

the
singleparent

confident and successful

Linda Ranson Jacobs

Creator of the **DivorceCare for Kids** program



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Introduction

Life Lessons Single Parents Can Learn from the Bible

She was . . . and then she wasn't.

She had funny, lovable, laughing kids . . . and then she didn't.

*She could sponsor a child for church camp or a mission trip
. . . and then she couldn't.*

*She would laugh and joke with her friends and co-workers . . .
and then she wouldn't.*

*She fell into a deep, dark hole where there wasn't a way out
. . . and then there was.*

In the five statements above is my story, and if you are a single parent, in some ways it might be your story also. Whether you are a single dad or a single mom, you have a story. We all have different stories, and our stories need to be told.

They need to be told to encourage each other and to lift up one another. They need to be told so others won't make the same mistakes some of us made. Our stories need to be told now, while we remember them, so that later we can tell them to our children and our children's children. Your story could be just the hope someone needs to keep moving forward in his or her life.

Being a single parent isn't all about surviving. Oh, maybe the first few years of parenting alone might focus on survival, but as time goes on, wonderful and funny things happen. As long as a night can be, joy comes in the morning. "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5 NRSV).

My Story

Allow me to share a little more of my tale, so briefly sketched in the five lines above.

She was . . . and then she wasn't.

I was married and then I wasn't. It was a shock to my system. I had never believed in divorce—still don't—and yet I'm divorced. I was no longer a wife. I no longer had a mate. I was no longer a part of someone. God had pulled us together, and man separated us.

She had funny, lovable, laughing kids . . . and then she didn't.

My children were funny and lovable little kids. I really enjoyed their sense of humor and their personality quirks. It seemed like they were always laughing and kidding around. Then all of sudden they were not happy. They were sullen, angry, depressed, defiant, and worried.

She could sponsor a child for church camp or a mission trip . . . and then she couldn't.

When my children were preschool and early elementary age we sponsored a lot of teens by paying their deposits for church camp. Sometimes we paid the entire amount for church camp or for a mission trip. In other words, we had the funds to help others. And

then I found myself barely able to feed my own children. I could no longer help others at church.

She would laugh and joke with her friends and co-workers . . . and then she wouldn't.

I owned two child care centers and loved my job. I enjoyed joking and laughing with my staff. I loved going to church and visiting my brothers and sisters in Christ. I was the first one to throw my head back and laugh uproariously at a joke. And then I didn't. I was in such turmoil and kept everything inside—it seemed as though the world around me no longer existed. Nothing was funny anymore. I wept late at night. I mumbled my way through my day at work.

She fell into a deep, dark hole where there wasn't a way out . . . and then there was.

I fell into such a pit that I felt I would never be able to claw my way out of it. I thought it was the end of my life—and it was the end of the life I had known for many years. I tried to pray, but my prayers seemed to reach only the ceiling of my bedroom. I tried to read God's Word, but the words just blurred on the page.

What I thought was a nightmare that would never end eventually did end. I won't bore you with all the details of my story, but I want you to know that through the Holy Spirit ministering to me, through Christian brothers and sisters mentoring me, and through God's Word, ever so slowly a new me and a new life emerged. There was a way out of the deep, dark hole after all.

What Happened to My Kids and to Me along the Way

My kids were seven and eleven years old when their dad left the first time. (He moved out more than once.) Those two kids grew up to be wonderful contributing adults in our society today. My daughter, Julie, has recently retired from the air force. While in the air force she received many accolades. She served our country well and with honor. My son worked his way through college and

medical school and today is Dr. Brian Ranson, an anesthesiologist in Texas.

Both kids are married and have given me outstanding grandchildren. We survived. We laughed. We found joy in the midst of trials. We prayed together. We read God's Word together. We supported each other. The kids brought their friends home to talk to me when their friends couldn't talk to their own parents. We created family. (More later on how we accomplished these feats.)

