

PREFACE

SOMEONE ONCE SAID that joy and sorrow are inseparable. The deeper sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can absorb.

I wouldn't have believed it twenty years ago. Not when the locusts of despair swooped into my life and ruined my dreams. But now, *after the locusts*, there is a deep valley in my soul—not a dark valley but a hollow crevice for joy to settle in. Joy I could never have known without the storm.

Hannah Hurnard defines joy as “*sorrow accepted and transformed*,” and I know it's true.

Ten years ago a shattered woman came to our weekly women's prayer breakfast, searching for hope. Because I had been like her—empty, confused, and hurting—I volunteered to mentor Ginger through her crisis time. Right away I shared God's promise from Joel 2:25, “I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten.” In the King James Version it reads: “I will restore to you the years.”

In my painful yesterdays someone gave me that promise, and I clung to it. I watched God not only repay me for the years but mold my life into something better and richer than ever before. If she allowed Him, God would do the same for Ginger.

Do you know the word *comfort* comes from the Latin word *fortis*, which means “strong”? As God comforts through loss, we are built up, through our resources, our new challenges, and our deeper faith.

After Ginger I met dozens of women who needed their spirits lifted in dark times, and as I shared Joel 2:25, many found comfort and hope. Some opted to decline the challenge, wishing that God would wave His magic wand and heal them. Instead they chose their own way. As a result, some ended up right back where they started, facing emptiness and despair.

Nobody urged me to write this book, but the idea kept tickling my brain, and when I brought the concept to a writers' conference in 1989, an editor said, “Unique idea—send me some chapters.”

I went home to my computer and bit my fingernails. A good idea is one thing; executing it is another. As I sat staring at an empty screen, it became clear that I wasn't ready to revisit my own pain and loss yet.

Then last year the notion came on again, and this time with a fervor. *Remember Ginger? Start with her story. Bring it alive on the page. Write that locust book!* By this time I felt ready. *But, Lord, I need so many stories of ruined dreams, wasted years. Where do I find them?*

The answer came clearly. *Look around. You know who they are. They've come through your life in the last ten years.*

The vignettes you'll read on the following pages are mostly women whose stories I know well, and each has not only survived loss and regret but also has answered the challenge to work closely with God in the process. Each woman has found new purpose and sufficiency, and each agreed she wouldn't have missed the *lesson from the locusts* for anything.

I walked a mile with Pleasure
She chatted all the way;
And left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.
I walked a mile with Sorrow
And never a word said she;

But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me.

—*Robert Browning Hamilton*

INTRODUCTION

I NEVER SET OUT to get cozy with Joel. He's a rather dim figure among the minor prophets of the Bible, and we hardly hear much about him. But knowing this guy changed my life. His name, a common one in Israel, means "*the Lord is God.*"

You've got to love a guy with a name like that.

Joel's book, wedged between the books of Hosea and Amos, is thought to take place eight hundred years before Christ. It deals with a locust plague, not such a big deal considering bug blitzes were quite common in those days. But this one was unique. A complete disaster, it wiped out everything. The locusts came in successive swarms, each destroying what the others had left behind.

But God had a purpose, to stir up the people to believe in his promises, to use the plague to stir the people into a new sense of himself.

Thus, along comes Joel. With vivid word pictures and powerful emotions, he pleads to the people of Israel to get the message; there are dark days ahead, yes, but God desires to bless His people who live honorably in the face of struggle and loss.

What does he want? *Nothing, just your whole heart—that's it.*

That's it? Seems simple enough, doesn't it? But not when your heart is bruised and weary. Not when your world is upside down in chaos.

Trusting God isn't always easy.

It took me a bit of time to piece this truth together. Though I had the promise of Joel 2:25 tacked on my refrigerator, I took some foolish turns on my way to healing. You'll hear about them as you read this book.

God didn't need to send out great armies to bring people to their knees in total dependence on him in order to stress that he was in control of everything. Or to show His kindness, his every intention of showering them with good gifts after their loss.

All he needed was a swarm of little insects.

I'm not a Bible scholar, but I've studied this man, Joel, and he wins the contest as my most popular prophet. Come and meet him, won't you? *After the Locusts* highlights women whose lives are a testimony to God's restoration plan, but it also takes you through a bit of the Old Testament with a straightforward, no-nonsense guy with great compassion for those who hurt.

You'll see after each chapter heading a Scripture verse from Joel that becomes the theme. Even though Joel's words apply to a specific event in Jewish history, there's a storehouse of hope in them for today.

This book may not answer all your questions or cover the exact difficulty you face, but I pray you'll be stirred to a new understanding of your loss. As you read honest accounts of women who've suffered, and not only survived but thrived, I think you'll be inspired.

