

YOU ARE
STILL A
MOTHER

HOPE FOR WOMEN
GRIEVING
A STILLBIRTH
OR MISCARRIAGE

JACKIE
GIBSON

“Losing a child is a peculiar grief. All griefs have their own way of breaking our souls, but to lose a child that you never met stays with you your whole life. But like all things Christian, when we do them by faith, a peculiar resurrection is born in our hearts, because Jesus is at work in all our deaths. The apostle Paul calls it a ‘fellowship of his suffering.’ Let Jackie guide you into that fellowship. This book is for everyone, not just those of us who’ve lost a child, because we all need to let our customized suffering draw us into Christ.”

Paul Miller, Author of *J-curve, A Praying Life,*
and A Praying Church

“*You Are Still a Mother* is not only a book for mothers suffering the loss of an infant; it is a book for all Christians, both men and women. I am now eighty years old, and Jackie’s practical wisdom (learned through suffering) has deepened my understanding of the ways of God and has provided me with daily solace. This is a book to be read, reread, dog-eared, and read again!”

Barbara Hughes, Author of *Disciplines of a Godly Woman*

“Deeply personal and richly biblical, Jackie Gibson’s book guides bereaved mothers to the Father of mercies. This is not a book about getting past grief, however. It is about walking with God by faith, even while empty arms ache for a missing child, and living in hope of glory.”

Joel Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI

“This lovely book is proof that things beautiful can grow from sorrows unspeakable. Jackie Gibson has found a way of lending her story of loss to others lost in darkness and overcome with grief in a way that shines light on the path ahead. In communion with others who have suffered in similar ways, with raw honesty but gentleness, she charts a journey of learning not to understand but to trust the One who does and who will never leave your side. These pages will be a balm to many, whatever your unique heartache, and they will point you to the goodness and love of God in a profoundly moving way.”

David Gibson, Minister, Trinity Church, Aberdeen; author of *The Lord of Psalm 23*

“This beautiful book captures both the profound devastation of losing a child through stillbirth or miscarriage, as well as the profound hope in God that is available in the midst of loss. It is a terrible thing to go through a pregnancy with all its anticipation and then to have empty arms. This book provides caring companionship and hope for healing for those who face this complicated grief.”

Nancy Guthrie, Author of *Hearing Jesus Speak into Your Sorrow*

“This is the story of Jackie Gibson and of Leila, her beloved still-born daughter. It is heartrendingly honest but also profound. And the hands that composed these sentences while drenched in tears also carry keys that open doors of hope. While written especially for Jackie Gibson’s sisters in sorrow, *You Are Still a Mother* is a gift to the whole church.”

Sinclair Ferguson, Preaching Associate, Trinity Church, Aberdeen; author of *The Whole Christ*

“In *You Are Still a Mother*, Jackie Gibson gently connects the grieving heart of a mother-to-be and the sympathizing heart of the Lord Jesus Christ. This beautiful little book ministered to my wife and me and we will be using it to minister to others. Thank you, Jackie.”

Dane Ortlund, Senior Pastor, Naperville Presbyterian Church; author of *Gentle and Lowly*

“The pain a mother experiences is like none other. It is the personal pain of loss, the pain for the little one you loved before meeting them, and the loss of a relationship before you’ve ever had the chance to enjoy it. Jackie has taken her heartbreak and has used it to bring words of consolation and life to those in need. Be deeply comforted by her reminder that the Lord is good, even in the midst of suffering. He will sustain you.”

Julie Lowe, Christian Counselor, CCEF; author of *Safeguards*

YOU ARE STILL A MOTHER

HOPE FOR WOMEN GRIEVING
A STILLBIRTH OR MISCARRIAGE

Jackie Gibson



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Preface



This is a club no one wants to be in. If you are reading this book, it is likely you are part of the sad solidarity of mothers who carry around the hidden grief of a baby who died. C. S. Lewis described the beginning of friendship as the moment two companions meet and discover: “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.’ . . . And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.”¹ Stillbirth or miscarriage is not something we want to have in common, and I wish you didn’t have a reason to pick up this book. But while you stand in the solitude of your grief, there are mothers all over the world who stand there too. I am one of them. Even though your arms are empty, I know your heart carries your baby with you wherever you go. Though in this instance you have nothing to show for your motherhood, you are still a mother. You will always be the mother of your child who died.

