**Caught in the Middle**

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*He was so cute, fun, energetic and just plain crazy – all the requirements of someone who I am attracted to. We met at a Christian dance on New Year's Eve. We became inseparable. We spent the next month glued at the hip. I had not been looking for anyone in my life; he just appeared. I had always heard that this is how it could happen. And wow, he is here. He was in seminary, loved to witness to others, had a great personality and boy could he kiss. I was in love or was I?   Within 24 hours of meeting Jack, I was in the middle. I mean, I am an adult. I know what I want. I don't need all that friendship stuff. I had been around the block and knew quickly if people were real. I saw his fruit. Well, some of his fruit. Whatever you could see in a few days. That was enough for me. But boy would I be wrong. I would learn later of how much being in the middle would cost us both.*

Don't you love being in a relationship where you are so comfortable that you can totally be yourself? You can take your shoes off, wear the same shirt for two days, lay on the couch, eat Cheetos and ice cream for dinner. You're so comfortable that you have cute pet names for each other. You don't have to plan every detail of your dates, in fact you have passed the "dating" phase and are just with each other all the time. No one is trying to impress. No one is trying to be someone they are not. You aren't planning the future but you are also not discussing the past. You are in the middle somewhere. The real middle, not the one you jump into after a week of dating.

I believe almost everyone wants to be here – the middle. But no one wants to do what it takes to get there. Everyone is in a hurry to get there because "there" is a safe place. A place where I don't have to be alone. A place that might lead to marriage. A place that makes me feel valuable. And while this may be true, it's also a place that can lead to rejection, pain, isolation and loneliness. When we skip building the foundation of a relationship, we build it on shaky ground. When the first storm appears, it not only shakes the relationship but can destroy, leaving damage that follows you forever.

Recently I watch a show on TV on Internet dating to get information for a conference that I am teaching. The show followed the lives of 12 women, and as I watched, I noticed a consistent need to jump into the "middle" of a relationship. There was such desperation on both sides to find someone and find them *now*. Some of the single adults not only were having sex within a few dates, they were talking to each other as if they had been dating each other for months. No one seemed interested in building a friendship, a foundation of trust, love and care. *And God certainly didn't appear to be in any part of the formula.*

**When I Was Younger**

When I was younger, every time I met a man my main purpose was to find out if he was single and if he could be the "one". It never crossed my mind if this man could be anything else in my life. Sure, I had business contacts, family friends, church friends, etc., but every other guy was the possible "one". I let friends set me up, tried a dating club, attending a zillion single adult events, and almost put an ad in the paper. I wanted to be married and I was in a hurry.

As time went on and I became stronger in my relationship with God, dating seemed to slow down. I was less interested in having friends set me up and totally against Internet dating. Then I met Jack, who seemed to be the answer to my prayers. I was at a place in my life where I had stopped trying to find "the one" with my power and had given that aspect of my life over to God. At least I thought I had. Jack would prove to be a test. I would end up skipping the foundation of a friendship and jump right in the middle. Why was this? Had I not learned anything from my past. Ultimately, Jack and I would not make it. When the storm came, we quickly crumbled.

**Getting Honest With Myself**

I had to get honest with myself and for the first time in my life, give my total desire of a relationship over to God. I had to find real contentment. I had to be willing to build friendships with the opposite sex no matter where that friendship might lead. I had to learn to love from the inside out versus the outside in. Even though I had learned that he must be a strong Christian, a follower of Jesus, this wasn't enough. He needed to also be my friend first. My best friend.

**Our Past Influences Our Present**

We are so influenced by our environment and the way we are raised. Today's society sends too many wrong messages on everything from how we dress, to music, to dating. If you don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend by the time you are eight years old, or had your first French kiss by the time you were 11, something must be wrong with you. In high school, wasn't the big question always, "Who are you going to the prom with?" Worse yet, in college, didn't people look down upon virgins, wondering what was wrong with them? Oh, and heaven forbid you make it to 40 and not be married. You might as well disappear off the face of the earth. Surely you are of no value to anyone, right?

**God First**

We should first start with examining our relationship with God. Are you spending time with God each day? Are you reading your Bible, praying, going to church, and attending a small group? If God isn't first, then everything in your life is headed for disaster – *everything.* You will never know what His best is if you don't know Him. We must seek Christ first in all things. Christ gives us our direction, our purpose, and our focus. Christ will tell you who you should be friends with and ultimately date and marry (if that is His purpose for you).

*Every relationship (romantic or platonic) must first start with a relationship with God.* *Exodus 34:14 says, "You must worship no other gods, but only the LORD, for he is a God who is passionate about his relationship with you."*  **Friends**

The Bible speaks about friendship over 200 times, not to mention the hundreds and hundreds of examples of how to treat others. It is through our friendship with God that we learn how to be friends with others. His example gives us the guidance we need. I don't think you can ever have enough friends. Don't you want the person you may fall in love with to be your best friend? You know, I have never heard a married person say to me "Oh, I just hated that six months I spent developing my friendship with my spouse." It is through friendship that we find out about each others' dreams, our walk with God, how we spend our money and how we treat our friends and family. It is through friendship that we learn to encourage, hold each other accountable, support, help, and ultimately love.

DATING 101:   I believe when you "date," you shouldn't be romantic until you believe God has led you to someone you could marry. So many times we go to fast too soon because we are lonely and desperate. We jump into the middle of a relationship. Then when things don't work out, we can't even go back to friends because we have gone too far. If while you are dating you make a commitment to not kiss or hold hands, taking this time to really get to know each other, I promise you will have less heartache and be able to keep them as a friend if things don't work out.

*"And Jonathan made David reaffirm his vow of friendship again, for Jonathan loved David as much as he loved himself" (1 Samuel 20:17).*

**Romance**

Allow friendships to turn to romantic friendships only in God's own timing. Enjoy the journey God has you on. Once you are married, you will never be able to go back to this very special time. Spend time praying about your relationship but be careful when you pray alone. Make sure you don't leave your single adult group or your church as a lot of couples do. You need accountability. Get some counseling, read some books, find a couple who can mentor you and seek Godly advice.  *"It is better to be patient than powerful; it is better to have self-control than to conquer a city" (Proverbs 16:32).*

**The Journey**

If we spend time with God, learning about Him, learning about ourselves and becoming more like Him, then we will know the journey He wants us to go and who to take along. I believe when we meet with the opposite sex or anyone for that reason, our goal should be to get to know them for Christ's purpose, not ours. You never know who that person might become in your life. I would rather have one best friend that is there for the journey than 10 who have not only distracted me but also taken my eyes off the journey.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. (Hebrews 12: 1-2)*

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