

SACRED singleness

LESLIE LUDY



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Forsaking All

My Story of Surrender

...the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

EPHESIANS 1:23

God has made us for Himself, and our hearts can never know rest and perfect satisfaction until they find it in Him.

HANNAH HURNARD

His name was Kyle.

He was a perfectly nice guy. Attractive, clean-cut, polite, moral. An upstanding “Christian” guy who went to church and believed in saving sex until marriage. The kind of guy my youth pastors and parents approved of.

Kyle liked me. I wasn’t really enamored with him, but I was lonely. I hadn’t had a boyfriend in about a year, and I was beginning to feel insecure and impatient. I loathed being single. I hated the stigma of not having someone in my life. It made me feel ugly and second rate. Not having a guy in my life was like being the kid on the playground who didn’t get picked for the dodgeball team—alone, rejected, and overlooked.

So after three rather shallow conversations, Kyle became my boyfriend. We started talking on the phone every night, going out to dinner a few times a week, meeting for coffee on weekends, holding hands, sweetly kissing each other good night. It was all very innocent. We even talked about God. We went to church and Bible studies together and discussed what we were learning.

On the outside, it looked like a great Christian relationship—healthy, pure, and Christ centered. But in reality the only reason Kyle was in my life was because of my loneliness and insecurity.

I knew that a romance with Kyle wasn't God's highest for me. Kyle didn't lead me closer to Jesus Christ. Sure, he talked about God and did all the right "Christian" activities. He didn't smoke, cuss, drink, or have premarital sex. But selfishness was at the core of Kyle's existence. He didn't live for God's glory—he lived for his own agenda. Christianity was just an afterthought to him—not the primary purpose of his existence. He wasn't a bond servant of Jesus Christ. He was simply a churchgoer, enslaved to his own whims and desires. Kyle didn't wake up each morning thinking, *How can I love, serve, and honor Jesus Christ today?* Rather, his attitude was, *How can I serve my own agenda today, and still somehow stay within proper Christian boundaries?*

Truth be told, I didn't want to end up with a guy like Kyle. I longed for a valiant and noble hero—a gallant knight who would sweep me off my feet and cherish me as his princess forever. I wanted a truly Christlike man; a man who was intensely passionate for God, a man who was willing even to spill his own blood to bring glory to the name of Jesus. I had read about great men—men like Jim Elliot, Hudson Taylor, and John Wesley. Their version of masculinity caused my feminine heart to stand up and applaud. I desired to be with a man who would go to all lengths for his Lord; a man whose life would inspire others to take up their cross daily for the sake of the Gospel.

The problem was, it didn't seem that men like this existed anymore. Moral-but-mediocre guys like Kyle seemed to be the cream of the crop. His version of manhood looked pretty good next to the scores of perverted, debased, and arrogant males I met on a daily basis. After years of encountering the warped masculinity of my generation, I had come to believe that finding a semi-decent guy like Kyle was probably the best I could hope for. True, he wasn't the heroic Christlike gentleman I'd always dreamed of, but at least he was nice, went to church, and didn't pressure me to have sex with him.

So I settled.

The longer Kyle was in my life, the more I began to feel a pressure upon my soul. It was as if God was whispering, “This relationship isn’t My best for your life, Leslie. Are you willing to let Me become your all in all instead of always trying to cure your loneliness with a guy?”

The question terrified me.

I had grown up in church singing songs about Jesus being my all in all—how He was everything I needed, the One who fulfilled the cry of my heart every day. But if I were to be honest, I had to admit that it was all just good-sounding Christian jargon to say those things. I didn’t *really* believe that Jesus Christ could actually satisfy my heart at the deepest level and *actually be* my all in all. The truth was that I didn’t really think I could be happy, fulfilled, and content without having a guy to turn to for comfort. And I couldn’t imagine feeling confident and secure without having a boyfriend at my side to stroke my ego.

Like most girls my age, I was merely *enduring* these years as a single young woman. I spent most of my energy pining for the day when I would finally meet “the one,” walk down the aisle in a white dress, and live happily ever after in a cute little house with a flower garden and white picket fence. *When I finally get married, that’s when I will truly be happy and fulfilled*, I told myself subconsciously. I was convinced that when I finally shed the “curse of singleness,” my dreams would come true and my life would finally have real meaning and purpose.

I was so repulsed by the thought of spending life alone, of never having my dreams of earthly romance come true, that I was willing to settle for a less-than-Christlike guy in order to avoid being single.