Through my journey as a single parent, I found I had skills that I didn't know I possessed. Other than in a college speech class, I had never given a speech before my divorce. Now I speak at children's ministry conferences, at family ministry conferences, before schools, at retreats, and at blended family events. I even spoke before a legislative task force once and also at the National Technical Assistance Center for the Children's Mental Health Training Institute at Georgetown University. Why am I telling you these things? Not to brag, but to let you know that I stand in awe of what God has done. I am still amazed, all these years later, at what God did, is doing, and will do with my life.

I also didn't know that I could write, but through all those trials I learned I could. I've had articles published in *Children's Ministry*, *Focus on the Family*, and *KidzMatter* magazines, and I can't even remember where else.

I wrote and developed DC4K,¹ DivorceCare for Kids, a curriculum kit and program for children whose parents are separated or divorced. I also write a blog, *Kids & Divorce*,² which has over three hundred articles for church leaders and children's ministers. I've written an e-book³ and print book,⁴ both aimed at church leadership, and now this book, *The Single Parent: Confident and Successful*.

Allow me to encourage you. Don't limit yourself or put yourself in a box. Don't try to put God in a box either. He has plans for you. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11 NRSV).

The Single Parent is not a book about how to survive a divorce or the death of a spouse. It's not about how one becomes a single parent. It is a book to help you learn how to be a better single parent and to encourage you through the Word of God.

Some stories in this book may hit you head on. You'll empathize and connect with the people in the stories. Other stories may not apply to your particular situation, but my prayer is that you'll remember them so God can use you to help another single parent. At the end of each chapter is a "Going Deeper" section, which you can use to help you invest in the Scriptures and to gain a better understanding of the issues presented. Or you can use the "Going Deeper" section in a small-group study.

Whether you are parenting alone due to a death, divorce, adoption, or some other situation, this book is designed to encourage you in your journey of parenting alone and to help you avert problems before they arise. Real-life stories are told in this book—my stories as well as those of the many single moms and dads who have come across my path through the years. While *The Single Parent* won't answer all of your questions, it will help you be creative in your parenting abilities.

When I became a single parent, I didn't know there were single parents in the Bible. I didn't realize there were Scriptures that would apply to me, that would grow me and help create a closer relationship with Father God. I thought that God had more or less deserted me after my divorce. But God was there all the time.

Is He there all the time for you? I hope you find out that He is through the stories and Scriptures in this book.

1

Loneliness: One of the Hardest Parts of Being a Single Parent

“God Sets the Lonely in Families”

She was . . . and then she wasn't!

Every time one of my kids had an event, I attended and I sat there alone. I would see men with their arms around their wives' shoulders. I watched as kids rushed from the stage after the concert toward their dads. The dads would ruffle their kids' hair, hug them fiercely, or pick their kids up and squeeze them with pride. The year before, when I had been married and my husband traveled, I went to these same events by myself, but I didn't feel alone. You see, I knew that when I got home my husband would call, and I would tell him all about the concert and the other events of the day. We would laugh as we talked about the kids.

The difference then was the fact that I had a two-parent family. Then we divorced, and I felt like I no longer had a family. It was just the kids and me. There was no one to share the day's events with and no one to talk with about the funny things the kids did or their accomplishments. I felt I was totally alone.

How many times have you looked around and felt that everyone must be married and part of a family except you? You see those families in the grocery store, at the ball games, at school events, and at church. As single parents, we have a tough road to travel, and then we go to church and hear Psalm 68:6, “God sets the lonely in families.” Maybe you read this Scripture in your private Bible study time and stumbled over what it was supposed to mean to you.

When I read this I had to stop and say, “But, God, what about me? I’m lonely. I have children, and yet I don’t feel like I have a family.” Or what about the father who lives alone without his children and only gets to see them every other weekend? Does he think, *Well, God, what about me? I love my children, yet here I sit alone without them?* Or the widow: *God, what about me? I was in a family, and now my helpmate is no longer living. What about me? I am so lonely that every part of my being hurts. What about me, God?*

What Is God’s Declaration Concerning Loneliness?