As a bonus, you'll get to know Joel and the wonderful promise he offers from the Lord. So let's get going, OK?

The Big Bug Blitz

Has anything like this ever happened in your days?

—Joel 1:2

The locusts were at it again.

I knew it the moment I saw the clouded look in her eyes, by the trance-like way she kept pouring cream into her coffee. “I can’t believe this is happening,” the woman murmured and then stared out the frosty window to the restaurant parking lot.

Slipping into my designated chair at Sweet Pea’s Cafe, I gave Ginger a weak nod. I hadn’t been formally introduced yet, but I’d been briefed on the new gal who might be joining us for our weekly prayer breakfast. *She is going through a very rough time.* Ginger looked up slowly, clutching a napkin to her moist eyes. “I don’t think I can go on. I feel so alone.”

Arms enveloped her as she choked back the sobs. The horror-story gaze on her face revealed the rough time she faced. She had the look I knew so well, as if her insides were being ravaged by some alien creatures.

Paralysis of the heart. Attack on the soul.

While I quietly motioned to the waitress I’d like my usual poached egg on rye, Ginger’s fist went to her lips. “Oh, I’m so embarrassed.”

Together we pressed her to get it all out, share her story. We were a safe haven, all seasoned veterans of life’s struggles, a group of women who had been meeting together every week for many years, praying, bringing hurts like this before the Lord.

My hunch turned out to be right; Ginger’s dreams were shattered. Her husband of twenty-five years had suddenly left and this breakfast at Sweet Pea’s was her first time out from behind the drawn blinds of her mountain home, except to go to church. With the pastor’s urging to find someone who has been there, Ginger phoned Jeanne, who had taught her son in school years ago.

Could Jeanne have some remedy for this pain? The valium wasn’t numbing it enough.

“Come to prayer breakfast,” Jeanne encouraged her, then promptly left a message urging me not to make this one of the days I decided to sleep in. Jeanne is always scheming for the Lord.

Sitting across the table from Ginger, I observed a soft-spoken woman in her forties with ravishing hair the color of California poppies. My writer’s mind envisioned her as a character from a gothic novel, an elegant Irish Lass, searching for a “happily ever after.”

Ginger’s would now be very much in doubt.

“How can we pray for you?” one of our gals asked.

“That he comes back,” she pleaded. “Or that God takes me home. I feel like there’s nothing left for me now.”

Those words pricked my heart, and I began to pray silently: *Lord, help her to cling to your promise—that you will restore the years the locusts have eaten.*

Though we aren’t dealing with the plagues of old, trials and misfortunes still invade our lives, and they still make unwelcome visits that test everything we’ve ever trusted. Plagues of the heart can come in many forms—divorce, the sudden death of a loved one, painful abuse, a

ravaging illness, a miserable marriage, a personal failure that rocks our foundations. The stories are different, but the feelings of damage and wasted years, emptiness, and fear are common to us all.

Those thoughts darted through my mind as I glanced around our breakfast table that morning over eight years ago. We had our matriarch, a widow who had lost a precious son decades before and now faced blindness; three of us abandoned by our mates; one whose son still battled drugs in his forties; another whose daughter is lost to the homosexual lifestyle. And yet another, whose decision to leave her first husband thirty years ago had brought some painful consequences.

There we sat at our usual table, a collage of ruined dreams and wasted years, a hodgepodge of tender hurts that bound us together each Friday morning. There are few secrets in our group; rather, we lay bare our hearts, expecting to hear the ruthless truth from one another and be better for it. We laugh hysterically and often cry before the eggs and oatmeal raisin pancakes arrive, all the while deepening our faith in a loving God whom we trust has a purpose for it all.

Ginger had come to the right place.

After our time of prayer that morning, I took a final sip of my lemon tea and felt a friendly nudge under the table from Jeanne. I had no trouble interpreting the gesture: *She needs you. You've been through this.*

You can say that again.

Yes, I'd been there, standing in the field of ruined dreams. Without the man who said he'd love me forever, without the cherished family life I had planned for as a young girl. Everything destroyed and me all alone with two confused daughters. I remember trying to stop the gush of tears as I surveyed what was left of my life. I looked out at the dried-up ground, wondering—would anything grow there ever again?

Bob not only abandoned me, but his rejection also shattered my daughters and sent them rebelling through their teenage years, their innocence destroyed.

Yet God had done some amazing things in the aftermath, not only with me, but also with so many other women that came through my life.

While our table talk still focused on Ginger, my mind drifted to locusts. Can you picture them, Hollywood-style, when Charlton Heston, as Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, cast them as the eighth plague over Egypt? Well-deserved judgment for Pharaoh's wickedness, don't you think? But not until years later, during an episode of *Little House on the Prairie*, did my emotions stir for the helpless victim of these killer insects. A pioneer woman, clutching to the porch rails, watched their descent into her life, a swarm so dense you couldn't see through the thick darkness. After they were gone, they left not a leaf—nothing but grayish-brown dust.

