

KINGDOM SINGLE

By **V.J. ALTHOUSE**

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The taxi driver looked at me aghast in the rear-view mirror: “*YOU are SINGLE!?? What a WASTE!*”

I have spent a good amount of time riding in taxis around the world, especially in New York City where I live working among international people. Conversations with taxi drivers quickly turn to the topic of families, and arrive in that all-too-familiar location: *their absolute shock that I am single.* (Sometimes these conversations result in marriage proposals—so ladies, if you are looking ... !)

Yes, he meant it as a compliment, but ... is it a waste? On good days, I can usually laugh with my new-driver-friend and explain my choices in the light of Who Jesus is. On tough days, though, those words can linger after I leave the taxi and leave a sense of sadness in my heart. *While traditional cultures value family and marriage, and progressive cultures aspire to an ideal of independence and autonomy—how does the single, missional follower of Jesus hold this tension in light of the Kingdom?*

Waste or Worship?

Three times in the Gospels (Matt. 26, Mark 14, Luke 7) we read of the woman who was so overcome with love for Jesus that she poured an alabaster jar of perfume on His feet. His disciples were aghast that something so costly had been poured out rather than being sold to help the poor. Commentators believe that this was her dowry, her hope of future marriage, which in that culture and time period was also her future security. In essence, she poured out not so much a large financial

sum, but her whole life. Jesus received and honored her gift of worship—and not only that—indicated that her act of worship would be spoken of around the whole world wherever the Gospel would be preached.

Living a life of worship as single, cross-cultural workers can feel as if we have spilled all of our hopes for marriage out onto the floor. Others may see it that way as well. My friend Veronica, who is American Born Chinese and a former missionary in East Asia, received this comment from her pastor when she told him that she would be serving overseas: “OH! You will be placing marriage on the altar!” She hadn’t thought of it quite like that before, but those words stuck with her.

A Broken Jar or a Poured-Out-Life?

As I reflected on the task of writing about the unique challenges of singleness among Great Commission workers, I came to realize something: each challenge I have experienced, while difficult, has borne both personal and Kingdom fruit. Rather than seeing a broken jar, I began to see poured out perfume among the nations.



Each challenge related to singleness deserves to be named, felt, and wrestled with. The grief produced by each challenge should be given its proper space in our lives, and allowed to go through its messy, unpredictable journey towards our acceptance and healing. The purpose of this article is not to devalue the struggle, but to invite my single colleagues to *live in the midst of this tension with hope; to hold a Kingdom paradigm within which to understand their single status. A poured out life is not wasteful. It is worship. And it bears much fruit.*



The Challenge of Loneliness

Loneliness is not a challenge unique to single missionary women, it is a challenge for all humanity. Yet, for those serving in a cross-cultural context, loneliness can be experienced in complex ways. Cultural loneliness is only the beginning. Veronica explains,

Working and living in a different culture and language environment...I remember countless times when hanging out with local friends who would crack jokes, reference movies, or other things they grew up with (songs, people, events) and I had no clue. Earlier in my linguistic journey, I couldn't actually understand what was being said, but later on, even when I could understand the actual language a lot better, I couldn't catch the humor or significance. We can feel lonely even when surrounded by people in our same culture, but it does get compounded in a foreign environment.

Kristin, a Caucasian American serving in Europe, shares another example:

I remember once I went to a concert with some friends... I had to use the bathroom, so I went alone thinking that I would have to awkwardly find the group in the crowd. But when I came

out, one of the guys was waiting for me. It was such a simple act, but it really made me reflect on how my regular day to day is filled with me doing things alone and having no one to share the load, or even wait for me, so I am not alone. I often feel braver with even just one other person, so it is hard having to do most of life abroad alone. I have had to reach out more to strangers than I ever had to in America, and that can be emotionally exhausting...

