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Anthony T. Evans

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Tony Evans Speaks Out on Single Parenting

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 at least 30 percent in the culture at large. For African-American children, that percentage more than doubles to 63 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 deserting their families too, but the numbers are still heavily weighted toward missing fathers.

We're told that half of all American children will go through at least some part of their lives without having a father at home. And the future doesn't look any brighter. By the year 2000, it is predicted that 70 percent of our black children will be products of single-parent (in most cases, fatherless) homes.

The implications of this 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 good number of people put their hands up.

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 reason 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 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 more than a million children being born out of wedlock every year, we're all paying a huge bill.

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. Regardless of how you got into that situation, if you love God and have a heart for Him, He is for you.

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 you have a mother you didn't know you had and a father when you don't know where your real father is. That is what the old folks meant when they said, "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 and computer wizardry to turn a character in a film into someone else. God says, "If you need Me to turn into a dad, I will turn into a dad. If you need Me to turn into a mom, I will turn into a mom. I will be to you whatever you need." That's a good word for you if there is somebody important missing in your home.

Psalm 68:5 says that God is "a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows." If your son does not have a father, that's not the whole story because God is a Father to the fatherless. He also acts in justice on behalf of a widow.

The Hebrew word for *orphan* means "fatherless." In Israel, a fatherless child was considered an orphan even if he 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.

The widow who needed God's special protection was not just a woman whose husband had died. You see, God had made a number of provisions for Israelite women who lost their husbands. A woman who had a grown son to care for her, a blood relative to take her husband's place, or a father to go back home to would not be called a widow in Israel.

A true widow was someone who not only had lost her husband but had no other male to take up his responsibility. When there was no man to step into the gap to protect and provide for a woman, she was called a "widow indeed" (see 1 Timothy 5:3). God took it upon Himself to protect women in this situation because there was no one else to do it. A woman left alone in the ancient world was vulnerable to be leached on, misused, and abused. So God said He would act on behalf of defenseless widows.

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 and undergirds 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)

Any questions? God says you better watch how you treat single parents because you are only one step away from that condition yourself.

Abuse them, and your kids might wind up fatherless sooner than you thought. Or your mate might wind up as a single parent. God says not to abuse or misuse those who have to carry this burden.

Let me show you one more passage by way of introduction 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 tithe 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.

These verses 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 breaks his or her back every day to make a living for the kids, then has to come home and cook dinner and wash clothes and go to bed alone at night—then do it all over again the next day, with no one there to turn to for help. 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 we do well to heed. 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 out."

Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as his second wife, 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 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 Sarai got hot. 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 a little spat about Hagar, and Abram does the manly thing. He tells her, "Do whatever you want. I'm staying out of this one."

By the way, don't help God. When God needs your help, He will request it. If He does not ask for it, don't assume that He needs it. Abram and Sarai wanted to help God out, but all they did was create the whole Arab/Israeli mess we're still dealing

with today.

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 thrust upon them by someone else's decisions or disobedience. 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 and 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 baby is nowhere to be found.

Who is the Angel of the Lord? Well, the Old Testament indicates that He was the revelation of God's presence. Later on, when Abraham was about to kill Isaac, the son he and Sarah were waiting for all these 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 pre-incarnate Son of God. He did not show up for the first time as baby Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem. He is the eternal second person of the Godhead. There is no time when Jesus did not exist. He appeared throughout the Old Testament as the Angel of the Lord.

What does the Angel of the Lord do? He shows up to fix things. 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 that mess. You may be in an "Abram and Sarai" kind of mess, but God can find you in order to fix you up.

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. Now Hagar was officially married to Abram when Ishmael was conceived, so even though it was an ill-planned event, Ishmael was legitimate. Many single mothers became mothers out of wedlock. However, there is no such thing as an illegitimate child.

We can talk about the *relationship* that produced a child as illegitimate because it was outside the bonds of marriage. But 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 full 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. The relationship that produced the child may be illegitimate, but 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" (v. 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 mess you are in, and He knows whether it's a mess you got yourself into or someone else put you in. He also knows where you are in the mess you are in.

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 that "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 OK "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, 'Thou art a God who sees.'" The Hebrew word for the name Hagar gave to God is *El Roi*. 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 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 am taking heed. I know."

