

In the book of Ruth, we witness a woman's journey of loss, loyalty, and love. Sound familiar? These are hallmarks of the military life. Our lives are fraught with heartache and sacrifice. But even when we're in a faraway, foreign land, He is not lost and has not lost us.

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LONELY HURTS

If you are looking for inspiring words about focusing on the coming rainbow after hardship, this isn't that kind of chapter, at least not initially. We have some hard things to get through first, friend.

We are going to get right into the thick of being uncomfortable, opening up our hearts to our struggles. Why?

It's the only way to make it to the other side.

This is the side where hope and goodness reign supreme. Before you can have the bright and pretty of the rainbow you are so unapologetically anticipating, it's important to sit in and work *through* the dark to get there. And loneliness *is* dark. It's an ugly and uncomfortable feeling that can bring on the deepest of despair and unbearable heartache. Staying in that space is painful, but without processing the "why" of it, you can't move forward *through* it.

I, too, have battled with loneliness and looked for ways to understand it.

As I was writing this book, I knew I'd be sharing the stories of my own military spouse journey and life lessons. But I had no idea I'd be unpacking my own loneliness trauma, with its roots going back to my three-year-old self.

My early years weren't picture perfect, despite being surrounded by a loving and very loud Italian family. Though my mother tried desperately to shield both my sister and me from our father's battle with alcoholism, there was no escaping it. I have cloudy memories of those years and of him, but the first one I can recall is visiting him while he was in drug and alcohol rehab.

I can still see the bunkhouse and feel him hugging me, his hands sweaty from nervousness and withdrawal.

When I was small, all I wanted to watch was *The Wizard of Oz*. Every night without fail, my mom would put it on after my bath. It's how I fell asleep, and I picked right back up the following night, like clockwork. My second memory of my father was of him fighting with my mother. Though I didn't know it then, he was drunk and apparently highly upset that I was hogging the television with my beloved movie.

I remember my mom carrying me from room to room, trying to get away from his loud and inebriated yelling. But I heard it—and vividly remember it all. Just like I remember the rain outside the moving trucks when we said goodbye to him not long after. My mother loved him with every breath she had—rehab to rehab she tried to save him from alcohol, and from himself. But

the day he told her he didn't love her anymore, she just couldn't continue.

I don't blame her.

He'd go on to make some truly terrible choices that would land him in prison and gone from our lives for a long period of time. Though he came back into my life briefly when I was six, he disappeared shortly after. The state of Florida couldn't find him, and

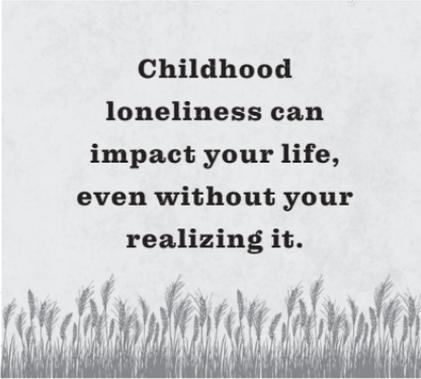
I wouldn't hear from him again for almost a decade, until he surprised my sister and me with birthday cards when I was in high school.

To paint the full picture for you, he was *still* paying child support for me after I was married and had given birth to my first child at twenty-five.

I share this portion of my life not to evoke your sympathy for that little girl, but rather to demonstrate how deeply childhood loneliness can impact your life, even without your realizing it. From the outside looking in, I should have been fine without my father. My sister and I were raised by a strong mother, grandparents, aunts, a plethora of cousins, and actually lived in a loving home with my uncle, who treated us as if we were his own. I had father figures and many good things.

But I was still feeling lonely.

I ached for him, even though I didn't really know him. It would take me years to work through the issues his absence created in me.



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NEVER ALONE

When I was completing my master's program, part of my clinical requirements was to attend meetings for family members of alcoholics as well as the traditional Alcoholics Anonymous gatherings.

Within thirty minutes of my first meeting, I forgave him.

My work through my graduate studies gave me the tools I needed to understand who he was and work through his life choices to a place of empathy and true understanding. But it was also my own journey of faith that would light the way to actual forgiveness. It's a powerful thing. I absolutely love the Scripture about it, which says: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

It was so easy and clear. I got it. As an adult, I'd sure made my share of mistakes and transgressions. Who was I to hold on to his, like stones? Grace would lead me. In fact, I reached out to him right then and there. I told him I knew he had tried but ultimately couldn't work through his own demons to make it back to me before I was too old to keep waiting for him. But I said that it was okay and I was okay, and that he could rest knowing I wasn't holding on to his failings.

His wife would tell me later he cried and prayed his thanks out loud.

