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GOD'S VIEW OF THE SINGLE PARENT

My heart was broken recently when the son of one of the single parents in our church looked up at me and said, "Pastor, why won't God give me a dad? Every night I ask God to give me a dad, but He won't give me one."

What would you have said to him? I didn't have any easy answers for that young man, but I tried to explain to him that he did have a father, his heavenly Father. Yes, that concept may be beyond his worldview right now, but I wanted him to know that he was not alone. And I want to say to single parents that they are not alone either. Single parent, God has a word for you, and it's a word of hope and comfort.

THE NEED FOR A WORD FROM GOD

That's not to say there isn't plenty of disturbing news out there when it comes to the issue of single parents. What used to be considered rather unusual not too many years ago—a family with only one parent present—is now a crisis of growing proportions. The reality in our culture today is that a staggering number of children are growing up in single-parent homes, the vast majority of which are fatherless.

In 1970, for example, only 13 percent of children grew up without both parents being at home. But today that number is over 30 percent in the culture at large with over 21 million children being raised in a single-parent home. For African-American children, that percentage more than doubles to over 70 percent. We're talking about millions of children growing up in homes where in most cases they will know little or nothing of a father's influence. I know that mothers are leaving their families too, but the numbers are still heavily weighted toward missing fathers.

Statistics show that close to half of all American children will go through at least some part of their lives without having a father at home. The implications of this situation are staggering in terms of the world we have to live in and minister to. This is not theoretical for me. My church in Dallas is not immune to the problem. One Sunday morning I asked single parents to raise their hands; then I asked those who had been raised in a single-parent

home to raise their hands. In each case a large number of people put their hands up and the problem is only getting worse.

So we need to ask, What does God have to say to single parents today? What hope and comfort does He offer to the mother who is alone and fears for her children's future because they have no father at home—and fears for herself because she has no mate? What does the Bible say to the small but growing number of fathers who are rearing children alone?

Before we turn to the Scriptures, let me say a word to the reader who may be thinking, *This is not really my problem. I'm not a single parent.* Let me say that God's Word to single parents will benefit you too, for two reasons. The first is that all Scripture is profitable. Many of the principles and truths we'll consider in this booklet will also help two-parent families in their child-rearing task. The second reason you need to know what the Word says on this issue is that you may be just one step, one heartbeat, one accident away from becoming a single parent. It could happen to any of us at any time. And as much as we hate to think about it, our homes could also be hit by divorce, death, or abandonment.

What I'm saying is that none of us is immune to the problems of life, so we need to know what God says.

Besides, even if your home stays intact you will have to deal with this issue as a Christian and a citizen of this country because the fallout of family breakup is hitting all of us. Your children may be sitting in a classroom right

now where there is a high percentage of single-parent kids. And you will almost certainly come in contact with a single parent if you don't know one already. And with close to half a million children being born out of wedlock every year,¹ we're all paying a huge economic, social, and spiritual price.

GOD IS FOR THE SINGLE PARENT

So we need a word of encouragement and hope and correction from God. First of all, I want you to know that God is for the single parent. No matter how you became a single parent, if you love God and have a heart for Him, He is for you.

**GOD CAN MEET
YOUR NEED. EVEN
THOUGH YOU MAY
NOT HAVE AN IDEAL
HOME SITUATION,
YOU DO HAVE AN
IDEAL GOD.**

In Psalm 27:10, David says, "My father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me up." David is saying that God will be a parent when a parent is missing. God will take up the slack caused by the absent parent. That's good news. It's good to know that your child has a mother

you didn't know he or she had and has a father if he or she doesn't know where the earthly father is. There is a saying I sometimes make, "If you don't have a mother, He will be your mother. If you don't have a father, He will be

your Father. He will be a lawyer in a courtroom and a doctor in a hospital and whatever else you need."

God can meet your need. Even though you may not have an ideal home situation, you do have an ideal God. Filmmakers use fancy technology to turn a character in a film into someone else. God says, "If you need Me to be a father, I will be a father. If you need Me to be a mother, I will be a mother. If you need Me to be a spouse, I will be a spouse. If you need Me to be a friend, I will be a friend. I will be to you whatever you need." That's a good word for you if there is somebody important missing in your home.

David writes in the book of Psalms that God is "a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows" (Psalm 68:5). If your child does not have a father, that's not the whole story because God is a Father to the fatherless. God also acts in justice on behalf of a widow. A widow includes those who have been abandoned by a spouse.

The Hebrew word for orphan means *fatherless*. In Israel, a fatherless child was considered an orphan even if he or she had a mother. Why? Because in the economy of God it was the job of the father to provide for and protect the family. When the father was absent, it made the family vulnerable.

In Psalm 146:9 we find more good news for single parents: "The Lord protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow; but He thwarts the way of the wicked." God supports those who are left alone. He picks up the pieces of their broken lives.