This book is the story of the death of my daughter Leila. I’m sure as you read there will be parts that feel familiar, details that you recognize in your story, the

“What? You too?” moments. There will also be parts that are different from yours. As I have heard my husband say many times, “Each person’s valley is each person’s valley.” But there is one character who is the same in all our stories. It is the God who made our precious children, and who called them home. This story is about him, and how he is always good, even in the darkness.

My prayer is that as you read this book, you will see that the God who was faithful in my story will be faithful in yours too.

For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

(Psalm 100:5)

1

Leila



*I loved thee, daughter of my heart;
My child, I loved thee dearly;
And though we only met to part,
How sweetly! How severely!
Nor life nor death can sever
My soul from thine forever.*

“A Mother’s Lament”
James Montgomery

FROM WOMB TO TOMB

This is the story of our dark-haired baby girl who died when the daffodils were blooming.

It was Sunday night, March 13, 2016, and I was a week away from my due date. I phoned the hospital from our home in Cambridge, England, concerned about my baby’s reduced movement. I was encouraged by a nurse to stay home, drink something cold, and count kicks. I did feel movements that day, gentle though they were; my husband Jonny felt them too, his hand stretched

across my full-term pregnant belly. When I phoned the nurse again and told her the number of kicks we had felt, she reassured me that there was no reason to come in. Little did we know, they were good-bye kicks, of a kind.

The next morning I woke up feeling uneasy, unsure if I had felt any movement from my baby. Jonny and I drove to the hospital, trying to make light conversation, but deep down we knew something was wrong. In the examination room, a cheerful nurse got out a fetal Doppler to listen for a heartbeat: "Now let's see where this baby is hiding!" As the wand traveled all over my stomach, her chipper demeanor quickly faded. My heartbeat could be heard, but not the familiar galloping heartbeat of a baby. She tried another Doppler, but still no heartbeat could be found. She went to get the ultrasound machine to check more thoroughly, and as she left, she pulled the curtain around our cubicle. I gripped Jonny's hand, holding my breath, willing all of this not to be true.

The nurse returned, followed by new medical staff, who gathered around us like ominous, storm clouds. "There's no heartbeat, is there?" I asked urgently, but they refused to answer until they were certain. The ultrasound machine was wheeled in, and just as they were about to put the wand on my belly, the machine shut down and stopped working. More waiting. Another machine was located, but it too had technical difficulties and refused to start. After an agonizing fifteen minutes, it was finally working. I couldn't look at the screen, so afraid of what I might see. Instead I stared at my husband's face, who watched our baby's body appear on the grainy monitor. The tears were already streaming when,

finally, the words we didn't want to hear cut through the silence:

“I'm sorry. There is no heartbeat.”

My heart cracked open and a terrible grief spread through my whole body. I didn't make a sound, but the tears increased and I started to shake. Jonny wept loudly, crying out, “No! No! No! It cannot be!” But it was. I asked if it was a boy or a girl as we had waited for it to be a surprise. I still couldn't look at the screen—“I think it's a girl.” A girl! God had given us a daughter. And taken her away.

After the pronouncement of death, I asked the doctors to wheel me straight into surgery for a Cesarean section. Surely they would take the baby out right away! But they gently explained that I would have to give birth naturally. What!? How could they expect me to go through labor when I was already in unbearable agony? I wanted to be under anesthetic immediately, so I could sleep through the horror of what was unfolding. No alternate path was offered. We had no choice but to go home and wait for labor to begin.

On the outside, I looked indistinguishable from any other pregnant woman nearing her due date. That same afternoon, we took our four-year-old to a playground. We were in complete shock but our new reality didn't erase our son's need for some semblance of normalcy (and we didn't have family living close by). I bumped into an acquaintance who excitedly asked when I was due. I couldn't bear to explain, so I just gave her my due date and left it at that. Little did she know that my womb had become a tomb.

The days between our daughter dying and waiting to give birth were the darkest of my life. The only thing that brought us relief was sleep, fitful though it was, punctuated by graphic nightmares. There was a moment after waking when I'd desperately hope it had all been a strange dream, but then I would look at my round stomach and feel the stillness. No kicks. No hiccups. No life. And then the crushing remembrance of what had happened would come flooding back. I was so afraid of giving birth to a dead baby. The terror of what was ahead overwhelmed me, and I spent most of those days lying in bed in stunned silence, weeping and listening to a few songs on repeat.

