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ONE



THE SILENT STRUGGLE

Why Childlessness Can Feel Lonely

When I was eighteen, I grew concerned because, unlike so many of my friends, I still hadn't graduated into "full womanhood"—I hadn't started my period. My mother was aware of the fact that my body hadn't reached full maturity yet, but she assured me that everything was probably fine, and we could give things a bit more time. As the months passed, my period never began, and we scheduled a routine physical, expecting to be told that I was just a late bloomer.

My OB/GYN was a kind woman who tried her best to calm my nerves. I'd never been to a gynecologist before and wasn't looking forward to the awkwardness that was surely going to accompany my visit. Growing up in a

conservative Christian family, topics like the development of my body and sex in general weren't openly discussed often. My parents were probably trying to be extra cautious because they wanted to guard our hearts and minds from the sexually explicit culture that was the context of our teen years. But as I fell behind in normal physical development, the conversations with my mom became more upfront.

At the end of my appointment, the doctor scheduled more tests in the upcoming months. Despite the lack of an exact diagnosis, the doctor had delivered devastating news. She gently explained to me that there was a possibility I would never be able to have my own children. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. She didn't offer any more information than that, and I was too scared to press her for more.

But I didn't have time to dwell on the "possibility." A few days later, I was packing up everything I owned and heading to Virginia to start my freshman year at Liberty University. The majority of my time and attention was focused on attending classes, making friends, and learning how to navigate college life. The one thing I didn't unpack was any further thoughts about my condition.

Before I knew it, Thanksgiving break came, and I could no longer avoid my fears. The possibility of not having biological children was another doctor's visit away. The night before my appointment, I locked myself in my room, facing a big unknown. What would the next day bring? Would the doctor confirm my worst fear? How could I go on living if my nightmare became true?

I had grown up in a family of six children and had been surrounded by other children my entire life. During

many summers, I worked in the children's ministry at my local church, where I learned how to better share the love of Jesus with kids. Babysitting was my first "real" job, and I volunteered at summer camps for elementary and middle schools. I have a natural love for children and had always wanted to be a mom one day. Sure, I was looking forward to going to college, starting a career, meeting someone, falling in love, and getting married. But I'd always anticipated the day when my husband and I would find out that I was pregnant, share the good news with our friends and family, and start planning and preparing for our little one to enter the world. This was the natural course of life I was expecting and longing for.

One of my deepest longings was to step into the role of motherhood, and there I sat alone in my room with the looming possibility of being unable to bear children. So many different questions stared me in the face. "Would I ever conceive a child? How would I handle life if I wasn't able to bear my own children?" But the one that weighed on my heart most in the quiet moments was "Will I ever be a mother?"

That question screamed inside my soul as I feebly attempted to prepare for the next day. Everything in me hoped that I'd find out that my body was normal and that I could move on with my life as planned. But I was aware of the possible outcome. I grabbed a pen and wrote out two pages of the most comforting Scripture verses I could find, mostly from the book of Psalms. As I sat there reading verse after verse aloud, tears streamed down my cheeks, and I prayed and begged God for a favorable diagnosis. I didn't think I could bear it if I found out that I couldn't have children. My faith didn't feel strong enough if God

denied me what my heart so desperately longed for.

The last words I heard as I finally drifted off to sleep were from the song “Healer” by Hillsong United. The lyrics about trusting God in the worst storms comforted me as I tried to remind myself that I wasn’t alone in those difficult moments.

The next morning, my mom and I pulled up to the Starbucks drive-thru to buy some liquid fuel for the “big day,” and she asked how I was feeling.

“Well, I’ve prayed up the best I can,” I answered. “I’ve filled my heart and mind with Scripture, and I’ve gotten a good night’s sleep. Past that, I don’t really know what else I can do. I’m just ready to get this over with.”

She smiled at me as she handed me my cup of coffee. We drove to the doctor’s office, and she tried to reassure me with the words, “It’s going to be okay.”

Everything in me wanted to scream, “You don’t know that! Stop offering me useless words!” Her attempt at comforting me fell flat on my troubled heart.

