

WIDOWHOOD

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Widows, Orphans, And Strangers

There are three groups of people mentioned over and over and over again in Scripture as those who are to be especial objects of God's care. These three groups of people are the widows, orphans, and strangers. What do they have in common and why is He so concerned for them?

All three of these groups lack relationships. They lack key relationships which are necessary for normal life. The widow has no husband; the orphan has no parents; the stranger, having removed himself from another city or country, lacks relations. It would not be uncommon for those who lack such relationships to also be the most needy in society. This explains why a compassionate God is so intent on the well-being of widows, orphans, and strangers among His people.

Repeatedly, Scripture condemns those who would oppress any of these three groups. Repeatedly, Scripture calls the people of God to care for these when they are found to be in legitimate need. Further, God promises to bless those who would aid these in their time of need. It would be counted an honor to receive their blessing. (See Job 29 as an example)

God in heaven uses these lost or missing earthly

relations to remind us of our need for a relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. The relationship between God and man is the most important in life and is available to any who long for it.

Two Widows And Their Goel

Naomi was a widow; her husband had died. Ruth, who had been married to Naomi's son, was also a widow; Ruth's husband had died too. Naomi was a stranger living in a foreign country without relations. Finding herself destitute, she determined to return to her homeland. Ruth loved Naomi dearly and refused to be separated from her mother-in-law. She chose to forsake her own people and renounced her pagan religion by boldly declaring to Naomi, "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God."¹

Having removed themselves to Naomi's country of Israel, Ruth went to the nearby fields to get barley as it was time for the new crop to be harvested. Ruth followed behind the field hands and gathered the grain they missed as they worked through the fields. It was the practice in Israel to allow the poor to glean behind the workers and receive the residue of the crop.² [Note: The grain was not handed to the able-bodied poor, nor already prepared into a meal for them. The poor had to do the hard work of gathering the missed grain and then prepare their own meals.]

While Ruth was busy in this labor, the wealthy Boaz, in whose field she was working, took notice of her. Boaz had learned of Ruth's godly character and

her kindness to Naomi from another. He was, in turn, kind to Ruth and protective of her.³

Later Ruth returned to Naomi with much grain and explained her meeting of Boaz. Naomi immediately recognized the hand of God's *providence* in this matter. Naomi praised God for His provision and made Ruth aware of the fact that Boaz was a relative of hers.⁴ The two widows discussed how to handle this situation in an honorable fashion.

Over time, a relationship between Ruth and Boaz grew. Boaz became more and more interested in Ruth until he finally made his feelings known to her. It was clear that Boaz recognized Ruth as an honorable, godly woman. In fact, many others had come to see Ruth as a kind and virtuous woman as well.⁵

Finally, Boaz decided to go before the local city officials (elders) on behalf of Ruth and Naomi because of their need. It was known that Naomi's deceased husband had previously sold a piece of land because they had become poor and needed the money. It was the practice in Israel to allow a close relative to repurchase a piece of land that had been sold due to poverty. A relative of the poor person had to be allowed, by law, to buy back the land, if he so wished and was able, so the family would not lose their property. The relative who redeemed the land on behalf of another was called the "goel" (which means "redeemer").⁶

Before the city officials Boaz asked Naomi's closest relative if he would be willing to purchase the

land from the present owner, as was his right under law, and serve as Naomi's goel. He agreed to do so.

Boaz went on to explain that, as the redeemer, this unnamed relative would also be buying the land on behalf of Ruth since she had been married to Naomi's deceased son. It was understood that the close relative would actually be standing in the place of Ruth's dead husband if he agreed to purchase the land for the family. It was the practice in Israel for a man to marry the childless widow of his brother in order for the widow to bear a child. The child would serve as heir of the deceased brother and carry on his father's name.⁷ This unnamed relative would need to marry Ruth!

