

Surrendering the Empty Space in Your Heart During the Holidays

It's the season to celebrate Christmas and the New Year. There is much to be done: shopping for gifts, putting lights on the house and tree and preparing food for friends and family.

Culturally, the holidays are thought to be times of joy, making memories and participating in family traditions. Yet for some of us, there will be an empty space.

The empty space may be a specific chair in the house that is now empty because of the loss of a loved one, or it may be a feeling of despair after a divorce. Whether it is the first year or the 20th year of the empty space, loneliness and depression can threaten to consume us. The empty space brings an unwelcome cloud that can separate us from the festiveness of the season.

During the holidays, the empty space may seem to hurt more than any other time of the year, because the holidays accentuate our loss. The empty space reminds us that the love and laughter enjoyed before is no longer present. It is natural to feel sorrow, grief, pain or anger, but it is what we do with the emotions around the empty space that can make or break the holidays for us and everyone else.

When the empty space interrupts my holidays due to tragic losses like that of my brother Elias in 2000 or my fellow Marines in Iraq (2007-2008) and Afghanistan (2009), I funnel my emotions through Jesus and turn the empty space in my heart into a place of prayer, knowing Jesus modeled this.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He was in an empty space. From here He could look up and see the city of

Jerusalem and the Temple for which He was zealous.

Even so, in His loneliness and despair, knowing what lay before Him, He surrendered His emotions and feelings, praying to our loving Father God, saying, "Not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Soon after, "An angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him" (vs. 43). This passage encourages me when I note the empty space where my loved one once sat, see a family picture from years ago reminding me of previous holidays or grieve the empty space in my heart. This text tells me that when I surrender my emotions and memories to God, He will strengthen me.

After surrendering His will to God's, Jesus prayed fervently from the empty space and "His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (v. 44). He then walked the steps of the "Way of Grief" and suffered an agonizing death on the cross, where He not only took our sin and shame but also our sickness, pain and grief. He then rose from the dead and sent His Holy Spirit to fill our empty spaces.

If an empty space is holding you back from fully celebrating the holidays this year, enjoy your family traditions but also start new ones, being intentional to engage the season with other loved ones. There will be times when you may have to take time out to pray and read the Bible or to refresh and recharge, but also make a point to rejoice together, sharing stories or pictures of loved ones who have passed away or serving their favorite food of the season.

Honor their memory by writing their stories for your children and grandchildren to read so the legacy and lessons live on or by giving toward a scholarship fund or other cause they were passionate about. If you are separated because of a military deployment, send your loved ones and their buddies cards and care packages, speaking positively of them when around others and lifting them up in prayer.

During this holiday season, surrender your empty spaces to Him, praying His will be done in you and through you and asking the God of all comfort to strengthen you as you celebrate our Savior's birth and the New Year. Look forward to heaven where "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. There shall be no more death. Neither shall there be any more sorrow nor crying nor pain" (Rev. 21:4). {eoa}

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