Her answer to my question was to escort me back to the pastor. My first words to him were, “Now what do I do?” He looked a bit overwhelmed at my enthusiasm and told me to call the office the next morning and make an appointment to talk about baptism. I was excited, I had hope, and I was ready to take on the world because I now knew Jesus, and He loved me just the way I was. In that moment, the course of my life was forever changed.

That next week I sat in the pastor’s office talking to him about getting baptized and my new journey with God. I will forever be grateful to Pastor Richard. With one question he helped me determine my first step in breaking the cycle. He asked me, “Do you love your boyfriend?” I said, “No, but there is no one else.” I began to describe our relationship in detail. I told him about the drinking, drugs, and verbal abuse. He didn’t judge me, and he gave me hope when he said, “God has a plan for your life. He has someone special for you, someone who will love you. You need to start praying that God will show you who that person is. He will make it very clear when you meet him.”

After much discussion, I decided my first action was to break up with my boyfriend. I left the pastor's office that day and drove home. Later that same afternoon as I babysat my neighbor's children, my boyfriend called their house. We were supposed to go out that night, and he wanted to know what time to pick me up. I told him, "You're not picking me up, and I don't want to see you anymore. God has someone better for me—someone who loves Jesus as much as I do." So after two years of dating, I broke up with him because Jesus wanted me to. He hung up on me without saying anything.

I began reading and studying the Bible. I started to learn about God and grow in my understanding of who He is. God put three women and two men in my life that year. Peggy, Eileen, and Dawn mentored me. These women loved me, listened to me, prayed for me, and guided me. Pastor Richard and Pastor Steve taught me the Bible and how to apply it to my life. These men modeled for me what a godly man acted like. Steve and Peggy treated me like family. I spent time in their home babysitting their two boys, and I got to see firsthand how a godly mom and dad raised their kids. I remember telling myself all those years ago that I was going to raise my children like they did.

Have you ever wondered if God has a sense of humor? He does. As I write these words, my son, Jack, serves in ministry with one of those two boys I babysat. Steve and Peggy's youngest son, Matt, became a pastor and started a church. That church now has multiple locations and thousands of members. My son is on staff as the campus pastor for one of the locations. I am watching this boy I babysat, now a pastor, mentor my son who is now a pastor in his ministry. It's funny how life works.

As I continued to live my life forward, I managed to drag my trunks of pain and disappointment with me. I met my husband, Bill, during my senior year in high school. We married after I graduated, and he began to help me understand and heal from the hurts, fears, regrets, anger, and rejection I carried into our marriage. He loved me, taught me about letting go of the stuff in the trunks, and showed

me that a husband and father can be committed and stay. Even as I was learning to trust, my greatest fear became that Bill would reject me one day. It took me thirty-nine years to finally let go of that fear. I had finally learned to trust him. I learned this just in time to walk through the darkest and scariest time of my life.

In 2015 the words, “My husband struggles with anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts,” became the hardest words I had ever spoken out loud. We didn’t see it coming, and it derailed our lives. I began to search for practical help in dealing with his mood swings, outbursts of anger, blame, paranoia, and withdrawal. I found none. I reached out to people I knew in the medical and religious communities, but no one had any help to offer. I wanted to find that person who had answers for me, but no one had any answers. I felt totally abandoned and alone. Fortunately I am stubborn and didn’t give up. I kept reading everything I could find, asking questions, developing practical ways to survive, and most of all, trusting God.

One day a friend said to me, “Tell them! Stop searching for answers and start writing about what you have learned and how you survive.” I believe that our lives are a journey. As our paths cross, we become a part of one another’s journey. It is not an accident you are holding this book and reading these pages. God has a plan for all of us. Our lives for this moment are on the same path. Maybe your life is a mess, maybe not. If your life is a mess, I am right there with you. If your life is not a mess right now, those of us in a mess need you. We need you to be there for us. We need your strength to encourage us, to hug us, to sit quietly with us. We need you to point us to God so we can find joy in our messy lives. For me, the months have turned into years, and we still have no answers—no real solutions or resolution. But I do have joy, and that’s what I want for you too.

If you relate to my story in even a small way, I want you to know you are not alone. God sees you and I see you. The journey will be daunting and overwhelming, so take a deep breath, focus

for a moment on something that makes you smile, and keep going. You can do this; we can do this together.

As you read the following pages, I am going to share with you the biblical and practical coping tools I use daily to survive. I like to joke and say that I am God's favorite daughter because He just keeps showing up and taking care of me. The truth is He loves us all, and we are all His favorites. He will show up for you in the same way He has for me. My life is still one big mess, and I live every moment finding joy in my messy life. So can you.



