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TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN

MARCH 2, 2016

THE SURPRISING
ANTIDOTE TO
LONELINESS

WHEN MARRIAGE
INTERFERES WITH
YOUR GOALS



The
HEAVEN
Hope

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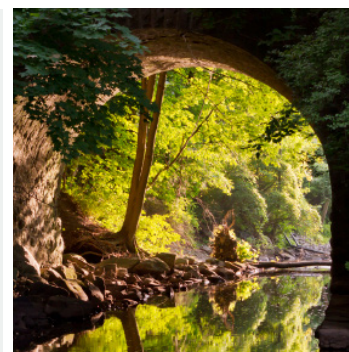
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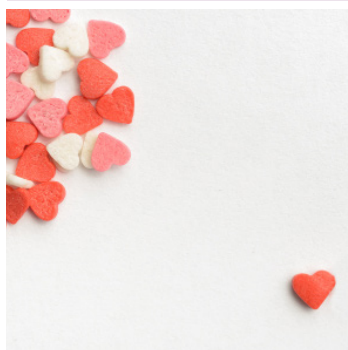


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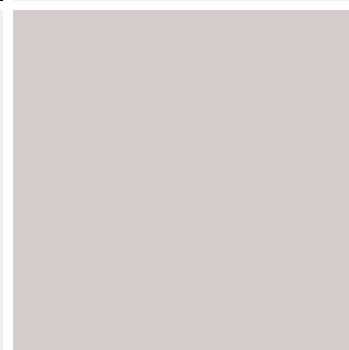


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Shaking Our Fist at Death

The grave is not the final word.



Kelli B. Trujillo, Editor

Oh death, where is your sting?" the speaker read from 1 Corinthians 15:55. *It's right here*, I thought, tears brimming in my eyes and a hollow feeling of nausea in my belly. *It's right here!* We were all deeply stung by death. In front of me was the picture of a beloved friend—a young man, in the prime of life, struck down by cancer. And, to the right, a few rows ahead, sat another friend, now a 20something widow. Death *does* sting.

What is truly awesome for the person who has been ushered into glory—who, absent from his or her body is present with the Lord ([2 Corinthians 5:8](#))—is the same event that has dealt a lifelong, traumatic blow to those left behind in death's wake.

Yes, there will be healing; yes, there is hope, but they both intermingle with grief. And in those moments when we are touched by death—a miscarriage, a friend's passing, a parent's last words, a spouse's final breath—we're forced to contemplate the reality that we may often tend to ignore: *We are mortal*.

Psalms 90:12 says "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (NIV). In his [Rule](#), Benedict encouraged this spiritual practice: "Have death always before our eyes." How morbid, right? But how essential to what it means to receive God's good gift of life and to live that life well. How differently would we each live if we knew today was our last on earth? We so easily forget that life is short, that life is precious, that we ought to live it to the fullest. Yet when we live in purposeful awareness of our mortality, we are better able to live this earthly life *abundantly* ([John 10:10](#)).

Death and loss also pull our gaze onto another central reality: *Heaven is real*. It is not just an intellectual concept or a creedal tenet we repeat. It becomes palpably, crucially real when we lose a loved one—when we miss them and we picture them there, more fully alive than ever they were on earth.

We long for heaven, too, when we face the evil and brokenness of our world. When we feel an inner rage at the injustice of cancer, the ugliness of racism, or the horror of terrorism—when we're shaking our fists not just at death but at pain and evil itself—that's our soul *yearning* for the place where all is put right. It's our soul's cry for the kingdom in which death, mourning, crying, and pain shall be no more and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes ([Revelation 21:4](#)).

Even in the midst of heavy sorrow, Scripture offers us robust hope in the picture it paints of God's heavenly kingdom. In our TCW [cover story](#), Scot McKnight unpacks five crucial truths about heaven. And in "[Seeing Our Parents Home](#)," Dorothy Greco explores what it's like to aid our parents on their journey toward heaven as they face death. It's not easy—yet God meets us even in the sorrow of loss.

Paul asked figuratively, "Oh death, where is your sting?" We know the sting of death is real when it wounds us and robs us of those we love. But Paul's greater point is this: Death, our enemy, will one day be destroyed ([1 Corinthians 15:26](#)). The sting of loss may feel grievous and long, but it is temporal in the scope of eternity.


In this life, we do mourn. We mourn because we love. We mourn, though, with [hope](#) in the one who is the [resurrection](#) and the life. Even when we are bowled over by grief, we can yet say, "Thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Grace,



Kelli B. Trujillo

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● Cover Story

The Heaven Hope

5 truths that speak to our deepest longings | **SCOT MCKNIGHT**

There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about heaven. Thoughts about heaven float through my head and course through my conversations because of what I discover on the news—mass shootings in government-sponsored buildings and schools and colleges.

I think about heaven in conversations with my wife, Kris, who is a psychologist and hears stories day after day about sexual abuse and family dysfunction—between siblings, between parents, between parents and children.

I think about heaven when I'm reading books about the Bible and theology that far too rarely deal with the realities of pain and suffering and injustice that many of us feel on a daily basis. What does heaven mean for the divorced and the children who suffer, sometimes profoundly, as a result of their perception of betrayed love? What does it mean for children who go to sleep in a pillow soaked with tears praying that Daddy will come back home?

