

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.