This is the plight of nearly every single young woman I’ve encountered over the last 14 years. We want to be fully set apart for Christ. We want Him to be our all in all. We want to find our fulfillment and satisfaction in Him, even if an earthly romance never comes our way.

But all too often, these desires are nothing more than good Christian sentiments that quickly fall by the wayside as soon as a semi-decent guy comes along. The moment we see an opportunity to shed the stigma of singleness, we cave. Instead of allowing Jesus Christ to be our first love, we look to earthly guys to meet needs in our heart that only Jesus Christ can fulfill. And we end up disappointed and dissatisfied...time and time again.

Don't get me wrong—I believe God is very interested in marriage. He doesn't call all of us to be single. In fact, for the large majority of us, He wants to script a beautiful lifelong earthly romance that will bring Him glory and be a reflection of heaven on earth.

But here is the crucial truth that all too many of us miss in our quest for true love: Even a beautiful God-scripted love story can never satisfy the way Jesus does. Even the most heroic and Christ-like man on earth can never fulfill the longings of our heart like the true Prince and Lover of our soul. And until we are able to *truly* make Him our first love, until we are willing to give up our dream of an earthly love story for His sake, we will never know the fullness of Him who fills us all in all. We will always be looking to a mere man to meet the desires of our heart, rather than to the One who created us, who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who gave His very life's blood to rescue us.

Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple...whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26,33).

As a single young woman, these words of Christ were not the reality of my life. As much as I hated to admit it, I had been clinging to my dream of an earthly love story and letting it take first place in my heart, even above Jesus Christ—the Prince of heaven and earth—who gave His life to set me free. I was so concerned with my own happiness, so consumed with my own fairy-tale ideal, that I had forsaken my first love.

Long before God wrote my love story with Eric, He wrote a different

love story for me—a love story far more important and significant. It was the greatest love story of all time—a daily romance with the One who had given His very life to rescue me. And He was asking me to put *that* love story first, far above my desire for human companionship.

He wanted me to lay down my “right” to be married, walk down the aisle in a white dress, and live in a cute house with a white picket fence. He was asking me to let Him be everything to me, to satisfy every need, longing, and desire in my heart—even if an earthly prince never came my way.

It was the greatest challenge I had ever faced. Could I really let go of my precious dreams? Could I really lay my lifelong fairy-tale desires at the foot of His cross? What if He never gave them back? Would He really be enough to fulfill the desires of my heart, even if I never got married?

The great preacher Paris Reidhead once said, “Is not the Lamb who was slain worthy of the reward of His suffering?” That was the question my Lord was pressing upon my heart. Was not the One who had given everything for me worthy of everything I could offer Him?

My heroes are women throughout history who were willing to lay down their lives for the glory of Jesus Christ; women like Gladys Aylward, who left home and family at the age of 26 and spent the rest of her life spilling herself out for the poor and least in war-torn China; women like Jackie Pullinger, who from the age of 20 shared her home with drug addicts and prostitutes in the filthy Walled City of Hong Kong; women like Amy Carmichael, who gave up wealth and comforts at the age of 28 and gave her life for the exploited children of India. Many of the amazing Christian women of history never got married. When they laid everything down for the Gospel of Christ, they laid *everything* down—they left home, family, comforts, education, *and* the hope of getting married.

And even those who did get married were willing to lay down

their husbands and children daily for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. Vibia Perpetua—an early Roman martyr—said goodbye to her husband, family, and infant son in order to give her life for the sake of the Lord who died to save her. Sabina Wurmbrand—the wife of a Romanian pastor during the 1945 Communist invasion—challenged her husband to stand up and defend the name of Jesus, even though it meant ten years of imprisonment, torture, poverty, and separation from the man she loved. Elisabeth Elliot—who had waited patiently for years to finally be married to her husband, Jim—allowed him to give his life as a martyr to the Auca Indians for the cause of Christ, and she chose to forgive them and pour out her life for them, even after his death.

This is what Christ meant when He said we must forsake father, mother, family, and houses in order to be His disciple. Even the most precious gifts He gives us must always be relinquished back to Him with a willing and eager heart. Our fulfillment cannot be found in marriage, children, or fairy-tale dreams come true. Until He is our all in all, we aren't truly living the Gospel life.

And until we are content with Him alone, we aren't truly ready for an earthly romance that will stand the test of time. Why? Because it's all too easy to start clinging to a human instead of to Jesus Christ. And when we cling to a human to fulfill the longings of our heart, we quickly become discontent. Even the most Christlike man cannot meet every need and longing of our heart. And if we expect him to, it only leads to disillusionment. Countless women drive their marriages into the ground by nagging, criticism, and selfish demands because they do not find contentment in the perfection of Christ, but expect perfection from their spouse instead.