As with many young women, my relationship with my mother was complicated during my teenage years. I was homeschooled from preschool through high school, and the closer college came, the more I wanted to break free, spread my wings, and fly away from home as fast as possible. My mother and I are very different. She’s a no-nonsense woman who raised and homeschooled six children. The term “Mama Bear” accurately describes her, because everything she does is out of her fierce love for and loyalty to her children. A quality I most admire about her now—her ability to be blunt—used to drive me crazy. My response to pain is to withdraw, which made communicating during the early months of this trial even more

difficult for the two of us. We had a tough time navigating how we gave and received care and comfort, and although she was the closest person to me, she's also the person I hurt the most.

Her motivation in the car that day was as pure as gold, but I was scared, and in that moment didn't appreciate overly simplistic attempts at support. But I couldn't blame her for her response; I hadn't shared with her the depth of my feelings and doubts. A part of me felt scared to verbalize all the fears that lurked in my mind. If I kept them to myself, maybe they wouldn't come to be. While I wanted to lash out at her seeming lack of understanding, I couldn't possibly understand everything going on in my own heart. So I only nodded to acknowledge her words, and we finished the drive to the doctor in silence.

As we got out of the car, the chilly autumn air hit my skin, and I gripped my coffee cup tighter to warm up. We walked into the lobby and were handed a stack of paperwork to fill out. I was thankful for the distraction while I was waiting to be called back. Each moment that passed felt like an eternity. Finally, my name was called, and I was greeted by overly enthusiastic nurses who instructed me to slip into a hospital gown. I was guided to the MRI machine and lay there silent and still, but my mind was racing. I felt something wet on my face. Completely unaware that I had been crying, I realized that I had never felt more alone in my life. As much as my family wanted to support me, no one could physically take my place that day. The same questions that flooded my mind the night before were back and even more overwhelming than before.

Later, as I waited in the examination room for the

doctor to come and explain the results to me, all I could think to do was to silently beg the Lord to be with me. At last the doctor arrived, I could tell from the moment she walked in that she didn't have good news to share. Her facial expression was solemn, and although her voice was quiet, her words hit my heart like a sledgehammer: "Sweetheart, you were born with a rare condition that has left you without a uterus." Before I had time to begin processing this, she jumped into explaining what this meant for my future. "You won't ever be able to carry your own child."

I looked at her stunned. I fought for breath to fill my lungs, and in one breath from the doctor, my life was forever changed. I had been born with Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser (MRKH) syndrome, a rare condition with a 100 percent guarantee that I'd never be able to carry my own children. When my body was being formed in my mother's womb, some reproductive organs failed to form. There I was at nineteen years old—the same age Ana was when she placed me for adoption—realizing that, biologically, I could never be a mother. As I tried wrapping my mind around this news, I left the appointment and was back in the car with my mom. I was too shocked to cry; all I felt was numbness. It took a few days for the shock to turn into myriad emotions—sadness, frustration grief, shame, anger, and loneliness.

Ironically, Thanksgiving Day was a few days after the appointment, and the last thing in my heart was thankfulness. Instead of counting my blessings, all I could focus on were the losses in my body. Life already seemed to be moving on without me. Family arrived at our house that Thursday to gather around the table, eat a giant meal, and enjoy the holiday together. All I wanted to do was escape

to my room and be by myself. No one but my parents knew about my diagnosis at this point, and I was ashamed to tell everyone else. I was worried that they'd immediately see me in a different light, and all that would define me was my inability to have children. So, I mustered up all the courage I could, dried my tears, and spent the day with the family.

After the Thanksgiving break, I headed back to college, a completely different woman than when I'd left. The news that I would be childless sent me into an emotional tailspin. It was too much to bear alone, but I was ashamed to tell people, so I withdrew from friends and family. For the first few weeks, I was able to stuff all my emotion and grief inside me and make it through the day. I'd rush back to my dorm room just in time to have a breakdown but was able to keep it hidden from people. That is, until I experienced my first panic attack.

It was a chilly winter day as I headed out to enjoy our college team play basketball. I met up with a group of my friends and tried to focus on having a good time, but the familiar ache of sadness was still on my heart. All of a sudden, I couldn't catch my breath, and I felt like walls were closing in on me. I'd just experienced the first of many panic attacks. The anxiety I'd been carrying in my heart forced its way out. A panic attack is a "sudden episode of intense fear that triggers severe physical reactions."¹ I was so afraid of not being loved or supported. In addition to my anxiety and sadness, I struggled with loneliness. All my emotions seemed to force themselves out in panic attacks.

