

CHAPTER NINE

RICH IN HOPE

→ **Strategy:** The rich single life confronts the universal challenge of loneliness with biblical hope.

Meditate on Proverbs 14:10. Do you ever think that some people don't struggle with loneliness?

He spent most of his life afflicted by illnesses that made it difficult for him to engage in even the most mundane social interaction. As an adult he was barely five feet tall, and profoundly unattractive. His only opportunity for marriage came about through a pen-pal relationship with a woman whom he had never met. He proposed through the heartfelt words of a poetic letter. She accepted his proposal, but on their first meeting, one glimpse of the little fellow crushed her desire for their marriage. He never came close to marriage again. What feelings of rejection and loneliness must have swept over this man as he surveyed his life?

Loneliness. It's the unwelcome hitchhiker on the road of singleness. Whether it enters through broken or unfulfilling relationships, lack of family connections, or transitory life situations, loneliness seems to invade our hearts at inconvenient and vulnerable times. It has been clinically described as "an intensely painful sense of exclusion, of rejection, of not mattering to anyone, and of being worthless."¹ The man described above knew it well. We will return to his story later in this chapter.

Margaret Clarkson shares her experience of loneliness as a single woman this way:

There are times when such a depth of loneliness wells up within us, such a sense of alienation engulfs us, that we cry out to God in anguish at the apparent waste of His endowments. Rich personalities that know no blending with another; brilliant minds that know no kinship; full hearts that find no union with their kind—to what purpose is such waste?³

“ If I'm such a legend, why am I so lonely?²

”
— Judy Garland

It is this very sense of wastefulness that this book is meant to address. I have sought in these pages to present a robust and purposeful view of singleness. To that end, I have endeav-

For Further Study:

Read John 16:29-33. Why did Jesus tell his disciples they would desert him?

ored to set before you a compelling vision—for identity, character, impact, relationships, even for marriage. I hope your perspective on this time in your life has been affected for the better. But even if I have succeeded beyond my wildest dreams, there will still be occasional seasons where you experience the consuming cloud of loneliness. Is loneliness the radioactive waste-product of the single life that can't be disposed of or recycled? Or is there some purpose, even hope, in loneliness from the hand of our loving Father?

Darkness on the Edge of Town

One of the first things we need to realize is that loneliness, no matter how unique we perceive it to be, is a universal challenge. Mother Theresa called loneliness the leprosy of the modern world.⁴ Feelings of loneliness occur when fallen human beings wrestle with the complexities of life.

While in college I was involved in a relationship that I thought and hoped would lead to marriage. When she

1 Write down the title of a song, book, film, or other work that has spoken to you during a time of loneliness.

broke off the romance, I was devastated. Having no relationship with Christ, I didn't know where to turn. I remember sitting alone in my dorm room for hours, listening over and over again to Bruce Springsteen's, "Darkness on the Edge of Town." The song is about an outcast who traveled in the shadows, away from the light of human connection.

For a time, that outcast was me. My friends tried to cheer me up, but for a season of my life I was enveloped in the shadows of loneliness.

We will all go through seasons and events no one else can share. The death of a loved one, rejection in relationship, personal failure—these will always be lonely times. But loneliness is not always associated with isolation. Some of the most acute feelings of loneliness occur in the context of healthy relationships, including marriage. One reason marriage is addressed in this book is so that you will be prepared to become a companion in life—one who brings comfort to another, not one who contributes to loneliness.

The Bible presents several godly people whose lives included deep loneliness. As an outlaw hiding in a cave, David declared, "I have no refuge, no one cares for my life" (Ps 142:4). God's servant Job laments, "All my inti-

For Further Study:

Read 1 Kings 19. In what ways did God respond to Elijah's complaint that he was the only follower of God left?

“ As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’ These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng. Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

”

— Psalm 42:1-6

mate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me” (Job 19:19). Naomi, upon losing her family and finding herself destitute and alone, cries, “Don’t call me Naomi [pleasant]... Call me Mara [bitter] because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty” (Ru 1:20). Like some of you, these saints struggled with profound loneliness in the midst of unexpected and difficult circumstances. They struggled righteously, but they struggled just the same.

Investing in Loneliness

Meditate on Ephesians 4:22-24.

Can you list some specific ways in which, this week, you sought to put off the old self and put on the new?

Like the young man described at the beginning of this chapter, often the circumstances fostering our loneliness are not of our own creation. So what do we contribute to our loneliness—nothing? No, we contribute plenty. We talk as if we want to connect with others, but our hearts betray us. At the heart of us (you, me, and everybody else) is a heart of sin, and at the heart of sin is separation, primarily from God, and secondarily from one another. How does sin provoke loneliness?

