

A painting of a person on a boat in a forest. The scene is set in a dense, dark forest with tall, thin trees. A person is visible on a small boat or platform in the water, looking towards the viewer. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding trees. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

# *SLEEPING ALONE*

THOUGHTS ON THE SINGLE LIFE

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT



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# SLEEPING ALONE

I wake slowly, face-down, stretching my legs, cupping my toes over the end of the bed, feeling my calf muscles pull and retract. My head is lying flat, on 400 thread count white sheets. I am facing left, the breeze from my open window setting across my face, the window's linen blind pulsing steadily in the same breeze.

I spread my right arm out feeling the empty space in my bed. My heart sinks.

There has never been anyone in this space, but I still feel the void all the same. My bed has never been shared, I have never been cuddled too tightly, or felt the aching space of an evening argument which keeps two hearts and bodies apart. I have never had to fight anyone for the covers and when I am cold, I am cold alone.

I stretch my left arm out, toward the window, rest my hand on the screen. My heart breaks a little more every day. It breaks itself and heals itself, and it does it all under the watchful, loving eye of God, so I am not alone, though I feel alone.

I used to worry I would not be married by 24. Then I worried I would not be married by 29. Now I worry I will never come to terms with always being alone. It is a hard thing to share one's bed with no one and it is a hard thing to wake every morning feeling more undesirable than the night before.

Friends think they are consoling when they say marriage is hard work (who among us thinks it is not?) or when they complain that she steals all the covers or he snores or she likes to cuddle and he only like sex. They think this is consoling.

But it is not.

Because the night comes slowly, every blessed day, like the poet, Richard Wilbur, [said](#), a punctual rape, same in, same out; but morning comes quickly and I spread my arm across this empty space feeling aloneness more than ever before.

Fabs Harford wrote about [Fasting from Intimacy](#) and this resonates in me because there is no monster inside of me more ravenous than the one who craves intimacy. I lean across the table in loud restaurants and ask hard questions. I hug tightly without discretion or discrimination. I touch the hands and shoulders of people I love, and sometimes barely know. I lean in. I do this because I am starving for intimacy and I am unafraid of that monster. I know he can kill me. But I know I will starve without his hunger.

Singleness is a beautiful thing and when I take account of the past decade I see a faithfulness to its beauty in my life in a way that only comes from grace, but I also see a succession of tiny funerals every step of the way. A cemetery full of them. Adventures I have had alone. Mornings I have woken alone. Moments I have reveled in alone. Each one bringing joy in its experience and mourning in its completion.

Life is meant to be shared and marriage is not the only way to share life, I know this, but the mystery of two flesh becoming one is a mingling that cannot be known by me, with my bed all to myself, 400 thread count sheets, open window, and quiet morning. And I mourn this.

Tim Keller preached a sermon called *Jesus, Lord of the Wine*, and he teaches how Christ is the Lord of the wedding feast, how His first miracle was in a wedding, turning water into wine and how this is a sign to us that He is for our joy. And not just our eventual joy, as the old Calvinists would have us believe, but for our present joy, our joy here on earth, in empty beds, empty hearts, and single flesh.

I meditate on this morning before I break my night's fast.

The hunger in my belly a reminder that there is a feast before me, *whether it is the feast I envision for my life or not*, it is a feast that brings joy somehow and in some way. And there are mornings when it will be hard, like this one. There will be nights when my fast from intimacy is painful and I shake my fist at God, or ignore Him altogether.

But He is for my joy and joy is there too, in the song of birds outside my window, the Roman blind shivering in the breeze, and the 400 thread count sheets, covers all to myself. There *is* joy there—a small, but ebbing joy.



# EVERY SINGLE SEASON

We've been having a spate of perfect days in Texas. I suppose there are no perfect days anywhere, but if they exist, they are present and accounted for here. The skies are clear, a spotless blue, the temperature is 72, the air is sweet and breezy, the sun warm and not wearing out its welcome. Every day I sit outside on our back porch and breathe in sun. Last winter I cozied and busied myself inside with wintry things, trying so desperately to make it feel like a familiar season, but when summer hit and the real cabin-fever set in (who wants to be outside when it's the 68th day of temps above 100?), I wanted those January days back.

This winter weather is getting every bit of me it can.

While I am calling to mind the things for which I'm grateful this week, it seems that singleness is topping that list *for real*. I italicize that because I have exercised that muscle of gratefulness before, but it has never felt familiar, good or right. It has always felt like a cheat, stealing away the best years of my life, chances for babies, young love and all that.

But the past week I have seen it nothing other than a sweet, sweet gift. I used to be jealous of my friends who married young, fresh faced and fertile, and I think it's worked out well for them. But I wish I hadn't spent my jealousy on that.



I say to my dear friend last night, after we laugh at her three-year-old's antics and she challenges and encourages me, "I have literally spent the best years of my life doing things that my younger married friends may never get to do—and I have never been grateful for that. Ever."

I don't know if God has marriage for me someday, plenty of my friends say it will happen and there's always an acquaintance I see at a wedding who nearly pinches my cheek and says "Next time it'll be you!" (Note: if you're pinching the cheeks of 30 year olds and saying that, please stop.) I don't know if my own children are ever in my future. I don't know if a wedding is in my future. I don't know if I'll ever be loved with the sort of love I have looked at jealously. I don't know.