As I continued to process my diagnosis, my mind was assaulted by self-doubt and lies from the enemy. I felt as if

I wasn't a whole woman. If my body couldn't even fulfill the basic physical functions of a woman, what good was I? Would any man ever want me if I couldn't provide him with children? The Christian culture I was immersed in seemed to promote the idea that a woman's highest calling was to be a mother, and my heart longed for motherhood. If I couldn't fulfill this expected role, was I somehow receiving God's punishment?

Despite the earliest days of my childhood, childlessness was my first real encounter with personal suffering. Until that point, my life had been comfortable and easy. I found myself forced to wrestle with my faith like never before and came to a spiritual fork in the road. I had no framework for suffering, and childlessness is an intense trial that affects you and those who love you forever. I found myself in the fight of a lifetime—a fight to hold on to my faith. Chances are, if you're reading this book, you're all too familiar with this grueling battle. I wish I could tell you that my immediate response to my suffering was to trust the Lord and to rest in His love. But I didn't.

Instead, I found myself struggling with frequent panic attacks, depression, and feeling traumatized in public places, because there were constant reminders of what I was lacking. Even a trip to the grocery store could be a struggle. Once, I was standing in the frozen food section of Walmart, trying to decide which ice cream flavor I wanted. I saw a mom with two young children who were jumping all over the place, obviously excited about buying ice cream. I tried not to look in their direction, but they came closer and closer to me. Surely, they didn't want mint chocolate chip too!

“Get away from me,” I thought. “There are a million

other flavors, and I don't want children near me right now." I turned to the family to give them a look of annoyance, only to notice that the mother was pregnant. That was the last straw, and I stood there crying in the ice cream aisle. This scene wasn't an isolated event but one that played itself out dozens of times over the years.

Because the pain could be unpredictable, emotion would grip my heart at the most inconvenient times. But how God chose to show His care for me could be just as surprising. One day in class, as my professor droned on and on about political philosophy, my mind drifted off to my grief. It didn't take long for the tears to come, and I hurried to the nearest bathroom, sobbing. The custodian walked in on me having a meltdown, but instead of ignoring me or walking out, she came and sat on the bench beside me, put her arm around me, and held me until I calmed down. I shared with her what caused my breakdown, and she knelt on the bathroom floor and prayed over me.

Unlike my personal times of prayer, which were lately characterized by wondering if following Jesus was worth the heartache I felt like He had caused, this precious woman's prayer was refreshing, as was the fact that she knew about my childlessness and lifted me up in prayer. I was trying to reconcile my childlessness with my professed beliefs about God's goodness and sovereignty, and she was lending me her faith when mine was weak. Throughout my time at college, this woman always made it a point to ask how I was doing every time she saw me. God was quietly showing me His care, too, even in the most unlikely places.

By God's grace, I'm still a Christian in spite of walking

through this horrible experience. I've wrestled with the Lord, screamed my pain, and groaned my prayers. Nevertheless, He's kept me. I resolved before the Lord that I would follow Him no matter the cost. Throughout this book, we'll look at ways to mourn childlessness. The cost might feel too great at times, but I promise that the Lord will hold you fast on this journey.

A FAMILIAR JOURNEY

This may be surprising, but childlessness touches the lives of many women, and the precious people who love them. Infertility alone affects approximately 12 percent of the US population—that's over one in ten couples!² According to estimates, roughly 15 to 20 percent of all pregnancies in the US will end in miscarriage.³ The risk of miscarriage in known pregnancies under twelve weeks is one in five.⁴

Despite these numbers, the data doesn't encompass couples who have lost children to illness or accidents, nor does it take into consideration single women who desire to be mothers. Those nearing the end of the ideal childbearing years with no prospects for marriage on the horizon often desire to be mothers, but their singleness has other plans.

Whatever your personal experience with childlessness, the first thing to hold on to is that you're not alone, even when you feel like you are. Because it can be difficult to share your particular journey with childlessness, it's helpful to remember that there are many women experiencing the same trial—often experiencing it in silence.