Loneliness can be made worse by **self-centeredness**—the drive to arrange people and situations in orbit around us. J. Oswald Sanders notes, “Without the aid of self-centeredness, loneliness would find it difficult to exist.”⁷⁵ We discussed the self-centered view of life, and the damage it does to our relationship to God and others, in Chapter Two. Self-centeredness always bears the fruit of loneliness.

Loneliness can also result from our **demanding will**. Why do our relationships never seem as satisfying or beneficial as the relationships we perceive around us? Why do we lack the patience to let relationships deepen through trust and time? Why do we have so little grace for the relational failures of others? I believe it’s because the idols of our hearts are both demanding and relentless.

For Further Study:

Read Luke 6:30-36. Is it OK to demand justice from someone who wrongs you?

The Apostle James questions us, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?” (Jas 4:1). James reveals that it is not outward events, but my inward desires (that I have elevated to the level of idolatrous demands) that lead to relational breakdown. As we learned in Chapter Six, when we begin to sacrifice relationships on the altar of

2 Psalm 68:6 states, “God sets the lonely in families.” An alternate translation is, “God sets the desolate in a homeland.” Using your own words, write another way of expressing this verse, based on your own understanding of and experience with God.

our selfish demands, we destroy true fellowship. When this happens we experience the opposite of fellowship—loneliness.

In this maelstrom of sinful propensities and circumstantial challenges, where does God come into the picture? Charles Spurgeon reminds us,

God is all eye and all ear, and all his eye and all his ear are for his people. Are you distressed in heart? God sees your distress. Are you crying in secret in the bitterness of your soul? God hears your cry. You

are not alone. O lonely spirit, broken spirit, be not dismayed; be not given to despair. God is with you. If he sees nothing else, he will see you. “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous.” And if he hears no one else in the world, he will hear you. “His ears are open to their cry.”⁶

““ What is God working on? Is He working hard to provide us with the biggest pile of this world’s stuff and this world’s happy experiences? If so, He has miserably failed. Even worse, He has used His creative and redemptive power to give us only that which is doomed to pass away. Would this be the work of a good God? Would a good God motivate us to hope in things that are by their very nature temporary?...Would He be good if He did anything less than to confront our powerful delusion of the permanence of this world?”

”
— Paul Tripp

When I sense the darkness of loneliness encroaching, I try to remember Jesus, my Good Shepherd, the One who gathers his sheep to himself (including strays like me). He will lovingly discipline me in my sinfulness. He will identify with and comfort me in my distress. He will give me hope. And he will do no less for you. Regardless of the apparent reasons for our feelings of loneliness, we need to see them as the loving call of God; he desires us to draw close to him.

God has great purposes in

all manner of adversity, including all manner of loneliness. I would like to encourage you with two of these purposes: solitude and pilgrimage.

Solitude: Loneliness as a Discipline

Meditate on Psalm 46:10. Why is it difficult to reflect on God when we are busy?

Biblically defined, solitude is not isolation. It is opportunity for private communion with the Father. Elisabeth Elliot, a woman greatly acquainted with loneliness, talks about turning “your loneliness into solitude.”⁸ God employs solitude to form two qualities in us:

Holiness, a divine set-apartness; and

Stillness, a heart secure and devoted to God.

These qualities, so crucial for the Christian who wishes to serve God in this life, *cannot* be attained without the experience of solitude. When you encounter loneliness or a season of isolation, embrace your aloneness as solitude. God himself may have brought you to this point to meet with you.

My children’s first pet was a cat named Nikko. As a kitten, Nikko would tend to get worked up by the bustle of the house. In this wired state he’d often rampage through the kids’ games, homeschool areas, etc., attacking anything that moved. My children’s solution was to banish him to the bathroom for some chill-out time. When he

was eventually released, Nikko’s disposition, while not exactly contrite, was much more feline than frantic. The change had been wrought through solitude.

Like Nikko, in my immaturity I can get all wound up by the bustle of life and cares of the world, even to damaging extremes. I’m so thankful that at those times the Lord graciously separates me to himself—so that I can once again be and act more like his child and less like his indispensable right-hand man.

It is also helpful to remember that God brings us into solitude not so much to test us as to prepare us. Jesus himself experienced intense loneliness during his time on earth. Luke 4:1-14 records that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. The isolation and temptation he experienced during that time did not weaken or compromise his authority, they defined it. When he returned 40 days

3 In which of the following situations would you feel most lonely in a crowd?

- A wedding reception for a couple you barely know
- Waiting to catch a plane in a city you have never visited
- An area where you are a racial or ethnic minority
- A new church or small group

For Further Study:

Read Mark 6:30-34.