I think about heaven when I think about aging parents and grandparents and when I think of those struck with cancers and debilitating diseases, and I think about heaven when others tell me stories about the death of their loved ones, and when they ask, "What are they doing now? Can they [see us](#)? Are they happy? Are they asleep or awake and thriving in the presence of God?"

What does heaven mean for the [57 million](#) babies in America who have been aborted

since Roe v. Wade, or for the **more than 1 billion** babies who have been aborted worldwide just in the past 40 years? Will there be reconciliation between babies and mothers in heaven?

These questions are hard and take a lot of time to discern answers, but here are five themes about heaven that can give us the courage to face each of these questions with the heaven hope, the promise that God someday will complete the work of creation in the new creation and will raise our bodies to become like the body of the resurrected Jesus—created afresh for life forevermore.

1. GOD OVER ALL

First, heaven means God will be God, and Jesus will be Lord, and the Holy Spirit will fill us up. Social media, state complexities, and local community politics make it clear that God is not acknowledged as God in our world today. In fact, God is being systemically silenced. Jesus has been raised from the dead, but there will come a day when his lordship will be acknowledged by all. People who live shaped by heaven's promise acknowledge that Jesus is Lord now, and by following Christ, they seek to live out a kingdom way of life in a world wrecked by death-creating injustices.

You may, as I do, find encouragement by reading **Revelation 21–22** a few times a month until that vision digs into your bones. We read that God will make all things new, that God is the origin of life and the goal of history, that God will make his covenant good, that the Lamb will be the temple, that God will be all the light we need, and that from God's good pleasure all things will be provided. Heaven is God-intoxicated; we will be Spirit-intoxicated, and God-intoxicated worship can get us through each day.

2. JUSTICE AT LAST

Second, in heaven all things will be made right. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly when that will happen nor does it explain how that will happen, but this one thing is clear from the Bible, especially the Book of Revelation: Heaven won't be heaven until *all* things are made right. All abuses will be acknowledged, undone, healed, and the person restored. There will be no death and no death-dealers. Even if sometimes it looks as if God is not God and Jesus is not Lord, the heaven promise is that victory will come.

Malcolm Muggeridge, who had been raised practically an atheist and a socialist in England by radical parents, departed from England for the Soviet Union prior to World War II. He expected to find a utopian kingdom on earth in Stalin's Russia. As a journalist he ran up against the low-truth quotient that Soviet censors mandated in news reports.

With his wife having barely survived a brush with death in their home in Russia, Muggeridge went on a ruminating walk through a forest. There he discovered a church being used for political propaganda. When he looked through a broken window of the church, he realized that it was used now for storing tools and signs bearing political slogans.

Sad but true, the church had been converted from a place of worship to a place of storage for political propaganda. But according to his autobiography, *Chronicles of Wasted*

Time, Muggeridge saw beyond the signs:

Yet at the back where the altar had been there was still the faint outline of a cross to be seen. In its survival I read the promise that somehow this image of enlightenment [in Christ] through suffering, this assertion of the everlasting supremacy of the gospel of [God's] love over the gospel of [Stalin's] power, would never be obliterated, however dimly and obscurely traced now, and however seemingly triumphant the forces opposed to it might seem to be.

The faint outline of a cross, hidden behind the injustices of violence, when seen for its revealing message, announces, "All will be made right!"

3. RELATIONSHIPS RECONCILED

Third, heaven means all relationships will be reconciled. Take a deep breath; breathe in God's creative justice and love, and now remember that all things will be made right in heaven. That means all relationships—bent ones and broken ones and destructive ones—will become what God desires. A pastor friend told me some people in his church may want to second-guess going to heaven if it means they have to get along with some folks they, well, don't like. Yet broken love, broken work relationships, broken church relationships—all will be healed. Such a vision for heaven prompts me to work out relational difficulties in this life on earth.

4. TRUE SECURITY

Fourth, all life will be safe. One of my favorite images about heaven in the Bible is that the gates of the New Jerusalem will never be shut for there will be no night, hence no fear of intruding enemies ([Revelation 21:25](#)). I remind myself of this when I watch horrifying events in the world unfold in the media, and I hope you will too. This image of the open gates summons me to be a safe person, to make my house safe for our family, and to work for a safe community. Heaven's vision of a safe New Jerusalem doesn't so much make me want to go to heaven as it makes me want to dwell in a safe world to show the world God's desire for safety for all.

5. ULTIMATE FORGIVENESS

Fifth, all sins will be forgiven and forgotten ([Jeremiah 31:34](#)). We may be tempted to hold the sins of others over their heads, but God isn't. Some churches will not forget the sin of a leader or some mother's nightmare marriage or a daughter's unwise decisions. But God forgives and forgets, and in heaven God will blanket people with a grace that both forgives and creates universal forgetting. Speaking of which, a recent letter from a friend, Karen Spears Zacharias, spun a number of wandering thoughts about heaven into place for me. In her book *After the Flag Has Been Folded*, Karen wrote of her choice as a teenager to have an abortion. In a later conversation with her about heaven and abortion, she wrote this:

When my own children—the four I have now—reached the ages of 14, 12, and 10, Tim and I sat them down and told them about my abortion. I wanted them to hear the story from me. They were shocked, of course. Cried a bunch. As did I. I asked their forgiveness, since, after all, this was a half-sibling of theirs.