My heart no longer hurt from the loneliness of him walking away. As an adult I could examine the broken pieces of his life and see how his story unraveled the way it did. He was a baby boy born to a family who couldn't afford him and essentially didn't want him. His biological father also accused his mother of having an affair, denying his paternity. He was adopted by his maternal

aunt, also an alcoholic. The name he'd lived with for three years was changed, and the siblings he'd been raised with were told he was no longer their brother. It wasn't a kind home and my heart aches for that little boy.

Though my mother was a stabilizing force in his life, he was only nineteen when they married and just twenty-one when I was born. A young man with unprocessed trauma and demons to fight suddenly thrust into being a father? It's a miracle he lasted as long as he did. What he needed was lovingkindness, extensive therapy, and knowing that though his road wasn't easy and was filled with holes, God was right there to fill them up.

My sister and I visited him when I was seventeen and we maintained a close relationship on the phone for years. The best chapter of our story was when he was completely sober in my early twenties! But it didn't last. After four years of consistent sobriety (the longest he'd ever gone) and even becoming an Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor himself, he called me one day, intoxicated. And he lied about it when I questioned him. My son was only a few months old and, as I heard the slurring words on the phone with Anthony in my arms, I made the decision to end the call and any other attempts to build a relationship.

I was clear, if he was going to choose to drink I would not be

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How we use our
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everything.**



around and he wouldn't be involved in my children's lives. They deserved better, and I was going to break the cycle of enabling that kind of relationship.

While we were not close, he did find the light of our Lord and went on to live a simple life on a farm. Though we didn't talk on the phone (something I maintained even though I forgave him, because he was still drinking after all), I would send him pictures of my babies, and he thoroughly enjoyed it all. In July of 2022, his ex-wife called to let me know he'd been diagnosed with an aggressive form of liver and lung cancer, which had spread throughout his body.

I knew what this meant. So, with my heart in my throat, I got on the phone with him for the first time in years. He sounded so tired and was clearly in pain. I told him I loved him and I'd be praying for healing. Just two months later, I'd be giving permission to remove his life support in order to allow him to pass through to heaven peacefully. The next day I'd fly to Idaho to take care of what little he had. A year prior, I promised I'd come see him again. Though it wasn't how I hoped, I kept my promise.

One day, when my children are older and can understand, I'll tell them the story.

And we all have stories.

How we use our personal struggles and trials is everything. Despite the memories I can't forget and the missing pieces of a family I couldn't have, I wouldn't change a thing. Every tear had its place and brought me right here. To you.

You'll find out quickly that I am slightly obsessed with Disney movies. I quote them often in my daily life. One of my favorites has origins from the movie *Dumbo*: "The very things that hold you down are going to lift you up, up, up!"¹

In the military life, loneliness is going to grab ahold of you and try to weigh you down in its awfulness. But know this—if you do the work—you'll be using that dreaded memory for something really good. It's all about the journey, sweet friend.

Those who avoid addressing the underlying reasons for loneliness and box it up always find that box overflowing later. The mess it leaves after being hidden for so long is often worse than when it began, especially as it spills all over your life. Again, been there, done that, y'all!

I could go into a long-winded explanation of the importance of using healthy coping skills and not allowing destructive defense mechanisms to prevent emotional growth, but that would be another book in itself.

What I will tell you is that despite how hard it is to walk that path of raw processing and finding your healthy methods to cope, there is always beauty in the everlasting truth that you *can* work through it. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us," Romans 8:18 tells us.

And you won't be alone when you do, I promise.

In order to tackle this beast of a feeling, you have to first understand what loneliness is, and what it's not.

THE CLINICAL AND SCIENTIFIC HISTORY OF LONELINESS

In 1674, English naturalist John Ray compiled a glossary of infrequently used words. He included loneliness, which he defined as “far from neighbours.”²

As a modern society, we have researched clinical implications of loneliness since the 1980s.³ It was psychologist Frieda Fromm-Reichmann who first began considering loneliness as a mental health issue back in 1959. She described loneliness as overwhelmingly painful, disintegrative, and paralyzing.⁴ Although she made questionable personal choices I’ll skip over (no stone throwing and all that jazz), her work led to the explosion of the true clinical exploration into loneliness.

So, it’s clear that we recognized the negative implications of being lonely because we were seeing it through evidence-based research

and overall declining well-being as a society. Check. A published article in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* suggested it was an official disease, saying, “The pathological loneliness has its roots in medical model consisting of a host, an agent, and an environment and is thus, a disease.”⁵ The author’s reasoning for this statement was in the way that loneliness affects our perception, thoughts, and even

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the actual chemistry of our brains. Loneliness is a feeling and state of being that slowly eats away at us internally until it manifests physically. It is a powerful feeling. Remember what I said before about secrets making you sick? It's indisputable at this point.