Verse 15 records the birth of Ishmael and his naming by Abram, obviously under God's direction. Now every time Abram called Ishmael by name, he too would be reminded of the mess 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 fuss 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 teenaged son to take care of, 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 Jesus Christ showed up in His Old Testament form. He

asked Hagar, "What is the matter with you?" (v. 17). Didn't He know the fix 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 I have gone blind?"

"The God Who Sees" You

Single parent, God has not gone blind. He sees and 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 kicks you out, will turn into a husband, if necessary, and be a Father to your baby. God will always provide.

Why? Because His name is *El Roi*, "the God who sees." He is the way out of your circumstance. Now I can't promise you that He will bring you a mate or a home or whatever. But I can tell you that He sees that baby, He hears that baby cry. He says, "Remember, I named Ishmael. And any baby 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 God's name. And when you give that child God's name, God takes responsibility for that child's well-being. So God's message to Hagar was, "Young lady, 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 busy crying and forgetting God that she stopped trusting, she stopped looking 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 could feed your babies? How many times has God opened your eyes and shown you how you can make it on one person's salary?

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," and she told 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 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 not long ago. My daughter Crystal'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."

Crystal 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 Crystal Evans?" She said it was. He explained that he was driving down the street when he saw something that looked like a book lying in the gutter. He thought it looked important, so he doubled back and picked it up.

He brought it home and saw Crystal'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! We had church because even though Crystal did not know where her notebook was, El Roi, "the God who sees," knew where it was. He came through just in the nick of time. I went with her to pick up the notebook and meet the man. He said, "By the way, I'm a Christian." See, God knows who to work with.

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.

In Hebrews 13:4-5 the writer makes a promise:

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge. Let your way of life be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you."

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.

Many of us don't feel that God is near because we have forsaken Him by

the way we live. Then we wonder why we don't see Him present in our circumstances. God says that, if we will commit ourselves to live for Him, He will be present with us in our circumstances. A single parent might say, "But Jesus doesn't understand my situation." Yes, He does, in at least two important ways.

First, on the night He was crucified, Jesus was totally abandoned, left alone by everyone. No single parent or any other person has ever been abandoned by other humans as completely as Jesus was abandoned. Yet on that night He said, "I am not alone, because the Father is with Me" (John 16:32). Jesus experienced the presence of God the Father on the night of His abandonment, and so can you.

Jesus also understands your situation because He was the son of a single parent. No, I haven't forgotten my Bible history. I know that Joseph was His earthly father. But Joseph apparently died sometime before Jesus began His ministry, because he is absent from the gospel narratives. While He was on the cross, Jesus told John to care for Mary as his own mother because Jesus would no longer be able to provide for her (John 19:26-27). He wouldn't have done that if

Joseph had still been around. So for some portion of Jesus' life, He was the son of a single parent.

Jesus knows what single parents are going through. He knows what it is to have brothers and sisters and only a mom available. He knows exactly what you are going through, and that is why in Luke 7:11-17, when Jesus encountered the widow of Nain on her way to bury her son, He sympathized with her and raised her son from the dead. That is why Hebrews 4:16 says that as our High Priest Jesus feels what you feel. He knows what you are going through because He has been there. He not only can help you, but He can share the feelings you have while He is helping you.

God the Father can know what you are going through because He is God. But God the Father can't feel what you are going through because He has never been a man. However, because Jesus has experienced everything you and I have experienced and felt everything we have felt, He can say, "I fully understand what you're going through." When Jesus the Son goes before the Father on your behalf as your High Priest and the Holy Spirit interprets your most deeply-felt prayers to the Father (Romans 8:26), you get the ministry of the entire Godhead

working in your situation. You get the total provision of God for your circumstances.

The Lesson of Ruth

I believe that every single mother, if not every woman regardless of her circumstances, should make a habit of reading the story of Ruth. Ruth is an extraordinary example of a faithful woman with some incredible lessons to teach us.

She was not an Israelite, as we learn right off. Her mother-in-law Naomi was, but she was living in Ruth's country of Moab because there was a famine in her hometown of Bethlehem. When Naomi's husband and her two sons died, she sort of adopted Ruth. When Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, she tried to persuade Ruth to go back to her father's home and find a nice Moabite man to marry. However, Ruth said she would rather be alone with Naomi and her people and the true God than find a new husband in the wrong crowd.

