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Colossians 3:18-19

23rd Message

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# SINGLENES: INCONSOLABLE LONGINGS

*SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH  
LIVING RESURRECTION IN RELATIONSHIPS #7*

The beloved hymn, *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*, was written in 1881 by George Matheson (1842-1906), a minister in the Church of Scotland. He has a particular place in my heart because he was later minister of St Bernard's Church in Edinburgh, my namesake church in my home city. He later said that he wrote this hymn in just a few minutes, as if dictated, and gave something of the circumstance that occasioned it. He wrote, "Something had happened to me...which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering."<sup>1</sup> The occasion was the wedding of his sister Jane. This should have been a day of great joy, but for him was a day of great pain. Suffering from failing eyesight throughout childhood he was almost totally blind by 18. Nevertheless, he persisted in training for the ministry. His sister Jane assisted him in his studies, in his ministry, and in keeping house, but when he was 39 she got married. That very evening he poured out his heart in this hymn.

Here at PBCC we now usually sing this hymn to an Indelible Grace tune. But I find that tune too "bouncy" for the words, so I asked that today we use the tune written specifically for this hymn (*St Margaret*, 1884), a tune which better fits the pathos of the text.

Some of you here can relate to Matheson: you have attended weddings of friends, but found it difficult to rejoice fully because of the pain of your own singleness.

For the past four weeks we have dwelt on Paul's instructions to wives and husbands:

**Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. (Col 3:18-19 NIV)**

But what about those adults who are not wives or husbands? What about those who are single? Do you have any place, or are you left out? "Singleness" is our topic today. In recent weeks I have covered both "headship and submission" and "divorce," both difficult, controversial topics. But for months it has been this topic of singleness which has loomed on the horizon as the really difficult one. It is not as controversial as the other two topics, but it is at least as painful. Many of you here who are single are my friends. Sue and I have walked with you for many years, and we know your pain.

People can be single because they have never married, or are widowed, or are divorced. All three categories are represented here today. All three categories bring great pain. For those never married there is the pain of the years ticking away while watching friends get married. Those who are widowed know the pain of losing a friend and close companion, often after many years. Those who are divorced have the added pain of the breakdown of a relationship that started so well.

Today is particularly painful because it is Family Fun Day. Months ago we knew of this coincidence. Through several staff meetings we discussed what to call today, and what message would be conveyed by the name, especially the word "Family." We decided to leave the

name unchanged, while emphasizing that this is a day to celebrate being a church family, whether young or old, married or single. But we know that this is still painful for those who are single.

If you have paid attention to the service thus far, there are some other elements which have probably pierced you like a sharp knife. The verse I put on the bulletin cover is from Psalm 37:

**Delight yourself in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Ps 37:4 ESV)**

But the Lord has clearly not given you the desires of your heart, especially the desire to be married. Our call to worship (Ps 34:1-8) ended, "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (v. 8), a message reinforced by one of our songs, with its chorus,

Oh taste and see that God is good to us,  
Taste and see His never-failing love,  
Our God is good.<sup>2</sup>

But, again, that rings hollow for some of you who are single.

Our opening hymn included the line, "Hast thou not seen how all thy longings have been granted in what he ordaineth?"<sup>3</sup> But, again, not all your longings have been granted, especially your longing to be married. Some modern hymnal editors recognize the problem with this line and have changed it to, "Have you not seen all that is *needful* has been sent by his gracious ordaining?"

I cannot pretend that these statements are not there, nor that it is easy for you to hear them. So, at the outset, let me acknowledge the pain that singleness brings to many of you who are single. For a long time I did not know what to call this message, but ten days ago it came to me: "Inconsolable Longings." I know that you have these longings, and I know that I myself cannot console them. So what can I say?

The Scriptures have little to say on this matter of singleness. Any discussion of the topic quickly turns to 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul advises the Corinthian church about marriage, seeking to correct some faulty thinking which has emerged in a letter they wrote to him. Addressing, first, those who are married,

**I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. (1 Cor 7:6)**

Next he turns to the unmarried,

**Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. (7:8)**

Then he addresses those on the verge of getting married,

**Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin**

marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. (7:26-28)

I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord. (7:32-35)

So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better. (7:38)

So, it is clear that Paul thinks it better for the Corinthians to be unmarried. But is this a blanket recommendation for all time? His advice is in light of “the present crisis” (26) which means that “those who marry will face many troubles in this life” (28). Corinth was engulfed in some crisis which rendered family life temporarily difficult. Elsewhere Paul does commend marriage, urging the younger widows to marry (1 Tim 5:14). Furthermore, if his advice were valid for all time then there would be few Christian families.