Many people who grew up in single-parent families have seen this truth in action. They made it not because their mothers had a lot to give them but because God showed up in their homes and made the difference. He made a way when there seemed to be no way. He provided when there seemed to be no provision. The fact is, God is so much for the single parent and the child with no dad that it could literally cost someone his life to abuse them:

You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless. (Exodus 22:22–24)

God says that you should treat single parents well because to do otherwise is to place yourself only one step away from that condition yourself. If you are a single parent, this should help you to see how valuable you are. If God will go to your defense at such an extreme level, then you should take comfort in His great love for you.

**YET GOD TAKES
SPECIAL CARE TO
MENTION HIS GREAT
LOVE FOR THOSE
WHO ARE
VULNERABLE AND
ALONE IN TRYING
TO RAISE A FAMILY.**

Let me show you one more passage by way of in-

roduction and setting the stage—one more word that shows God's love and care for the single-parent family:

At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithes of your produce in that year, and shall deposit it in your town. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do. (Deuteronomy 14:28–29)

In other words, how you treat the fatherless family will often determine how your Father in heaven treats you. How you relate to people who are in need will affect God's hand of goodness on you. One of the worst things you can do is to spurn people who have not had the opportunities and privileges you have had; we can't know how someone ended up in the situation they are in without having walked in their shoes.

It is easy for you as a single parent to feel less valuable than those who come from a nuclear family. Or perhaps you feel out of place when you compare yourself to other families, or you feel like you are something less worthy or important than they are. Yet God takes special care to mention His great love for those who are vulnerable and alone in trying to raise a family.

These passages will give you an idea of how God feels about single parents and their children. But now I want

to get very specific and give hope to the single parent who works hard each and every day to make a living for themselves and their children, then has to come home and make dinner, wash clothes, help with the homework, only to go to bed alone at night—then do it all over again the next day, with no one there to turn to for help, comfort, companionship and guidance. For those of you who are single parents, you've got a kindred spirit in Hagar.

THE SAGA OF HAGAR

I call the story of Hagar a saga because it has all the elements of a great drama, and it has some real-life lessons in it for us as well. We first meet Hagar in Genesis 16, where we learn that she was the servant of Sarai, and that Sarai and Abram (this was just before their names were changed) were unable to have children.

It was the custom of the day in situations like this to bring in another woman who would bear the husband's child and thus act as a surrogate for the barren wife. This was the case with Hagar—Sarai proposed the plan to Abram, who followed her advice.

Now it's obvious that Sarai wanted a child desperately. But we also need to remember that God had promised her that she would bear a child someday. The promise hadn't been fulfilled yet, so, like many of us, Sarai decided to help God out. By her actions she was saying, "Lord, I know Your intentions are good, but since You can't pull this off, let me help You."

Sarai gave Hagar to Abram, and Abram went into Hagar's tent for the purpose of conceiving a child (v. 4). Bad idea. It was doomed from the start because it was an attempt to bypass God's method and timing and force Him to fulfill His promise.

It was also a bad idea on the human level because it backfired. When Hagar got pregnant, she evidently began to look down on Sarai, and this made Sarai feel hurt and jealous. Even though the whole thing was her idea, she said to Abram, "That woman is not staying around here." So in verses 5–6 Abram and Sarai have an argument about Hagar and Abram backs down from taking any initiative in the issue. He tells her, "Do whatever you want. I'm staying out of this one."

Before we move on, I just want to remind you that it is never a good idea to try and help God out. If God did not ask for your help, don't assume that He needs it. God has a way to accomplish what He has promised, and so when we try to "help" God – it only makes the situation worse. It reveals that we lack faith. Abram and Sarai wanted to help God out, but all they did was create larger problems between Ishmael's and Isaac's descendants that have lasted for generations, even until this day.

Sarai drove Hagar out of the house, and suddenly she found herself alone and pregnant, with no Abram or any other male to support and protect her. She was about to become a single parent because she got caught in someone else's plan to help God. A lot of single parents didn't ask for their status. It was brought upon them by someone

else's decisions or disobedience, or possibly someone else's persuasion or pressure. But I like verses 7–10 of Genesis 16:

Now the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." Then the angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority." Moreover, the angel of the Lord said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count."

The star of the saga arrives: the Angel of the Lord. Notice how often this title is repeated in just these few verses that it was the Angel of the Lord who found Hagar. That's good news when you have been rejected. That's good news when the father of your child is nowhere to be found. That's good news when you find yourself alone and vulnerable.

Who is the Angel of the Lord? The Old Testament indicates that He was the revelation of God's presence. Later on, when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac, the son he and Sarah had waited for all those years, it was the Angel of the Lord who stopped him and said, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Genesis 22:12). The

Angel of the Lord speaks as though He is God, yet He is distinct from God the Father. Who then is this divine person who finds Hagar in the wilderness? He is Jesus Christ before His incarnation in Bethlehem.

The Angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Son of God. He is the eternal second person of the Godhead. He did not show up for the first time as baby Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem—there is no time when Jesus did not exist. He has always existed and He made His appearance throughout the Old Testament as the Angel of the Lord.

What does the Angel of the Lord do? He shows up to make things better. Isn't that just like Jesus? He shows up in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. How can He do that? Because He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). The preincarnate Christ went out to the wilderness for the benefit of a single mother-to-be.

First of all, He found her. If you are a single parent, God knows where you are, the situation you are in, and how you got into the struggles that you now face. He loves you, forgives you for wrong choices you may have made, and shows great compassion on you. When you hurt, He feels it. He knows your loneliness, stigma, and pain. After all, He experienced the fullness of all three on the cross.

The Lord told Hagar in verse 11 that He was very much aware of her condition and very much involved in and interested in the birth of her son. Keep in mind, that

even though the situation in which the child was conceived may have been less than ideal, in order for that child to be formed in the mother's womb, God had to go to work.

Sometimes we talk about the relationship that produced a child as illegitimate because it was outside the bonds of marriage. But there is no such thing as an illegitimate child, because God has never had a baby that was not legitimate. That is, God has never made a mistake in giving a baby to a set of parents; it is never the case that He didn't mean for that child to be there or considers that child to be any less than a fully valuable human being.

I say that because God's response to the conception and birth of Ishmael is a strong reminder that every child is special. The Bible says in Psalm 139 that every baby is woven together in the womb by God. Whatever the circumstances of a child's conception, the child produced by that relationship is legitimate because that child bears the image of God.

That ought to be good news for single parents. It does not justify wrong actions, but it is an affirmation that God recognizes the value of each life. Not only did God recognize the life of Hagar's child, but He named the baby "Ishmael" (Genesis 16:11). The Hebrew word for this means "God hears." In other words, God knows what I am going through. Guess what, single parent? God knows. He knows the trouble and stress that you are in, and He knows whether it's a situation you got yourself into, some-

one else put you in, or whether it is a mixture of both. He also knows where you are right at this very moment.

God showed up in the wilderness and told Hagar what to name her baby. Why is that good? Because every time she ran out of diapers she could say, "Ishmael needs diapers," for she knew that God was listening. When she didn't have enough food to feed Ishmael, his name reminded her that God knew that she needed food for her baby. The value of the child is also reflected in the fact that God described details about his future life and personality (v. 12).

Single parent, God knows what you and your children need. The reason God gave Ishmael his name was so that every time Hagar used that name, she would remember something about God. The Angel of the Lord told her to call him Ishmael so that every time she spoke his name she would remember "God hears and God knows."

That's the beauty of the grace of God for a single parent. Hagar is out on her own with no help, but God says, "I know." He goes on to say in verse 11 that she would have a son and that they would be all right "because the Lord has given heed to your affliction" (v. 11).

Now notice verse 13: "Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are a God who sees.'" The Hebrew word for the name Hagar gave to God is El Roi. El Roi simply means that God sees. Do you know that God sees? He sees the circumstances you are in. He sees you out there in the desert all alone with no one to provide for you, give you spiritual and emotional covering,

and protect you. He is not unaware of what you are going through. No matter what your family situation may be, no matter what your need or loss, God says, "I see. I hear. I know."

Verse 15 records the birth of Ishmael and his naming by Abram, under God's direction. Now every time Abram called Ishmael by name, he too would be reminded of the trouble he had made. He would remember, "God knows the situation I have created."

The Angel of the Lord showed up in a bad situation, but the saga of Hagar does not end here. Turn over to Genesis 21 and look at the conclusion of the story. Hagar has gone back to Sarah, as the Lord told her to do. And by now Sarah has had Isaac, the son of promise whom she and Abraham (their names were changed in chapter 17) were waiting for all along.

Both mothers and their sons were living in the same tent. And there was trouble. Sarah saw Ishmael making fun of Isaac, the son of promise (v. 9). She did not like that at all. Ishmael was a teenager now. Teenagers will do that. But Sarah said, "Not in my house you won't!"

Abraham didn't like this mess any better than he did the first one, but Sarah demanded that he give Hagar her marching papers. Abraham was very distressed, but God assured him that He was in control and that He would personally care for Hagar and Ishmael (v. 12). So according to verse 14, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away from his house to wander in the wilderness alone. Hagar was now a bona fide single mother.

Soon the water Abraham gave to her and the boy was used up, and she left him so that she wouldn't have to watch him die (vv. 15–16). But the Angel of God (Jesus, before His birth in Bethlehem) showed up again, assuring Hagar that God knew exactly what was happening and would not only keep her and Ishmael alive but would make a great nation out of him (vv. 17–18).