Single parent, did you notice that? It is better to be faithful to God and not to have a husband than to have to leave God behind just to have a mate. This truth is just as applicable to single fathers and widowers.

Ruth was ready to give up the thought of ever marrying again if that's what it took to be a follower of God. Naomi warned Ruth that her marriage prospects in Bethlehem would be absolutely nil. But to Ruth there was something more important than having a man beside her at night.

Chances are you know how the story of Ruth ends. She meets Boaz and not only marries him but, in the process, becomes a part of the lineage of David and eventually of Jesus Himself. Naomi didn't have the whole picture in front of her. God honored Ruth's faithfulness in a way neither woman could have guessed. Now you may say, "That's great, Tony. Nice, happy ending. But I'm not Ruth, and this is not Bethlehem."

No, but your God is the God of Ruth! Of course, I can't say whether, or when, God will give you a new mate. He doesn't share that kind of information with me. But He sees and knows you. He's watching and listening. He knows the deepest desires and needs of your heart.

If Ruth were here, she would tell you it's worth it to be faithful to the Lord. She became part of the godly line because she was willing to go all the way with God in her single state.

God's System of Responsibility: The Single Parent

Now I want to turn to a crucial area, which is the system God has put in place to help us deal with situations such as single-parent families and single women in particular who have no one to care for them. God has given all of us spheres of responsibility. Our marital or family status does not excuse us from carrying out our God-assigned responsibilities, because in His economy, or way of ordering life, God always starts with personal responsibility. So the first question we always need to ask ourselves is, What is my responsibility under God? Once we understand that, we can move out in concentric circles to the broader contexts of the responsibilities God has assigned to the family, the church, and society.

Before I get to the responsibilities of the single parent, a couple of general observations will help us understand why it seems that so little of what God wants done in this world actually gets done. The problem comes when we flip-flop roles, when we blur and mix the circles of responsibility God has clearly drawn and mess up His order. God never expects your

family to do for you what you ought to be doing for yourself. God never expects the church to do for you what your family should be doing for you. And God never expects society to do the job of the church.

Today we have it all mixed up, all out of order. The result is that people are actually made worse. We have too many people who want society and the government to do for them what they are not willing to do for themselves. We have people who expect the church to do for them what ought to be the responsibility of their families. So we get the system out of whack. When that happens, we end up with the chaos we have in the whole welfare debacle. We end up with children who have no sense of responsibility toward their parents, even though in some cases their parents have invested years in taking care of grown children who should have left a long time ago. We're in the mess we're in because we are operating outside of God's system. We've got to get back in sync with Him or else nothing will work.

It is important that we do not let others make us feel guilty for staying in sync with God's economy. What many people will do is make you feel guilty that you are not doing for them what they ought to be doing for

themselves. If you don't watch out, you'll wind up feeling bad and they'll wind up feeling good, when it ought to be the other way around. A lot of parents of single parents feel guilty because their son or daughter is having to rear children alone. But a lot of that guilt is false guilt. Parents cannot make their grown children's decisions for them, and sometimes all of us make bad decisions.

So what is the responsibility of single parents? What must they do? What does God expect of them? I want to answer that from Scripture by looking with you at the story of a widow in 1 Kings 17:9-24.

This account shows us that, if you are alone and without the support systems you need, if you are financially destitute and see very little hope of making it, the first thing you must do as a single parent is to obey God. You may say, "I want something practical. You're giving me theology." Well, this theology is extremely practical. Just ask the widow at Zarephath. Here was a woman with a son to feed who had run out of the means by which to live. She was destitute.

In fact, she had only enough oil and flour for one more meal, yet God

sent her a boarder, the prophet Elijah. Notice that God told Elijah, "I have commanded [her] to provide for you" (v. 9). So this woman was about to be confronted with the issue of obedience to God—and, by the way, she wasn't even an Israelite.

One thing you need to know right off is that if you trust God it does not matter what race, class, or creed you are—He will take care of you. He sent Elijah to a Gentile woman and told the prophet He had already put it in her heart to feed him because there was a famine and the preacher needed to eat.

So Elijah came to this single parent and asked for a meal. The widow told him her plight, that she was planning a last meal for herself and her son because of the famine (v. 12). She was saying, "I don't see any way out, preacher." I have sat with single parents who have said the same thing. I think any single parent can understand how this woman must have felt. Her statement was not in conflict with God's desire for her, because at this point she is simply stating the reality. Her obedience hasn't been tested yet. She didn't have much, but Elijah asked for it anyway because he knew what God was going to do.