Paul's advice to the Corinthians is frequently used to commend the gift of singleness. There have been a few people who have felt that God has specifically called them to singleness: John Stott, for example. But singleness is a gift that most of you would like to return to the sender. You don't view your singleness as a gift, nor as something you have chosen. To describe it as a gift belittles the pain and does you a disservice.

So, I want to put 1 Corinthians 7 aside. Instead, I want to examine how George Matheson found comfort amidst the pain of his singleness on the occasion of his sister's marriage. Specifically, I want to use the opening lines of the four verses of his hymn to show how he found comfort in God:

O Love that wilt not let me go,  
O Light that followest all my way,  
O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
O Cross that liftest up my head.

Though I am dealing with the topic of singleness, much of what I have to say applies to all of us.

## I. O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee;  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.

God has made us with the capacity for love, because he has made us like himself, in his image and after his likeness. God is himself love. Augustine observed that love involves three elements: the lover, the beloved, and the love itself; and that all three elements of love exist within the godhead: the Father is the lover, the Son is the beloved, and the Spirit is the love flowing between them. The godhead is a community of perfect love. God has made us with the capacity to both give and receive love. An important element of what it means to be human is that we love and have desires. One approach to the issue of love and the pain which can arise from love is to give up

desire. This is the Buddhist approach: suffering arises from desire, so we should give up all desire. The Biblical view is diametrically opposite: it is good that God has made us creatures of desire. In our capacity to give and receive love we imitate God. The Bible presents two paradigms of such love: the father's love for his son, and the husband's love for his wife.

God has differentiated the human into male and female, making the woman to solve the “not good” state of the man being alone. Ever since the garden he has been bringing man and woman together, putting the two back together as one. We long to have someone who is special to us, and to be special to someone. In the TV series *Downton Abbey*, one of the many subplots is the relationship between Daisy, the kitchen maid, and William, the footman. They marry just minutes before he dies of his war injuries. Afterwards, William's father wants Daisy to accept the gift of being special to him, a gift which she eventually accepts. Our hearts, capable of love, long for the relationship of being special.

Marriage is good. The church has not always seen it so, at times exalting singleness, usually because of a wrong understanding of sex. Such was the situation in Corinth: Paul began his discussion of marriage by referring to what the Corinthian church had written him,

**Now for the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” (1 Cor 7:1)**

The Bible affirms that marriage is good; it is good for a man and a woman to be united in marriage. But in recent centuries marriage has been exalted as the primary environment in which we find community. Marrying for love is a recent phenomenon.

We are created for community: it is not good to be alone. But marriage isn't the ultimate answer to this. We are made to be together in family, but God has now provided a family which transcends the togetherness even of marriage. The church was born in a house, a home. On the day of Pentecost the followers of Jesus were gathered together in a house in Jerusalem, probably the home of Mark's parents. When the church was born the believers did not meet in the temple or in a meeting hall. They met in people's homes. This was unlike any other religion. They functioned as a family, considering one another to be brother or sister. This was a spiritual family that transcended any physical family.

The United States is one of the greatest melting pots of all time, a nation of immigrants. But the church is the greatest melting pot of all. These house churches contained an assortment of people: slaves and masters, children and parents, wives and husbands, widows old and young. The household code in Colossians is preceded by the statement,

**Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Col 3:11)**

Today we might add to that list that there is neither single nor married.

The church is called to be a community of love, loving God and loving one another. Our Scripture reading (1 John 4:7-21) calls us to this sort of love:

**Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God... And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister. (1 John 4:7, 21)**

As a church we should function as a big family, embracing people in all stages of life. This is difficult in a larger church, because it is

easy to self-select into homogenous groups. Many church ministries reinforce this, being age-specific, or targeted at a particular stage in family life. But this robs the church of an important element of what it means to be a church.