How Could This Happen to Bill?

Just because you don't understand it doesn't mean it isn't so.

—Lemony Snicket

From the moment I saw him, I knew he was my person. I was seventeen years old and sitting on the front row in my church's worship center. I turned and looked toward the back of the room as he walked in. I heard God say, *There he is, that's your husband.* I turned to my friend, Teri, sitting next to me and said, "I am going to marry that guy." We were introduced by mutual friends that day, and a few weeks later, Bill invited me on a midnight motorcycle ride. That night we decided to begin dating, and I started to plan my fairytale wedding. We were married fifteen months later and vowed to love each other in sickness or health, for richer or poorer, until death parts us.

I was eighteen years old when I married Bill—just seven months out of high school. I had been raised by an abusive, alcoholic father who abandoned me when I was eleven. My mother was enjoying the single life of partying and dating in the seventies, and I had become mom to her and my three siblings. I had no example to follow of a working marriage; I just knew that divorce was not an option for

me. I believed God planned my marriage to Bill. I was committed and in it for life. I didn't need to worry because Bill was dependable, strong, hardworking, and committed to God and family. He was nothing like my father and would never leave me or reject me.

Whenever I have a moment where I feel like I can't go on and want to quit, I go back and remember that day and God's words: *There he is, that's your husband.* The memory keeps me going, but it also sets the stage for the question: how could this happen to my strong, dependable Bill? It's the same question everyone who ever knew him would one day ask.

Early in our dating relationship, I began to notice something different about Bill. When he got upset about something, he had a hard time letting it go. If he got angry or upset with me, he would push me verbally until he felt there was a resolution. He was so worried about my family background of divorce that he struggled asking me to marry him. He wanted me to commit to not getting a divorce before I even committed to marrying him.

In our first year of marriage, I experienced moments when his anxiety was so high he even acted it out in his dreams. We lived in Citrus Heights, California, and our apartment was located in an area that was being terrorized by the East Area Rapist. Bill was so anxious and fearful that he placed a board under our bedroom door every night. One night his anxiety caused him to have a nightmare, and he began to act it out. He sat straight up in bed, and in his sleep he reached over and shoved me off the bed to the floor. As I was trying to wake up and wiggle myself out of the crevice between the bed and the wall, I heard him begin screaming at the doorway, "Stop right where you are; stay away." It took me a few seconds to realize he was dreaming. I crawled back up on the bed and began trying to wake him up. He never did wake up. Still sleeping he looked at me with wild eyes, gently pushed me back down on my pillow and said, "It's okay, he is gone; go back to sleep." I lay there in the dark, adrenaline pumping, wondering what just happened. The next morning when I asked him about it, he had no memory of it.

I also noticed that when a change needed to happen, he pushed until it was resolved and had an extreme need to control everything. While he thought he was being helpful, his behavior came across as negative and controlling. I am a creative, fluid person who fights against routine, so this was really hard for me. In his defense, we were living on a really tight budget, and I routinely spent more than our grocery budget would allow. I refused to track the costs. I just knew I needed those tomatoes, radishes, and mushrooms for my salads, even if it meant going over the weekly budget. I also struggled to get the house cleaned and laundry done, *in a timely fashion*, as Bill called it. He would make lists and schedules for me and then would say, "Just follow the list and schedule. Do the cleaning and laundry on these days at these times. Don't let anything get in the way." I, on the other hand, would forget to look at the lists and schedules, lose them, or simply ignore them if something came up that was more fun, like lunch with a friend. For example, one Monday morning, my schedule read, "Clean the bathroom at 10 a.m." Well at 9:55 a.m., a friend called. We talked on the phone for an hour, and after we hung up, I forgot to clean. When Bill came home from work, he was so upset he kicked a plant across the room.

He had also determined while we were dating that I didn't understand style and color, which explained why I couldn't pick out the right kind of clothing. After our marriage, we both worked in retail so he would routinely come home with clothes and shoes that he'd describe as "perfect for me." Somewhere along the way he even began to determine who my friends should be. His rationale was: "I am helping you avoid messy relationships by picking the wrong friends."

By year two of our marriage, we had moved to the San Francisco Bay Area so Bill could attend seminary. I worked full time so Bill could go to school. His control and negativity were hard to deal with. On our second anniversary, he gave in to my constant bugging, and we went to Hawaii. The entire plane trip he kept looking at me and saying, "I have no idea why I let you talk me into this. We have

perfectly good beaches at home without this expense and trouble.” To my excitement, Bill fell in love with Hawaii on that first trip. He became familiar with the weather, environment, and culture and this brought comfort. His comfort engaged his need for control, which meant after that trip, I couldn’t get him to travel anywhere else. We have currently been to the islands more than forty times.