Later that afternoon, as I was loading laundry in the washing machine, Ashley and Shelby came to me. Ashley handed me a sheet of paper.

“We came up with a name for our baby,” Shelby said. They had taken a letter from each of our names and created a name for the unborn child: Kasey.

Oh, how I wept as those girls handed me that! And I've wept several times since. . . . I believe the day will come when I will meet the child named Kasey. I believe that as well about babies that are miscarried or stillborn.

Whether we give that baby a name or not, God has given that child a soul.

In this story from Karen you can see how the heaven hope reshapes life: Karen knows God is God and Jesus is Lord, she accepts God's grace of forgiveness, she works at relationships being made whole, she longs for a future when all of that will be put into effect with Kasey, and she lives now in light of that kind of heaven.

Karen's story illustrates in one particular person's life story—an abortion, forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope for new creation life—how heaven will make all things right. It gives me hope that those gunned down in mass shootings will be raised to live the life God intended, that those who suffer abuse of all sorts and dysfunctions of all sorts and broken relationships of all sorts will find a way through the problems into a loving, reconciled, and flourishing life, and it gives me hope that children who have suffered divorced parents will find in God and in the bounty of the New Jerusalem the family God has planned. ●

The Rev. Dr. Scot McKnight is the author of more than 50 books, including *The Heaven Promise* (WaterBrook Press), from which this article is based, and he currently serves as a professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary in Lombard, Illinois. A much-sought-after public thinker and speaker, he blogs regularly at Patheos under the banner of [“Jesus Creed.”](#)



Seeing Our Parents Home

The painful privilege of caring for aging and dying parents
DOROTHY LITTELL GRECO

COURTESY OF DOROTHYLGRECO

Though we hope that death comes quietly to beckon our parents home, reality is often bracingly different. Not long after my father turned 80, he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. **COPD** had already taken a toll, limiting him to approximately 15 minutes of physical activity at a stretch. Hoping to beat the cancer, he reluctantly agreed to radiation and hormone treatments.

It was humorous to commiserate with my father about hot flashes. Whenever we talked on the phone, he asked, “How do you deal with them? They’re so awful!” At that point, he had no idea the hot flashes would be the least of his problems.

NEW TERRITORY

My husband and I are among the 20 million adults in the **sandwich generation**: simultaneously parenting our own children and caring for aging parents. We’re signing permission slips for our teenager’s field trips alongside **do not resuscitate** (DNR) orders for our parents.

Few of us are prepared for the physical, spiritual, and emotional challenges of this season. Too often, we defer to health care professionals to decide what’s best for our parents. But a doctor who has not previously met them may not know what’s best. That’s why we need to have candid conversations with our mothers and fathers about the end of their lives—before a crisis hits.

After my father was diagnosed with cancer, he was willing to talk about the practical aspects of his final years, including his health care plan and how to pare down his belongings. Above all else, he wanted to finish life in his home, where he lived for almost 60 years.

Unlike my father, some parents resist having such conversations and possibly even resent offers of help. End-of-life discussions force us to face our mortality and reckon with our impending losses—things that we generally prefer to avoid.

Additionally, our parents may want to retain control of their lives as long as possible. Though their resistance may be frustrating, we need to extend patience and grace. In such situations, a gradual approach may work better. Give them time to prepare by asking if they would be willing to have a conversation at some point. If they decline, try again in a few months.

AN UNEXPECTED DETOUR

During the last week of my dad's radiation therapy, he fell, shattering his hip. I got the call moments before a speaking engagement. After a forgettable presentation, I rushed home, packed my bag, and drove five hours to his hospital.

Twenty-four hours after surgery, his kidneys started shutting down and he developed sepsis. For three days, it wasn't clear if he would pull through. In the midst of a morphine haze, he said, "I want to go home." I assumed he meant back to his house, but he corrected me: "No, I want to be done living."

Prompted by the Holy Spirit, I asked my dad if he felt confident about his eternal home. When he said no, amidst the bustling nurses and beeping machines, we prayed together—answering a petition I had been offering to God for more than 30 years.

As our parents approach the end of their lives, their spiritual and emotional needs are just as important as their physical needs. They may be bound up by fear and uncertainty about death yet unable to initiate a conversation about it. They may need help forgiving or finding closure in painful relationships. Asking direct questions such as "Is there anyone you need to forgive?" or "Is there anything you would like to talk about?" gives them permission to broach these topics. These holy moments also offer us the opportunity to express our gratitude and love for them.

NEW NORMAL

My dad did recover from surgery. He then faced three grueling months of rehab, frequently asking when he could go home. He hated being told what time to get up, what to eat, and when to go to bed. This loss of dignity made him question whether life was worth living. "The chance to shape one's story is essential to sustaining meaning in life," Atul Gawande wrote in *Being Mortal*. My father struggled to understand how—or if—he had any power to continue shaping his story.

Though my father had communicated that he did not want heroic measures to prolong his life, doctors continued to order tests and procedures until the last weeks of his life. As a

result, he felt unheard and powerless. My sister and I had to advocate on his behalf, occasionally questioning or even declining the doctors' suggestions.