Loneliness shows up sometimes when we least expect it: on your day off when you didn't get around to "planning companionship" for that day; on holidays when you are yet again the 5th wheel at someone's family gathering; in decision-making when you are exhausted by the idea that yet again another major decision rests on your shoulders. It shows up when there is no one there with whom you can share the hard days of cultural misunderstandings, or even when you sense your own vulnerability trying to just 'do life' in a context where being a woman alone brings risk.

I have experienced all of these. And in the moment, when it is strongest, loneliness looks a lot more like the broken jar than a life of worth, poured out and sweet-smelling like perfume. And yet, the experience of loneliness in my life has borne fruit.



The Kingdom Fruit of Loneliness

Loneliness has great power to produce Kingdom fruit in the lives of singles who are serving cross-culturally. A keen sense of loneliness produces a longing for

family, and when one isn't readily available we are forced (in a good way) to create one. This can happen in two ways: we lean more heavily on the formation of missional community wherever we are and/or we focus our efforts on creating that sense of family among the people we serve. In my own experience loneliness has produced in me a fierce bond with the missional community I serve with. I am deeply invested in their growth, health, and effectiveness and use my energies towards that end just as I perhaps would have done with my own family if I had had one.

My loneliness has also produced in me a passion for creating a sense of family among those who also have no family locally. I find that when I meet the needs of others, mysteriously, my own needs are met. Because of this, I have had the privilege of being an Auntie, Sister, and even Mother to young people from all over the world. And through those relationships, the Gospel has gone forth among unreached people groups.



"I love it when we get to live out God's Word," says Mendall, an African American cross-cultural worker. "I experienced family while serving on the field among the local people and my fellow workers in the field." She found strength in Mark 10:28-30 (ESV). She became a living testimony to the truth that whoever has left "house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children... for My Name's sake and for the Gospel's sake... will receive a hundred times as much... in the age to come."

Perla, a Mexican cross-cultural worker, shares about living with a family in her new country. They were downstairs, celebrating a family event together and she felt that she did not belong with them. The sharp pang of no biological family of her own hit hard. But, "When they were ready to eat, my friend's mom came to my room and told me 'Perlita, we are ready to eat, join us!' The rest of the day was just wonderful. My broken jar turned into a poured-out-life."

I have been personally changed by my experience with loneliness. Loneliness has taught my eyes to see people, to *really see them*. I notice more quickly, look into their eyes more deeply. I notice pain and loneliness in people around me every single day. Because of this, my own loneliness unites me with the people among which I live and work by our shared experience of this common human condition.

The Challenge of the Lack of Intimacy

The lack of intimacy in the life of a single person takes many forms. By remaining single, we choose to live without sexual pleasures available to those who are married. But there is a deeper layer: the physical act of sexual intimacy is (or ought to be) an outward function representing an even deeper kind of intimacy—the emotional and spiritual connection shared by two people who have committed their lives to one another. The lack of physical intimacy is hard, but the lack of emotional intimacy can be just as hard or harder.

For singles who remain within their own familiar culture, the lack of intimacy is still very hard, but there is a compounded experience of it for those living overseas. "The truth is, no matter how much we adapt to a culture or are accepted in said culture, we will always be foreign and often misunderstood," says Kristin. "That can get very lonely on all levels, especially emotionally."

While many of us began our young lives picturing our future idyllic family, prolonged singleness has brought that dream crashing into reality. In my experience, the loss of that somewhat simplistic ideal moved me to wrestle with, then recognize and embrace a whole new life in my single status. This movement from dream to reality allows me to bond deeply with others who have also found that life has not turned out the way they expected that it would. It is in that space that I can speak of my hope in Jesus.



The Kingdom Fruit of the Lack of Intimacy

My unmet needs have borne fruit in Kingdom ways. I found that I could live with joy, and that the “enoughness” of Christ for me was a testimony to the nations around me. For my Muslim and Hindu friends especially, my choice of chastity added weight to my words about following Jesus. My life spoke loudly to them. In the midst of a cultural message that tells us every desire must be satisfied now, a walk of sexual obedience is a prophetic witness to the world around us.

