

chapter one



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The name we give to something shapes our attitude to it.

—Katherine Patterson

*WIDOW, noun [Latin] A woman who has lost
her husband by death.*

—Webster's 1828 Dictionary

WHAT'S IN A NAME? If we live long enough, we will find an accumulation of names we call ourselves, often based on roles or names we've been given by others. We may call ourselves nurse, doctor, pastor, teacher, mother, or sister—all roles that may define us. In today's world, we Google name meanings months before our unborn babies make their entrance, looking for names that will perfectly describe the image and characteristics we hope for our little ones. In the past, names were passed down from generation to generation, often based on the positive attributes of the namesake. For example, I am my grandmother's namesake. The word *Mary* comes from the Greek root word "bitter root," which I hope doesn't define my grandmother or me!

I much prefer a different description of myself that was given

to me quite innocently by a child but made a huge impact in my life. As I worked in a classroom at Sunday school, the pastor's son instructed another child: "Go give these to Mrs. Bruce." The other child responded, "Who's that?" The pastor's son answered, "The one who loves children." From that day forward, I've thought of myself as *the one who loves children*, a name worthy of effort. I have other names as well: nurse; wife of thirty-four years; "Miss Mercy," another name given to me by a young child; "Piedad," given by a peer at work; mother of two; homeschooling pioneer; grandmother of four—Mimi for my daughter's children and Marmie for my son's children; prayer warrior; intercessor; National Day of Prayer ministry leader; child of God; and widow.

As a woman, you may have many names and many titles, but widow is not one you planned for. Widow is a word used only to denote life in the past, not in the future. Before widowhood, you may have handled money matters, arranged family schedules, managed the shopping, and run the home. All of these responsibilities can make the transition to widowhood easier, though you may not have previously identified them as strong leadership points. Widowhood automatically places you as head of household, head of your husband's business, head of the family, and sole parent. What you call yourself and how you recognize your strong characteristics will move you forward through the season of loss into your new leadership role.

As you begin to envision your future without your mate, you may fall back on habits, traits, and expressions of your own personality before marriage. Marriage brings necessary accommodations. Once those thoughtful accommodations for the benefit of another are no longer necessary, you may slip into habits of youth, such as "burning the candle at both ends" or letting the housekeeping or bill paying go until stress forces action. Now you bring wisdom from life lessons and maturity from experiences gleaned through your married days to your new position as widow. Trust in your abilities and lean on God as you make the many decisions you will

be forced to make. Remember your strong characteristics as you make decisions, such as which car to keep and who is going to help you with tasks your spouse covered. (I recommend waiting a year to make major decisions, but I recognize that isn't always practical.) Welcome the everyday realities—such as feeding the dog, tending the garden, going back to work, and cooking dinner—as tasks that will help you adapt to your new normal. Keeping your focus on God will also play a vital role in walking through your grief.

Early in my nursing career, I learned about the fight or flight responses that the human body triggers in reaction to perceived threats or real stress. In my own life, I recognized that my reaction to stress is the flight response, so I learned to harness my flight tendency by looking at my calendar and setting goals. This practice has been a relief for my mental health, giving me control on whether to work on something or not!

After Ron died, however, I recognized a third option to flight or fight. Each morning for that first year, I would sit on the back stoop before sunrise and listen for God, waiting for a sense of his presence to overcome me, and then appreciate the individuality of each pre-dawn sky and sunrise. During winter months, wrapped in my coat, boots, and blanket, I would enjoy the stillness before the start of a new day. This became a place of solitude and a space of refuge, where I took comfort in being a child of God and embraced Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God!”

Dear sister, is your focus on the past or is your focus on the future? If you are not a morning person, can you identify a time in your day that is completely free of interruption where you can wait for a sense of God's presence to overcome you? Reading through the Psalms on a regular basis can help move your focus onto the character of God and direct your thoughts to him. Try reading five psalms a day: one recommendation is to start with the “Psalm of the day”—for example on the third day of the month, read Psalm 3, and then read Psalm 33, Psalm 63, Psalm 93, and Psalm 123, adding the number thirty each time. On the fourth day of the

widowhood: a calling to leadership

month, read Psalms 4, 34, 64, 94, and 124. In this way you will read through the complete book within a month; we save Psalm 119 for day 31, since it is a long psalm. Try this for one year. Be sure to jot down your thoughts, prayers, and questions in a journal. You will be blessed by God.

Church leader, do you recognize your own fight or flight response to stressful situations? How do you process the many stressors that encroach upon your oneness with God and your peace? Do you see each unexpected call as an interruption or as an opportunity to practice the character of Christ? How do you protect your personal devotion time and keep it as a time of the day when you can restore yourself and find yourself in the God of Israel, our fortress, as David did? Read through Psalm 46 and picture yourself in ancient Israel.