Figuring out how to provide care for my father during this time pushed us all into unfamiliar emotional territory. He needed help with many basic activities that felt shameful to him. My sister and I were asked to provide the kind of care for him that we had never received from him. Dad was not an affectionate man. The first time I rubbed moisturizer on his dry feet, my stomach knotted up. I wanted to love him well, but such intimate contact reminded me of the times I longed to be comforted by him as a child. This left a bittersweet residue on my offering.

FINALLY HOME

When I finally brought Dad home, a hospice team came and attempted to communicate what he could expect in the coming months. Dad was visibly confused when he was asked to sign papers promising that in the event of a respiratory emergency he would not call 911. While hospitals keep people alive, hospice offers them the best quality of life possible as they die with dignity. That first meeting with the hospice team sobered all of us.

One morning after Dad had been home for several months, his neighbor called me. My father confided in him that he thought death was near. This was contrary to what the hospice team assured us, in part because he was not manifesting **end-of-life symptoms**.

My husband and I made the trip to his home the next day. After helping my father get ready for bed, I held his hand and said, "You've been a good father. You've always provided for us and put our needs before yours. I'm so grateful for all you have done." We prayed for him, and I kissed his forehead and said, "I'll see you in the morning." My husband slept downstairs on the couch by his side. Near dawn, his breathing changed and then simply stopped.

Though our relationship was far from perfect, I miss my dad terribly. No amount of preparation makes it easier for us to say goodbye to our parents. But by thoughtfully and prayerfully helping them navigate the end of life, we make it a bit easier for our mothers and fathers to find their way home. ●

Dorothy Littell Greco is a TCW regular contributor as well as a photographer, writer, speaker, and pastor. Follow her on Twitter at [@DorothyGreco](https://twitter.com/DorothyGreco) or at DorothyGreco.com.



The Ministry of Tough Conversations

When God calls you to lead, he also calls you into conflict. | **NICOLE UNICE**

Over sushi, I affirmed my friend, whom I'll call Amanda, for her first big leadership opportunity. She had just led a major ministry event, and from my perspective, it had been an incredible success.

"Honestly," Amanda said with a little shake of her head, "when it was over, I didn't feel successful. I felt like crying."

Amanda shared that she had experienced conflict with her team, and it came to an ugly head during this event. I pressed a little further, getting the facts about how a particular relationship with her coworker had gone sour. Her details were her own, but the story was familiar—good people, with good intentions, getting it wrong with one another.

And then I killed the conversation with my next question: "When are you going to have that tough conversation to resolve the issue?"

Amanda looked at me like I had asked her to throw her cat off the highway overpass. Apparently, I had asked the impossible.

What I've learned over countless lunches with women like Amanda is this: The prospect of a tough conversation scares many into silence. But dealing with difficult matters—be it resolving conflict, confronting a character issue, or uprooting bad behavior or poor performance—is not an optional exercise in Christianity.

The Bible calls us to be people of reconciliation: people who pursue peace and value

unity, people who do not live as the world lives but choose the deeper, sometimes scarier path of real relationships with one another. Real relationships take hard work, but I've discovered that the ministry of tough conversations is the fertilizer of soul growth.

So how do you know if a relationship needs a tough conversation? And what can you do to prepare yourself for one?

STEP 1: DIAGNOSE THE NEED FOR A TOUGH CONVERSATION

When you consider the challenging person or circumstance in your life, ask yourself, *Am I sincerely pursuing a reconciled relationship?* Three words are important here:

Sincerely implies a desire to pay attention to what our hearts are really telling us—to be our most genuine selves. It means examining what we've experienced and how we've interpreted it.

Pursuing is an active word that calls us forward with intentionality, turning away from passive-aggressive behavior that leads to resentment and bitterness. It means we do not skirt the tough issues when we know that hurt and distance have entered the relationship.

Reconciliation is a Jesus word. The apostle Paul tells us that Christ “gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation” (**2 Corinthians 5:19**). That message is one we speak with our words and our actions. It begins with the way we handle the daily snag and snares of doing life with family, friends, and coworkers. A reconciled relationship will not happen on its own—all real relationships require tending.

To say it another way, a tough conversation might be needed when we truly and honestly cannot say we are *for* the other person. There is a blockage between us, and because our faith calls us to the ministry of reconciliation, we are commanded to enter in.

If we are missing any component of this—sincerely, pursuing, reconciliation—we have gone astray. To follow Jesus means that we place a high value on honesty, clarity, sincerity, and peace.

Amanda was willing to maintain a superficial relationship with the coworker who had hurt her feelings, but she could not sincerely say that she was pursuing reconciliation.

“Okay,” Amanda said to me after she recovered from my question. “I don’t even know how I would start that conversation!” Over the next few minutes, we talked together about what I’ve learned over the years through leadership, counseling, and friendship.

STEP 2: TACKLE YOUR INSECURITIES

There is always a reason you don’t want to enter a tough conversation. Perhaps you’re worried about how the other person will take it, or, more honestly, how they are going to take *you*. Maybe you are worried that this will be a boomerang confrontation—you bring something up, and they boomerang back with grievances against you. Maybe you are frightened that the other person will reject you.