Did Jesus have to have his “personal space”?

Meditate on John 5:1-

8. Reflect on the challenges of loneliness for people who are physically handicapped.

later “in the *power* of the Spirit” his impact and ministry began at once to be felt. In the wilderness, Jesus exchanged earthly glory for heavenly glory.

As necessary as that 40 days of solitude was to the success of Jesus’ ministry, it was not sufficient. Frequent, shorter periods of solitude were a regular part of Jesus’ communion with his heavenly Father. He regularly drew away from the crowds of mission and ministry for solitary times of prayer. In the solitude of Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-46), when even those with good intentions failed him, Jesus found renewed strength and faith to face his crucifixion. Jesus submitted to the will of his Father and exchanged “My will for Thy will,” ultimately to be proven in the Cross, the most intense loneliness ever experienced.

The Scriptures are full of saints (Moses, David, Elijah, Paul, and others) whose “my will for thy will” exchange occurred through times of prolonged solitude or relational poverty. Church history, likewise, is replete with testimony to the preparatory effect of solitude. Imprisoned for more than twelve years for preaching the gospel, Puritan John Bunyan wrote, “I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now....Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now; here I have seen and felt Him indeed.”⁹ It was in the solitude of prison that he began to write “Pilgrim’s Progress.”

Missionary pioneer Hudson Taylor and the great evangelist D. L. Moody both experienced failure that brought

intense loneliness and isolation. Amy Carmichael lived the last 20 years of her life virtually confined to one room because of illness. But by turning these times of isolation into times of solitude, these saints and countless others like them produced fruit that has pushed the gospel forward and inspired many discouraged

souls. If you find yourself separated from the relationships that satisfy your soul, maybe God himself has brought you to a time of preparation through solitude, a time when all your satisfaction can be in him.

“ It is a noble and a lofty spectacle to see amidst a race of frivolous mortals a soul, which being immortal, is intent upon its immortality, and though surrounded by the frivolities of this visible world, is intent upon the realities of the unseen state.¹⁰

”

— John Angell James

The Way of Hope

For Further Study:

Read Psalm 39:4-7.
When we realize how short life is, what do we look for?

“But I’m not Amy Carmichael, or D. L. Moody, or Hudson Taylor. I’m just me and all I feel I’m good for is filling a church seat and digging ruts I can’t climb out of!”

Is this where you live? Has the gnawing of doubt and discouragement eaten the heart out of your faith? Are you frustrated that your SELF stubbornly refuses to budge from the driver’s seat of your life? Have you quietly given up on dreams that once ignited your passion for God? Where do you turn when you’ve tried all the tricks and exhausted all the remedies for loneliness?

The Bible does give an answer: Hope.

Now, if you are like me, you tend to look at hope as sort of the Santa Claus of Christian virtues—good for setting a happy mood but not likely to deliver the goods on the big day. In our modern, comfortable Christianity, hope has taken a bad rap as the uncoordinated cousin of faith and love in the backyard football game of life. You know, “Faith will be the quarterback, Love can be the receiver, and Hope...um, you can hike the ball.”

But in the Bible, hope stands triumphantly on its own.

4 Committing which of these social stumbles would, for you, be most likely to create a sense of isolation?

- Declaring an unpopular political opinion
- Talking approvingly of a movie that you suddenly realize others find objectionable
- Being the object of a practical joke
- Being offered a breath mint for no apparent reason

In fact, Paul tells the Colossians that faith and love actually spring from hope (Col 1:5). The hope of the Bible is energetic (a “living hope” in 1 Peter 1:3) and rock solid, an anchor for our souls both firm and secure (Heb 6:19). Hope doesn’t simply stand pat, it compels us onward and upward—toward joy (Ro 12:12), peace (Ro 15:13), boldness (2Co 3:12), endurance (1Th 1:3), action (1Pe 1:13), and holiness (1Jn 3:3).

What is hope? *Essentially, hope is the ability given to us by God to view life from an eternal perspective.* Hope allows us to live in this oppressive and soul-numbing present world with spirits unbroken.

How does it work? Hope emerges within us when we trust in the sovereignty and goodness of God. God’s gift of hope is there for us at each moment—when life is pleasant and faith is strong and untested, but also (and even especially) when we face difficult circumstances with a battered faith.

The book of Lamentations tells the ghastly tale of the destruction of a civilization. The people about whom this book was written have rejected God and are reaping the

For Further Study:

Read Romans 5:1-5 (reproduced in the box on page 143).
Why doesn’t hope disappoint us?