In addition, infertility, barrenness, and miscarriage are still taboo subjects, especially in the Christian culture.

Probably without realizing it, churches may isolate the childless by not integrating the subject into the regular conversations of the life of the church.

If so many people struggle with being childless, why isn't this a conversation that's had more often? I believe one of the reasons is that the church often doesn't know how to respond appropriately to pain. People's hearts are often in a good place and desiring to help, but they simply don't know how. One of the first steps to creating safe places is by raising awareness. When pastors and their flocks are more conscious of the childless in their midst, they'll begin changing their language, what they joke about, and the questions they ask.

Often there aren't enough safe places, even in our churches, for us to come together to share our stories, our longings, and our losses. In my own experience, I have been shocked that there aren't more books, more support groups, and more willingness to be open on this topic. When I was fighting to hang on, fighting to hold on to my faith, I felt like no one understood what I was going through. The lack of available resources propelled my desire to write this book.

The book you hold in your hands is a labor of love. I feel like I've written it in blood instead of ink. Dear reader, I've prayed over you with such intensity. While I don't know you by name, the Lord does. The world may never know how many tears you've cried, but you can rest in the fact that not one tear has fallen to the ground without God noticing. Are you ready to begin this messy journey together? I can't promise that it'll be easy. In fact, there will be moments when you may feel like giving up. But I can promise that if you keep moving forward, by God's

grace you'll begin to find the healing you so desperately long for. As I type these words, my physical circumstances haven't changed, although I am engaged and will soon marry Michael, the love of my life. I haven't seen the Lord redeem my trial as I would have liked. I'm not on the other side of it, holding a beautiful baby, happy and satisfied. If I'm honest, there are still nights when I cry myself to sleep, days when I wrestle with the Lord because I can't have a child. I'm still in the middle of this journey, right beside you in your childlessness.

Childlessness is a heartbreaking experience, and my desire is that those experiencing it will begin to feel more comfortable sharing their trial with their communities of faith, family, and friends.

SHAME KEEPS US SILENT

Many women feel shame mingled with their sorrow. It is easy to believe that you don't have children because of something you have done or failed to do. People are quick to offer their (frequently unhelpful) opinions and advice when you're experiencing a trial, particularly one as intimate as childlessness. As Karen Rivers, director of the Solace Foundation, a nonprofit organization that offers comfort and support to parents after the loss of a pregnancy or infant, says about miscarriage, "The isolation is huge. It's not something that's talked about, because it makes people uncomfortable, and it makes people sad. My hope is that we're getting better in terms of awareness, but I think it's still largely taboo."⁵

Even though I have experienced only one of the forms that childlessness can take, I'm well acquainted with the

grief of being unable to have a child. This heartache has forever stained my heart with sorrow. The desire for children is often one of the most intense longings you can feel. Not only are you struggling with an unfulfilled desire, but a private and often unspoken struggle. No one knows that you can't have children or are struggling unless you tell them. No one knows the sorrow of your heart or how heavy and difficult this situation can be. Childlessness is not a visible pain. It's not easily on display for the world to see. When someone walks through a visible trial, such as an illness, while still difficult, the fact that it's unconcealed makes the way clearer for talking to others.

Despite the fact that we live in a society with increasing access to information and to social networks, childlessness remains a taboo topic that many people aren't comfortable discussing. As a result, this topic doesn't receive the attention it needs, especially from Christians. Because we don't always experience a culture of openness, a woman might not feel safe being the first one to begin the process of sharing.

CHILDLESSNESS AFFECTS EVERY PART OF A PERSON

The struggle toward motherhood can affect every part of your life. Research from Harvard Medical School has shown that women with infertility have the same levels of anxiety and depression as do women with cancer and heart disease. The same study reveals that many women who experience childlessness say that it's the most upsetting experience of their lives.⁶ For some, childlessness may be their first major encounter with suffering and can

quickly lead to their faith being tested and tried in the furnace. When I first began walking through childlessness, I wanted everyone I came into contact with to know how deeply I was hurting. I wanted to wear my hurt and my heart on my sleeve. I longed for empathy and encouragement. Even though my childlessness was an intimate detail about me, and I didn't necessarily want everyone to know *why* I was suffering, I still wanted people to know that I was hurting. My soul longed to be seen and loved, but I felt like I was in a cocoon of my own emotions.