This woman faced a big question,

one that many single parents face today: Do I obey God even though I am a single parent who has very little to offer? Or do I take the little that I have and keep it for myself? She did have the promise of God to act on, for Elijah told her:

Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first, and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel, "The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth." (vv. 13-14)

Here is the classic dilemma for people of faith, single parent or not. Are we going to obey God and get long-term blessing, or are we going to disobey Him for a short-term fix? A lot of us will settle for the latter because we have a hard time seeing with the eyes of faith. This may be even a bigger temptation for single-parent families, since the short-term prospects often do not look good and it seems crazy to risk what little they have.

This Gentile widow could have said no to Elijah and eaten her last

meal. But she had a heart that was open to the God of Israel, and she acted on His word, not on her situation. Single parent, if all you see is your present situation, you are going to be controlled by it. What God wants you—and all of us, for that matter—to do is to learn to operate on His Word and not on our circumstances. I once asked a single mother how she was doing, and she said, "OK, under the circumstances." Get out from under there. You don't belong under the circumstances. What God wants you to do is to step out on His Word.

Now please don't misunderstand. I am very much aware of the burdens single parents carry, and I am not into handing out easy answers. But what I'm talking about is real-world Christian living. I saw a practical example of what happens when we act on God's Word. Another of the single parents in our church, who was concerned about her giving, came to me. Things were tight, but she wanted to honor the Lord. So we prayed about it, and I told her, "Well, just honor God with what you can."

We talked awhile longer and she left. Soon after that she called to tell me about somebody who had died in her family and left her a large inheritance. Now I know what you're

thinking! But I am not going to tell you that if you give faithfully God is going to take out somebody in your family and dump a big inheritance on you. What I am saying is that this single mother honored God in her situation, and He honored her heart toward Him. She had a heart that wanted to obey God.

The widow of Zarephath also had a heart to obey God, and we read in verses 15-16 how God kept His promise made to her by Elijah. She and her son not only did not die but "ate for many days." She didn't get a big inheritance, but God kept her jar and bowl filled with enough flour and oil for each day's need. That may be how He honors your obedience. The point is that God gave her what she did not have because she obeyed what God said. Before you complain about what God is not doing for you, your first question must be, "Am I doing what He told me to do?"

If you are not obeying God, then don't be surprised if you are not eating for many days. God's ability to supply is never the issue. Paul writes, "Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us" (Ephesians 3:20). The power is working in us when we

obey. The issue is our obedience to the Word of God.

By the way, this widow was not a perfect single parent. Go on further to 1 Kings 17:17-18 and you find that her son died and she feared that it was God punishing her for her sins. In other words, she had some bad things in her past, some mistakes she had made, some sins she had committed, some not-so-nice circumstances, things she would rather forget. She was not a perfect person, but that's the beauty of God's grace. If you have an imperfect background but you are willing to obey God today, He can take care of the miracles you need tomorrow. If you have an imperfect past but an obedient present, you can have a blessed tomorrow.

This woman obeyed, and she saw yet another miracle when Elijah raised her son from the dead. Her story ought to be good news for any single parent. Yesterday's sins don't have to cancel tomorrow's blessings. If you will obey God today, if you have put yesterday's sins under the blood of Jesus and are not repeating them today, God wants to bless you based on your obedience.

In fact, turn just a few pages ahead in your Bible and you will see this principle expressed again in a similar

setting. This time God's prophet is Elisha, but the woman in the story is another destitute widow (2 Kings 4:1-7). Her husband had been one of the "sons of the prophets" (v. 1), so he was a godly man. The woman herself said that about him. But she was about to lose her children because she couldn't pay her debts and her creditors were at the door. A lot of single parents can identify with this scenario because the financial burdens of single parenthood can sometimes make you feel like you and your kids have been sold into slavery.

Notice how differently God dealt with this situation. Remember the single mother who wanted to honor God by giving what she could and she received a large inheritance? That's the kind of solution God uses here. Whereas the widow of Zarephath apparently got just enough food supply to last each day, this woman got a windfall of oil, enough to pay off all her debts and set her and her sons up for life.