The second change I saw in me because of a lack of intimacy and unmet needs was my journey through grief and loss. To live life without what we were designed to experience is a loss, and losses must be grieved. While grieving the recent loss of my father, I most wanted to spend time with others who had also lost a parent. They “got me.” I knew they understood, and I was safe with them. Profound loss, while painful, becomes a bridge to those around us who have also experienced great loss. There is a form of beauty that only shines through those who have experienced great loss, and this beauty can produce great fruit. Our souls expand through grief and loss. In my own experience, *loss*, not some idyllic life, builds a strong bridge for the message of Jesus to flow across. In some form, singleness and the grief it can produce, does deep work in us that enables us to relate to the broken world around us.

Singles’ lives are a living testimony of the ‘enoughness’ of Christ. Robert Cunningham, in a September 2022 episode of the podcast *Every Square Inch*, speaks about fulfillment, “...in a world of erotic idolatry, [singles] are telling the world that the ultimate fulfillment of erotic

love is found in marriage to Jesus.It’s not an easy path, but it is a noble path.”¹ While earthly marriage illustrates this eventual fulfillment, single people are a living testimony to it right now. Singles “fast from the foretaste to savor the substance.” *Jesus* did the same.

The Challenge of Unseen, Unmet Needs

Unseen and unmet needs cross a wide breadth of categories, from the emotional need of desiring to be loved and known, to practical, every-day sorts of needs. We all desire to be seen as significant in someone’s eyes and to experience that through their attention and service.



Single, cross-cultural workers often struggle to name their unseen, unmet needs. The busyness and intensity of cross-cultural life (and sometimes just survival) has a numbing effect. Even if these needs can be named, *meeting those unseen needs in legitimate and healthy ways is a challenge* while far away from home and familiar cultural norms.

Single workers experience marginalization in various ways on the field. While much of life for the team and for the host culture revolves around family and marriage, singles must create their own belonging and patterns of life. Single people often lack places to process team discussions or even just the day’s work. Other times, single are treated as if they are not yet adults, no matter what age they may be.



¹ *Every Square Inch* podcast. <https://www.kouya.net/?p=13879>



The Kingdom Fruit of Unseen, Unmet Needs

In ministry, if what we give away is really *who we are* (not our performance), then this struggle has rich rewards in the Kingdom. Our single, cross-cultural work is the crucible through which greater Christlike character is being formed in us. Fairly often, some of the people I work among have commented to me that when they are with me they feel peace. Doing deep discipleship work in my own life allows me to carry peace to others who have not yet found their peace in Christ.

My own unmet needs make me more aware of others' unmet needs, and because of that, I work hard to give others the gift of deep, focused attention. It is this kind of attention that becomes a bridge for the Gospel. When we feel that someone is seeing us deeply, we feel loved. Few of us receive this kind of gift from others, but my experience of singleness has taught me how to give the gift of focused attention to others.

As a single worker, I have the opportunity to love many. As I Corinthians 7 teaches, singles can live lives "without distraction," pouring out our worship-filled energy and time, bringing healing to a broken world. My own experience of marginalization pales in comparison with so many around the world, but I can choose to channel my hurtful experiences into identification with others and be moved to Christlike, responsive action.

The Challenge of Displacement

Often, the idea and feeling of "home" is an elusive one as a single missionary. A sense of displacement can result from a variety of sources. It is hard to feel at home when you don't feel understood: Mendall shares her experience,

My first experience overseas was as a Peace Corp volunteer (which God used to prepare for foreign missionary work). When I returned home, I went through reverse culture shock- emotionally (family friends were not interested in hearing about my overseas experience, and they thought it was strange that I wanted to leave the USA in the first place. I felt very alone at home; physically, I developed shingles due to the stress of returning to my home society, As a missionary, when I returned home , my church family understood and supported me emotionally, but most of my family and some of my friends (even the Christian ones) couldn't understand why I would leave the USA, and were not really interested in the work I did overseas. I was very much alone."