These are real fears. Be gentle with yourself, but don’t be dishonest. Listen to your insecurities and then tackle them. Make sure you consider the consequences of *not*

confronting. For instance, I said to Amanda, “Would you be willing to work with this person again?” When she said no, Amanda began to understand why a tough conversation was needed. She realized that her insecurity made her willing to compromise the mission of the organization and her own leadership—and that’s a bad alternative. The tough conversation seemed more important when she slowed down to think through how toxic it would be to remain silent.

STEP 3: MOVE BEYOND FEELINGS

As a counselor, I am a fan of emotions. Emotions are valuable and teach us many things. But emotions can also be irrational and stubborn. Emotions have long memories and bear grudges, reminding us of things that happened in middle school when we’re trying to make decisions about adulthood. When it comes to feelings, we must be kind but firm with ourselves. You might say to yourself, *Yes, this feels very hard. But that doesn’t mean I can’t do it.*

Identifying the feelings that need to be addressed is important. This can be a simple statement that you share in the confrontation: “When X happened, I felt Y.” By directly addressing the facts of the situation rather than providing your interpretation of them, you give the person a chance to explain his or her side of the story.

Use feelings and facts rather than interpretations and inferences. For instance, if a friend stood you up for a coffee date, you might say, “When I missed you for coffee, I felt disappointed and sad” rather than, “When you stood me up for coffee, I knew you didn’t care about our relationship.”

STEP 4: REWRITE THE STORY

Listen to the story you’re telling yourself about you, about the other person, and about the circumstance. Most of the time, the stories we tell ourselves are not based on facts alone but also on the inferences and insecurities we’ve brought to the table. By staying silent, we avoid the truth—even when that truth could bring healing and growth for us.

The ministry of tough conversations is about letting the Holy Spirit redeem and rewrite that story. You might share how the situation made you feel and then say, “When this happened, I began to tell myself this story about us.” This allows the other person to enter in and clarify, apologize, or reinterpret the experience with you.

STEP 5: PRESS TOWARD THE GOAL

What is the goal of a tough conversation? For most of us, the goal might be an apology, to feel heard, or to get affirmation. But a healthier goal in tough conversations is clarity and reconciliation.

Clarity means that both parties have had a chance to express their side of the story. *Reconciliation* means we are willing to sacrifice our own interpretations of the situation and compromise, believing the best in the other and choosing forgiveness. This means we express the facts and our feelings, and we might say, “I want us to be able to move forward. What do we need to do to reconcile?”

Is it scary? Absolutely. Is it tough? Guaranteed. But is it worth it? *Yes!* The apostle Paul gives us this example: “Not that I have already obtained all of this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12, NIV). In the ordinary conflicts of life, Jesus calls us to press forward. Let us pursue this ministry of reconciliation in the everyday opportunity of tough conversations. ●

Nicole Unice is a pastor and counselor and a regular contributor for *Today's Christian Woman*. Her latest book is *Brave Enough: Getting Over Our Fears, Flaws, and Failures to Live Bold and Free*. Nicole has three kids, one husband, and ample opportunities for tough conversations.



When Marriage Interferes with Your Goals

Does submission mean sacrifice? | **MAGGIE JOHNSON**

If you've been married for any time at all, then you know that marriage is a union requiring both the strength *and* submission of our wills. In the early hours of matrimony, when every face is painted with a smile and endorphins are passed around like candy, unity is an easy choice. But like most things that grow old with time, choosing unity can come to feel anything but euphoric.

These are the moments that urge us to recall what we know to be true. As Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* insisted, "I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. . . . If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth?" The vows we profess, the covenant we make, the living metaphor of Jesus and his church that we agree to emulate—all of these things make up the umbrella under which we love, protect, argue, repent, forgive, and sacrifice.

But what happens when, no matter how unified and committed you aim to be, you and your spouse have conflicting goals? How do you choose unity when you and your spouse are passionate about vastly different things or have competing needs?

A COMMON PROBLEM

Here's the (somewhat) good news: It's supposed to be hard. The apostle Paul warned us that marriage would distract us from serving God with a single-minded focus ([1 Corinthians 7:32–35](#)). This struggle is a natural consequence of the oneness we now have with our

partners, but it's a struggle worth having.

My favorite thing about Paul is how much he cares about Jesus and the church. Knowing that my marriage is a mysterious metaphor for the relationship between Christ and his bride, I've tried to pay particular attention to when and how Paul talks to the local churches at Philippi, Ephesus, Colossae, and others. Throughout the New Testament, it's clear that unity in the body is of utmost importance. That means unity in my marriage must be critical too.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul asked, "Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose" (Philippians 2:1–2). Paul may have been talking to a church here, but I think his words also apply to the daily grind of our marriages. If we have surrendered our lives to Jesus, if we live under the banner of his love, if we walk in attentiveness to the Spirit of God, if grace upon grace is our reality, then the only option is to be unified.

But that's easier said than done, isn't it?

A GOOD EXCHANGE

Paul got into the nitty-gritty of what this looks like when he said, "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too" (Philippians 2:3–4). This is the hard truth: The work of unity will always cost us something. It will cost our pride, our preferences, and sometimes even our passions. It will ask us to give up some of our deepest longings, but if I've learned anything, it's that our God is a God of exchange.

In Exodus, God wanted to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. But after two months, the Israelites complained to Moses that the food they had received while in slavery was better than what they were getting in the wilderness ([Exodus 16:2–3](#)). They couldn't grasp that God was going to *exchange* the good food of Egypt—along with slavery and oppression—for a land flowing with milk and honey.

