

Week 6: A Thorn In My Side

Day 1

Dear GFFs,

Although I battle frequently and mightily with a couple of issues, that one that drives me to the depths is loneliness. This might surprise many because I am blessed with awesome friends, a wonderful in-law family, and my dear husband.

I won't go into detail about my family, but I grew up in Phoenix, AZ. My family didn't attend church, but a childhood friend invited me to her little Missionary church when I was 11. There the husband and wife youth pastors "loved" me to the Lord. As a young teen I remember longing to have my family join me at church, and wishing they were there the day I was baptized, but it wasn't to be. I was surrounded by a loving church family though, and that was a huge blessing.

My youth pastors attended Fort Wayne Bible College (Indiana), and thanks to a visit when I was 15 years old, and the Lord's strong tug on my heart, I decided it was the place for me. Again, I ventured out alone, but it was an exciting time in my life.

Fast forward!! I met and married the crazy piano playing guy from college- never dreaming I would end up spending the rest of my life in Indiana. I enjoyed living out in the country, learning to burn trash, dealing with rusty water, and sliding through intersections in my car. At the time, my husband Brad was teaching in Fort Wayne (about 40 minutes from home). He was the music/ choir director which kept him at school late during competition and musical seasons. I slowly developed friendships at our church, and was blessed to have a couple of dear college "sisters" fairly close by. Still, loneliness for my family, my Phoenix church family, and the desert sunsets dogged me.



Please know that in the midst of my struggles God had brought many amazing people into my life, and eventually He brought to fruition the dream that had resided in my heart since I was nine years old- to become a teacher. My career began (and continues through today) at my husband's rural alma mater- Adams Central. I have proudly worn the moniker- "Brad's wife" - for a long time now.

I assumed Brad and I would have children. We never had any definite plans and life was keeping us busy, so we didn't worry too much about it. When I was 38 my dad was diagnosed as being in the final stages of colon cancer, and only lived about a month after his initial surgery. To my knowledge, he never came to know the Lord as his Savior- loneliness and sorrow took my heart captive. During a three year blur of working and flying back and forth to Phoenix to help my mom, whose health wasn't good, I just sort of existed. Mom passed away- I knew life would never be the same without her crazy Lucille Ball personality, but I rested in the assurance that she had become a Christian. Brad and I realized that children were not going to be a part of our future - loneliness now became my secret companion. It accompanied me to baby showers, weddings, birthdays and holiday celebrations. Church was probably the loneliest place of all as it seemed to be filled with constant reminders of what I wasn't- not a daughter (anymore), not a mom, not a grandma- I was just me and it didn't seem like much.

Slowly the Lord has been healing this loneliness. He has led me to dear ladies I have been able to share my struggles with. He has provided constant reminders in scripture that He is in charge of my path - that this is what He has chosen for me and He will equip me with what I need. I realize that this aspect of my life has been "a thorn in my side," and has forced me to my knees for many years now - exactly where I've needed to be! I am who I am supposed to be because I am a child of the the King!

Love, Susie

Take time to highlight and/or journal your thoughts as you read our GFF's story. What do you think God has to say about these ideas and feelings?



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Day 6

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Loneliness is feeling alone no matter how many people are around you. When we feel lonely we feel disconnected, unplugged, left out and isolated even when we are surrounded by great company. Loneliness is a feeling and not necessarily circumstance. This feeling is real and was experienced by many people in the bible, even Jesus. The world says when we feel lonely that we are all alone, but God says that He will never leave our side.

Today's Readings:

Do not be afraid - I am with you! I am your God - let nothing terrify you! I will make you strong and help you; I will protect you and save you. -Isaiah 41:10 GNT

The Lord has made a solemn promise, and he will not abandon you, for he has decided to make you his own people. -1 Samuel 12:22 GNT

He gives the lonely a home to live in and leads prisoners out into happy freedom, but rebels will have to live in a desolate land. -Psalm 68:6 GNT

He heals the broken-hearted and bandages their wounds. -Psalm 147:3 GNT

Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me. Your Shepherd's rod and staff protect me. -Psalm 23:4



Yet I always stay close to you, and you hold me by the hand. You guide me with your instruction and at the end you will receive me with honor. What else do I have in heaven but you? Since I have you, what else could I want on earth? My mind and my body may grow weak, but God is my strength he is all I ever need.

-Psalm 73:23-26 GNT

No man shall be able to stand before all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. -Joshua 1:5 GNT

For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in.

-Psalm 27:10 GNT



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Day 3

In her story this week, our friend, Susie, talks of "a thorn in her side". Indulge me for a moment by imagining why the image of a thorn is so very accurate in this situation ... Surely you've had a thorn in your finger at some time. You can be going along just fine, doing tasks and living life, and then 'Wham!' you bump your finger and are instantly reminded of the thorn and compelled to grab your finger in an attempt to find relief by squeezing the tender area.