Feeling displacement can also result from not having a permanent physical home. Even though New York City is within the United States, it is in many ways its own culture and country. I went through culture shock when I moved here 17 years ago. I have been changed by living here and by my many international friendships. Because of that, home doesn't fit me the way it did before. I don't fit 100% anywhere anymore. My apartment is rented because I can't afford to buy one, thus even my occupied 'home' space is temporal.

Feeling displacement is experienced by many cross-cultural workers, not only singles. But again, a sense of home can be even more elusive for those who have no permanent family with whom home is wherever you are together, such as it is for those who are married.



The Kingdom Fruit of Displacement

This feeling of displacement has changed me and my single colleagues in several ways. One change is discovering the home that we have in Christ while

remaining, in a sense, ‘homeless.’ My friend Veronica explains this well:

I experience this a great deal in a culture (Chinese) that values marriage and family greatly, and people derive their identity from their roles as spouse, parent, child, etc. One way that being single in His Kingdom has changed me is that all through these years, I’ve noticed how many siblings, parents, children, and homes that God has invited me to enter and be a part of...in a physical sense, I got this impression on my furloughs when I might be sleeping at 10+ different places within a 4 month time span...displaced? Yes...but also a sense of “having a home everywhere”...and tasting what Jesus said when He said that the Son of Man didn’t have anywhere to lay His head...but also when he told his disciples that God would give us houses, land, siblings, etc.

Displacement has the potential to move us into a desire for proximity among the marginalized. In my own life, it is like the pull of a strong magnet. In a sort of Kingdom paradox, I feel most at home when I am not in my comfort zone, cultural or otherwise.

Living in proximity also means living as Jesus did, incarnationally. To the best of my ability, I choose a life and lifestyle walking among those who have not yet experienced God’s love as I have been given the opportunity to do so.

Just as Christ did, I choose the discomfort of leaving my own culture in order to bear the discomfort of another culture—so that the message might have receptivity. Singleness affords me the freedom to make this choice without needing to wrestle with how it will impact my spouse or children.

Another change I’ve observed as a result of feeling displaced is that the American Dream has significantly lost its grip on me. While I still love my creature comforts, the ideal that I am chasing in my mind is not one of settled security, family and a picket fence, but one of Kingdom vision and expansion. I am then moved to live in a catalytic way: that those who already follow Jesus might be roused to live more intentionally for the sake of the

unreached and for eternity. My words only bear weight when my life also testifies to their truth. This poured out perfume of my life is a prophetic call to others to join the work of seeing all *ethne* reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Leighton Ford, in his book *The Attentive Life*, mentions the two realities of heaven: place and personhood—a place to go and a person to be with; “where I am, there you may be.” Singles don’t have this now, but point toward future fulfillment as they live with this anticipation.

A Poured Out Life of Worship



I reflect regularly on the phrase, “for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross.” Healthy Christianity is not flagellistic. We are not in pursuit of suffering for its own sake. Rather, the suffering that happens as we walk in the way of Jesus is embraced not for itself but for what it results in. In ways I cannot even imagine, all of the unseen, unmet needs I experience now will be met when I finally meet Him face to face.

In James K.A. Smith’s book, *You Are What You Love*, he reminds us that all of life is liturgy, all of life is worship. If we want to know who and what we love, simply look at our daily liturgies: what we do every single day. Every single day of our single lives is an act of worship. Just as Mary Magdalene did, kingdom singles can choose to love Jesus more than the promise of future marriage and demonstrate that through a poured-out life. While some see it as wasteful, Jesus *names* it and *honors* it as *worship*.

Are you single as a cross-cultural worker? Name the challenges, give space to the feelings, grieve all that you need to grieve. Then, name the blessings and fruit. Some fruit can be seen now, some we may need to wait to see. But the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies does not do so without hope. On Jesus’ authority we know that it bears much fruit. 🍓