If you're walking through childlessness, chances are you feel as if your heart is breaking and the suffering is agonizing. Did you know that having a broken heart is a scientifically proven phenomenon? It's called "Broken Heart Syndrome," and women are more likely than men to experience the intense chest pain, a reaction to the surge of stress hormones that can be caused by an emotionally stressful event. This pain, accompanied by shortness of breath can almost feel like a heart attack.⁷ I experienced frequent panic attacks as I began processing my barrenness. The pain that's deep inside your heart demands to make its way out. If you're experiencing physical pain of this nature, recognize that the link between your mind, heart, and body is strong. These types of physical manifestations are common when going through something this difficult.

Suffering is hard. Suffering alone is almost unbearable. One of the things that makes childlessness so difficult is the fact that it's such an intimate experience. A woman's fertility, or lack thereof, is typically viewed as an integral part of her identity. When her ability to reproduce is compromised, it can cause immense shame on top of sadness. Childlessness can even be humiliating, because

it contradicts what we know about the created order of the world. God created us to be nurturers. Although not every woman longs for motherhood, it is a godly desire. Our physical composition tells of this truth. We have breasts to feed a newborn; we have a uterus to grow a fetus. Our bodies were intentionally designed to fulfill God's mandate to "be fruitful and multiply." However, the fall continues to taint everything in our imperfect world. Things aren't the way they should be—they aren't the way God originally designed them to be.

ACKNOWLEDGING EXTERNAL PRESSURES

While our longing for motherhood is normal and natural, oftentimes it's intensified by external pressures. Well-meaning family members can often place a huge burden on the shoulders of their loved ones. Asking one too many times when they'll start their own family or give them grandbabies can be devastating for the couple who is struggling.

Some of the greatest pressure to be a mother can actually come from within the church. Christians have a tendency to take good things and fashion them into the ultimate goal. Hence the elevation of motherhood into the ultimate goal of womanhood. Oh, how this breaks my heart! Being a woman is so much more than being a wife and mother. When the church elevates motherhood to a place that it shouldn't be, it is unintentionally implying that once you've become a mother, you'll be more satisfied, more fulfilled, more of a woman than before. Women who don't have (or can't have) children may feel alienated, humiliated, and afraid to vocalize their struggle. I've

attended far too many churches where single women, or married women without children, simply don't fit in well because the church culture doesn't make room for them. Small groups are a way in which this issue often plays out in local churches. Far too often, small groups are created based on age or life stage. Women who are of childbearing age are often lumped into groups with young mothers. These types of well-meaning groups can easily stir up jealousy and pain in the hearts of childless women.

While being a wife and a mother are both noble goals and callings, they don't have to be our primary goals as women. Motherhood has its own unique challenges for stay-at-home mothers, single mothers, working moms, etc. The church often doesn't dwell on the difficulties of motherhood. Instead they tend to gloss over the hardships and paint motherhood to be the most desirable role possible.

We know from Scripture that we can learn to be content in any and every circumstance, but when we're walking through one of the most difficult trials a woman may face, the pain can be intensified when the church is unintentionally insensitive.

In a later chapter, I'll discuss this further and suggest ways that churches and pastors can begin changing this culture, in order to love well those who are experiencing childlessness. For now, it's enough to acknowledge that the church can be one of the loneliest places for those of us walking through this particular struggle.

FIERCE FEMININITY

Femininity and womanhood are so much grander and more beautiful than we're often taught. Women are created

in the image of our Creator. God intentionally and carefully designed us. The greatest role of a woman is not to be a mother, but rather, to glorify God with our whole lives in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Biblical womanhood is about boldness, tenacity, tender heartedness, and loving the Lord and His people. As Elisabeth Elliot wrote:

To understand the meaning of womanhood we have to start with God. If He is indeed “Creator of all things visible and invisible” He is certainly in charge of all things, visible and invisible, stupendous and minuscule, magnificent and trivial. God has to be in charge of details if He is going to be in charge of the overall design.⁸

The Hebrew word used in Genesis to describe Eve, the very first woman, is *ezer*. This term means “help” and is used to denote strength or power. It occurs twenty-one times in the Old Testament. In many of the Psalms, *ezer* is used to describe God’s character and the way He interacts with His people. Here are a few examples:

Psalm 20:2—May he send you *help* from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion!