When he finished his seminary degree three years later, we began to interview for positions in church ministry. It is common for the wife to be included in the interviews. Bill would attempt to preplan my answers to questions he thought I would be asked. This brought more to worry about and more attempts to control. The church is full of people with opinions and needs. He tried to juggle it all. I remember after an interview with a church’s search committee, we received a letter saying we were rejected because I wore designer jeans to the meeting. Bill tried working as a music and youth minister, then he tried to plant a church, but nothing seemed to work. Finally God opened the door for him to become a senior pastor and his response was, “Good, when this doesn’t work either, I will leave ministry.”

We had been married for eight years when he started his first position as a senior pastor, and this brought new pressure on both of us. Growing up with an abusive, alcoholic father, my greatest fear was rejection. I soon discovered that I couldn’t please some of the women in our church. They had expectations of their new pastor’s wife, and I was routinely rejected and publicly criticized. I couldn’t play the piano. I didn’t want to work in the nursery. I didn’t sing solos or even sing in the choir. To get back at me, the women placed my name on the schedule for the nursery every month. I fought back by not showing up. During a church talent show, I was assigned a piano solo in the printed program, so I played chopsticks. As the pressure got to me, it also was getting to Bill. He began to turn on me as well and became more controlling and negative. I couldn’t do anything right, and I felt like I was becoming everyone’s problem.

Life became more complicated when our two children were born—now there were two more people for him to worry about and try to control. Have you ever tried to control an infant and a fourteen-month-old at the same time? I was also beginning to fight back against the control. I wanted to pick my friends, and then go out to dinner, a movie, or go shopping with them. I wanted to pick out my own clothing. I felt like a rebellious teenager.

We moved to Santa Clarita in 1990, and Bill became the pastor of a small, struggling church. As soon as we moved, doors began to open for me to work in Hollywood as a commercial actress. I landed an agent, and I loved my new life and career. Bill was supportive of me, yet under the surface he was about to implode. The pressure, anxiety, and lack of control where I was concerned, structural building problems with the church, and trying to control and please everyone in the congregation began taking a toll on him. I began wondering what was happening to him.

In 1992, we celebrated our fifteenth wedding anniversary. At the time, he had been the pastor of a church in Newhall, California, for two years. He was thirty-eight, and his anxiety, need for control, and rumination got so bad that he experienced his first emotional breakdown. This was the first time I found myself asking how this could happen to Bill, as I stood in a hospital corridor at 2:30 in the morning, waiting for a nurse to take me to see him. A few hours earlier, I had found him lying on the floor of our living room in tears holding his chest. I called 911 and a deacon from our church and then sat down next to him on the floor to wait. Sobbing, he told me, “I’m having a heart attack.” As I sat stroking his forehead, I began to suspect that his problem had nothing to do with his heart.

The ambulance arrived, and the paramedics began asking him questions, “Are you dizzy?” “Does this hurt?” “Is your chest feeling tight?” They took his blood pressure and listened to his heart. After a few minutes I could see them relax a tiny bit, as there were no signs of a heart attack. They determined that he should go to the hospital to be checked out. The deacon and his wife arrived as Bill

was being loaded into the ambulance. The medics told me where they were taking Bill and that I should meet them at the hospital. Our children—Kate, seven, and Jack, five—were asleep upstairs, so the deacon’s wife stayed with them while he drove me to the hospital.

As I stood in the hallway of the emergency room waiting for the nurse, the question kept repeating in my mind: *How did this happen to Bill?* The nurse arrived and led me to the room where Bill was being examined by a doctor. As I walked in, I heard the doctor say, “Pastor, I have seen this before; you guys forget you’re not God and take responsibility for everything. You are not handling your stress, and you are trying to control the world.” He then told Bill he wanted to prescribe a medication to help him, but Bill immediately said, “No, I can calm down on my own.” The doctor then asked me to join him in the hallway and told me that Bill was suffering from severe anxiety and that we needed to find him a counselor as soon as possible. He also let me know that Bill would benefit from medication. My suspicions were correct . . . this had nothing to do with his heart.

I brought Bill home from the hospital the next day, and we soon found a counselor for him. After a few months of counseling, he seemed to calm down and he was back at work. I didn’t yet understand, however, that mental illness is a cycle. I didn’t see that the cycle was starting over as he went right back to his anxiety and controlling ways.