Contrary to what most of us believe, our discontentment with singleness can't be solved by finding a guy and getting a ring on our finger. Sure, there may be a short-term high that comes from having someone by our side. But if Jesus Christ is not our all in all, the romance will lose its luster, the temporary fulfillment will fade, and the discontentment will return with even greater force.

Marriage is not the answer to the longings of our feminine heart—Jesus Christ is.

If someone had spoken those words to me as a single young woman, I would have nodded my head in hearty agreement. But like most other Christian single young women today, my life didn't demonstrate that reality. The moment a guy like Kyle came onto the scene, I quickly lost the "Jesus is enough" attitude and replaced it with "Jesus is enough as long as I have a boyfriend and the potential of getting married soon."

So now it was time to make a choice. The soft whisper of Christ's Spirit was convicting me of leaving my first love. He was challenging me to lay everything on the altar before Him, to give up all that I clung to outside of Him, like Mary of Bethany pouring out her precious ointment upon His feet (John 12:1-3).

It was time to not only let go of Kyle—but also of the hope of ever having an earthly romance. It's not that God was telling me I was called to be single for the rest of my life, but He wanted to make me *completely willing* to be single if He so chose—and not just willing, but *eager and delighted* to sacrifice my all for the One who gave everything for me. It wasn't enough to just say, "Sure, Lord, I'm willing to be single if that's what You call me to." I'd said those words for years—but they were just words. It was exactly as Christ said, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matthew 15:8). He didn't just want me to say it—He wanted me to live it.

I wrestled with the decision for days.

Here I was, in a perfectly healthy Christian relationship, with a perfectly nice Christian guy. I wasn't technically doing anything wrong or unspiritual. In fact, my romance with Kyle was far more "pure" than most others I'd had in the past. Even our physical relationship didn't seem to be evoking much compromise. Why would I walk away from something so harmless? Why would I voluntarily give up the ability to have a boyfriend, especially a morally upright guy like Kyle, when this kind of guy was so hard to come by?

I realized that the only times I'd ever been single without a guy in my life were the times I'd had no choice. I'd never deliberately decided *not* to have a guy at my side. In fact, whenever I didn't have a boyfriend, I spent most of my time and energy trying to find one.

I knew that to truly allow Jesus Christ to become my all in all, specific obedience was required. I knew what He was asking of me: To end my relationship with Kyle. To not enter another relationship until God made it very clear that it was the one He wanted me to spend my life with. To stop spending my time and energy chasing after guys, daydreaming about guys, or wondering what guys thought of me. And to no longer be on the lookout for available Christian men.

The gentle voice of Christ's Spirit was challenging me to become so completely consumed in my relationship with Him that I no longer pined after an earthly romance. To become so perfectly content in Him that guys were no longer the focus of my existence. To be so fulfilled in Him that I had no urgent need to have someone at my side. To embrace singleness joyfully, no longer seeing it as a curse, but as an amazing opportunity to build my entire life around my heavenly Prince.

I knew there weren't many people in my life who would support or understand this kind of choice. Well-meaning friends and family members wanted me to find a godly guy, get married, and raise children. They weren't trying to pressure me; they just wanted me to be happy. They didn't want me to miss out on all the pleasures of marriage and family. But their concern only left me feeling inadequate and incomplete as long as I remained unattached. I knew their subtle pressure upon me would only increase if I chose to walk the narrow path Christ was calling me to.

Most of the Christian girls my own age were so caught up in the dating scene that they would think of me as mentally unstable if I chose to walk away from it. And I knew there weren't many Christian guys who were interested in a girl with "unusually high

standards”; a girl who didn’t flirt, date around, or make herself available to every guy who looked her way.

But I also knew that no sacrifice was too great for the Prince of my heart. Just as Paul considered everything that was gain to him as rubbish for the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord (Philippians 3:8), so I was being called to lay aside anything and everything that stood in the way of building my life completely around Him.

There would be plenty of Christian voices in my life that would shout with indignation that such a sacrifice was completely unnecessary and extreme. But they did the same to Mary when she poured out her valuable perfume upon Jesus. Mary did not have the understanding or approval of others, but she had the smile of her King. And I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt which one I would rather have.