JOY IN THE JOURNEY

There is a joy in the journey
There's a light we can love on the way
There is a wonder and wildness to life
And freedom for those who obey

And all those who seek it shall find it
A pardon for all who believe
Hope for the hopeless and sight for the blind

To all who've been born of the Spirit
And who share incarnation with Him
Who belong to eternity stranded in time
And weary of struggling with sin

Forget not the hope that's before you
And never stop counting the cost
Remember the hopelessness when you were lost

There is a joy in the journey
There's a light we can love on the way
There is a wonder and wildness to life
And freedom for those who obey

— **Michael Card, 1986,**
Birdwing Music/Mole End Music (ASCAP)

horrible consequences of rebellion. Famine, disease, and devastation were the life experience of an entire generation. Yet in the midst of this terrible tribulation, hope springs up like a flower in the rubble. Listen to the power of hope.

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD (La 3:19-26).

“ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.¹¹ ”

— Paul the Apostle

The Lamentor has known nothing but hardship in experience, yet he grasps on to the anchor of deeper truth—that “his compassions never fail.” In other words, only God can promise good and deliver it without fail. This is where the power of hope ignites. It sees beyond present reality to the goodness and sovereignty of God, and it acts on that reality.

For the Christian, the greatest expression of God's sovereign goodness occurred in the death and resurrec-

tion of Jesus Christ. Therefore, *all Christian hope draws its authority from the resurrection of Christ*. Without the resurrection there is no reason to hope (1Co 15:19). Why? Because the resurrection not only authenticates the past compassion of God toward us, it guarantees that our future lies in life everlasting. Hope, remember, is *eternal perspective*. It searches out the deeper truth of existence and finds true and eternally valid reasons for faith in the present.

John Calvin describes this dynamic of faith and hope so clearly:

Meditate on
1 Corinthians 15:13-26. How can this passage help you respond to someone who says it's OK to believe that Jesus was a good man but not God's son?

Faith believes that God is true; hope expects that in due season he will manifest his truth. Faith believes that he is our Father; hope expects that he will always act the part of a Father towards us. Faith believes that eternal life has been given to us; hope expects that it will one day be revealed. Faith is the foundation on which hope rests; hope nourishes and sustains faith....Hope is nothing else than the food and strength of faith.¹²

For Further Study:
Read Titus 2:11-14.
How should we live, as we await our eternal hope?

Remember in Chapter One when we talked about the inadequacy of coping? Coping with life in general, and singleness in particular, is the opposite of hope. Coping is hopeless acceptance of “the hand you’ve been dealt.” If there is one thing I want to communicate through this book, it’s this—a **rich life, single or otherwise, is a life lived for the glory of God.** Hope always glorifies God, because it is a foretaste of the eternal life that he has given us. It is the lamp of welcome on our pathway home.

Of Refugees and Pilgrims

In 1994, one of the great tragedies of the 20th century occurred in the African country of Rwanda. An ethnic civil war triggered the genocidal massacre of more than 500,000 people in just a few short months. Hundreds of thousands of Rwandans fled to neighboring countries for asylum, creating instant refugee camps the size of cities. Many people died in the camps from disease, malnutrition, and further violence before some semblance of order was brought by international relief organizations.

Many of the refugees were children, orphaned when their parents died in the genocide. Others had simply gotten lost in the mass exodus of the refugees—cut off from their parents by the fleeing mob. Many children who made it to the camps were sent away by their sick parents

to find a relief station, where “orphans” had a much better chance of receiving help than did children who arrived with parents.

Temporary orphanages were built and filled overnight, but more orphans continued to pour across the borders.

A small but significant miracle occurred in one of

““ They say that love can
heal the broken
They say that hope can make you see
They say that faith can find a savior
If you would follow and believe
With faith like a child¹³

””
— Dan Haseltine

these orphanages. A young, anonymous child had found a refuge from the chaos. Just a few months earlier, this child would have been growing up innocently in a small village. Now the child was alone and adrift in a violent world. But in the midst of that colossal nightmare, this lost child experienced a miracle. How do we know? A Christian relief worker came across the lyrics to a song, scribbled on a piece of scrap paper in the labored scrawl of a little child. It is a song that must have been sung through tears of despair and fear, a song of hope from within the midst of a hopeless situation.

I hear talking about the Heavenly home
They tell me there are many houses
They tell me that it is a very good place
And it is very good to be there
What wonderful country in which God lives!

