

When You're Raising Kids Alone

✖ According to the U. S. Census Bureau, in 2008 there were more than 15 million single mothers in the country, many of whom are no doubt born again as I am.

There are a myriad of reasons why a growing number of women find themselves the head of a one-parent home. Some have endured the pain of divorce, the death of a spouse or a pregnancy outside of wedlock. Others are still married but separated from their mates. Whatever the reason, one thing is certain: God's faithfulness to us can be seen in Scripture and is evident in the lives of mothers and their children today.

A Biblical Example

Genesis 21:9-14 tells the story of a tumultuous family problem involving Isaac, the son God promised to Abraham in his old age, and Ishmael, his son born to Hagar. Though Abraham's wife, Sarah, was the one who originally suggested that her husband sleep with her maid, she later insisted that the son produced by that union and his mother be "cast out" of their home. As a result, Hagar became the first single mother mentioned in the Bible.

Early in the morning, Hagar left the place she and her son had called home for many years. It was a difficult departure. Nevertheless, she gathered up her belongings, took the boy and headed for the door.

Abraham was devastated by the thought of never seeing his son again, but Sarah insisted that the woman and the boy leave. With God's consent, the two were sent away—for good.

In biblical times, it was customary for a woman who was barren, as Sarah was, to offer her maid as a substitute to

conceive children. This practice was important because the birth of a son insured the perpetuation of the family, and it also provided an heir to the inheritance left by the father.

Under normal circumstances, Sarah's actions would have been acceptable. But a desire to 'help' God keep His promises and a lack of trust in Him to perform His Word—that Abraham would be the father of many nations and that through his seed all nations would be blessed—caused Sarah and Abraham to take control of the situation.

Genesis 21:14 says Abraham placed the strap of the water bottle on Hagar's shoulders. The Hebrew translation of the word shoulder is shek-em', which means "place of burden." Hagar was left with the overwhelming responsibility of raising a child alone without the provision and protection of a father.

Imagine Hagar (the Hebrew translation of her name means "flight") wandering in the wilderness of Beersheba. The comfort of the morning air was no doubt snuffed out by the sweltering heat.

With no water to drink and no well to draw from, death seemed imminent for the boy and his mother— until God intervened.

"Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation," God said to her (Gen. 21:18). Today, God is still reaching out to single mothers. He's offering to be a never-ending source of love, strength and provision as we face the challenge of raising God-fearing world-changers for Him.

After interviewing several mothers for this article, I discovered that the challenges single moms grapple with are universal. We face the tasks of providing housing, buying a car, pulling double shifts at work, feeding our families and paying for health care, all while trying to lead an emotionally healthy life. Many perform these functions without

the help of family or friends.

But I believe single parents who have a relationship with Christ have an advantage over those who do not. Why? Because the Father hears us! Ishmael's name meant, "God hears."

He demonstrated His commitment to Abraham when He responded to Ishmael's cries and spoke to Hagar through the angel of the Lord. "And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, 'What ails you, Hagar?'" (Gen. 21:17).

We Are Not Alone

God desires to have a relationship with us. It was never His intention for single moms to go through life alone. Oftentimes, it is during wilderness experiences such as Hagar had that we are able to hear Him clearly.

I can remember my trip to the doctor for what I thought was a follow-up visit for a terrible bout with strep throat. During my examination, I told the nurse I had been experiencing dizziness and feeling somewhat queasy. She asked if I would take a pregnancy test just as a matter of routine. I agreed, but when she returned with the results, I was speechless.

"Miss Lowe, your pregnancy test is positive." The first thought that ran through my mind was, I'm not married! What I felt that day ran the gamut of emotions. What will I say to my mother? How will I provide for my child? What will the pastor think of me?

My concerns were not unfounded. There was a time in many Holiness and Pentecostal churches when unwed mothers were told they had to stand before the church, confess their behavior to the congregation and ask for forgiveness.

If a woman was a single mom because of divorce, she was not permitted to serve in ministry and was told to remain silent

in the church. However, congregants who had other challenges in their lives were never made to come forward.

The home and church situations weren't my only concerns. I was just two months away from college graduation.