This is a classic single-parent scenario—one that, with a few changes of detail and geography, could easily be repeated today. Hagar lost her home, she had a teenage son to take care of, and she was on the streets, so to speak, with no money in her pockets. She was thirsty and probably hungry. She feared that her boy would die. So in despair she sat down and cried.

That's when the Son of God showed up in His Old Testament form. He asked Hagar, "What is the matter with you?" (v. 17). Didn't He know the mess she was in? Of course He did. He was saying, "Hagar, have you forgotten what I did for you earlier? Have you forgotten how I found you out in the wilderness when you were pregnant and Sarah had chased you away? Do you think I am going to remember you one minute and forget you the next? You yourself said I am the God who sees. Do you think that now I have gone blind?"

Single parent, God has not gone blind. He sees, He hears, and He knows. You may be in a far from ideal situation, but you have an ideal God. You have got a God who, when your husband and the father of your baby forces you out of the home, will turn into a husband, if

necessary, and be a Father to your child or children. God will always provide.

Why? Because His name is El Roi, "the God who sees." He is the way out of your lonely and negative circumstances. Now I can't promise you that He will bring you a mate or a home or anything on your wish list. But I can tell you that He sees you and your child or children, and He hears your cry. He says, "Remember, I named Ishmael. And any child who has My name, I am going to take care of."

That is the beauty of dedicating children to the Lord—you give that child to God. And when you give that child to God, God takes responsibility for that child's well-being. So God's message to Hagar was, "Have you forgotten who I am?"

Genesis 21:18–21, the final chapter of this biblical saga, shows how God fulfilled His word. The well Hagar saw in verse 19 was there all the time, but she was so consumed with sadness and crying and forgetting God that she stopped trusting, she stopped looking for God.

THE GREATEST
THING A SINGLE
PARENT CAN DO IS
TO HAVE A PASSION
FOR GOD.

How many times has God opened your eyes and shown you a well, a source of supply, when you did not see any way, with no husband, that you would be able to make it? How many times has God opened your eyes and

shown you how you can make it on one person's salary alone?

A sister in our church who is a single parent once came to see me. Her whole world had collapsed. She said she just did not see a way, so we called on God together. I got a call two days later. "Let me tell you what Jesus did," she began, and she went on to tell me how Jesus had made a way. I wasn't surprised. He is the Angel of the Lord. He knows where you are. He is the God who sees you.

The greatest thing a single parent can do is to have a passion for God, because when you have a passion for God you have Someone who can be a Father to your child and be a Husband, a protector, to you. Single father, when you know God you have Someone to lean on who understands a father's heart and a father's desires for his children. He is the God who sees and knows and cares.

This was brought home forcefully in my own home a long time ago when my daughter Chrystal was not yet married. My daughter Chrystal's life revolves around a schedule notebook she carries. She keeps all her plans and papers and credit cards and a lot of other important things in this notebook. One day she inadvertently put it on top of her car and then drove off, forgetting it was on the roof. She got home and discovered that it was gone. She remembered what she had done and drove back over to the mall to look for it. But her notebook was nowhere to be found. She came back home crying.

As she sat there shedding tears, she began flipping through her daily calendar. She came to one of the verses and read this statement under it: "God will be a husband to you if you need one."

Chrystal looked at that statement and prayed, "God, You said You would be a husband to someone who needs one. I need you to be a husband to me right now and find this book that has my life in it."

When she had said that, the telephone rang. A man asked, "Is this Chrystal Evans?" She said it was. He explained that he was driving down the street when he saw something that looked like a book lying alongside the road. He thought it looked important, so he doubled back and picked it up.

He brought it home and saw Chrystal's name in it. "I live fifty miles from there," he went on. "I just happened to be in that neighborhood today. I wanted to know if I can bring you your notebook tomorrow morning."

I want you to know we had church in the Evans house that night. We had church because even though Chrystal did not know where her notebook was, El Roi, "the God who sees," knew where it was. He came through at just the right time. I went with her to pick up the notebook and meet the man. He said, "By the way, I'm a Christian." God can make a way where there seems to be no way. God says He will never leave you by yourself.

Now, I know someone will say that was luck. Others will say it happened just by chance. But there is going to come a day when you will lose more than a notebook,

and on that day you will need to know who Jesus is. He is the Angel of the Lord, "the God who sees." That is the message here. If you are not in an ideal situation, God is here to make up the difference. Hagar, don't just sit there crying. Call on the name of the Lord. He will hear you.

Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. (Deuteronomy 31:6)

God says that He is never going to leave you out there by yourself. But the context says that this promise is to those who live lives that honor Him. If you are living faithfully to please God, whatever your marital or financial circumstance, if you are holding on to God as your priority, then you have His promise that He will never leave you or forsake you.

Note

1. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RS20301.pdf>