

Dear God: Who, Me?

Thoughts on Answering a Spiritual Call You'd Rather Not Take

One of the most simplistic but powerful messages in the spiritual community is this: "God doesn't call the qualified; He qualifies the called." I have experienced the truth of this principle, and share my insights on following God's promptings after the death of my husband.

By Joni Aldrich

It's not unusual for people to speak of receiving their callings from God. Pastors are called. Missionaries are called. In many ways, it's not even unusual for authors to be called—think of those who wrote the Bible! Today's authors might not have such a profound influence on history, but their words can still have an impact. As an author and speaker, I consider myself to be one of those "called" authors, but I'm pretty sure that my initial response to God's promptings was somewhat different from many others who have written through faith. After all, I was angry with God because of the recent and difficult loss of my husband to cancer—and my initial response to God's calling was not, *Thank you!* but, *Who, me?*

God and cancer changed my life. When my husband, Gordon, was diagnosed with cancer, we truly believed that he was destined to beat the disease. Though we were not Sunday churchgoers, we had always believed strongly in God. And there were congregations across the country praying for us. I never doubted that God's "footprints in the sand" were next to mine, or that He was holding Gordon up. Like many cancer patients, Gordon's treatments were vicious, including three outpatient stem cell transplants. Every day, Gordon woke up to excruciating pain. The fact that he could get out of bed every morning was a miracle.

In 2006, I lost Gordon after a two-year battle with cancer. In my book about surviving grief—*The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief"* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392649-3-5, \$15.95, www.griefbeacon.com)—I tell the inspirational story of my own rebuilding after losing my husband. Each chapter begins with a touching yet inspirational letter to Gordon that I wrote during my grief "process." For those dealing with cancer, my first book, *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications,

2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95, www.thecancerlifeline.com), tells the story of the Aldrich family's experiences while simultaneously offering valuable step-by-step advice that will give readers the tools they need to have a fighting chance against cancer.

After two long years of constant struggles, the cancer infiltrated Gordon's brain. The final days were horrific. I still have nightmares about them. I felt totally betrayed by God. Now, I never blamed God for the cancer itself, because He gave us a beautiful world and *we've* polluted it. But those final weeks left deep scars where my love of God had been. I asked bitterly, *Why were they necessary?*

In fact, anger with God is a common side effect of grief. In our pain we strike out at that person to whom we are closest, just as Gordon did towards me while he was dying. Right or wrong, fair or unfair—it seems to be a part of our human nature. My personal rift with God was focused on the premise of praying for His will to be done—I had learned the importance of that prayer years before when my father had been critically ill. So with Gordon, I was very careful to ask that God's will be done. After he died, I thought, *Why should I pray at all if God's will is going to be done anyway?* At that point, it made sense to me almost like a tantrum makes sense to an unruly child.

My anger finally cooled, but didn't subside. And in the back of my mind, I felt that there was a need to tell the story of losing Gordon. There had been some issues with his treatment, which—had they been approached differently—may have extended his life...and I couldn't help but feel that others could learn from my experiences. But the more that God called me to act, the more impressive my excuses became.

I had a great job; I was a rare employee who truly liked my work and who looked back with pride over a 25-year career. I had never written anything close to a book in my life—in fact, I was trained in technical writing, which is exactly the opposite of writing for the general public. The excuses persisted, but so did that “voice in the dark.” Finally, as I was walking on the beach (a place where I'm always closest to God), several chapters came into my head seemingly from nowhere—and there they remained until I gave in and wrote them down. Several days later, other chapters came to mind. That was the beginning of a journey that eventually led me to leave my job and follow the path that I was now convinced that God—and Gordon—wanted me to follow.

Writing my books on survival have led me back to my love of God, and back to my love of Gordon, too. The effects of the brain cancer caused Gordon to damage my heart in his final days. Instead of sharing heartfelt love phrases, he was often short and bitter—and I was hurt and vulnerable. Consequently, I tried to put him out of my mind as much as I could after he died. Thinking of him and of his final days was just too painful. Today, though, I “live” with him every day through my books.