Now the unnamed relative understood his obligation to Ruth. She could bear children (evidently Naomi could no longer do so) and perpetuate the line of Naomi's husband. As goel it was his obligation, if he agreed to it, to redeem the family name as well as the family's land. He refused.

Boaz, being the next closest relative to Naomi and having received a legal permission from the unnamed relative, agreed to serve as goel to Naomi and Ruth. He would purchase the land for Naomi and marry Ruth for Naomi's dead husband/son. The deal was legally sealed with the ceremonial removing of the sandal⁸ from the foot of the unnamed closest relative before the city officials. Boaz would "voluntarily" serve as goel.

This touching story, albeit somewhat obscure, is

worthy of study because it holds many lessons, but ultimately it points us to Jesus. Jesus is the supreme Goel (Redeemer). Boaz redeemed the land for Naomi; Jesus, through his death on the cross, has bought a people by paying the highest price.⁹ Boaz married the widowed Ruth to satisfy a critical missing relationship; Jesus is portrayed as having such an intimate relationship with His people that it is referred to in terms of a marriage.¹⁰ Jesus is the bridegroom and His people- the Church, is His bride.¹¹ Who are His people? Those who receive the gospel¹² and love Jesus with a supernatural love¹³ – a love beyond familial relationships!

Are you a widow? Jesus will be your Goel, your Redeemer, and He will be your Husband!¹⁴

Widows Honored By Their Redeemer

There are several stories of widows given a place of honor in Scripture. This was especially evident in the life of Jesus as He interacted with and taught people while on this earth.

As a newborn baby the first woman to recognize Jesus as the Redeemer was an aged widow. It was revealed by God to Anna and she bore witness in the temple that Jesus was the promised Saviour who had come. It is recorded “...she gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.”¹⁵

When Jesus was teaching on the fact that He would not be received by His own countrymen, He reminded

the listeners of the widow of Zarephath. Although there were many widows in Israel during the time of Elijah and the famine/drought, God sent Elijah to another place to be cared for by this widow.¹⁶ God miraculously provided food for the widow and Elijah, and brought her son back from the dead.¹⁷

As a large funeral procession was coming from the city of Nain, Jesus was moved with compassion over the weeping of a widow. He raised the dead man back to life, thus returning the widow's only son to her.¹⁸

Jesus taught on the importance of persistent prayer by use of a parable. He chose to tell the story of an honorable widow who repeatedly presented herself before an unjust judge. The widow, due to her endurance in this matter, finally gained satisfaction. So it is that we are to not grow weary in prayer.¹⁹

Jesus taught His disciples on the significance of sacrificial giving by His observation of a poor widow. Into the collection box she had dropped only a tiny monetary gift, but it was all the money she had. Jesus honored the widow for her offering into the treasury.²⁰

As Jesus hung on the cross in agony, dying, He called down to His beloved disciple John. Jesus, near death but forgetting Himself, had one more widow to honor. This widow, being a very important woman to Him personally, received an expression of Jesus' great compassion. Jesus told John to care for His own mother – Mary, who was evidently now a widow. After Jesus' crucifixion, John took Mary to his own home to care for her just as Jesus had requested.²¹

Widows In Need, Widows Indeed

It is remarkable to learn the nature of the first quarrel which arose among the believers of the early Church. The source of the contention concerned the care of the poor widows among the growing numbers of new Christians! The Greek Christians complained to the Hebrew Christians that their widows were being neglected. These needy Christian widows, according to the Greeks, were not receiving adequate care in proportion to the aid received by the Hebrew widows.

The twelve apostles called the entire Church together to address this troublesome issue. It was decided that seven worthy men would be selected to oversee the future care of the Church's widows. The selection process and the serious nature of the proceedings indicated this to be a very important responsibility of the Church. The seven men were to be uniquely and spiritually qualified. Prayer was lifted on behalf of the seven and there was a special ceremony conducted involving the laying on of hands to set the seven apart for this necessary work.²²

Although Scripture does not clearly state this to be the origin of the office of deacon, most believe this to be the case. Nevertheless, this was a noteworthy event in the history of the Church. The early Christians considered the care of widows to be a necessary function of the Church which could not be neglected.