Good for nothing but to choke on.

Have you felt like that pioneer woman? After my loss I was her, staring from my sod house at the carefully tended fields being ransacked by zillions of icky bugs that came soaring out of nowhere. Every day they ascended in immense numbers so dense I couldn't see the sun through them.

They turned my day into night.

We're not talking about little crickets, not about harmless little creatures flitting through the garden. When the locusts paid me a personal call, they were out to destroy all I had toiled so hard for.

And they nearly did.

Feast Day

First came the *creeping* locust, whispering that this thing can't really be happening to me. It's a nightmare, just cover your head, don't tell anyone, just pretend everything will be fine tomorrow.

Then the *gnawing* locust, whittling away my confidence. If only you were a better woman, this wouldn't be happening to you. If only you had more faith, you wouldn't feel so empty right now.

Next the *stripping* locusts, exposing the hurt and anger. I hate him. I hate me. I hate God. I hate everyone who smiles at me.

Finally, the *swarming* locusts, stripping me completely bare, speeding me straight into a life of uncertainty. All those years of tilling, spading, planting a crop in neatly planned rows. Wasted years. *Now, look at you—how will you ever start over?*

Where was my prophet to plead on my behalf like so many did in the Old Testament? My prophet never showed up, but my calamity sure did. It came and dined and left me with a bill I was not equipped to pay. Beyond the pain a new experience waited for me, strange and frightening, the last thing I ever expected.

None of it made sense for many years, but through it, I found contentment in my situation. There are now new crops in my field, new dreams stored up in my barn.

They're God's dreams this time, instead of my own.

My heart ached that morning for Ginger, for the snuffing out of cherished dreams, for the medley of grief that plays on the soul when it's wounded, and for the fear that lurks over our shoulder when loss pays such an unwelcome visit.

Ginger needed assurance that her God is reliable, that he would see her through this, and that somehow he would help her clean up the impossible mess. Because I had been witness to the Lord's wonderful restoration plan, I had no doubts of this. Neither did our Friday morning ladies, because despite difficult circumstances that still lingered for some, they held on to solid evidence of a faithful God.

But Ginger needed more than a Friday morning fix. I could see that.

Suddenly, I began to squirm in my chair. *But, Lord, she needs a mentor, an encourager, a sister in sorrow. That's a big commitment! And you know I really don't want to revisit my own pain and loss again. Couldn't you have sent her to someone else? Don't you have some other task for me now? I'll reconsider teaching Sunday school, maybe preschoolers?*

Naturally, God paged me with an instant message. *Remember what you tossed in at the end of your prayer last week? Use me, Lord. Make me a blessing.*

Oh? This is one of your divine appointments? I see. Still, I secretly hoped that Ginger's husband would magically return in a few days to create a powerful testimony of love restored. Either way, it would be a long, hard road, and she would need a friend.

Ginger's sniffles broke my thoughts. "I gave him all the best years of my life," she warbled. Silver-haired Betty squeezed her shoulder. "There, there, sweetie. Now don't cry. Just remember, all things work together for good for those who love God."

Forcing a smile, Ginger stiffened, brushing a strand of copper hair behind one ear. She still clutched a few locks when I beamed in on her distress signal. She didn't need Romans 8:28 right then. Later she would appreciate it, even relish in it, but right then the last thing on her mind was rebuilding her life; she was bleeding, in agony, protecting a gaping, open wound. She had come to us hoping for first-aid provisions—a tourniquet, a sling, a good strong crutch.

Not to mention an antidote for stinging bug bites.

When I looked over at Ginger, pale and stone-faced, I made up my mind to volunteer as her guide through this desert experience. My mission, should she accept the offer, would be to show her how to welcome the difficulties that now poured into her life.

Huh? Welcome the storm clouds? you might be wondering. *Welcome this plague I'm now facing?*

You can't see me, but I'm nodding. Yes, that's exactly what you can do.

Of course, no sane person sends out invitations to a bug banquet. We never ask for a swarm of trouble or disaster, but when it arrives, we can learn to welcome the experience. Oh, not warmly, the way you would welcome a friend, but wisely, like you might a visiting professor who is taking over the college course. You may think the guy's presentation stinks, but there are valuable lessons to learn if you don't ditch the class.

Perhaps you're battling locusts today. I have good news for you.

In the midst of my own battles, I found a great promise of hope tucked in the book of Joel, right in the second chapter. Though the prophet preached to ancient Judah, his message is for us today. And it is a powerful one.

This promise will reshape your life if you let it.