Or perhaps you've been pricked by the thorn of a rose. This is a sudden sharp piercing that has the potential to drop you to your knees as you cry out in pain. The thorn, though not in your skin, leaves a tender area that is awakened by pain every time it is touched. Whether a thorn has pierced your skin or is buried beneath the surface it has a way of repeatedly calling your attention back to your need for healing.

In her story this week, our GFF shares how she has been pierced by the thorn of loneliness. She has prayed and sought God to remove this hurt, yet He has chosen to allow it to persist. Why?

Meditate on the following portion of scripture. Why does the author tell us that God allowed the "thorn in his flesh" to remain?



Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. -2 Corinthians 2:7-10

Paul, the author of this passage, had something that plagued him. Something that was a thorn in his flesh. Something that pained him and pierced his heart and took him to his knees in prayer. He tells us that though he asked God to remove it, He did not. Why not? God allowed this thorn (He did not cause it- He allowed it) to keep Paul from becoming conceited. In other words, if God were to remove this "thorn" Paul would become confident in himself and not in God. God allowed the hurting to develop his child in dependence upon Him.

Allowing His children to struggle seems a strange way to express His love for us, but can you imagine the great restraint it takes on God's part to not just fix everything for us? As a mom, I love my children. But when I see them struggling, I want to fix it; I want to take away their hurt. However, fixing their issues or removing their consequences doesn't teach them to be responsible, work hard, or make wise choices. And God knows the same is true for us. We only learn and grow when we have to struggle and wrestle through the hard stuff.

Like Paul, I pray that we all ask God to help us bear our "thorns" not in our own power, but through the grace and strength of God. I pray that we will endure hardships with the perspective of Paul- knowing that if God allows hardships and pain He is at work to increase our dependence upon him.



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Day 4

There are many examples of lonely in the bible. Job was lonely when he lost his precious family, and on top of that his friends made him feel isolated and shamed. The prophet Jeremiah was told not to get married or have a family. He was not able to commune with people or join in parties. The very message he spoke would have isolated him and made him feel disconnected as the people around him would have despised him. Mary must have felt lonely when she found out she was pregnant. Left out and afraid because no one understood her, she would have felt alone in a group of many people and friends. Noah and his family were called to build a boat and save themselves from a flood. A huge boat! Water would pour out of the sky, which they had never seen before. The whole world was wiped out except for them! They must have felt lonely. The list could continue and the reasons for our lonely feelings vary immensely. Loneliness can stem from many situations. God may choose that for our lives, we may have feelings of inadequacy that end up making us feel isolated, or the people around us may not include us or make us feel welcome. Our identity may be rooted in something or someone other than God and so we can often feel like we don't belong anywhere. But one thing loneliness does have in common is we have all experienced it. Even Jesus experienced loneliness.

Jesus was so different from everyone around him. He was the only man without sin living in a world made of sinners. He stood out and was very different than the many people around him. He spoke differently and of things no one had heard of before. He wasn't always accepted. Even his hometown and family didn't understand him! In his biggest suffering his best friends ran away and denied him. Jesus was also living apart from his Father physically. He made the ultimate sacrifice and was forsaken by God for our sins. And so, Jesus knows loneliness. Jesus took on loneliness so that we would never have to be alone again!



Today's Readings:

This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. -Hebrews 4:15 NLT

So now you gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. -Ephesians 2:19 NLT

Now it's your turn! Find some new scripture combating loneliness. Commit one to memory, or add them to your notecards. Find one that refreshes your soul with a promise of never being alone. Keep it close so that you can share it with a friend or you can read it in your own loneliness.



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Day 5

As we draw to an end of the week it's time to take our GFFs story and ask God to use it to heal us, change us, strengthen us, empower us to help others, and move us to action. Are you one who struggles with loneliness of the heart? Then search the scripture to find God's words to you. Susie has shared that in reading Luke 5:12-16, where Jesus heals a man with leprosy, the passage ends with this statement,

"But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

As she read this passage, This is what God spoke to her heart, "This reminded me of how our Lord had to feel so lonely so often during his earthly ministry. I know he has been beside me, understanding exactly how I felt, when I was experiencing my lonely places."

What a comfort to know that our Lord understands us - that he has experienced and knows first hand what we are going through. So, make time to sit with Him and let Him minister his love and understanding to your heart.

Perhaps loneliness isn't your thorn, but without a doubt someone around you is experiencing this hurt.

Ask God to speak to you when someone needs your arms of comfort, a place to feel welcome, or a simple smile.



