



Gary & Denise March 2014

3 Lessons Learned from 85 Years of Singleness

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For many unmarried Christians, singleness is an adventurous, carefree time, full of unique opportunities for personal and professional growth. For others, singleness can be frustrating, marked by the pain of longing, and characterized by a sense of “stuckness.” Still other Christian singles find themselves somewhere in-between these two poles. We know from personal experience that there can be a real storm of emotions during the life of a Christian single.

When we the two of us met, we were both in our 40s, single and never married. Because so many of our married friends can boast of several decades of successful marriage, we like to proclaim that we have a combined eighty-five years of single experience! When we look back on our single years, we know that God was doing some painfully transformative work in our hearts, work that we greatly value to this day, but wouldn't have asked for at the time!

Of course, God's goodness, faithfulness, wisdom, power, and beauty sustained us throughout our single years. But among the many things the Lord taught us, several are worth mentioning.

Whether you are a young single, a "single-again" by widowhood or divorce, or an older, never-married single; and whether you hope to be married or not, some of these shared life lessons will probably resonate with you.



"SPIRITUAL GROWTH" AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH CANNOT BE SEPARATED.

Of course, the Bible places a premium on spiritual growth (1 Pet. 2:2-3; Heb. 5:12-14—6:1). With that in mind, we would define spiritual growth or maturity as follows: "A mature Christ follower is a consistently Spirit-empowered person who, after having spent a sufficient amount of time in the study of God's Word, has developed skill in the ability to apply the Word to the daily situations of life." Also, Hebrews 5:14 tells us that, "solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (ESV). Based on this text and others, it would seem that emotional and relational health would be concurrent with spiritual maturity.

Then again, one of the conundrums we all observe in life is that we meet people, both single and married, who know the Bible well and who have skill in applying biblical truths to some life situations. Yet, the way they relate to others and the way emotions are expressed—or suppressed—is blatantly foolish. It leads us to the conclusion that the Gospel has only superficially affected their relational style and their concern about their impact on others.

We realize that "emotional health" can be a bit hard to define. But here's what we mean. Emotional health is the ability to discern and respond well to the range of human emotions, both our own and those of others. This includes giving attention to our impact on others, and to consider what is the wisest, most loving thing we can do in our interactions. Particularly is this true when we need to exercise "tough love" in our interactions.



Call it eccentricity or even socially maladaptive behaviors, Christian singles, just like married people, can fall into disordered patterns in the way they live and relate. All over the globe there are Christian singles who are doing admirable works of service for the Lord. At the same time, some are blind to and insensitive regarding their negative and potentially damaging impact on others. We are all susceptible to behaviors toward others that are self-protecting, dismissive, defensive, or controlling. We can also be clueless regarding our over-confidence, oppressive drivenness, and obsessive perfectionism. When all these factors are added up, they point to a lack of significant self-awareness. But what is more disturbing is that these factors may point to a significant degree of self-deception. Persistent self-deception is foolishness.

To be an emotionally healthy Christian is a tall order. To be sure, it always involves a relentless commitment to self-reflection and genuine willingness to follow through.

This process is characteristically painful. But make no mistake, the Lord calls you into this process, and He will walk with you during this time of heart-renovation. And, He will delight in giving you His supernatural power to endure and to love.

In order to flourish, especially as a single person, consider the following questions:

- Do I have a growing understanding of my true identity in Christ which includes understanding my God-created uniqueness?
- Am I gaining a biblically-informed understanding of intimacy?
- Do I demonstrate a genuine sense of masculinity/femininity without acting out sexually?
- Are my friendships Christ-centered and emotionally healthy?
- Do I have a "growth" outlook more than a closed mind about my ability to change?
- Am I healing from past wounds in body, mind, and soul?

Questions such as these require thoughtful dialogue partners. A small group with spiritually-minded confidants provides the ideal context for this kind of dialogue. None of us will make significant advances in maturity in isolation. Commitment to community and inviting discerning people into our lives is crucial. Additionally, a spiritual director or a coach can prove priceless in the journey toward spiritual and emotional health.



IN TIMES OF DEEP LONELINESS, LAMENT IS A NECESSARY RHYTHM

During our lives as singles, questions like these are not uncommon:

- "Why would God give me strong sexual desires but call me to impossibly high standards of sexual purity?"
- "Why would my desires to be married and have a family be put 'on hold' year after year after year?"
- "Why are there so few dating possibilities in my life--whether locally or even on the internet?"
- "Why should I continue dating when it seems that every relationship I enter ends up in disappointment?"
- "Why is my voice not valued as much as the voices of those who are married?"
- "Why do I feel invisible in my church, especially to my church leaders?"

In each of the situations above, there is a felt absence of God and/or a felt inaction on His part. Following the biblical pattern, lament is our cry of complaint to God; it is complaining to God with confidence. Our lament creates space for God to do a deeper work of reorienting our desires for Him and His agendas. It is important for singles to bring their discouragement, doubts, failures, and the full range of their emotions to God so that their intimate companionship with Him can deepen.

In the spirit of David and other biblical authors, offer your own lament to God about the pain of waiting on His plan. Cry out to Him from the depth of your felt frustration and discouragement. This kind of honesty with God is humbling, and hard if you haven't done it before. But this kind of passionate conversation is a necessary prelude to confidence in the Lord; believing that His plan for you is good. We must remember too that the Lord Jesus himself offered up lament to His heavenly Father in His dying moments (Matt. 27:46). Because of our union with Christ, Jesus' lament upon the cross offers a profound pattern worthy of consideration and imitation: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and HE WAS HEARD because of his reverent submission" (Heb. 5:7).

No matter how loud and constant, God LISTENS to our disagreements and disappointments concerning His seeming inattention to our deepest desires. And, inexplicably, as we lament, over the course of time we will notice that wonderful things are beginning to take shape in our inner worlds.



PERSEVERING THROUGH SINGLENESS PRODUCES CHARACTER AND DEEPENS OUR INTIMACY WITH CHRIST

A respected spiritual guide once wrote, "Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget it or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude [with God]." (Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 22). Singles who are living with deep disappointments are in a position of developing a theology of suffering, and more specifically, a theology of waiting. Waiting, by the way, is not something that is valued in our broader culture. At the same time, the Holy Spirit can do some remarkable character formation during times of waiting.

Biblically speaking, "waiting" means living with the reality that our singleness can at times feel both mysterious and unjust. Yet, in the midst of this tension, hope can be awakened, deep joy and peace can be experienced, and companionship with the Lord can become rich and meaningful. This seems to be the point that the Apostle Paul makes when he told the Roman Christians, "we rejoice in hope of the glory of God . . . we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:2-5) (ESV).

Psychologist and author Larry Crabb raises the following questions for those waiting upon God:

- "Where is God offering you the sustaining power of His hope right now?"
- "What vision do you have for yourself that fills you with true joy and anticipation?"
- "What vision does God have for you that anchors you in the confidence that He will complete the good work He has already started in you?" (Loss, Love, Lament, Week Three)

The waiting that singles are called to is an active waiting. It involves a movement toward others. It means not only "looking out for our own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4) (PAR). This is not a compulsive or guilt-motivated moving toward others. But it is a loving, heart-felt attention to others with the energy and freedom that singleness allows. Even in the loneliest of times we can be wounded healers and a source of refreshment to those the Lord brings into our lives.

**In the eyes of your Loving Creator, singleness is not "a holding pattern,"
but an invitation into intimacy with Him.**



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