WE ONLY MET TO PART

Three days later, we drove to the hospital in the early hours of a misty morning, labor finally underway. Miraculously, the Lord gave us peace which surpassed all understanding, and we were ready to meet our daughter. We were ushered to a special room in the labor and delivery suite set apart for sad circumstances like ours. As we walked toward it, we passed the room where our son had been born four years earlier. Death and life only doors apart.

Labor was intense, but mercifully short—thirty-seven minutes in total! Our baby was born at 10:25 a.m. inside a fully intact amniotic sac. With no living baby bearing down, my waters never broke. Usually, the groans of labor culminate in the wondrous sound of a crying baby. But this delivery suite was filled with deathly silence as we beheld our beautiful, still daughter—a sister to Ben, a niece, a cousin, a granddaughter, a great-granddaughter. She weighed seven pounds, her

head was covered with dark hair, and she had a nose like her big brother's. Her balled-up fist was resting under her chin, as if she was deep in thought. We named her Leila Judith Grace. Leila (pronounced "Lay-la"), simply because we love the name; Judith, after her great-grandmother from Sydney, Australia; and Grace, because God graced us with a long-awaited second child.

Death had already marred her body. Limp and floppy, she had no muscle tone, and her pale skin had started to peel. But despite these signs of death, we could still see so much beauty. Leila had chubby thighs, dainty long fingers and fingernails, and thick, brown hair—all signs of her growth and health in the womb for almost nine months. I was so proud to be her mom, and Jonny and I poured out our love upon our precious baby. We put a diaper on her, even though she wouldn't need it; we dressed her; we cradled her in our arms; and we covered her face with kisses. Her cheeks were so soft.

Ben came to meet his baby sister later that afternoon, so curious to see her. He eventually gained the confidence to hold her, proudly sitting up very straight and holding his arms out just as we had shown him. Jonny wrote to friends: "For just a brief moment we felt like a family of four, in body at least, of three in soul." The sadness filling the room was punctuated by moments of joy; we got to see the baby we were so curious about for the past nine months. With family all living far away, we FaceTimed with each of them to 'introduce' our Leila.

The kind nurses in the hospital never rushed us. We cherished our time with her, choosing to spend two days in the hospital, staying overnight. Throughout the night, Jonny and I alternated between holding Leila

and putting her in the cold crib, especially designed for stillborn babies to preserve their deteriorating bodies as long as possible. Despite being exhausted after labor, I remember fighting sleep, not wanting to miss a moment with my child, to whom I would soon have to say good-bye. If ever I had wanted to slow down time, it was now. But of course the hours ticked mercilessly by, the moment of departure creeping ever closer.

Parents are meant to leave a labor and delivery suite with a baby strapped into a car seat, balloons and bags in tow. But we had to leave our daughter behind and turn our backs on her, knowing we would never feel the weight of her in our arms again, nor see that perfect little face this side of heaven. How do you say goodbye to your child and physically force yourself to walk away? As I held her for the very last time, Jonny kissed her on the forehead and said, "My sweet, sweet Leila, we'll see you on the other side." And then I placed my baby in the arms of a nurse whose name I don't remember, and we walked away with empty arms, past parents with their babies strapped into car seats, balloons and bags in tow.

LIFE WITHOUT LEILA

We returned to a home filled with painful reminders of Leila's absence: newborn clothes washed and folded, a Moses basket beside our bed, packets of diapers, and swaddling wraps. So many spaces and items were ready to be filled with a baby but instead remained untouched and empty. A friend came to collect the Moses basket so that we wouldn't have to stare at its unused mattress, and I passed on diapers and newborn essentials to another pregnant friend. A few days later my milk came in—another cruel reminder—as my body urged

me to feed a baby who wasn't there. After days of cold compresses and painful engorgement, the milk dried up. From fullness to emptiness once again.

The days blurred together, and the effort of doing anything normal like showering, changing out of pajamas, or taking Ben to preschool left us completely drained. It felt like we were functioning in a dream state. We pressed on, weary and devastated, just doing the next thing—eating food people brought us, caring for Ben, finding a burial ground, choosing an outfit for Leila to wear in her tiny, white coffin. As the days rolled by, bringing no relief to our broken hearts and exhausted bodies, we looked to the days stretching ahead and wondered what life would now be like—life without our Leila.

*For then this waking eye could see
In many a vain vagary,
The things that never were to be,
Imaginations airy;
Fond hopes that mothers cherish,
Like still-born babes to perish.*

“A Mother’s Lament”
James Montgomery