Following this first breakdown, I had my first experience with the discomfort others experience when dealing with mental illness. The members in our church didn’t want to talk openly about what had happened to their pastor. He was supposed to be strong and close to God, a rock everyone could depend on. A few of the church members began whispering the question behind our backs, “How could this happen to Bill?” Bill explained it away as stress and assured everyone he was getting help. I felt like everyone, including Bill, was simply sweeping it under a rug, and they felt more comfortable ignoring the issues and pretending nothing had happened.

Several years later, the pressure started to get to Bill again. The cycle was repeating itself. He couldn't handle the daily and weekly responsibility of pastoring a church. His anger and anxiety flashed daily. His favorite task of preparing a sermon each week was now so much pressure that he wanted out. Our daughter was getting ready to graduate from high school, and we had a family trip planned, a two-week trip to Maui to celebrate. Bill informed me that when we got back from Hawaii, he was going to quit his job.

When we arrived home from the vacation, he did just that, and God opened the door for Bill to make a career change. He went from being a pastor to working for a foundation and helping churches raise money to build buildings. The pressure seemed gone, and his job appeared to be a perfect fit for his abilities and personality.

A year later we moved to Fresno and built a beautiful house. We had nice cars, more money than we could spend in a month, and great friends. From the outside, our lives looked perfect. No one could see how miserable I was. I could tell from watching Bill that he was about to fall apart again, and everyone kept telling us how lucky and blessed we were. The cycle of anxiety, control, and emotional breakdowns continued. He would seem okay for a while, and then the cycle would start all over again. He would turn on me with his control and negativity and then end up in the hospital thinking he was having a heart attack. The doctors would tell him, "You're not handling your stress. You need counseling and medication." And again Bill would say, "I can calm down on my own."

Our world began to slowly and silently crumble. We had been living in Fresno for three years, and Bill realized that working for the organization gave him less input than he had anticipated. This began to mess once again with his control issues. He had another emotional breakdown because of the anxiety and lack of control. He couldn't eat or sleep, and he cried all the time. The economy crashed, and the organization he was working for was in financial trouble. They began to let people go, and Bill was let go in the first round of job cuts. We had enough money in savings, so we didn't panic. Bill

decided it was time to go back to working in the local church as a pastor. We began to search for what would be next. What neither of us knew was that his body and emotions were beginning to break under the strain. As he got weaker, he couldn't handle stress of any kind. If his leadership was questioned, he became angry and pushy. Meanwhile I was getting emotionally stronger and learning to stand up for myself and become more decisive. Things began to shift in the household, and I began to manage our money, speak up, make decisions, and even pick my own friends and clothing. The shift was so subtle that I didn't even see it happening.

After a year of searching for a job, we ended up right back where we had started eight years before—the same city, the same church, the same people, the same problems. This time it was temporary. We knew that we would be in Newhall, California, for about two years to help the church get financially stable and to find another pastor. We moved into a small apartment because we now had less stuff and less money.

Bill was miserable. His anxiety and need to control were out of control. He made comments to people that were out of character and created problems. People in leadership of the church were beginning to see his anger and control issues in decisions he made. During a four-week period of time, he had health issues, such as a hernia repair surgery and an emergency appendectomy with major complications and infection. I began to see how his mind and body were suffering from the pressure of his anxiety. I watched helplessly as my husband was imploding, and I couldn't stop it. The Newhall church finally became stable, and they called a new pastor. It was time for us to leave, and we relocated to pastor a church in Fairfield, California. Little did we know that this move would be the one that created the perfect storm of emotional chaos that would permanently change the landscape of our lives.

The storm started as soon as we moved to Fairfield, which was experiencing a housing boom. It took six months for us to find and purchase a home, and we lived in a small hotel room for those six

months. We made offers on ten homes and were overbid. When we finally purchased our home, the night before the sale was to close, the sellers refused to sign. It was frustrating, and it took ten days to convince them to close the deal. We had a vacation planned to Hawaii, so we left all our possessions in a car in our realtor's garage. Bill couldn't relax on our vacation and was constantly checking his cell phone, email, and voice messages. The house finally closed the day we flew home, and we started to get settled.

I loved our life in Fairfield. We had a great church and a beautiful home. We had recovered financially from the economic crash, and I thought we were enjoying the pace of life. But a few months later, Bill's anxiety and need for control came back with a vengeance. I started to notice he was more agitated, got frustrated more easily, and couldn't handle stress. Then his blood pressure started slowly creeping up higher and higher. His doctor wanted to put him on blood pressure medication, but he refused. He became pushy and opinionated about everything I did. Bill was miserable, and I had no idea how to help him. I was stronger and more secure than I had ever been and fought back against being controlled.