In Genesis 2:18 we find that “the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’”

God in His infinite wisdom could see and know that Adam was lonely. Even though God had created the most beautiful, perfect world and had taken care of all of Adam’s physical needs and had surrounded him with every animal, fish in the sea, and fowl of the air, God knew that Adam needed someone like himself. God knows that we need people around us. He knows that sometimes we need someone with “skin on.”

God is always with us; He is always there, cradling us in His arms. But how many times late at night have you just needed to talk with someone? It may have been a time when you were experiencing a problem with one of your children, or possibly you were just hurting or feeling lonely. A minister once told me that all I needed was God, that I didn’t need anyone else. Evidently, this

minister had never been a single parent, and one has to wonder if he had ever read Genesis 2:18.

Don't feel guilty when you want someone with whom you can sit and talk. God understands that as humans we need to have people around us.

“Adam's aloneness was not a mistake by a God who is sovereign and all-knowing. Instead, God's declaration is evidence that being created in the image of God includes being relational. God has designed us with an inherent need for intimacy with Him AND with other persons who are significant to us,” write the authors of *Discovering Intimacy*.¹

When I speak at retreats for single parents, I address the issue of loneliness head on. Following are some of the responses I have received after asking participants to “think about the following statement and then write out the scenario that comes to mind: *I remember a time when I was very lonely. It was when . . .*”

- My grandmother died, and I didn't have anyone to console me in my grief.
- I had a New Year's Eve party. My house was full of people, and everyone had someone—and I didn't.
- The youth group got together after church. All the parents were there, and I was shunned by the moms.
- I walked into the house after my husband died.
- I had just found out my son was diagnosed with autism. How on earth would I get through raising an autistic son by myself?
- My son was in track, and sitting at a track meet by myself was excruciating.
- My best friend was getting married, and she wanted me to be her bridesmaid. My husband had just died five months before. As I stood beside her I couldn't quit weeping. I was so happy for her but had never felt lonelier than at that moment.

- I attended school conferences. Every school conference after we divorced was when I felt my loneliest.
- At night I'm lying in bed, and it's dark and quiet.
- On Friday nights of my ex's weekend and the long weekend is stretched out before me; I feel so very lonely and missing my kids the minute they walk out the door.
- I was at church! Church was where I felt the loneliest.

What Is God's Decision Concerning Loneliness?

Even though we tend to think we are the first generation, nation, or century to face so many family problems, we are no different from people in biblical times, when families faced war, famine, slavery, isolation, and the splitting apart of family units. What happened in the Bible when families were torn apart or people found themselves alone and not part of a family?

In the Old Testament, we read about Naomi in the book of Ruth. Naomi, like many of us, did not start out being alone. She was married and had children, and then her husband died. Unlike women in today's world, Naomi had no way of supporting herself.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

Ruth 1:1–5

Do you think Naomi was lonely after the loss of her husband and sons? Like many of us, Naomi was left in a crisis mode. I imagine she was grieving and wondering, *How am I going to survive? I've lost my husband and my children. I am so alone.*

As you read the book of Ruth, you learn that Naomi decided to return to Judah, and one of her daughters-in-law chose to go with her. The daughter-in-law, Ruth, eventually married and had a child.

And Naomi was adopted into a family:

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son." And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Ruth 4:14–17

As you can see, these people created a different kind of family unit. They made a surrogate family.

Therapist Carmen Hoffman² writes in *Single Parent Magazine*,

We make surrogate families through friends, community or work contacts—especially when our biological families are insufficient or unavailable. As believers, we have a dual family membership through Christ's body, the church. We bond by sharing our lives, successes and failures. As with all families, commitment, struggle, laughter and shared experiences strengthen the emotional glue.

Jesus never endorsed a particular family form. Instead, He gave us examples of how the church constituted our primary family. In three gospels, Jesus declares that His brother and sisters do the will of the heavenly Father.

All through the Bible, people created surrogate families.

Jesus said in Luke 8:21, “My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.”