You can read the story for yourself. The point is that, when Elisha asked the woman what she had, she told him her circumstances, just like the other widow did with Elijah. But like Elijah, Elisha then took her a step beyond that and challenged her to live by faith. For

this widow the moment of truth came when Elisha told her to get as many vessels as she could lay her hands on. She could have looked at the reality of the situation and said, "Borrow vessels? For what? I don't have anything to pour in them." Or she could live by faith.

She made the right choice. Living by faith meant going to every person in the neighborhood and getting every empty vessel she could, because she didn't know how the Lord was going to do it and when He was going to do it, but she believed He was going to meet the need.

Once you are convinced that God is able, once you are convinced that your circumstances are not the ultimate determination of God's ability, then you're ready to act in faith. We tend to focus on the wrong thing. We focus on how bad things are with us, not on how great things are with Him.

Philippians 4:19 says that God will supply all your needs "according to His riches," not according to your circumstances. Satan keeps us focused so much on our inability rather than on God's ability that we rarely see the great "over and above" supply of God.

Here we have two single mothers who saw God do more for them than

what they had in the house to work with. Again, the issue is not what you have. It is what God has. All He asked those widows to do was obey Him; He took responsibility for the supply.

Did you know that Paul's spiritual son Timothy was the product of a single-parent home, as far as we can determine? If Timothy's father was not physically absent, he was at least spiritually absent, for the faith Timothy had was the result of his godly mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy was influenced by Eunice and Lois, and he turned out to be a man of God. Even if there is not a godly man in your home, God can take up the slack. How could Timothy become a man of God when he did not have a male influence in his life? Because he had two women who knew how to get hold of the best male in the universe—the heavenly Father.

Many of us are Christians today not because we had a great male model in our lives but because we had a mother or grandmother or aunt who knew a great God. She made us go to Sunday school and church when we did not want to go. And God was able to catch hold of what she planted and bring about a transformation in our lives.

Don't be upset that you can't be a mother *and* a father. God does not expect you to be a mother and a father. He expects you to be the best mother you can be. *He* will take care of being a father if you will be a mother who is obedient and faithful to Him.

Timothy was not perfect either. He had some timidity. He had some fears. But at the right time God gave Timothy a Paul, a godly father figure and example, somebody who would give the male influence he needed at the time he needed it. If you will obey God as a single parent, live by faith, and generate as much godly influence as you are able, you can trust the rest to God. All He asks of you is to fulfill your personal responsibility.

God's System of Responsibility: The Family

What about the family of the single parent? I would say there's a good chance that you have a single parent somewhere in your extended family. The statistics alone make that a pretty safe assumption. Scripture has a lot to say about the responsibility a family bears to its single parents and widows:

If any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to practice piety in regard to their

own family, and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.... But if any one does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever.... If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed. (1 Timothy 5:4, 8,16)

The point is inescapable. The next line of defense, protection, and support for the single-parent family, particularly if the parent is a woman, is the family of that single parent. It is not the church. In fact, Paul says specifically not to burden the church with the care of someone who has family to take care of her. Why? Because children are to "make some return to their parents" (v. 4).

Some of us believers ought to be ashamed of the way we treat our parents. I grant that they were not perfect. I grant that they made mistakes. But nobody else has invested in you the amount of years, time, money, attention, pain, frustration, aggravation, irritation, and love that your parents did.

If you have neglected your parents, who have made such an investment in your life, according to Paul you rank below the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 5:8). He says that even atheists do better than that. Even people who don't know God will take care of their parents.

Some people get upset if the church or the government does not take care of their parents. But your parents did not rear the church or the government. Your parents reared *you*, and, if God has blessed and honored you, then you need to see to their well-being.

When I go to a nursing home, it is horrible to see how many parents have been discarded and cast aside to waste away when they have living children who could have a part in their lives. Paul says we owe our parents something. It is the family's responsibility to take care of its single parents.

The Old Testament had a number of options for taking care of a widow. One option was for her to marry a relative of her husband to keep the family intact. A second option was for her son to take care of her if he was old enough to do so. A third option was for her to go back home to live

with her father. We often read about athletes who make it to the pros and get the big contracts. Many times they will say that the first thing they are going to do with the money is to build their mothers a house. They are on the right track.

What they are saying to their mothers is, "You hung in there with me. You did not forsake me. You did not throw me away. So because you stayed in there with me, I want to honor you. It's payback time, Mom."