The night I broke up with Kyle was one of the most significant nights of my life. I experienced a small taste of what Christ meant when He said, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). I’d heard those words all my life as a Christian, but I’d never actually realized that they meant something specific and practical for my day-to-day existence. I was finally seeing things more clearly: Taking up my cross meant deliberately choosing to give up “rights” that other people enjoyed and laying down my own plans, dreams, and agenda in order to make Jesus Christ my first love—not just in theory, but in real life.

As I hung up the phone after telling Kyle I needed to end our relationship, I felt a strange mixture of pain and hope. Ending the relationship had been painful, but not in the same gut-wrenching, heartbreaking, hopeless-feeling way that all my other breakups had been. Rather, it was more like the healthy, positive pain of training for an athletic sport. It wasn’t comfortable, but deep inside I felt a clear sense that something amazing was going to come of it. It was the pain caused by obedience to my King, “who for the joy that

was set before Him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). For the first time in my life, I was following His pattern. I was willing to gladly endure the pain of self-sacrifice, knowing that unspeakable joy lies on the other side of obedience.

Elisabeth Elliot wrote, “None of us likes pain. All of us wish at times we did not need to ‘go through all this stuff.’ Let us settle it once and for all: we cannot know Christ and the power of His resurrection without the fellowship of His suffering.”¹

I knew that ending my relationship with Kyle was only the beginning. My King was calling me to walk a path of radical obedience and sacrifice for Him—at least one that *seemed* radical compared to most of the other Christians I knew. This sacred call required me to die daily to my own wants, ambitions, whims, and desires. No longer could I be led by merely my feelings and emotions. Rather, I must be led by the longing to glorify my Lord, no matter what the cost.

That night I not only laid down my relationship with Kyle, but also my obsession with finding a guy and getting married. It’s not that the desire to get married magically disappeared the moment I made that commitment, but by the grace of God I was no longer discontent with being single, pining for the day when I would finally meet the right guy and live happily ever after with him. Rather, I began to build my life around my first and most important love story—a daily romance with Jesus Christ.

It wasn’t easy to retrain my daily habit patterns. Instead of continually pondering how I could make myself physically attractive to win the approval of guys, I had to train myself to care far more about becoming attractive on the *inside* by the transforming beauty of Jesus Christ. Instead of spending my free time on the phone, at the mall, or on my computer, I had to learn how to spend my free time cultivating my relationship with my true Prince—journaling, worshipping, praying, studying His Word, and reading stories of great Christians. Instead of strategically placing myself in the path of available guys, I had to reprogram my attitude to one that trusted

God to write my love story in His own perfect time and way, without manipulation on my part.

But the amazing thing about all of these painful-yet-rewarding decisions is that I did not have to “become strong enough” to live them out on my own. I found that as I leaned upon the strong arm of my Bridegroom and trusted in His power, He enabled me to live according to His pattern and gave me strength to make difficult choices I never would have been able to make on my own.

Giving up the temporary pleasures of the dating scene and the relentless pursuit of finding the right guy didn’t make my life colorless and miserable. In fact, I had never felt so vibrant, joyful, or alive. Jesus Christ really became my all in all—and I found that He was more than enough to satisfy the longings and desires of my heart.

Yes, I still desired to get married and raise a family someday. But those desires no longer controlled or consumed me the way they had before. I was no longer enslaved to my fairy-tale dreams and ideals. I was able to entrust the desires of my heart into the hands of my faithful King and, for the first time in my life, to *leave* them there instead of immediately taking them back out of impatience.

It wasn’t easy. There were many lonely nights, wondering if I had made the right choice, wondering if a life of such extreme consecration to Christ was really necessary. But in those moments I would call out to the One who faced the most intense loneliness of all time. He would gently remind me of the struggle He faced in the Garden of Gethsemane. He also had asked His Father if there was any other way—but there was not. And so willingly, joyfully, He had endured the greatest test of all time...all because of His love for me.

That season of surrender was the foundation of everything I have now, from my love story with Eric to my daily intimate walk with Jesus Christ to my message for today’s young women. When I laid everything down at the feet of my King, that’s when I discovered the beauty and romance of the Christ-life. The moment I died to self’s agenda was the moment I truly began to live for the first time.

Obedience, when it flows out of genuine love for Jesus Christ, is never wasted and never regretted. As Corrie ten Boom said:

Self is a tight lock. I see many decent sinners who are in spiritual prison because their self is on the throne of their hearts, and Jesus is on the cross. What liberation comes when Jesus cleanses their hearts with His blood and comes to the throne, and self goes on the cross!²