In Mark 3:34, we read that Jesus “looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’”

People need and want to belong. In today’s society, the church can become the surrogate family. The church is and should be the family of God. A family meets each other’s needs and cares for one another.

The Story of a Desperate Single Mom

Melissa, a single mom with two elementary school-age daughters, joined our church. I began to mentor and help Melissa survive her lonely single-parent journey. She was renting one bedroom for herself and two daughters from a local woman. Because she had only one room, she kept everything she didn’t need at the moment in a storage unit. As people gave her items, such as a used washer and dryer, she put the items in the storage unit. She kept most of the kids’ toys in the unit along with clothes and other seasonal items that weren’t needed yet.

One day she went to switch out summer clothes for warmer clothes and noticed the lock had been cut. As she raised the door, she discovered an empty storage unit. Every single item was gone. There was nothing left—no clothes, no school backpacks, not even the boogie boards her little girls had used that summer. She called me immediately, in tears.

She was devastated. She was just about ready to give up. I contacted the people who had been in our Single & Parenting³ group, and they all began praying for her and texting her encouraging messages.

When the mission team heard about her situation, they called and said, “We’re having a church garage sale. Come and pick out some dishes and things you think that single mom will need.”

We were able to find dishes, glasses, bowls, a can opener, and many other things she would need when setting up her own household. Afterward they told me to have her come on Saturday at noon and that she could have anything left over from the sale.

I didn't tell her we were going to give her a bunch of stuff—I just asked if she could meet me at the church on Saturday at noon. I told her I wanted to show her something. When she arrived, I took her to the back room and showed her all of the items we had set aside for her. I thought she was going to faint. Then I shared that as soon as the sale was over, she could also have anything that was left over from the sale—free.

As the sale ended, we loaded up her little car with just about everything you can imagine. One of the men brought a trailer and delivered a computer desk and some other large items to the storage unit. Some of the men purchased a stronger lock for her.

Her little girls watched wide-eyed as their mom collected things. One of the little girls was overheard saying, “Look at all this stuff my mom is buying for us!”

As their mom continued to load up her car, one of the little girls came up to me and said, “Miss Linda, Mama is getting a lot of stuff. I don't know how she is going to pay for it. We don't have any money.” I explained to the girls that their mom didn't need any money because the church was giving all of these things to them. Astonished, they said, “*What?* Everything? Why?” I said, “Because we are all family, and we love you. God loves you too, and He has led us to give you these things.”

The little girls were in awe. Their mom was ecstatic and so grateful. As a matter of fact, she was afraid she was taking too much stuff until we explained that everything that was left was going to a local thrift shop.

This show of Christian love was not lost on those two little girls as they grew. It wasn't lost on the other single parents in our group. And it wasn't lost on the people in our church who contributed to help out a single-parent family in our community.

In Psalm 147:2–3 we read, “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

If God did this for the exiles of Jerusalem, shouldn't the body of Christ today, His church, gather up

- the exiles,
- the divorced,
- the hurting,
- the widow and widower,
- the fatherless and motherless,
- the never married but raising children alone, and
- the never divorced but separated for years and raising children alone?

Allow God's example of healing broken hearts and binding up wounds to influence you. Single-parent families can belong to a complete family—a church family. It may be hard to reach out and ask for help, but hopefully thinking of the church as God's family will make it a little easier.

Lean on One Another

Single parents can find comfort in banding together. Single parents together can bear one another's burdens. As single parents, we can fulfill Galatians 6:2: “Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

Our burdens do not automatically go away when we belong, but something amazing happens to our spirits. We find strength and support, and we realize that we are not alone; we are not the first to walk through deep waters. Through talking and sharing with others, we can find encouragement in how God has provided comfort and love for them. While in the midst of a crisis, it may be hard, if not impossible, to see life beyond the crisis or to find

a solution for the dilemma. Sometimes we just need someone to “carry” our burdens for us, to walk with us through the turbulent waters.