Some of us need to go today, pick up the telephone, and apologize to our parents because we never call or check into their welfare. Someone may say, "But you don't know what my parents did to me!" Yes, some parents were far from ideal. But at least you are here. They could have aborted you. Even if they were not perfect, you still have a responsibility to them. It's an even greater responsibility if you have a single parent to care for.

What about younger single parents who are still trying to rear their children alone? If they are doing all they can and still need help, they should be able to turn to their families before they turn to the church or the government.

I know that's not popular, but it's

biblical. If a single parent has to go to the church or to the welfare office and say, "I need help, but my family turned me down," that's a shame to the family. We need to care for those in our household (v. 8).

Gods System of Responsibility: The Church

The church's responsibility to single parents and older widows is outlined in 1 Timothy 5:16. Here we run into the phrase "widows indeed." These are widows who have no one to support them. They are out there by themselves. For these women, the next line of defense is the church. The church is an extended family. That's how God meant the church to be viewed. The Greek word for church means a "called-out people." In the New Testament, the church always referred to people, not buildings.

In fact, Paul told Timothy to treat the people in the church as his fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters (1 Timothy 5:1-2). We call each other brothers and sisters in Christ because God views the church as an extension of our family. It is God's family, and He is the Father (3:15). Jesus Christ is also called our elder brother (Romans 8:29). These relationships are

especially important when it comes to caring for single parents and their children, because it helps us to understand that when God talks about the church He is referring to His family.

You get the idea. The church gathers on Sunday and then it scatters, but it never quits being the church, just like a family doesn't stop being a family just because the members scatter to school and work in the morning. That's why Paul can tell the church to care for its single parents and widows who are alone, because the church is to function every day.

It is important to see how God designed the church to function as a family for those who don't have an immediate family to fall back on for help and support. The book of James is called a general epistle, but we know that the author was writing to an assembly of believers because of what he said in James 2:2—the context is the church. Now go back to 1:27: "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father [in this family relationship], to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

God says that your relationship to the single-parent family determines

how truly Christian you are! The issue is not how you treat the rich and famous but how you treat those who are in distress, the ones Jesus called the "least" of His brothers (Matthew 25:40). These are the people who don't have any reputation, recognition, or esteem. It is what you do for them that reveals how deeply your religion has penetrated your heart.

So the church has the responsibility to care for the orphan and the widow as part of God's extended family. We are the ones who are to provide the support mechanism for those people who need it. That is why the social service ministry at our church in Dallas is so comprehensive and is expanding all the time. Whether it is helping someone with job training or skill development, helping a person get an equivalent high school education, or providing food and clothing for more immediate needs, we are committed to taking care of those in need in our assembly.

Another important ministry we are thoroughly committed to is providing spiritual role models for those who are missing them at home. We have men investing their time in boys who don't have fathers. We have spiritual mentoring taking place on a number of levels because we believe it is vital for

the church as an extended family to take up the slack.

I believe that mentoring should exist for both the single parent and the child through "ministry in" and "ministry out." For "ministry in," parents should find someone who understands their specific needs and who prays, counsels, listens to, and spends time with them. It helps if mothers find other women and if fathers find other men to serve this function. At some point in the single parent's healing, she (or he) should "minister out" by becoming a mentor to someone else. That does not mean that she ceases to be mentored herself. When a single parent helps others who are new to single parenting or to spiritual things in general, she aids her own healing and growth.

I encourage single parents to start this process by asking themselves what they want from a mentor, then to seek help from friends, teachers, service organizations, or other resources. And I strongly encourage single parents to challenge their church to start a mentoring program.

This kind of ministry, or the lack of it, tells you what kind of church you are in. The effectiveness of your church and mine is not measured by

the size of the building we can put up, the number of people we can pack in the pews, or the amount of the offering we can take in on a Sunday morning. It is not measured by how popular the choir is or how many radio stations the pastor is on.

The church is measured, according to James, by how much attention is being given to the least among us. To the people who have no base, no family support. If caring for them is not a priority in the church, then James says our religion is worthless. If all we do is cater to the "up and in," to people who can do something for us in return, then James says we have missed the essence of the Christian faith. Many of us have worthless religion because we don't have time to use the blessings God has given us to help somebody in distress. James says that orphans and widows are at the top of that list. By and large, they are the single-parent family.