Stick around. You can't miss the message: See the Lord in this experience. Remain true to Him even though you may not understand what has happened to you. What you see in the end will be worth it.

It's no mistake this book has come into your life at this time. Maybe you've suffered a loss, or someone close to you has, and you're searching for ways to find or offer comfort.

As you travel through this book with Ginger, me, and a host of others, you'll see that no one escaped the devastation in the time of the prophet Joel. From priests to peasants, nobody was out of bounds of the disaster that came along.

Today few of us escape loss. It seems to be everywhere, in so many of our relationships and families. With it can come confusion and anger and questions for God. Maybe you're there now, in the midst of trouble, praying for a break in the dark clouds. Perhaps you've struggled with ruined dreams, shattered hopes, and discouragement.

You may be limping down a narrow, rocky road, cold and tired and bleeding from a broken heart. Everything you planted in hope and expectation has been swept away and along with it your trust in God's promises.

Perhaps you can relate to the feelings of the women in my Sunday school class. The first day we met I passed around a basket filled with collected items from around the house and asked each woman to take one and use it to describe something about herself. Horti took the meat tenderizer. "My husband killed himself a year and a half ago. I have no children, no family. I'm not wallowing, I'm just marinating in God's love right now."

Ginny held the miniature Coleman lantern flashlight. "I lost my husband to cancer last year. I need some light to find my way." A young single mother, who had suffered years of abuse, had a spool of yarn and burst into tears, "I'm hanging by a thread."

You might be blaming yourself for the years you wasted on disastrous choices. Feeling that you've failed yourself, you've failed God.

So what do you do?

Take heart. Even the steel-tempered Scarlett O'Hara could never have fought off the locusts if they had threatened her beloved Tara. The key is not to panic. Don't be tempted to sell those broken dreams for pennies on the dollar. Stand firm, dig in, and hold on to your barren fields. With God behind the plow with you, your life will produce again—and better than before.

*God's promises are like stars—the darker the night,
the brighter they shine.*

Years ago, that chilly December morning at Sweet Pea's, I made Ginger an offer she wouldn't refuse. *Hang in there girl. Stick out the siege. I'll be there with you.* As a bonus I would throw in a pair of old frayed boots to trudge through the dirt clods, my jumbo broom to beat at the bugs (it does absolutely no good, but the exercise makes you feel so much better), and a pledge from the Master Gardener.

His promise? To restore the ruined dreams and wasted years.

If you stick with us to the end of the book, you will know much of what God taught us. We'll help you work through the questions, show you how to endure the painful attack on your soul and not run away to something worse, and most of all—how to profit from the trials.

Our God is the ultimate conservationist. He won't let one groan or tear be wasted. He recycles them into fuel for our future; they're like a bottle of high-potency vitamins guaranteed to provide energy if we follow all the directions.

Only His aren't in small print.

And hear this: he wants to be involved in this whole restoring process as your partner. You will not be alone.

If you are looking for a formula-type solution for your situation, it's not in here. But what you will find are some gutsy accounts from women who've lived through the wasteland of death, disappointment, and sorrow. Through their stories you cannot help but embrace hope and trust.

Whatever your circumstances, I hope you'll grow stronger and more hopeful from Ginger's journey to a new life. You will also read stories of other women who've not only survived but also lived on in spite of their losses to find renewed meaning for their lives. Each woman highlighted in the following pages is more fulfilled and more fruitful for God now than she could ever have imagined before she faced her loss.

By the time you finish reading, I hope you'll have a clearer idea of how God intends to redeem the losses in your life. As an added bonus, you'll get to know the prophet Joel, and I think you'll come to like this "before and after" kind of guy. He paints a pretty dismal picture of the "before," but wait until you get a glimpse of the "after"!

Pretty good stuff.

As we follow Joel through two chapters, we meet one of the great realists in Bible history—a man who looked at things from the right perspective. And knowing him a bit better will help you go from the earthly view—I have lost those years—to the heavenly confidence that the years will be restored in a surprising and wonderful way.

Think about this. The locust plague in Joel was an experience beyond compare, something so astonishing that people would be talking about it for generations to come. They would be telling their children and grandchildren about the ruin "in the old days" and how the Lord turned it all around.

But, most important, they would tell them how it changed the hearts of the people.

Your dreams may be devastated, but know this to be true: the best is yet to come. I know the path you're trudging down right now is not much fun. Restoration projects are a lot of work; they take tremendous commitment for months, maybe years of sweat equity. But when you're over the hump, when you can look back and see the fruits of your labor, you'll consider it the most soul-stirring work of your life.

For now, pull up the straps on your overalls, and go find a good pitchfork. Let the replanting begin.

She that lives in hope plants a crop where there are few seeds.