Several chapters in both books are dedicated to God and spirituality, and one particularly poignant chapter discusses “if only” regrets. Because this issue relates to surviving both cancer and grief, I have included a similar version in both books. The lesson I have learned is to lift your “if only” regrets up to God, because He has big shoulders.

So, what advice do I have for those individuals whom God calls to a purpose that might be at odds with their desires? Believe me, I tried to ignore it. God got tired of nudging and just pushed. At that point, I had to look deep inside of myself and consider the options for making a difference—for helping people. But it was—and still is—terrifying. I’m way out of my comfort zone. Somehow God has provided, and I’m confident He will continue to support my path. If God calls you, make sure you’re hearing the right voice, and that your cause is indeed a worthy one. If you decide to follow, you may find that unbeknownst to you God has been preparing you for your journey throughout your life.

When you consider my relationship with God at the time that I received my “calling,” you can understand why I would be surprised at his choice to enlist me. I simply couldn’t believe that God would give someone with a hardened heart the tools necessary to carry forth such critical messages on cancer and grief. Yet, He called and was very persistent in His message. I guess God really does work in mysterious ways.

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Onward with Purpose: Tips for Keeping the Faith After You've Answered the Call

You've heard God's call and have decided to act—but that doesn't mean that stepping outside your comfort zone is any less daunting. Here are some things to consider as you step forward with God.

From Joni Aldrich, author of *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95, www.thecancerlifeline.com) and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief"* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392649-3-5, \$15.95, www.griefbeacon.com)

- **Pray about it.** As with any major decision or potential life change, it's important to advance prayerfully. If you feel that God is nudging you in a specific direction or toward a specific action, bring your thoughts and concerns to Him. But don't stop with the telling—*really* listen to what He might be saying to you in response. If you're truly aligned with God's will, you'll feel a sense of peace about what you're planning to do.
- **Consult others.** Don't go it alone! Chances are, you have plenty of people in your life who will be more than happy to help you think through your plans; for example, your minister or rabbi, spouse, friend, or mentor. Not only will these people be able to give you insight and advice, they'll be able to encourage you and hold you accountable once you've begun your task.
- **Make a plan...** Yes, God has given you a job to do—but that doesn't mean you can charge full steam ahead without figuring out the basics of how you'll complete it! The old saying is right: "Pray as though everything depends on God...and work as though everything depends on you." The fact that God has called you doesn't mean that you're absolved of all responsibility, so think through all logical aspects of what you're planning. How much time will it take? What/whom do you need? Where should you begin?
- **...but don't discount Providence.** Yes, a plan is good, and even necessary—but remember, you're not in this alone. If God set you on a path, He'll be walking beside you every step of the way, and He won't abandon you. There probably will come a time when you can't see your way forward—but don't let yourself succumb to disappointment or despair. The right people and opportunities will find you. It's simple but powerful advice: Have faith!
- **Remember that you're part of a team.** Even if the task on which you're embarking is divinely prompted, you're not operating in a vacuum. It's important to discuss your thoughts and plans with your family and loved ones, because they'll be affected too—in the short term and in the long term. Be upfront with them, and get them on board. Their support is crucial, and their encouragement will be invaluable when the going gets tough.

- **Be open to change.** A quick glance through just about any religious text will show you that God has a tendency to shake up the lives of those whom he calls to specific tasks. It depends on exactly what you've been called to do, of course, but it's likely that your new path won't fit neatly into the life you currently lead. Changes—sometimes big ones—probably lie ahead. When you find yourself questioning if it's worth the hardship, remind yourself that the path of least resistance often isn't the right one—and again, always remember that a very powerful Friend is with you.

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About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* and *The Losing of Gordon* for most of her life. As a child, she was a better than average student. She wrote dramatic poetry. Before college, she worked at a newspaper. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. She has also been able to incorporate her love of photography into the design of her books. She feels it is her destiny to relay this true story to readers in a way that will help them in their own difficult trials.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight Journal*.

For more information, please visit www.thecancerlifeline.com or www.griefbeacon.com.

About the Books:

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