As I continued to fight against the control, Bill got angrier and pushed me harder. I found myself tiptoeing around an emotional minefield, never knowing when my words or actions would set him off on an angry tirade. I found myself often wondering why he was so mad at me. In hindsight, I was able to understand what was going on.

On a sunny October afternoon, God told me that we were going to move to Bakersfield, California. My daughter lived there, and we were visiting her for a few days. I was reading the newspaper one morning and saw an ad for some model homes called NextGen Homes. They had small apartments attached to the main house, making it convenient for families to live together. I was intrigued and felt like we should go look at them. That afternoon Bill and I took a drive to get out of the house. I told him I wanted to go look at the model homes I'd seen in the paper, but he was

not very nice and said, “This is a waste of time. I will *never* live in Bakersfield, especially if it means living with Kate and her family.” We went anyway and found the model homes. As we toured one that had an attached apartment, I walked into the bedroom and heard God say, *You are moving here soon and will live in a house like this here in Bakersfield. Get ready, Carole, a mess and a huge change is coming.* I realized that if something ever happened to Bill, this is exactly where I would want to be. I put the brochure in my purse as we walked out.

A few weeks later, Bill’s doctor was unavailable for his check up, and we had to see another doctor. After talking to Bill for a few minutes and looking over his chart, she stared at him and said, “I know exactly what is wrong with you. My husband is a retired pastor, and I have seen the same issues in him. You can no longer manage the stress of your job; you need to retire.”

The next day we took a drive up to the mountains, and I asked Bill, “What would it look like to retire. Could we manage?” We decided to check out some options, the first being the possibility of selling our home. I called Karan, a realtor in our church. I needed to tell her something, so I told her that Bill and I were preparing for retirement someday in Bakersfield. I told her that upon retirement we wanted to move into a home we found with an attached two-bedroom apartment, sell our home now, and rent an apartment in Fairfield until Bill was ready to retire. We wanted to buy the house with our daughter now so that Kate and her family could go ahead and move in, and we would move sometime in the future. Karan told me we were wise to think about the future and that she would love to have the same opportunity with her daughter.

We made an appointment for Karan to come over the next Tuesday to look at our house and talk about options for selling it. As I hung up, Bill looked at me and said, “That is exactly what we are going to do, isn’t it?” I said, “Yes, it is.” The realtor came the next week, and in an incredible series of God-orchestrated events, we sold our home for a full-price, cash offer, bought the one God told me

we would live in, in Bakersfield—all over the next seven weeks. We closed escrow on December 29, 2015, and then we decided not to move into an apartment. It was time to set a retirement date and we did, for January 31, 2016. Bill's blood pressure dropped to a normal range that day. I thought we were out of the woods.

The same day that Bill's blood pressure dropped, he got a call from a man named Ralph. Ralph was the chairman of a search committee for a church in Sacramento and wanted Bill to give him a reference on a fellow they were interviewing for a temporary, executive pastor position. Bill knew Ralph from his days working in Fresno at the foundation. As they talked, Bill shared with Ralph about our move and his retirement date. Ralph and Bill began to talk about Bill taking the part-time position as soon as he retired, instead of the guy they were interviewing. Bill expressed to me that this was his dream retirement job. I questioned him, "We haven't even retired yet, and you want to go back to work?" I was frustrated, even though the position took us back home to Sacramento, to the church where I grew up, to the church where I met God, to the church where I met and married Bill. There were even a few people still in the church who had been there all those years ago.

As soon as Bill retired, we began commuting from Bakersfield to Sacramento every week. We would spend four days working with the church, stay three nights in a hotel, then drive back to our home in Bakersfield for three days. The drive took five hours one way, and within a few weeks, Bill began to develop anxiety about driving. His anxiety got so bad he could no longer drive, and I had to do all the driving. Then he began to need me to be with him everywhere. I had to be with him at the church, or if I couldn't be there in person, I was on the phone with him constantly.

By September 2016, Bill was developing depression, and things were getting out of control. I was the only one who knew of the chaos and of the mess we were dealing with. By October the depression and anxiety had completely taken over Bill's mind. He couldn't sleep, and I forced him to eat. I took him to doctor after

doctor, and no one seemed to be able to help him. Finally, suicidal thoughts joined the anxiety and depression, and my husband no longer wanted to be alive.

How could this happen to Bill? How did it get this far? I still have no answers to these questions, even now.