Another thing the church must do is to hold the biological family accountable as the first line of defense. We saw in 1 Timothy 5:16 that Paul told Timothy to tell the families in the church at Ephesus what their duties were so that the church would not be burdened with the care of those who had family members available to help

meet their needs. So the first thing we in the church must do is make sure that families are being families.

We are living in a world where family members don't want to be responsible for each other. They don't want to be families anymore. They don't want the responsibility. It's hard holding a family together today. But the church needs to call families to shoulder their responsibilities so that the church can be free to assist those who are out there all alone with nobody to help.

Gods System of Responsibility: The Government

The final concentric circle in God's structure of responsibility for single parents is society, the government. Single parent, the government is last, not first. You don't go for a welfare check first.

I am not playing politics now. I am not talking about whether you are a Democrat or a Republican. I am talking about whether you are biblical. You don't go to the government first. You don't find out what Uncle Sam has for you before you have dealt with the prior areas of responsibility and help.

The first thing you find out is what

God has for you. You go to His Word. After that, you find out what support systems are in your nuclear or extended family. Then, you go to the family of God. When all else fails, that is when the broader society helps out. I must say again, we mix God's order all up. We have a generation today that has been trained to go to the government first. In fact, they go to the government before they even fulfill their personal responsibilities. If a person is unwilling to fulfill his or her responsibilities, no one else should help him (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Then they get mad if the government does not meet their needs. So they go to the church for help, and if that doesn't do the job, they turn to their family and get mad if a brother or sister or some other family member doesn't want to step in and help.

My message to that person is, you started at the wrong place. If you have not started with God, you have started wrong. The government is your last line of defense. Romans 13:1-4 says that the job of the government is to make sure order and justice are maintained so that we can conduct our lives without fear of chaos. God did not ordain government to set up and administer these massive giveaway entitlement programs.

This hits home particularly for those of us who are of African-American descent. Back in the days of slavery, there were no government programs, no societal support, no federal grants. Yet families took care of each other. It goes back to the family connection, where everybody was related to everybody else. If you did not have a father, the man down the street became your father. If you did not have a mother, the woman up the street became your mother. And if there was nobody to be found for you in your family or in the neighborhood, there was always somebody at church who would love you. That is how it is supposed to be.

If we want to reverse our single-parent crisis, we have to get back to the biblical standard. That means that you start with yourself and God. That means that you then move out to your family. Beyond that, the church steps in. And before the church does anything, it confronts that child who is now grown and is not taking care of a mother who is alone.

If the church does for a widow what a grown child is called to do and takes the responsibility off him, we are doing just what the government does: helping him to be irresponsible. I'm not saying that you let a widow go

without help just because her children are irresponsible. But what I am saying is that we have to get hold of this thing and start bringing our actions in line with God's will.

When people in a family are functioning the way they should toward a single parent or widow, then the church can use its reserves for the people who really need it because they have no one else. Then that frees the government up to take care of what the government needs to take care of—that is, giving us a peaceful, well-ordered, and just society to live in. The government cannot spend its time maintaining peace and order if it has to have bureaucrats monitoring massive welfare programs. It has to put out billions of dollars toward welfare programs that could be going to safety and protection and well-being in society.

The way around this for the future is for men to make sure that, as long as they are alive, their family won't be a single-parent family. We can't solve all the problems of the existing single-parent families, but we can prevent the problem for those who have families now. This means that men are going to have to rise up and carry the standard. We are going to have to hold high God's standard and be men of godly

commitment and integrity. We have a generation of "sissified" males. They wear pants, but that's the only way you know they are men. They are not willing to step up to the plate. They are not willing to take care of the children they are responsible for.

We need to teach our sons to be responsible so that the next generation does not inherit the heartbreak and curse of shattered families, so that little boys won't have to ask their pastors, "Why won't God answer my prayer and give me a dad?"

I'm reminded of the little boy whose father was on a business trip. As he was sitting in his father's chair, his older sister got upset because she didn't want to see her little brother trying to act so big. She wanted to embarrass him, so she said, "How much is seven plus seven?"

The little guy thought for a moment and answered, "I'm busy. Go ask your mother."

That's the image many kids have of their father. We fathers are going to have to stop being so busy if we are going to reverse this growing trend toward single-parent families.