Paul later revisits this same issue in some detail when he writes to the young pastor Timothy. Evidently the care of widows was still viewed as a critical matter

to the Church. It was now necessary to set some guidelines for handling this area of Church life.

Maybe the resources of the young Church were being strained by the addition of large numbers of widows. Maybe it was time to recognize that only the most needy and aged widows should be assisted. Whatever the reasons were, it was time to designate who the “true widows” were. The basic guidelines set out before the Church was to intervene were the following:

- (1) The family was to shoulder this responsibility if they were able and available.
- (2) Only widows who showed themselves to be godly women were to be received.
- (3) Widows were to be elderly- sixty years of age and above.²³

Providing for aged, godly women is a way of honoring them.

The Lord has given me a heart for His widows in their old age. The ministry I head has afforded me the opportunity to visit several hundred elderly widows in their homes and apartments. I have spoken privately with many professing widows who were lonely and sickly as they entered their last days on this earth. I have prayed with them and offered them home delivered meals. A number have expressed to me that they were being neglected by their churches. Some had reported being seldom, if ever, visited by their local church. They felt forgotten because they could no longer participate in or attend church services

because of poor health. I have conversed with elderly widows who have appeared quite bitter over their plight! They angrily blame the churches for forgetting them in their time of need.

Whether these attitudes are always justified on the part of these widowed women, I cannot say. There is no way for me to know their hearts or their past. How faithful were they to their churches? What were their family lives like? Maybe some have not lived as pious a life as they fondly remember. There may be some who make such accusations who are deluded due to reduced mental capabilities brought on by age. I am certain these things do happen in the lives of elderly widows.

Notwithstanding, the challenge to the Church is before us. “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble...”²⁴

Summary

There are many widows because there is much death. Death is the result of sin and must be addressed on a personal level. Thus, Jesus came. There are many widows in need. Our Father uses widows to test our faith as His people. Caring for widows tries and refines our commitment to Christ. It is a matter of obedience.

REFERENCES*

1. Ruth 1:16c
2. Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22

3. Ruth 2:11-12
4. Ruth 2:20
5. Ruth 3:10-11
6. Leviticus 25:25-27
7. Deuteronomy 25:5-10; Luke 20:27-33
8. Ruth 4:7; Deuteronomy 25:9
9. I Corinthians 6:20; 2 Peter 2:1
10. John 3:28-29; 2 Corinthians 11:2;
Ephesians 5:25-27
11. Revelation 21:2,9
12. I Corinthians 15:1-4
13. Matthew 10:37-39
14. Isaiah 54:4-5
15. Luke 2:36-38
16. Luke 4:24-26
17. I Kings 17:8-24
18. Luke 7:11-17
19. Luke 18:1-7
20. Luke 21:1-4; Mark 12:41-44
21. John 19:25-27
22. Acts 6:1-6
23. I Timothy 5:3-10
24. James 1:27
25. I Timothy 5:8
26. I Timothy 5:4

*All quotations cited in the text are from the New King James Version of the Bible.

EXPLANATION

The purpose of this booklet is two-fold. The first is to present the gospel in terms of the need to satisfy a crucial missing relationship. Just as a widow finds herself in the unhappy state of having no husband, an unbeliever finds himself in the sorrowful state of having no relationship with God. Widows serve as a strong reminder to us of our human need for intimate relationships. We are caused to consider that our most important relationship is with God through Jesus Christ. A widow has lost the intimacy of a husband. A sinner has lost the communion of his Creator.

Jesus' life on earth was marked by widows. At the beginning the widow Anna declared the Baby to be the expected Redeemer. At the end of His earthly life Jesus marked His closing minutes before death by His compassion toward the widow Mary.

