

When the Holidays Hurt

I was 31, and it was Christmas Eve when we had “The Talk.” Everyone thought we were the perfect match, and I’d already given him too much of my heart. So even though I put on a happy face, my heart reeled as he told me we should “just be friends.”

We wished each other a merry Christmas; he walked out the door, and I fell apart. Then I pulled myself together again to join my family for Christmas Eve dinner—where loved ones joyfully announced their pregnancy. I rejoiced as I choked back soul-deep sobs.

Our Soul’s Bitterness

My single years held many Christmases like that one—sweet joys in the midst of silent anguish, bitterness tangled up in beauty. The very things about the season that enchanted me also served to magnify my heartache: parties with everyone coupled up but me; romantic Christmas music and movies; and those annual Christmas letters brimming with friends’ burgeoning families. It all reminded me of what I didn’t have, of what I longed for with all my being.

My fight for contentment and hope was so much more intense through those holiday weeks. But I didn’t have the corner on the market of pain. Others were also hurting and hoping for better Christmases to come.

Over the years I wept with friends who suffered the loss of a newborn baby, a parent’s sudden death, a broken marriage, a barren womb and financial hardships. My heart grew tender toward those who lacked the very basic necessities of life: shelter, food and love—as well as those who suffered “smaller” pangs: strained family relationships, the betrayal of a close friend or the loneliness of living far from home and loved ones.

And while marriage and motherhood have taken much of bitterness' bite out of the season, my husband and I have navigated a job loss, flooded home, debilitating illness and other such stresses, all while celebrating "the most wonderful season of all."

Dear one, you've been here too, haven't you? You have fasted in the middle of the feast, and you've tasted the bitterness in the bounty.

The holidays, especially Christmas it seems, represent all that is generous and beautiful. We sing of peace and well-being and hope. We give thanks, and we exchange gifts. We cherish the idea of an invisible Santa Claus delivering wishes-come-true, of family gatherings around a festive feast, and of hot drinks sipped at the fireside with Bing Crosby's voice crooning in the background.

But we feel the deep disparity between this broken world we live in and the world we were made for. Our hearts long for unadulterated happiness and peace, but we are marred by brokenness and need.

Our Only Soul-Satisfier

And therein lies the greatest gift of all: This deep disparity brings us back to the true meaning of Christmas. *Our heartaches, our have-nots and even the brokenness of the world around us—they drive us to the only one who can satiate our souls.* And that longing within us for something more, that discontent that follows the feast and the gift-opening—it reminds us of the immeasurable gift God gave us in sending His Son Jesus to us.

To live with us.

To die for us.

To give us the infinite riches of Himself.

And not only did He give us His Son, but He also constantly works this brokenness and heartache for our good—our infinite, perfect, glorious good. Though I won't know the fullness of that good until eternity, I've experienced it here in a million ways. Do you know how thankful I am for those years when God didn't give me what I so desperately wanted? Oh, how I praise Him for that long wait that made me fall in love with Him, and for saying "no" to every other man so that I could marry the best man of all, Edward Chao.

These holidays are for us, dear one—for the hurting, the broken and the needy. Our culture is enamored with busy, expensive, indulgent, feel-good holidays. *But God is always about us finding our highest good in Him, even when that requires us to suffer, to do without, or to wait an inordinate length of time.* He loves us too much to let us settle for lesser loves.

This Christmas, may our silent aches and longings compel us to worship the God of the universe, who wrapped Himself in flesh and blood so that our lives would have meaning, so that we would know the Hope that does not disappoint.

(Scriptures referenced: Hebrews 13:14-15, Romans 8:32, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Romans 5:5)

Taken from Colleen Chao's blog post "When the Holidays are Hard." . Used with permission.