When I was single I was the beneficiary of such love and inclusion. As an undergraduate a family in the church would invite me to their home on Sunday every few months. After graduate school I worked in Geneva for two years, where I was part of a church drawn from all over the world. One couple, who had two sons my age, “adopted” me into their family. On my first Sunday at PBC, Palo Alto, twenty-five years ago, I sat next to an older couple, who invited me to a meal in their home, not just once but over many years. Sue and I met when a young couple at PBC invited us both and my roommate to join them for Thanksgiving. This was not a setup; they simply had the custom of inviting single folk over. Our relationship started at their dining table.

So, let me encourage those of you who are married and have families to practice hospitality, to reach out to those who are in a different state than yourselves. Some of you already do this abundantly, and it is a great joy to watch. Let us not be a church that self-selects into homogeneous sub-groups.

But there is a message also for the singles: be involved in the broader life of the church community. It is easy and safe to stay within your own community, but this is not what the church should be. Many of you have gotten involved, and this, too, has been a delight to watch.

In his book *The Rise of Christianity* Rodney Stark writes,

“The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs... Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they *love one another*. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of *one another*. Moreover, such responsibilities were to be extended beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to ‘all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.”<sup>4</sup>

The church is to be a revolutionary community, a community in which love is shown, not just to people like us, but to others. This message is conveyed in the household codes, how the householder treats others: the husband should love his wife, the father should not embitter his children, the master should provide his slaves what is fair. To love self-sacrificially in this way we must be filled with love, having a deep reservoir of love within us. We must feel that we are deeply loved. Only then can we rejoice with those who rejoice, even when they have what we don’t have.

God has provided the church as the community in which we are family, in which we find and receive love. But even the church won’t ultimately satisfy our longings for community and love. Before God made the woman to be the companion for the man, he made the man in his image and likeness. He created us with the capacity to know him, to be in relationship with him. As Augustine famously said to the Lord, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you, O Lord.” It is only the love of God which can satisfy our deepest longings for love. We need to know how much God loves us. But this is hard for many. Perhaps we have experienced a poor modeling of love from our parents; perhaps talk of a father’s love conveys a painful, negative image. But the biggest hindrance is that we don’t appreciate the gospel: “For God so

loved the world that he gave his own Son...” Jesus told the story of the prodigal son to show the depths of the Father’s love.

When his sister left to get married, George Matheson found comfort in God’s love: O Love that will not let me go. He knew a love deeper than any human love, true love in whom he could rest his weary soul.

## 2. O Light That Followest All My Way

O Light that followest all my way,  
I yield my flickering torch to Thee:  
My heart restores its borrowed ray,  
That in Thy sunshine’s blaze its day  
May brighter, fairer be.

When life is not going the way we expected it is easy to feel that God has forgotten us, that he does not see us. Singles see other people fall in love, get married, have children. They see other people’s lives move forward. But where is God? Has he forgotten me?

When I was single I found great comfort in this passage written by Philip Doddridge in his book *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745):

Can you, even when your natural spirits are weak and low, and you are not in any frame of mind for the ardors and ecstasies of devotion, nevertheless find a pleasing rest, a calm repose of heart, in the thought that God is near you? That He sees the secret feelings of your soul while you are, as it were, laboring up the hill, and casting a longing eye toward Him, though you cannot say you enjoy any tangible communications from Him?<sup>5</sup>

God doesn’t promise to give us an easy life, but he does promise to be with us. This is encapsulated in his very name Yahweh. God revealed this, his personal name, to Moses at the Burning Bush, when he called Moses to return to Egypt to deliver his people. God promised, “I will be with you,” and then gave his name, “I am who I am” (Exod 3:12, 14). God was not affirming “I exist” but “I am the one who is present with you.” There is nowhere we can go where God does not see us. This was a source of great comfort to the psalmist.

Matheson found comfort here: O Light that follows all my way. To those who are single I can only say, “God knows.” God sees you, he knows your circumstance, and he is present with you.

## 3. O Joy That Seekest Me Through Pain

O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee:  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain  
That morn shall tearless be.