The second purpose is to teach on the emphasis, concerning widows in general, found in Scripture. Godly widows hold a prominent place in the Bible. They cannot be overlooked. It is not by chance that there are so many verses mentioning widows throughout the Old and New Testaments. The small book of "Ruth" is devoted to recounting the plight of two widows. Why so much emphasis on widows?

The family and church have a responsibility to care for their widows when in need. This is especially true of Christian widows. Christian widows are uniquely "His widows". The Bible uses strong

language in making this point concerning widows. We read not only “True and undefiled religion is to visit widows in their trouble,” but we find, “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”²⁵ In context, this is a reference primarily to caring for widows in one’s family.

Children and grandchildren who do not care for their needy widowed mothers and grandmothers give *proof* they are not true believers.²⁶

How Have Other Religions Viewed Widowhood ?

Hinduism –

The Hindu religion has as its chief gods Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), Shiva (the Destroyer), and Kali (the wife of Shiva with many arms, fangs, and skulls hanging about her neck). It is a religion that has been known for its strict caste system with its rigid rules of separation where people cannot improve their lot in society. Hinduism emphasizes a continuing cycle of death and rebirth. Along with the teaching of reincarnation was the belief that a great sacrifice would be rewarded in the person’s next life on earth.

Into this setting of castes and reincarnation came the horrible practice of sati. Hindu society pressured widows, and sometimes even forced them, to be sacrificially burned alive on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Hindu widows were strongly

encouraged by their culture to commit suicide!

Largely due to the influence and efforts of the great Christian missionary William Carey, the widespread practice of sati (widow burning) was abolished in India. The practice of sati in British-occupied India was outlawed in 1829.

Confucianism/Buddhism –

The influence of Confucius is widespread, especially in China. His teachings emphasized five basic relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend. Buddhism, which came from India, spread to many other countries. Buddha's teachings centered around personal ethics and individual introspection (meditation). The teachings of Confucius and Buddha did not speak of God or address adoration for a God or gods.

Into this setting of exclusively earthly philosophies, devoid of a God, the adherents embraced ancestor worship. Before home shrines the Chinese worship their dead ancestors by burning incense, igniting fake money for the dead, and praying for assistance from them. Death does not separate or destroy these most important relationships.

Women and widows hold a unique place in this traditional scheme of family dominance. I spoke to a missionary living in China who told me he'd met older women in the countryside who had no names, only the last names of their husbands! In this culture it is

taboo for a widow to live by herself. Once her husband dies, a widow must live with her son and his family and serve them by cooking, babysitting, shopping, house cleaning, etc. Remarriage for a widow is considered a family disgrace and is heartily discouraged. The deceased husband's family can block a remarriage.

Islam –

Mohammed is responsible for the Islamic religion and its adherents are called Muslims. During Mohammed's lifetime his "revelations" were memorized or written down by his companions. Later, Mohammed's teachings, which were believed to be given to him by an angel from Allah (God), were compiled into the holy book known as the Koran. Mohammed is recognized as the Prophet and worship is directed to Allah by Muslims.

The Koran does address caring for the poor and needy (almsgiving), providing for one's family, and protection for the orphaned and widowed. According to the Koran, a husband is to provide for his wife enough for at least one year in case he were to die and leave her a widow. Widows are free to re-marry. Especial concern is expressed for widows of jihad (holy war).

Muslims and the Koran go further than just calling for aid to their widows though. They criticize Judaism and the Old Testament for their levirate laws. [The levirate laws dealt with the responsibility of a widow's

brother-in-law to marry her in order to make provision for the widow's care and to raise up a male descendant for the dead husband. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 has been cited for example.] In Chapter 1, Verse 22 of the Koran it says: "Accept what is past and it is a shameful, odious, and abominable custom indeed to regive a brother to marry a widow."

Muslims either reject or do not understand the ultimate intent of this requirement to redeem a widow. For Christians, the Old Testament teaching of a man marrying (redeeming) his brother's widow, foreshadowed the Redeemer of the New Testament marrying His people.

–Robert Smith

