

Encouragement for Single Women Over 30

Thirty is an arbitrary number. There's no telling what year the tide changes for the Christian single woman—that moment when you wake up and no longer feel the rush of being a swinging single but rather profound loneliness as you eye what seems a desolate future. It happened to me when I was 26.

When I was 24, I moved to South Korea for a year. I was dating a guy seriously at the time, and we planned to marry when I got back to the States. I developed diabetes while I was in Korea. When I got home, I just didn't have peace about marrying this guy.

I couldn't talk myself into it, so I broke up with him. I spent a year trying to regain my health; then I moved to a new city to start a new life with a new job. Almost immediately after moving and starting the new job, I fell into pretty serious depression. I slept a lot.

I cried when I was awake. I laid prostrate on the floor of my bedroom waiting for lonely hours to pass. I finally called the guy that I had broken up with to see where he was and put out feelers about getting back together. But he had already started dating someone else seriously.

They got married soon after. I was devastated—I thought I had lost my last chance at happiness. I had a warped view of the sovereignty of God and had no confidence that He was going to work my circumstances for good.

Weekdays were hard, but weekends were unbearable. Sundays were the worst day of all. I hated trying to find a church home by myself.

Everyone else seemed to have a family. Walking in all alone to

a service filled with unknown people was almost more than I could bear.

I remember visiting one church in particular. I was interested in the topic at one of their Sunday school classes but felt distinct pressure to go to their singles' Sunday school class. So I gave in and went to the singles class, after which the entire class walked out single file to what apparently was the singles row in the church sanctuary. I was funneled right down to the singles row in the church—to have gotten out of line and sat somewhere else would have been obvious and rude. I never went back to that church.

I hated my singleness too much to allow myself to be pigeon-holed with what I perceived at the time as other hopeless singles. In my depressed state, I ended up choosing my church that year not based on doctrine or theology or ministry philosophy or anything of value. I chose my church because I had married friends there that invited me to sit on their row and would have me over for lunch every week afterward. That church allowed me some family companionship. I didn't care what they taught—having a family to eat Sunday dinner with was worth it to me.

Fast-forward a couple years. I got married and moved to Seattle. It came time to focus on having kids. I miscarried and entered a season of struggling to get pregnant. I was in a very small community group at the time—just three couples. And both of the other wives had never miscarried, nor had either had problems getting pregnant.

Each had a young child, and one was expecting her second. But both of these women were encouragements to me during that season. Even though they hadn't experienced what I was going through, they were very concerned and willing to listen.

I remember holding one of their newborns. I rejoiced with her over her new baby even as she sought to support me during my

time of infertility. She asked me questions so she could better understand my struggle and be a safe place for me to be honest about my emotional struggles.

Here's how I'd summarize what I learned during these experiences.

First, the depression I experienced as a single (which I thought was completely tied to the issue of being single) really was about much more than singleness. It was about loneliness, insecurity and discontentment with God's plan for my life. And that same struggle has crept its way back into every stage of life I've had. I've found that changing my circumstances isn't the hope of release from depression, because inevitably the depression returns in a slightly different form, regardless of how my circumstances evolve.

Second, I have found great encouragement from godly women at differing stages of life. These women were good listeners who were honest about what they did and did not understand about my struggles. They helped me not feel alienated, like I had as much to offer them as they had to offer me despite the differences in our life experiences. And now, as a married woman with two kids, I find some of my greatest sources of encouragement are from single friends who have never been married and have no kids.

If you are an older single woman, transitioning out of a time when being single was fun into a season in which it feels a heavy burden, I encourage you to think on this question: How are the mental, social and emotional battles you face "common to man"? So often, we tend to compartmentalize struggles, but I would like to submit that while there is a unique aspect to the struggle you face, there is also a common element to it that identifies you with all Christian women regardless of stage of life.

"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.

And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

I am burdened that we tend to alienate ourselves (and sometimes our churches facilitate that alienation with extensively segregated ministry) based on the particular burdens we face. Divorced. Single. Mothers. Newlyweds.

I'm not discounting the value of counsel specific to our stage of life, but I'm also burdened that we not discount the commonality of our burdens. Whatever emotional battles you face now, tempting you to doubt God and despair over your circumstances, they are not unique to you or your stage of life. They are "common to man."

You likely experience intense emotional battles (discontentment, loneliness, alienation, despair). You probably experience sin battles (sexual sin, gossip, bitterness). You have many sisters in Christ who have experienced similar variations of the struggles you face. You need your Christian family. Don't allow Satan to use feelings of alienation to marginalize you in the church.

"But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' ... But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor. 12:18-27).

Furthermore, whatever emotional battles you face now, your Savior is well able to sympathize with you. He understands your weakness and is ready to help or nourish or strengthen you in whatever temptation you face: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

You face temptations to doubt God's plan, to doubt God's goodness, to take matters into your own hands, to settle for less than God's best for you, to fill your life with substandard and superficial entertainment to numb yourself from the deeper issues in your heart. And yet, "For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help [succor, nourish] those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:17-18).

On a practical note, I highly recommend *The Path of Loneliness* by Elisabeth Elliott. I have at times had the attitude that I am a victim of my circumstances, and I look for anything to medicate me to put me out of my misery. Distract me. Give me hope that something is going to change. But whatever you do, don't make me really think about my reaction to this stage of life. If that's your attitude, don't read this book. But if you refuse to play the victim and instead stand ready to face head-on what God does for us through pain, loneliness and personal loss, this book is a good companion on that journey.

Elliott calls it a "severe mercy." Loneliness, loss, pain, suffering. It is the severest form of God's love and mercy. It is "not good" that we be alone. Death, loss, sickness—these are the result of the fall of man and sin on the earth. And yet God in His sovereignty governs the fallout of these pains. Sin bombs our lives, but God guides the ashes to the ground—like the fireman to the rescue, He clears the path to

the one door of escape. And then the bomb becomes not simply a force of destruction but the avenue to see God's providence and hand of provision more clearly. It becomes a "severe mercy."

You will never hear me minimize the pain you experience at this stage of life. But if there is one thing I've learned from godly older single friends, it is that we cannot wallow. We are not victims.

We cry out to God. We weep when we struggle. We are honest with ourselves and our church body about our burdens and struggles. But after all is said and done, we echo with the apostle Paul, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (2 Cor. 4:8-10).

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