But when I prayed and repented of my actions, God spoke to me just as He did to Hagar. Valerie, you will have a little girl, you are to name her "Faith," and that's what you will live by. The word from God that day settled the issue in my mind and gave me peace in my heart.

Though God permitted Abraham to send his firstborn child away, He never abandoned the outcasts. If you are a single mother, you can trust God to walk alongside you and, when necessary, to carry you.

Faith, Not Fear

Noted author and Christian child psychologist James Dobson wrote a book titled Parenting Isn't for Cowards (W Publishing Group). When I first read the title, I thought it was a bit strong. But Dobson is right. Parenting, including single parenting, isn't for people who shun their responsibilities or are afraid to meet the challenges of raising children.

The Bible says Hagar wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. Located in the southernmost part of Judah, Beersheba was a desert that still exists today. Its name means "well of oath" and "seventh well," indicating that its function is to be a constant source.

Hagar was frightened at the prospect of losing her son to the wilderness, just as single moms are fearful of losing their children to this world. Scripture says she placed Ishmael "a good way off" and said, "Let me not see the death of the child" (Gen. 21:16, KJV). She then turned her back to him and cried.

Can you identify with Hagar as I do? The pressures of this world are enough to leave even the most committed single mom distraught! But take heart. God has given us a command to “fear not.”

Today, single moms are fearful for a number of reasons. Divorced women are afraid they will lose custody of their children. Some moms are afraid their children will not have the opportunity to go to college. Others are concerned that their children will take a wrong turn in life.

Oftentimes, our problems and situations are overwhelming; the odds seem stacked against us. For instance, the Census Bureau reports that children from single-parent homes are twice as likely to drop out of high school before they turn 18 as children from two-parent homes and 2.5 times as likely to have children out of wedlock. Such statistics indicate that single moms are currently one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in the church.

Single parenting takes faith, trust in God and action. When Hagar cried out to God, He “opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink” (v. 19). God provided a well of water for her and Ishmael. That well represented His never-ending commitment to single mothers and their children.

Raising a Great Nation

God has given all parents the unique opportunity and special privilege of raising children who will love and serve Him. It is our responsibility to fulfill our duties as parents so that God can make of them a great nation (see Gen. 21:18).

The angel of the Lord told Hagar to “lift up” the child. It takes commitment and hard work to help our children reach their purpose and destiny in life.

When I was in the sixth grade, I talked a lot. I would lock

myself in the bathroom and render what I thought were award-winning speeches to a make-believe audience. My mother would sometimes get tired of my jabbering and insist that I stop talking so much.

Later she would come back and tell me how God was going to use me to spread His Word. As a journalist with *Charisma* magazine, I'm fulfilling my mother's words partly because she "lifted" me up and spoke into my life.

If our children are to rise up and be effective, we must take strategic steps to nurture them.

I believe the most powerful tool in impacting our children for Christ is prayer. During my years as a high school teacher, I learned that single parenting was a key factor in a child's being at risk to drop out of school.

After discovering the odds were against me, I started praying Scriptures that contradicted the data. When Faith went to sleep at night, I knelt in her bedroom and prayed: Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and you will remain sexually pure.

Sometimes I laid my hands on her feet and said: His Word is a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path; you will take the straight and narrow pathway in life. And I spent many years at her bedside praying against turbulent teen years. Today, Faith is a born-again, pageant type who loves youth ministry and cheerleading. We can always trust God to perform His Word.

Another important tool is training our children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4). If we spend quality time instilling godly character through Bible study, loving discipline, church attendance and setting the right example, our children will beat the odds against growing up holy in a one-parent home.

Perhaps the most effective tool in reaching families headed by single moms is a single-parent ministry. Today, many churches are finding ways to help lighten the load with everything from Mom's Day Out programs, free child care and food giveaways to free car repairs, support groups and job placement services. Such congregations are intentionally reaching the next generation by helping to equip, support and disciple single moms in faith and family life.

I know from experience that it's not easy raising a child alone. But I also know that single moms can trust God to provide, through the church and other means, a well of spiritual water—like the natural well He showed Hagar in the wilderness—that will bring us hope as we seek to raise a chosen generation for Christ.

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