

Must Singles Be Lonely on the Field?

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It was a frigid February morning as I arose and watched my breath hanging in the air before my eyes. I knew today's priority had to be finding kerosene to heat my apartment. Oil delivery to Armenia had been limited this winter making kerosene purchases an exhausting hide-n-seek game. As I ate my chilly goat cheese and flatbread a host of thoughts joined me at the breakfast table; I really don't like eating alone. Does anyone know my struggle? What if I freeze to death? Must I always be brave? Why do I have to do this alone? Who can help me? Where are my students when I need them? Why don't I have a husband? Why won't Thomas ask me out? Suddenly I was astounded at how a simple lack of kerosene led to utter loneliness and sadness.

Serving single on the mission field has numerous benefits of ease, simplicity, flexibility, time and exciting adventurous possibilities. Singles tend to learn new languages, develop national friends and adapt to culture, more quickly and smoothly. Housing and travel options tend to be greater and expenses fewer.

But as in most things in life many pluses often include minuses. The solo servant needs to be aware of and prepared for periods of emotional and spiritual loneliness. I believe for many of us single missionaries, loneliness is not a constant state of being but more a feeling which comes in seasons and waves.

I will clarify a few truths about loneliness on the field and then consider some proactive responses.

1- Loneliness is normal, and to be expected. The reality of loneliness is not only for singles but also for marrieds. All people experience times of loneliness which is a feeling of being isolated, disconnected, unsettled and longing for relational connection. Though followers of Christ know that they always have God's Spirit within and beside them, the longing for human interaction is natural and necessary. God specifically designed us to be relational and connected to one another for intimacy, support, and comfort. God even calls His people a body, each dependent and linked to another. So it is actually expected for us to feel lonely when this God intended aspect of life is missing.

2-Loneliness will be honored. God designed us for relational intimacy and he knows well the ache when it is lacking. God has provided several promises for His servants who experience loss of relations specifically for Kingdom purposes. "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life." (Luke 18:29-30) Without a doubt on the mission field God would raise up endless mothers for me when I was ill, when I had a cooking crisis, when I needed counsel, or simply a hug. And that is

merely the portion here on earth; He also promises we will receive in eternity what we forfeit on earth!

3-Loneliness is part of our own decisions. In the depth of our alone pain on the field, missionaries need to remember that they chose to be where they are. Often in the darkness and trials amnesia masks the truth: we are on the field because we responded to God's call and longed to obey Him.

During one of my emotional depths of despair in Armenia, because a close colleague had returned home, I went to see a mentor of mine who was teaching at the university. She compassionately reminded me that I feel the pain I do today because many years ago I made a choice that I wanted Jesus more than anything else in my life. And today's sorrow is simply a real part of that decision. When we chose to live and serve in radical ways, and have Jesus more than anything, there are natural consequences to this choice.

Again, though loneliness is natural and expected, it will be honored and is connected to our choice of following Christ; at times the feelings for singles can be more intense, more often and less easily remedied. The question remains...How then shall we live on the field as singles?

First and foremost, loneliness can be a call of our soul towards Christ our Comforter, Companion, and Creator. **Run to Christ**, call out His name, and ask what new thing He has to reveal to you. Enjoy, rest and wait upon Him for assurance, peace and relief. Discover fresh ways to relate to God in prayer, reading, music, worship which you have not previously tried. Do not become stale in your relating to Christ.

Find an accountability partner locally. Whenever I move to a new city my first priority after housing is to find a peer friend or possibly a mentor woman whom I can meet with regularly. Pray devotedly until God provides this one person for you on your field of service. This person will perhaps become your most valuable asset on the field. They need not be identical to you in personality, theology nor your best friend but a godly person of the same sex who is faithful and available.

Establish your inner circle back home. With easily accessible technology on nearly every field, orchestrate a handful of friends who know you well, to be ready ears and hearts during lonely bouts. Help them understand their role in your life and what you desire from them when you call or write. You need not hesitate or feel guilty about contacting them because they are prepared and eager to serve you in this way. But I repeat, though we need home friends, those with whom we have history, it is critical to have a local and physically present comforter on the field, as mentioned above.

Tiredness and weariness often evoke greater loneliness. **Plan well that after big events,** outreaches, trips to other villages, departure of short term visitors, that you will have a person, or

small group with whom to debrief, relax and refresh with. Plan this ahead of time, not when you are exhausted.

Similarly, **plan ahead in regards to holidays and local celebrations.** Again these can be desperately lonely times when the entire city is gathered with family and friends and you are home alone. Be creative, be honest about your need, take initiative, and gather some others together.

Next, **plan ahead for vacations, trips and conferences.** Long plane or bus journeys bring out the lonely blues in me. I try to travel to conferences, especially new cities with another person; even if I do not know them well. Travel companions can be so helpful in relieving the stress and pressure in going to an unknown place. Perhaps the day or hour will not be your ideal choice when traveling with another but some flexibility goes a long way in lessening the hours of loneliness and anxiety.

Know yourself well by tracking your lonely blues. For one month, keep a calendar of when you feel the most sad, discouraged, disconnected, or alone. Is it weekends? When overworked? During church? When traveling? At night? At language school? During a major decision time? Be honest and reflective about your periods of loneliness so you can better care for yourself next time that period arises.

Finally, **own a journal and open it regularly.** Use this time to explore your feelings of emotional, relational, spiritual loneliness on the field. For nearly all single missionaries, the experience is for a season, a term, a period of time which will conclude. Make the most of discovering your faith, your heart, your dreams, and your desires more honestly and deeply in loneliness. Do not fear the intense feelings or minimize them but become acquainted in true and meaningful ways with loneliness.

Note, several of the above ideas suggest scheduling, advance planning and initiative. At times singles resent the added effort of doing many things themselves or working to build relationships. But remember families and married couples also need to plan and organize; their provisions do not simply fall into place either. All healthy relationships, companions, and families exist because of attention, energy and desire.

And Jesus the single missionary said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” John 14:1-3, Matt 28: 20b

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February, 2009