I want to tell you what I tell the single parents in my church. We love you and care about you. We know we

are only one heartbeat away from being single parents ourselves. I also want to say I know it's not easy, but we have to do things God's way if we want His blessing.

By way of review, that means you start with your personal responsibility. Then you go to your extended family. If no one is there, you appeal to the church. And, as a last resort, you go to the government. Whereas one circle can support the other, it cannot and should not replace it, for each must bear his own load (Galatians 6:5). When you do it God's way, you do it right!

A Final Challenge

Even if you're a parent alone, you are not out there alone. God says that if you give yourself to Him He will never leave you or forsake you. Though everyone else may turn away from you, you will never be alone. That doesn't mean you don't have responsibility, but not you, your family, the church, or the government can replace God in your life.

But you may have some practical questions: "How long do I have to be a single parent? How long do I have to wait for a break in my circumstances? How long do I have to wait for

someone to share my life with? How long?"

Obviously, I can't answer that. But let me share something God continues to teach me. I fly a lot, and sometimes the plane I'm on gets stuck in a holding pattern. We have to circle the airport for minutes or even hours. You may have been there yourself. On one flight we circled the airport for three hours because of a low cloud cover that had the airport fogged in. It would have been too dangerous to try to land. So the air traffic controller said we had to stay up.

You know, I could not see any of the problems they were talking about because I was at 30,000 feet. The problems were at 500 to 1,000 feet. All I could see was clear skies.

But the pilot knew something I did not know. There was danger below. The pilot was in contact with somebody I could not see or hear, the air traffic controller in the tower. These people said it was too dangerous to land.

Of course, the other passengers and I were fidgeting and getting tired and frustrated because we had places to go and people to see and things to do. But the pilot said we had to keep circling until the tower said it was safe to come

down.

My friend, if you feel like you're in a holding pattern going nowhere, don't come down too soon. You may be heading straight down into a low cloud cover that will obscure your landing. If you try to land on your own before God brings you in, you might crash and be far worse off than you were in that holding pattern.

I understand that single parenthood can feel like a perpetual holding pattern that's getting you nowhere. It may be that God has you up in the air right now, but I can tell you this. As long as you need to fly, there will be enough fuel in the plane. For as long as God keeps you up there, there will be enough to keep you going.

If you are about to run out of fuel, God may take you to a different airport to land. He may want to take you somewhere entirely new, but let Him set the flight pattern. He has flown this way before. He has been on this flight many times.

God knows how to get you from where you are to where He wants you to be. So when you begin to get fidgety and tired while you're waiting on God, do what a lot of airline passengers do. Go to sleep. Sit back and rest in God's love. Let Him take care of the stuff

you can't fix. He knows exactly where He's taking you, and He will most certainly give you a safe landing.

God bless you.

What is the Urban Alternative?

The Urban Alternative (TUA) is a ministry designed to equip, unite, and empower the church to impact individuals, families, and communities for the rebuilding of their cities from the inside out. TUA believes that the Bible has practical answers for all of life's issues we face.

TUA's program includes a two-minute and thirty-minute daily radio broadcast, as well as a thirty-minute weekly TV broadcast, where Dr. Evans provides God's answers to the issues that people face today. TUA also provides audio, video, and written resources for spiritual development and community impact. In addition, TUA hosts an annual National Church Development Conference designed to assist pastors and church leaders in expanding this influence in the lives of their members, as well as in the broader communities in which they are situated.

TUA's comprehensive, biblically-based community development

program is called Project Turnaround.

Included in Project Turnaround are strategic impacts addressing the areas of church development, youth and family, economic development, housing, health and education, and community mobilization and racial reconciliation. TUA believes that the church and not the government can provide the best plan for changing our communities.

For a free TUA newsletter and resource catalog, please contact:

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GOD HAS A NETWORK OF CARE FOR YOU.

If you are a single parent, you know what "alone" feels like. If you had time, you could write a book on stress. But did you know that many places in the Bible show us God's compassion for single parents? Consider:

- God's special care and promises for Hagar and her son in the wilderness
- God's promises to be a Father to the fatherless and a Husband to those who are alone.
- God's provision for the needs of a destitute widow and her son through Elijah

Tony Evans points out that God has a system to ensure that your needs are met. Even though your situation may be far from ideal, you have an ideal God who delights in extending His grace.

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