In a church group, for example, single parents can lean on each other. Here are two testimonies:

One mom expressed that she tended to be lenient with her children when problems arose. She found it helpful to have someone to encourage her to be strong and follow through with setting boundaries for her children.

A dad said he was too strict and harsh with his child. When a problem arose, he tended to lash out and then feel sorry afterward. When this happened, he put a barrier between himself and his child. A friend helped him see that he was pushing his child away with his unyielding attitude. This friend shared how he had learned to tell his children that he would have to take time to think and pray about what had happened before he could respond to the situation.

Just through the two men sharing, talking, and eventually laughing about various situations with their children, God allowed this single dad to view his son in a different way. His parenting skills did not change overnight, but he found solace in the fact that he was not alone. There were other single dads out there, and they had developed good relationships with their children. God provided Christian brothers to help him.

“God sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68:6).

Two Single Moms Helping Each Other

When I was single, I became friends with another single mom who had younger children. She was a counselor. We became fast friends and talked a lot, sharing our thoughts and expertise. For example, I told her when her son entered public school to be prepared for life to change. Her son would have pressure from older boys to conform to whatever the trend was. At that time—and remember

this was years ago—Underoos were in style. But when boys went to first grade and used the big boys' bathroom, they were teased if they wore “preschool” underwear with a superhero or cartoon character theme. All the boys at that time were supposed to have white underwear.

One night very late she called and said, “Well, it happened tonight. After I put the boys to bed, my oldest son came out with big tears. When I asked what was wrong, he said, ‘I have to have white underwear tomorrow. If I don’t, the other boys will tease me and say I’m a baby because I wear baby underwear. I can’t go to school tomorrow.’ I was so ready for this conversation because, thanks to you, I had stocked up on white underwear and was just waiting for him to tell me he couldn’t wear his cute little Underoos.”

Other times I would call my friend Cindy, and she would counsel me. I was running two child care programs and needed someone to vent to who didn’t work for me. She was great at listening to my rants and then calming me with her counseling abilities. It is difficult for single parents to share with other people who have no idea what it’s like to operate as a single parent. Many times, we just need someone to vent to and to know we are not alone on our journey.

Church Family

As single parents, we can become part of a church family. Allow God to “set” you in a church family to fulfill some of your needs, and in turn allow yourself as a single parent to support the church family. You can bond with others by sharing your life, your laughter, your successes, and your failures also. “As with all families, commitment, struggle, laughter and shared experiences strengthen the emotional glue,” writes Hoffman.⁴

When we stop focusing on our loneliness and concentrate on others the Lord puts in our path, our loneliness no longer over-

whelms us. You may find moments when you are lonely, but you can come to recognize these as precious moments meant just for you. Over the years, I came to appreciate the quiet moments in my busy life. These moments were times of renewal for me. Time to rest. Time to commune intimately with my Creator. Time to laugh and connect with my precious children. Time to remember we were family.

Psalm 68:6: “God sets the lonely in families.”

She wasn’t . . . and then she was a part of a family.

GOING DEEPER

1. Take time to read the entire book of Ruth. Ask God to fill your heart with what He wants you to know about Ruth and how her and Naomi’s plight can influence your life. Make notes about what you learn. Dads, this applies to you also; you can learn from Naomi’s plight too.
2. Take time to study and pray about this passage:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

2 Corinthians 1:3–5

3. Think through this statement: “I remember a time when I didn’t think I could go on for another day or minute. Then God sent _____ into my life to encourage me. They did this by _____.”

4. How can you use the comfort that God the Father gave you to comfort someone else? Ask God to lead you to a single parent who is struggling. Perhaps they just need a phone call. Or maybe they need comfort, food, or help solving a problem with one of their kids.
5. Can you think of someone needing encouragement or comfort right now whom you may be able to help? It helps us follow through when we put things in writing. As you pray and the Lord brings someone to mind, write about him or her below.

Name: _____

Situation: _____

How you can be of help: _____

6. “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

How can you be part of the church family?

How will you allow yourself to be set in a family?

How can you reach out to others?

How can you encourage your children to reach out to others?