In the early church, many Jewish believers had a hard time understanding the exchange of the law for grace. They remembered the law and that it was supposed to bring righteousness, but God was doing something new through Jesus. Now they more clearly understood that righteousness would come through faith, apart from the law ([Romans 3:21–24](#)). The law wasn't bad. In fact, we would not have known our sin without it ([Romans 7:7](#)). God often exchanges what is good for what will bring him the most glory.

Maybe that's what happens when we pursue unity in our marriages too. Instead of getting bitter at my spouse because I have to lay down a perfectly godly passion for the sake of unity, maybe I should start to look for the ways in which God is glorified through our pursuit of *being one in spirit and purpose*.

SACRIFICE OR COMPROMISE?

In his book *Sacred Influence*, Gary Thomas says, “The church must not teach the submission of wives apart from the sacrificial love and servanthood required of husbands.” This isn’t all on you, ladies. The pursuit of unity is a bending of *both* wills so that they come together for the purpose of glorifying God ([Ephesians 5:21–33](#)).

Sometimes we need to make a compromise with our spouses by finding middle ground between our two desires, but sometimes that isn’t possible. When compromise can’t be found, it might be time for one spouse to sacrifice his or her preferences out of love for the other person. Sacrifices such as these aren’t easy and often cause pain, but God is able to work through the hard parts of our marriages to bring redemption and sanctification when we least expect it.

Our mentors, Chang and Angel, have been invaluable in our early years of marriage, particularly because they have done the work to secure unity in their relationship. Chang is an introvert and Angel an extrovert, which creates its own challenges, and they have also walked through seasons when they felt called to different, opposing ministries. When Chang was nearing the end of his medical residency at Indiana University, he was drawn to the idea of missions in China. Both Chang and Angel had family in Taiwan, and he wanted to take the [Great Commission](#) seriously. But Angel felt that they were called to be senders—supporters of other missionaries—not missionaries themselves.

“I did not believe that we needed to be international missionaries in order to fulfill our callings as Christians. This caused some tension as Chang started to seriously look into radiology jobs overseas,” Angel recalls. “Finally, after some passionate discussion, I told Chang that if he could tell me unequivocally that God was calling us to become missionaries, I would follow his lead and move to China.” This challenged Chang to pause and both of them to spend serious time in prayer and in seeking wise counsel from mentors. Our dear friends ended up staying local, and many lives, including ours, have been irrevocably changed because of their commitment to unity.

When my husband and I have conflicting goals, I think about Chang and Angel, who modeled pursuing the good of the whole over the good of one. It would have been easy for Chang to sulk and punish Angel for taking away his dream, but instead he mobilized his faith right where he was and focused on unity in their marriage. Whether it’s a difference as profound as conflicting ministry callings or as routine as having different ways to recharge at the end of the day, working toward oneness is an endeavor that will not return void.

GET TO WORK

There is no magic solution to creating unity in marriage, and no easy compromises. This takes good, old-fashioned, hard work. Maybe you’re the introvert who needs to sacrifice a couple nights of solitude for community-driven activities. Or maybe you need to have a hard conversation with your mate about whose career takes the backseat for a season. Perhaps it’s time for your family to make a mission statement, pray some brave prayers, and ask God where he’s calling you *together*. It won’t be easy, but God doesn’t call us to difficult things without giving us the strength we need to overcome.

When Marriage Interferes with Your Goals

I believe a shared commitment to pursuing unity in our marriages is the greatest untapped resource we possess for making Jesus known. And that's what it's really all about, isn't it? If we make every effort to pursue unity with our spouses, our communities will never be the same. ●

Maggie Johnson is a writer, wife, and social justice junkie. She lives in Indianapolis with her bearded husband. Connect with her at MaggieHJohnson.com or on Twitter at [@maghjohnson](https://twitter.com/maghjohnson).



The Surprising Antidote to Loneliness

How two hard things equal unlikely joy



Margot Starbuck, MDiv., is an award-winning writer and speaker. Connect with Margot on **Facebook**, **Twitter**, or at **MargotStarbuck.com**.

M

y friend Sarah is in a hard marriage.

Really hard.

Each day it takes tons of energy for her to be a mom to her four children. To be a wife. To be a person.

Some days it's hard for me to be a person too.

I'm no longer married, but as Sarah and I journey together and navigate holidays, friendships, and parenting, we experience a similar sting of absence. Some of our single friends do too.

We feel *lonely*. And we'd love to be loved.

BLOSSOMING AMID PAIN

A few months ago Sarah told me about some vulnerable children who were on her radar. She was seeking discernment and resources in order to advocate for them. As she engaged on behalf of these little ones, I saw my friend—who daily had every reason to feel angry, sad, and afraid, and no doubt did feel those feelings most days—vivified as she cared for others. As Sarah took action on behalf of these kiddos, she came to life. I saw, with my eyes, the woman God had made her to be, the woman she was before her life got really messy.

And *while* her life was messy.

Sarah didn't find life because she received exactly what she needed from a loving

partner. It's been a long time since she has. In the midst of her precarious circumstances, Sarah experienced joy and satisfaction when she offered others exactly what *they* needed.