Psalm 33:20—Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our *help* and our shield.

Psalm 115:9—O Israel, trust in the Lord! He is their *help* and their shield.

Psalm 121:1–2—I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my *help* come? My *help* comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

WOMEN AS THE WEAKER SEX?

Women are generally more nurturing than men. The way God designed us can often cause society to view us as the weaker sex. In our feminist-leaning society, we take insult with the label “weaker sex.” We demand to be treated just as equally as men, and we bristle when we hear the church talk about us as “helpmates.” However, the identity God gave us isn’t “lesser than” a man’s identity at all. We’re created differently, and that’s a good thing. Men and women complement one another in ways that reflect the Trinity.

In fact, the power the Lord has placed in our hearts is fiery and fierce. Women are not only warriors, we’re also a fortress. We were created to be a safe place, a shield, a help, and a comfort. When we’re modeling these characteristics to the world, we’re saying something about God. These characteristics manifest themselves even in our bodies—yes, during pregnancy but also in the marriage relationship. In the most physically intimate act between a husband and a wife, the woman’s body is designed to be a safe place, literally a shield for the man in his most physically vulnerable state.

God crafted a woman’s body and spirit to reflect Him in such a powerful way. So often, we can feel ashamed or annoyed that we’re referred to as a “helper,” but if we read it in its original biblical context, it’s one of the greatest honors God could have given to women.

In 1 Peter 3:4, women are instructed to “let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.” In their book *True Beauty*, Carolyn Mahaney and Nicole Whitacre explain that “a gentle and quiet

spirit is not a personality trait. It is the quality of a woman who meets adversity—slander, sickness, rejection, and loss—with a calm confidence.”⁹

When I found out I couldn’t have children, that my body was made differently than most women, that I was a woman without a womb, I began to question my usefulness and even my existence on this earth. I thought, “If I can’t even fulfill the basic duties of a woman, what good am I?”

Have you had similar thoughts? Have you felt like your worth is tied to your ability to have children? Be assured that your value isn’t dependent on your ability to conceive or bear babies. I realize those words are easy to say, but much harder to actually believe.

For years, one of my biggest fears—and a self-imposed pressure—was that I wouldn’t be loved by a man because I can’t have children. I was afraid that if I were fully known, I would never be fully loved because of this huge secret I’d kept for so long. I feared I would be rejected and remain unloved based on the defects of my body. Thankfully, these fears haven’t come to pass, but these are lies I’m regularly tempted to believe. We must constantly remind ourselves that a woman is no less feminine if she’s unmarried, without children, or unable to carry children. Our womanhood is based on who God says we are—and nothing less.

GRIEVING IN THE MIDST OF THE SILENCE

When I began baring my soul to close friends and sharing about my childlessness, many people’s first reactions were, “Oh, Chelsea, I’m so sorry. But it’ll all be okay—

you can just adopt children.” What those precious friends weren’t getting was the fact that I was sharing something incredibly intimate about myself, this information was breaking my heart, and I needed them to grieve with me. I needed someone to be there with me to say, “I don’t really know what to do or say right now, but I’m right here, grieving with you, ready to love and care for you in whatever ways you need.”

Our general response to pain is typically one of two things—either we’re fearful of the pain and want to run away from it or eliminate it as quickly as possible, or our pain becomes the most important thing in our lives. With the private trial of childlessness, more often than not, we try to minimize our pain. Because of the private nature of our struggle, we may often find that people don’t know how to comfort us. They might be scared that they won’t offer the right words of comfort, or that they’ll be too intrusive, so they remain silent. Both sides can struggle to know how to approach this trial well. As a result, we can be scared to quiet our hearts and feel the reality of the situation. It’s uncomfortable; it hurts.