America is constitutionally founded on the right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. This assumption has carried over into both church and marriage. It is not simply the health, wealth and prosperity gospel which states that Christians should be happy people; it is a common evangelical assumption. Likewise, singles often assume that marriage will make them happy. But life does not work out this way. Life is often filled with pain, not just physical pain but the deeper wounds of emotional and spiritual pain. We all experience pain. Pain can arise from many causes: from being single, from being married; from being childless, from having children; from being children, from being parents; from being unemployed, from being

employed. Pain afflicts us all. God inflicted pain on both the man and the woman after the Fall, and it has been part of life ever since.

A major source of pain is unmet expectations. We have a vision that life will be a certain way, but then it turns out differently. God doesn't give us the desires of our heart or grant us our longings. We so easily assume that if only our desires were met then the pain would go away. Or we assume that the grass is greener on the other side. If only! If only I were married. If only we had kids. If only we could get the kids out of the house. If only! As long as this is how we think we will never properly deal with our pain. The pain of disappointment and unmet expectations can generate such bitterness that we close our hearts to God.

Pain is actually a gift from God, though it is a gift no one seems to want. Pain tells us something is wrong; it reminds us of our wretched condition. Pain urges us to seek relief, but we look in the wrong places. We look to treat the symptoms rather than the root causes. We tend to look for short-term fixes to make the pain go away. Pain afflicts us when we are living east of Eden, and it will not go away until we cease our wandering and find our true home.

In his pain, Matheson understood that God was seeking him in that pain, and that the God who was seeking him was the God of Joy. There is a great difference between joy and mere happiness. There is little correlation between joy and our circumstances. People can have everything in the world yet lack joy. Conversely, some of the most joyful people I have known are ones who have suffered the most, who have experienced the most pain. They have learnt joy in the presence, not the absence, of pain.

God knows your pain. He knows your disappointed expectations. He knows your longings. But he bids you come to him and find true joy. He won't necessarily remove the circumstances which cause the pain, but he can transcend the pain with joy and give you contentment. Do not close your heart to him.

#### 4. O Cross That Lifest Up My Head

O Cross that lifest up my head,  
I dare not ask to fly from Thee:  
I lay in dust life's glory dead,  
And from the ground there blossoms red  
Life that shall endless be.

One of the greatest hindrances to true joy is a preoccupation with self. We are so easily self-consumed, seeing the world as revolved around self. But we cannot bear the burden of being the center. Matheson wrote that it was the cross that lifted up his head. It was the cross which turned him from self to look on another. There are two great benefits to taking a cross-centered view of life.

Firstly, we see that we are part of a much larger story. Our tendency is to fit God into our story. We want him to be the genie in the bottle who will make all our dreams come true. But we should be thankful that God does not give us all the desires of our heart, because many of our desires are not good for us. In the cross we see how we fit into God's story. He calls us to follow in the footsteps of his beloved Son in death and resurrection. Since we have been raised with Christ (Col 3:1), we have died to the old self and been raised to new life as new selves (3:9-10). This message of Christ is to dwell among us richly (3:16), whether we are married or single. Those of you who are single are called to live resurrection life just as much as those who are directly addressed in these household codes, the householder in relation to his wife, children and slaves.

The second benefit of a cross-centered life should be gratitude. When we see who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit, we should be overwhelmed with gratitude. This will greatly affect how we view life. Overwhelmed with gratitude, we view our present painful circumstances as light, momentary afflictions.

To all of you, single or married, I urge you to find in God the Love that will not let you go, the Light that follows all your way, the Joy that seeks you in your pain, and the Cross that lifts up your head. And today, on Family Fun Day, let us function as a family, knowing God as our loving, heavenly Father, knowing the Lord Jesus Christ as our elder brother, and embracing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. God loves us deeply, and he calls us to love both him and one another.

1. Ian Bradley, ed., *The Book of Hymns* (Woodstock N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1989; repr. New York: Testament Books, 2000), 311.

2. Stephen Altrogge, "Taste and See," on the album *Psalms* (Sovereign Grace Praise, 2008), based on Psalm 34.

3. Joachim Neander, *Praise to the Lord* (1680), trans. Catherine Winkworth (1863).

4. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 86.

5. Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Burning and a Shining Light: English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 183.

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