THE SURPRISE OF JOY

I know, I know. At first blush it sounds horrible and codependent, but hear me out.

The invitation to love others—the way God has loved us and the way we love ourselves, both notably generous ways—is woven throughout Scripture. But too often, we hear it as an order rather than a gift: “Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other” (1 John 4:11). We get tangled up with the *ought*.

Admittedly, a lot of “oughts” are a big drag. But not this one! This one is for our good. This one is for our welfare. This one is a blessing to us and a blessing to others. This one is a win for us, a win for others, and a win for the world.

TRUE FOR ME

I think I recognized the ways Sarah was thriving by advocating for kids in need because I'd experienced something similar. As I anticipated a recent holiday, I knew my kids would be away with their dad and that I would be alone. I'd enjoy time with friends and neighbors, but I dreaded being without the family I'd built my life around. My only plan for the holiday was to be miserable.

But something else happened.

God began to open my eyes to others who weren't going to have a picture-perfect Norman Rockwell holiday. (Spoiler alert: No one does. *Perfect* is fictitious.) I thought about Sarah, who would be juggling trying to be authentic with family members in a larger gathering and still be the mom her kids needed her to be—especially as those two things tugged against one another. I remembered a friend who'd recently lost a baby. I held in my heart an acquaintance whose adult daughter had died three years ago. I called to mind a single friend who, like me, would have loved to share the holiday with a spouse and children.

Though I'm not the neighbor-loving superhero I want to believe I am, I did reach out as I was able. I sent a text. I prayed. I showed up with a decadent dessert. And, predictably, the encounters in which I did make that little effort were the most satisfying moments, for me, of the whole dreaded holiday.

And therein lies the beauty. Each of us has the ability to make meaningful connections that bless us and have the potential to bless others. We don't have to wait around to be invited on a date or to a dinner party in order to give and receive the love for which we were made.

TRUE FOR YOU

Believe me, I hear how unrealistic that sounds, like putting a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. But my report from the battlefield is that it really works.

It worked for me. And I wondered if it worked for others. So I checked in with Sarah: “In a season of wanting to be loved,” I typed, “I've found much relief and groundedness by loving

others in teeny ways. You too?"

Sarah's response confirmed my suspicions: "Oh, yes, yes, yes. It's remarkable what it does for my soul."

That we would benefit by using the little energy we have left in the midst of our own loneliness to reach out to others doesn't add up. I know it doesn't. And though it appears to be an exchange of one hard thing for another, the surprising kingdom math is that two hard things equal unlikely joy. ●

Editor's Note: Sarah's name has been changed to protect her privacy.



● TOP 10

10 Things Your Single Friends Need from You

Navigating friendship across life stages | **STEPHANIE RISCHE**

The story goes something like this: Boy meets girl. Boy and girl plan wedding. Boy and girl ask their people to stand in front of church in matching outfits. Boy and girl live happily ever after.

But there's one part of the story that rarely gets covered in this script: What happens to boy and girl's single friends after they get married?

It can be tricky to navigate cross-life-stage friendships. From a logistical standpoint, your schedules and availability don't always match. Maybe you're trying to spend quality time with your spouse in the evenings or running your kids to soccer practice when your friend is available to hang out.

And on an emotional level, you may be facing different challenges and celebrating different victories. While you're mired in potty training, your friend is muddling through online dating profiles. Is it even possible to maintain close relationships with your single friends after you're married?

Although there are challenges inherent to these relationships, the benefits far outweigh any awkwardness. When you have a friendship that transcends life stage, you know that you value each other for who you are. You aren't friends simply because you're in the same dorm or because your kids are in the same class; you're friends because there's a deeper, soul-level connection. And when your relationship weathers a major life change, it creates a loyalty that can last a lifetime.

If you want to maintain a close relationship with your single friends, you must realize that there are some things they need you to do.

1. BE PART OF THEIR COMMUNITY

Our culture, and the Christian subculture in particular, is couples-focused, which means that daily life, and special occasions in particular, can feel isolating for those who don't have a spouse. Invite your single friends to join you for holidays, celebrate their birthdays, sit with them at church, or invite them over for pizza on a Friday night.

2. SHARE AND LISTEN

Don't shy away from talking to your single friends about marriage and parenthood, both the good parts and the challenges. At the same time, be ready to listen when they want to talk about the guy they just met or about lonely Saturday nights. When you're in a group setting where everyone except one person is married or has children, it's easy for conversations to center on topics your single friends aren't privy to. Be sensitive to this tendency and look for ways to make sure they're included. Your relationship will grow when you can share authentically about the struggles and joys of different life stages.

3. REFRAIN FROM GIVING UNSOLICITED ADVICE

Unless your single friends specifically ask for your input on their single state (why they're still single, where they should go to meet people, or what guys are looking for), you're better off just listening, asking questions, and being there for them. Even if your words are true, your friends probably won't hear you unless they're directly seeking counsel. Chances are you wouldn't want unsolicited marriage advice from them, so it's a safe bet the reverse is true too.

4. GENTLY ENCOURAGE THEM TO TAKE RISKS

Although you don't want to barrel forward with unsought counsel, there may be times when your friends specifically ask for your input. If your friends are looking for a relationship, walk with them through the difficult terrain of meeting people, whether through a singles group or online dating. Be willing to take a profile picture for them or offer your feedback on the people they've been matched with. If the circumstances are right, you may even offer to set them up with a potentially compatible single person you know.