We've examined the accepted definition and clinical implications of loneliness. But long before we had doctors and scientists researching the concept of loneliness, our Bible addressed it. Pretty eloquently, I might add!

Our ancestors were no strangers to loneliness, despite the formal official research only being recorded in more recent times. Though this section is truly devoted to clinical aspects, I just have to throw a little Bible epic-ness your way. Remember alllllllll the way back in Genesis when God was creating everything? Since God knows everything, it shouldn't surprise you that He recognized the importance of avoiding loneliness, from the absolute beginning of time as we know it!

No matter what version of the Bible you like to soak in, the realization that Adam wouldn't do well alone was glaringly obvious to God. We see evidence of its ramifications throughout the Bible later. Although I think (and hope) most of us aren't going through something quite as serious as some of those stories we find in those sacred pages, we all have our own battles with loneliness.

Don't compare or think your story is less than because someone else's sounds more challenging. *Your experience matters and needs space too.*

I also want to be absolutely clear on something as we continue to navigate the understanding of loneliness: there is a definitive

difference between being by ourselves (solitude) and being *lonely*. The latter is a negative feeling, while the former is a healthy experience that can lead to improved self-confidence and worth. We should *absolutely* be okay sitting with ourselves and our thoughts from time to time. It gives us time to pause our hectic lives and be mindful of the beautiful moments we are living.

For example, I absolutely adore taking long hikes in the woods by myself (with supplies like bear mace; hey, I love the outdoors but I also appreciate the importance of staying alive). Breathing in God's beautiful creations and soaking up the peace of the forest resets me like nothing else. I *never* feel lonely in those moments, even though I am intentionally seeking solitude. But when my husband, Scott, was deployed and had to leave me in a strange city where I knew no one and had no support, I was so lonely it manifested into quite obvious physical symptoms of distress.

I couldn't eat without feeling sick, nothing in life gave me pleasure or joy, and I felt endlessly fatigued. *That* was loneliness morphing into a clinical episode of depression.

So, what exactly *is* this terrible feeling that so many of us are so deeply familiar with? Let's dissect it and lay it bare. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the word "lonely" refers to being cut off from others and having a "feeling of bleakness or desolation."⁶ Psychologically, it refers to the absence of imperative social relations and a lack of affection or connections in current social relationships.⁷ These explanations describe so many seasons of the military spouse's life that's it's eerie.

The official definitions or descriptions give us a good idea of what it feels like to experience loneliness, but we need to go a little deeper on how detrimental it can be for our well-being. I also want you to know and recognize the signs that it's rearing its head in your life and heart. Loneliness looks different for everyone, but there are definitely common themes or emotions that accompany this complex feeling. So, let's start with some of the specific types of loneliness we can experience as human beings. Though there is a plethora of opinions on the subject, these are the three that I feel bring the biggest negative impacts to our lives.⁸

Situational

Situational loneliness is exactly what it says and revolves around environmental factors. Examples include interpersonal conflicts, disasters, or migration (for us, this is a fancy word for moving, something we are deeply familiar with). Sadly, we'll probably all sit in this type of loneliness a time or two, or five. Situational can also equate to life stressors, something almost entirely unavoidable but more easily treatable.

Emotional

As human beings, we thrive on close emotional attachments. When that is missing, it can lead to loneliness, which can then spiral into a myriad of mental illness symptoms. This can accompany a loss of someone close to you who you had previously confided in and shared attachment with. Think about things like broken friendships, lost connections due to frequent moves, or any other

force coming between you and a close attachment. It causes emotional weight like no other.

Social

Isolation and a lack of community support is detrimental. Emotional and social loneliness go hand in hand, each wreaking havoc on your health. This kind will arise when there is no sense of belonging or feeling valued. As creatures of God who were intended to thrive in families, groups, or communities, missing support and connection socially is perhaps the most harmful. In this type of loneliness, we will see isolation and declining health, and it is a road that takes a lot of work to find your way back home.

Experiencing any of these three forms of loneliness can bring about depression, feelings of worthlessness, anxiety, and physical symptoms such as reduced appetite and inability to sleep. While all this is occurring, our brains are shooting off stress hormones like cortisol, which is shortening our lifespan and making us physically ill.

Medical professionals openly discussed how many more patients they were seeing with headaches, muscle tension, or stomach problems, as the quarantines through the pandemic continued. We were not meant to be isolated as human beings and it was clearly witnessed as we watched the world shut down in 2020. Academic studies have even identified loneliness as a predictor of suicidal ideation and eventual attempts.⁹

When I say loneliness can be deadly, I mean it.

