

When Children DIE

Lillian Baker knows about suffering and loss. Four of her five children died prematurely, but she discovered God's peace in the midst of tragedy

By: Barbara Dickson



Susan



Joey



Billy

MOST OF US WILL NEVER HAVE TO ENDURE THE HEART-wrenching experience of losing a child. Our children will outlive us by 20 years or more. That's the way it's supposed to be. But Lillian Baker knows that rules are sometimes broken. Lillian is the mother of five children. She has buried four.

As a child, Lillian experienced sorrow first-hand. At only three years of age, Lillian cradled her baby brother, Frankie, as he lay dying. He had just suffered massive third-degree burns from boiling water in a tipped over kettle. Her mother, hysterical with the realization that Frankie was fatally scalded, placed her baby son in her little girl's embrace.

When Frankie died, her mother cried out: "God could have spared him, but He didn't." Lillian didn't know who God was, but she now knew who God wasn't. He wasn't caring or loving. He let Frankie die.

This same thought was firmly

etched in Lillian's mind years later when her first daughter was born in 1954 with spina bifida and lived only a few days.

"I took her death extremely hard," Lillian recalls. "The nursery was ready; I had sewn clothes for the baby. I was broken. Outside I hid my loss, but inside there was such a void."

When she became pregnant a year and a half later, she worried about having an unhealthy baby, but little Susan was born healthy and bright.

"Having Susan changed my life," Lillian says. "I thought that maybe this was going to be the beginning of good things."

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Joshua



Janet Lynne

After suffering another miscarriage, Lillian had two more healthy babies, Billy and Janet Lynne. This little troupe would complete Lillian's family for many years. But the toll of two miscarriages and the loss of a newborn left a wound in Lillian's life that wouldn't heal.

"I had a busy life and yet there was always a feeling of emptiness," Lillian recalls.

Billy would be Lillian's second child to die. At 14, he was in Northern Ontario with a friend playing around on a logging machine. He fell under the wheels and was crushed, dying instantly. Lillian's heart was shattered again.

"I couldn't feel anything," she remembers. "For seven years after Billy's death I was dead inside." She stuffed all her grief and pain deep within and sank into depression. In desperation, Lillian pulled out a Bible given to her as a child. She had never even glanced at it before and didn't know one verse. She found John 11:35—"Jesus wept." Did Jesus weep for her in the loss of her children?

Several years after Billy's death, she and her husband adopted an 11-year-old boy, Joey. She had been blessed with another child. "Because of his age, nobody wanted to take Joey in. My heart went out to him." She grew to love him like her own.

Three months later, Lillian and her husband separated after years of abuse. She was forced to raise her three children alone.

Before long, Lillian experienced another life-changing event. Audrey, a neighbour, invited her to a Bible study. Audrey became Lillian's best friend, and asked her to come to church. She went reluctantly, but found the experience pleasant.

Lillian was home alone one cold November evening in 1975 when she felt the need to pray. She can still recite the simple conversation she had with God: "Jesus, I believe in You. I don't understand why You had to die and shed Your blood, but I accept that You died for me."

Lillian felt sure that she had come through the worst in her life. It would be almost 15 years before she would learn that

loving God and enjoying a relationship with Jesus wouldn't exempt her from experiencing sadness and mourning.

Death cruelly intruded again and stole Susan, in 1989, after a valiant, three-year battle with breast cancer. Lillian helped care for her daughter throughout her brave struggle.

Lillian lost Joey nine years later in 1998. He was struck by a car at night while out walking. She still recalls the police coming to her door to deliver the bad news.

"Four of my children are gone," Lillian remembers sobbing. "If God loved me then why would He allow so many traumatic things to happen? Can You hear me, God?"

Misery, heartache and death, clumsily wrapped up in the guise of a doctor or a police officer, had pounded four times at the door of Lillian's broken heart. She had no choice but to let them in.

With such overwhelming personal tragedy, it would have been easy for Lillian to give up her belief in God. But her faith has been steadfast. How did she cope? How did she survive such loss?

With peace in her eyes, she concedes: "We don't have all the answers, but God does. He has a reason, plan and purpose for everything. God has touched my life in so many ways. How can I not believe in Him?"

She acknowledges that she has struggled with her faith. "Have I ever had mixed feelings about the Lord? Yes. But when I pray and tell Him how I feel, I experience His healing."

Today, Lillian delights in her last surviving daughter, Janet Lynne, and grandson, Joshua. Lillian continues to serve God in her community by comforting neighbours and friends who are in need.

In the Bible, King David writes about God's tender care and unfailing presence: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

Lillian has learned to lean on God as she continues her life's journey. She is confident that God is faithful. He will comfort her and walk beside her—whether in times of joy or sorrow.

How to Cope With Loss

Talk. You deserve to express yourself at this difficult time. Talk about your loved one to others or to God (and encourage them to do so, too). Let them know that it is part of your healing process.

Remember. Reflect on the good times. Looking back, what do you appreciate about your loved one? What are the moments together that you cherish the most? Do things to honour and remember them.

Have fun. Read a book, see a movie, get a massage or listen to uplifting music. This is the time to do it. Even though you may feel guilty about being pampered at this time, you deserve to treat yourself well.

Forgive. You may be reminded of the need to forgive that person for a past hurt—and forgive yourself if need be—then move on. Perhaps you wish you had done more at the time. Pray about it and experience God's healing.

Plan ahead. You may feel especially emotional on anniversaries or holidays. This is a normal reaction. Talk to other family members and decide how you would like to adjust your traditions to honour the memory of your loved one.

Get the support you need. There are people who want to help you get through this time—friends, loved ones, pastoral counsellors, trained laypersons and professionals. It's all right to tell people how they can best help you.