

The Empty Nest: Beauty for Ashes



by JANET NYGREN

Family is a high priority in the church. A lot of resources are poured into its various stages: parenting, children’s ministry, preparing our youth for the world, and sorting through family challenges of all kinds. Raising a family is a very busy time of life with high demands at all stages. Celebrating high school graduation can feel like the final crescendo of a long symphony, marking the end of many movements. Parents might congratulate themselves for a job well done, or secretly look forward to a break from the challenges they have faced. But what about the empty nest? Much less is said about this stage, and it sometimes creeps up unexpectedly. Any new stage of life is hard to prepare for. But unlike new parents, with a precious new life to show for all their labors, many empty nesters are looking in their rearview mirror with trepidation and mixed emotions about the future.

The term *empty nest* is somewhat ambiguous. While we often refer to the transitional years after children first leave the home as the empty nest, it can also refer to the *entire season* of life once children become adults. It starts when they leave home, but it continues when they’re married and have children. It extends even into retirement and the challenges of aging. That covers a lot of territory beyond the scope of this article, but the empty-nest issues I will raise pave the way to consider these later periods as well.

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Even the initial empty-nest stage is complex, as it covers quite a variety of situations. Single parents experience it differently from married couples. Parents of one child might process it differently from parents with many children. And parents who stayed out of the workforce or homeschooled will likely experience the empty nest differently from those who spent more time apart from their children because of work or other commitments. All these variations will affect how the empty nest plays out.

Some empty-nest issues overlap with other struggles. They might not result directly from children leaving home but may happen in the same season, such as a divorce, a debilitating illness, or retirement. When these problems arrive in a cluster, the season can feel overwhelming, testing our limits and fortitude. Such transitional periods in life are hard but inevitable (Eccl 3:1–8). They challenge us to rethink or reevaluate our readiness for what lies ahead. The empty nest is one such transition.

This article will mainly focus on the beginning of the empty-nest season when the scope of new challenges is the most unfamiliar. Following descriptions of some typical empty nesters, we will look at the various struggles they face. We will then consider how to think biblically about the empty nest, and how God meets us during this season. Finally, we will reframe the challenges of the empty nest as opportunities and see that it can be a time to thrive. Not everyone will struggle with the empty nest. But if you are dealing with these issues, or are seeking to understand and help someone else who is, I hope to bring this season into greater focus. I also want the church to consider how to embrace and serve its empty nesters.

The Faces of the Empty Nest

At first, I considered the empty nest only from my own personal experience. But as I began counseling in my empty-nest years, I saw similarities in others that related to this season of life. Following my story, I describe some other faces of the empty nest. They are composite descriptions of people I have known or counseled in similar circumstances.

My empty-nest story. My story is fairly typical of a family starting out in the 90s, attending an evangelical church. When we started our family, I looked forward to being a stay-at-home mom, and my husband

and I chose a lifestyle with a modest house in a suburban neighborhood to allow that to happen. We have a daughter and a son, born at the then-national average of 2.3 years apart. Our children attended public school, and I used my free time to serve our church in a variety of capacities. In anticipation of our empty nest, I went to graduate school when our children were teenagers, looking forward to working after they left home. I put off career ambitions to be home for our kids while gaining valuable life and church experience that would prepare me for my next phase. I was excited for my kids to head off and pursue their own dreams, and I thought I was well prepared to pursue mine.

The term *empty nest* refers to the entire season of life once children become adults.

Dropping off our firstborn at college was emotionally hard, but it was tempered by having our son at home for two more years. While continuing my job as the mom-taxi and attending school, sports, music, and church youth events, I was busy. But when our son left for college, my life changed considerably. I was unprepared for the ache I felt when my nest became truly empty. One day, I heard a familiar piece of music and called out to my son to come and listen with me, only to suddenly realize he was not there. I burst out crying. In hindsight, this was a normal pattern of grief, but I was not expecting it.

I plunged myself into more activities, particularly at church, unconsciously looking for ways to fill the emptiness and pour myself into something meaningful. But nothing could replace those sacrificial years for my kids. As time went on, I continued to feel lost and confused, untethered from the activities and friendships that had been connected to my active teenagers. At the same time, my escape into volunteer church work and other responsibilities added stress that began to choke me. I did not realize it at the time, but I was in an identity crisis.

God intervened in ways I never would have expected. When he called my husband and me to work overseas for the next few years, we abandoned our now-empty nest. The disruption from my familiar church home, my friends, and my family gave me the distance I needed to recognize that all was not well in my heart. The tools I had learned to

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