It's important to recognize the pattern of life-altering symptoms

that can accompany extended loneliness and address the heart of what's going on before it progresses.

If you are experiencing loneliness, you are *not* alone. I pray working through it with me helps you in your path to processing and eventually healing.

Now that I've dragged you through some of my life, a brief history, and a clinical psychology lesson, I want to get to the really, really good stuff. This is your rainbow moment of the chapter (see, I *told* you it was coming). We are about to hit the part of our journey together that lights my heart on fire. Ready? Here we go.

THE BIBLICAL ANSWER TO LONELINESS

Ruth 1:1-5

Although there are many books of the Bible that make me nod my head, smile, and feel joy, Ruth is special. You know how you can watch a movie ten times and find something new each time? The Bible is like that for me. I'd heard and read the story of Ruth many times growing up, but it wouldn't be until I had been a military spouse for over fifteen years that I saw the parallels of our lives. I firmly believe that God revealed it to me only when I was ready.

When you dive into the book of Ruth, remember that it takes place during a time period when the judges ruled the people of Israel. At this time, the nation did not have a king, so the judges' duties were basically to govern under God's direction: drive out their enemies, lead the people in God's law, and so on.

We see Naomi's husband, Elimelech, move her and their two

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sons, Mahlon and Chilion, from Judah to Moab because of the ongoing famine. To give a little context, Moabites were pagans. So, here's Naomi in a strange land with only her sons and husband as her community when they arrive. Add in the factor of no true connection spiritually, and it was certainly a small circle of support. Lonely.

Eventually her husband dies.

But she still has her two sons, and although I imagine she was sad she pressed on. Both sons had married Moabite women, Orpah, and our honorary military soul sister, Ruth. They were all a unit until Mahlon and Chilion died.

Suddenly, Naomi was thrust into the pit of loss and pain all over again. This time she felt (I think) like there was no hope or goodness left, lost without the physical presence of her family. This belief is supported by the undertones of bitterness we feel in her words and anger with God we see later on in the story. Here, we recognize what Naomi is going through: loneliness.

She was probably experiencing all three types of loneliness that we covered earlier. *Situational* (migration to Moab away from support), *emotional* (loss of family), and *social* (isolation and lack of community). Naomi was going through it, y'all, but what she doesn't realize yet is that she won't have to do it on her own.

God used a pagan woman with no blood ties to Naomi in order to restore her faith in Him, love her, and show the true meaning of lovingkindness.

This is it, friends.

You *will* go through seasons of loneliness that challenge everything you believe to be good. Some of these trials will make you question where God is leading you and even make you doubt His love or—maybe even worse—His existence. There is no judging here. We have all been there in some form or another. And if you meet a Christian who hasn't even had a moment or sliver of a shadow of doubt, I *need* to meet them. Over a cup of coffee, of course.

But guess what? Despite your internal ache of loneliness, you are *never* alone. God is always with you, ready to bring you through your despair.

First Peter 5:10 is encouraging: “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”

God is with you, friend.

I often use music as a positive tool to combat bad moods and struggles I'm going through. But just know that although I love Jesus with my whole heart, I rock out hard to some '90s hip-hop too. It's typically country music I like, but I grew up alongside Tupac and it is what it is. But at this moment, I am *actually* listening to one of my favorite worship songs, and its words are so poignant for this. I encourage you to listen to and look up the lyrics to the beautiful song “Oh My Soul” as sung by Casting Crowns.¹⁰

To me, this song is telling us to keep on keeping on. Yes, what you are sitting with is hard. *It hurts*. But just like the sun rises, it will set too. Work through it one moment at a time and know what's waiting for you when you come out of it.

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He sits with us as our shoulders shake with those sobs that echo our pain. I like to imagine that when we've exhausted our tears, it's His hand on our head that gives the relief that often accompanies emotional unburdening. He was certainly sitting with Ruth in hers, giving her the strength she needed to overcome loneliness not only for herself but for Naomi too.

Lovingkindness is a *hope* we desperately need! Paired with God's perfect and constantly present love, you *will* heal your loneliness. And as we continue to navigate the story of Ruth together, I'll show you how.

Let's Talk about It

Matthew 28:20 tells us, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

As we delve into the topic of loneliness, it is my fervent hope you begin to hold fast to the realization that He is with us, in and through everything. As a clinician I believe deeply in the power of sharing stories and the healing that can result from the unburdening. So right now, write down the thing in your life that is making you feel the deepest loneliness and heartache. Then, head over to Romans 5:1–5. There I pray you find some restoration of peace . . . and a whole lot of love.

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