They tell me that my house is also there
in that Heavenly home
I hear that many friends are there
that they are waiting for me in heaven
Where the water of life is transparent and it comes
from the throne of the King, God

They tell me that Jesus is the King of that place
I will see Him face to face when I reach there
No lamentation will be there
There will be peace in that house which is built in gold

They tell me there will be no crying
Jesus will take away tears from our eyes
There is no sadness and there is peace in Heaven
And a lot of enjoyment only¹⁴

This child was a homeless orphan, a refugee. But somehow in this lonely, desperate, hopeless chaos, hope broke through. A refugee became a pilgrim. That was the miracle.

What is a pilgrim? According to the dictionary, a pilgrim is one who travels in search of a sacred place, or a sojourner for reasons of faith. By contrast, a refugee survives. A refugee has no place to go.

A refugee can only cope.

But pilgrims are people on the move. We can't stop, won't stop—a goal awaits. So we live with purpose, with vision, and with wise investment of our lives. Are you a

Meditate on Psalm 84. Meditate on this Psalm as an itinerary for your personal pilgrimage in God.

refugee...or a pilgrim? What this anonymous orphan child found, and what we in our own way need to grasp, is that the difference between a refugee and a pilgrim is hope—the blessed hope of Christ in you, the hope of glory. If you know Christ, you have hope, and you *are* a pilgrim.

Brothers and sisters, I have wanted this book to encourage you. It is meant to help you look at your singleness with greater joy and anticipation. I trust that reading it will challenge you to better use of your glorious

opportunity as a single man or woman to exercise undivided devotion to the Lord. I pray that it will help you make better decisions and build better friendships, and that it will help you prepare for your call as a single—and for marriage, should that time come. But more than anything I want to inspire you to embrace the pilgrimage of the Christian life. I want you to be rich in hope.

To be a pilgrim means to embrace the challenges of life, and the loneliness of our singular journey, as investments in hope. A. W. Tozer once wrote: “Most of the world’s great souls have been lonely. Loneliness seems to be the one price the saint must pay for his saintliness.”¹⁵ Beyond seasons of solitude, there is an abiding loneliness that all who walk the path of Christ must embrace—singles and marrieds alike. Though often hidden in the fabric of our busy lives, the loneliness of pilgrimage is familiar to us all.

But the cost of this pilgrimage is nothing compared to the riches to be enjoyed at the end of the journey. It is like trading play money for bars of pure gold. Many have walked the road before you and are now waiting to cheer you to the finish (Heb 11). Some of them you have

encountered in this book. Others will walk alongside you on the way as dear traveling companions. God may even give you one person to be your lifelong partner in pilgrimage. No matter what your future on this earth holds, at this moment you are a single person walking a pilgrimage in the gift of singleness. Do it for the glory of God.

5 Which of the following gives you the greatest sense of eternity?

- Times of worship
- Seeing someone come to Christ
- Answered prayer
- Experiencing the wonders of God’s creation

Meditate on 1 Peter 1:3-7. How is hope presently living in your life?

“ Home is where our Father is. While we are content to be on our Father’s business here in these seventy-year motel rooms we call bodies, we are never entirely at home. How can we be? Our true home is so far superior, and the spiritual family there so vast and rich. The Great Reunion awaits us, and we long for it.¹⁶

— Randy Alcorn

And when you get to the end, **he** will be there. The Blessed Hope with arms outstretched and a big smile on his face. He has prepared a place for you, a city, a house, a place at his table. And at that table there will be an exchange—your loneliness for rest, your suffering for glory, the perishable for the imperishable, pilgrimage for home. The Rich Single Life will have been lived, and the eternal inheritance which has been kept in heaven for you, will be yours!

* * * * *

By the way, whatever happened to the poor little pilgrim at the beginning of this chapter? His name was Isaac Watts, and though he remained single all his life, he too found hope in his journey. From this hope came more than 600 hymns to the glory and faithfulness of God, including these words of encouragement to the lonely pilgrim:

O God our Help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come
Be Thou our Guide while life shall last,
And our eternal home.¹⁷ ■

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Make a list of words that describe the experience of loneliness.
2. What kinds of everyday experiences can trigger feelings of loneliness for you?
3. What can cause loneliness in a marriage relationship? What can help prevent it?
4. How does self-centeredness tend to express itself in you?
5. How can you know when your expectations of a relationship are appropriate and when they are demanding?
6. Describe a time when you realized that God was at work separating you to himself.
7. Why do we as Christians have such trouble when faced with a “my will or thy will” decision? (See p. 140)

8. When faced with loneliness, where are you likely to turn?
9. Describe a time when you found hope in God.
10. How can you keep from coping and start hoping?

RECOMMENDED READING *Future Grace* by John Piper (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1995)

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NOTES

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