Too often, we rush through pain, because we want to get to the other side. We want to feel “okay again.” We want to return to a normal life. We don’t like to sit with the pain, because there’s an uncertainty and unpredictability to suffering. You never know what your heart will and won’t be able to bear. But don’t be afraid of tears; don’t be afraid to truly mourn and to feel the hurt. It’s completely normal to grieve an unfulfilled desire. Because if you’re experiencing childlessness—either for a season or indefinitely—you’re essentially mourning the death of what could have been. You’re mourning the death of

a dream and in order to find healing and recapture hope, you must allow yourself to grieve.

When we're in pain, the last thing we need is for someone to attempt to fix it for us. Well-meaning friends often end up hurting our hearts more with responses that feel like salt in a wound. And when we're not given the freedom to grieve, we begin to keep our emotions to ourselves, instead of sharing. We don't know who in our community we can really trust with our heart and our sorrow. David wept, Job wept, Hannah wept, even Jesus wept. Why aren't we allowed to weep and lament without someone rushing in, slapping a few Bible verses on our problems, and expecting us to "get over it" and be okay? As singer-songwriter Michael Card wrote in his book on suffering titled *A Sacred Sorrow*, "It seems to me that we do not need to be taught how to lament. What we need is simply the assurance that we can lament."¹⁰

One of the biggest ways the Western church can grow is to learn that sorrow, grief, and lament aren't things to run away from. Life is a painful journey toward heaven, and Christians should learn how to have tender hearts. The grief of another is an opportunity for the church to put Galatians 6:2 into practice as we "bear one another's burdens."

CHANGING YOUR PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

It's important that we feel free to share our trial with family, friends, and our local church communities. And as we begin journeying toward hope together, I want to remind you that God promises never to leave or forsake us. Even though our feelings might tell us otherwise, we can stake our hope on the fact that He'll be with us every

step of the way. He sees you, knows you, and loves you.

There's no doubt that this trial is going to change you. When you've walked through childlessness—whether for a season or a lifetime—your heart will never be the same. My greatest prayer as we begin this journey deeper into grief and toward hope and healing is that you know Christ. Right now, as your heart is breaking, you might not feel close to Him, but I can guarantee that He's right beside you because He promises to be close to the brokenhearted.

I urge you to read this book through the lens of God's goodness, sovereignty, and great love for you. I can't answer all your questions; I can't tell you why the Lord allowed you to walk through this particular trial. But I can identify with your pain, I know the sorrow your heart has been through, and I can offer to walk the road toward hope alongside you.

Oh, may Christ be enough for us, even in the midst of childlessness! In great suffering on earth, there is great support from heaven. Four of the sweetest words ever spoken by God are, "I am with you."

Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you. (Deut. 31:6)

Our Father has promised never to leave us, never to forsake us, always to love us, and to work all things together for our ultimate good. Much of the time we don't understand why He's doing something, but we have a choice to make. We can choose to trust Him or to run

away from Him. Even though we don't understand, we can choose to trust that our Father is with us . . .

When our heart is torn into pieces.

When the Lord hasn't answered our questions.

When we don't know if everything will be okay.

When the Lord hasn't promised to work in the ways that we want.

When the pain threatens to overshadow our vision of the Lord.

And I encourage you to hold on to the Lord's promises to us in Scripture:

He promises to be present (Matt. 28:20).

He promises us His love (Rom. 5:8).

He promises us His grace (Ps. 86:15).

He promises to sustain us (Ps. 55:22).

He promises us His aid (Heb. 13:6).

He promises steadfastness (Ps. 31:7).

He promises provision (Phil. 4:19).

I'm so happy you are taking steps toward hope and healing. Wherever you're at on this journey, recognize that it's okay to not be okay. It's okay to limp, it's okay to fall, it's okay to be quiet, and it's okay to wail out your pain. God is big enough to handle it. Being seen and loved in the midst of this trial will make all the difference in the world. May this not remain a silent struggle for you anymore.

REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

How have you responded to childlessness (e.g., anger, frustration, fear, sadness, guilt)? Spend time writing out the types of emotions that surround this trial.

Do you feel alone in your suffering? If so, what's making you feel like you can't share (e.g., shame, lack of support, fear)?

What are some external factors that make you feel pressured to be a mother?

Think about three trustworthy people with whom you can share your experience of childlessness.

Which promise of God listed at the end of the chapter stands out and why? Spend some time memorizing a few verses!

How do you see God's grace and love in this chapter?