5. RESIST VIEWING YOUR FRIEND AS A FIXER-UPPER

It may be tempting to think of ways your single friends could improve themselves to snag a date, whether it's losing a few pounds, getting a haircut, or overhauling their wardrobe. But people pick up on that attitude, even if it's unspoken. Being single is an adjective, not an identity, and you don't want to inadvertently communicate that there's something wrong with them because they're not married.

6. SET AN EXAMPLE OF HEALTHY MARRIAGE

Your single friends may or may not get married someday. Either way, one of the best gifts you can give them is an example of a life-giving, Christ-centered marriage. If they can see your marriage being lived out in authentic ways, it will help them gain realistic expectations for their own relationships, know what to look for in a potential mate, and gain appreciation for marriage as one of God's good ideas.

7. OFFER AFFIRMATION

It can be discouraging for people to watch their friends get married while they remain single. After a while, they may begin to question their worth and identity. Look for opportunities to affirm the good qualities you see in your friends.

8. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IT CAN BE HARD TO BE SINGLE

Make space for your friends to experience a range of emotions when it comes to their relationship status. Understand that every life stage comes with unique challenges, and avoid the temptation to compare or make light of their pain. If you're raising a toddler and are short on alone time, it doesn't help you or your friend to say, "I wish I lived alone; I can't even go to the bathroom by myself!" Instead, try to find common ground when you can and grace when you can't.

9. PRAY FOR THEM

If your friends want to be married, pray that God will bring the right relationship at the right time. You may even offer to pray with your friends directly. Regardless of what happens with their relationship status, ask God to bring whatever they need—comfort, joy, love, and peace. God may use you to hope on their behalf when they can't hope for themselves.

10. BRING THEM ICE CREAM WHEN THEIR HEARTS GET BROKEN

We all get our hopes dashed at some point. Be the kind of person who shows up with the mint chocolate chip.

There is some awkwardness in being in a different life stage from a friend. But as Proverbs 17:17 reminds us, God didn't create friendship only for the times it's convenient or straightforward; it's for all seasons: "A friend loves at all times" (NIV).

Great joy can come from friendships that span life stages if we're willing to invest in those relationships. When we learn to love through the changes and transitions of life, we get the opportunity to rewrite the story: Boy and girl get married. Boy and girl create the kind of community with their single friends that would make Jesus proud.

And they all lived happily (if slightly awkwardly) ever after. ●

Stephanie Rische writes about the more mortifying (yet ultimately redemptive) moments of her life in her memoir, *I Was Blind (Dating), But Now I See* (Tyndale House, 2016). Connect with her at StephanieRische.com or on Twitter at [@StephanieRische](https://twitter.com/StephanieRische).

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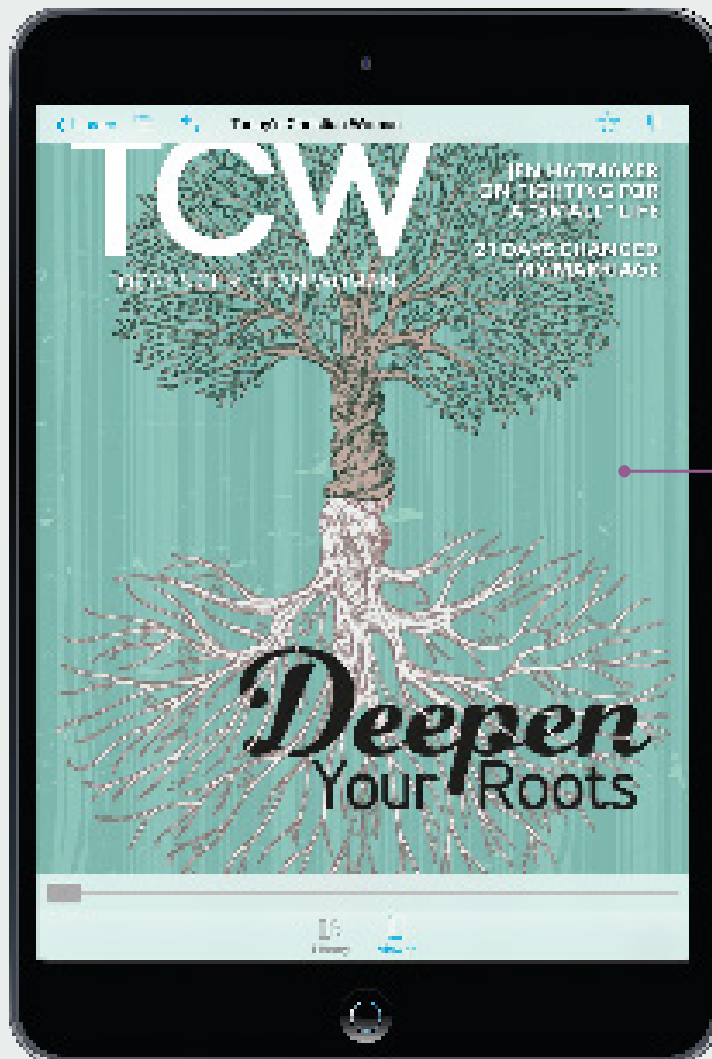
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