But here's what I know: I don't want to waste this season, *this perfectly crafted season*. I want to live it large, open, others-minded, with risk, faith, and possibility. I want to live it in its time, fully embracing *this* gift for *this* day. I want to keep my eyes on the blessings of this portion and I want to live it as abundantly as the Spirit allows.

Back in New York it's snowing and icing. My favorite people are curled in patchwork blankets and shoveling snow. They're making crock-pot soup and drinking hot tea with honey. It's winter there, a New York sort of winter. But here, in Texas, we're having a different sort of winter and it's not wrong or misplaced or a cheat, it's by design.

And I'm so very, very thankful for it.



# WHO CAN HELP US?

A **friend** asked me recently if I had any thoughts to contribute about what it means for a single person to be fruitful and multiply. It was nicely timed because I'd just written a post on **adoption as sons** based on the idea that singleness brings with it a barrenness no one wants to acknowledge, so all of that Genesis stuff was fresh on my mind. But then I went to a wedding. And watched a movie about adoption. And RSVPed to a few more weddings. And listened to some friends talk about their new relationships. And held a newborn baby. And suddenly anything I thought I had to say or think about singleness or fruitfulness went the way of hoop skirts and handlebar mustaches, that is to say, extinct.

I have this other friend. We don't get to see each other often, she lives on the other side of the 70 mile metroplex we call home. But usually all it takes is a glance at one another at church or a text or a simple thought and we're on the same page. She's a talented, beautiful girl, with a talented, godly husband. They live in a

beautiful home they've made into a haven. People might envy their idyllic lives, and in some ways, I wouldn't blame those people, this couple has what many people only dream of.

But they don't have a *baby*.

And that's what they dream of.

She and I, we're the sort of friends who enter into one another's pain, and though it is not the same, it is the same: we both want what we do not have and there is no guarantee for either of us that we will ever get it.

The longer I am single, the more women come into my life who struggle with infertility, a staggering number of painfully quiet pray-ers.

So I began to listen. I began to listen to their stories, to their mourning, to their agony, to the ways in which they felt inferior or on the exterior or incapable. I began to listen to their tears and their fears. And here is what I am learning:

We are all barren souls, empty wombs, and carved out holes. We, all of us, long for something not yet here and it might be as beautiful as marriage or a baby or it might be as simplistic as a big screen tv or better career. We want. We ache. We ache. Deeply in us for something to satisfy the gnawing inside of us.

Another friend of mine left our church recently, choosing another church to call home for a season. Why? I asked him. To find a wife, he said. I stared at him—if you're a good man and you can't find a wife at my **church**, you're not looking to your left or right. But then I realized something: there's a gnawing in him. An ache. A barrenness. A desperateness.

"It is not good for man to be alone.

I will make a **helper** fit for him."

I sit in need these days. I wonder how I could ever be a helper fit for *anyone* and then I remember Christ's words in John: I'm sending my Spirit to you! He will help you, guide you into all truth.

He has made a helper fit for us, all of us.

So friends, I just want you to know that I understand and you understand and more than anything He *understands* and we, all of us, are called to help. I help my babyless friends by reminding them of God's faithfulness. They help me by reminding me that marriage and a home doesn't equal completion. Women, we help our brothers by being approachable, willing to take risks. Men, you help us by not overlooking what could be the best spouse fit for you.

But more than anything the Holy Spirit helps us all by guiding, teaching, comforting, and filling us full, to overflowing.

***You may feel alone, but you are not alone.***



# HOW TO BE MISSIONAL WHEN YOU GET OUT OF BED

A friend stopped me in the hall tonight with a question and I gave a short answer but told her I'd blog the long answer later. This won't be a creative post, but

it will hopefully be educational at least and encouraging at most. My friend's question was along the lines of: how do you, as an unmarried person, reconcile this [tonight's sermon on covenantal relationships, specifically marriage] with your singleness?

MY SHORT ANSWER:

While I am unmarried the Church is where I am united primarily as a giver and helper. Note that though I use the capital C Church there, it plays itself out in the context of my *local church*, which, by extension, is my *home* most locally.

LONG ANSWER:

A few years ago I decided that unless I were to craft for myself a creed of sorts during my single years, I would be in danger of letting these years pass me by in either purposeless and vain ways **OR** in begrudging and self-righteous ways. I know my nature well enough to know that I can't exist in nothingness very well—and judging from nearly every conversation with every single person I know, neither can most of humankind.

Here's my personal creed on how this unmarried person lives in covenant (and it will probably continue in context if I become a married person living in covenant):

***MY HOUSEMATES ARE MY PRIMARY COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS***

In this season of life the girls with whom I live are my first priorities when it comes to covenant. That does not mean they can call first dibs on me, my time, talents, etc. What it does mean, though, is that *I* will drop almost anything for them. In regard to my finances, time, talents, and wisdom—they are my primary partakers, they get my first-fruits. Because there are four of us, those things are

divided, but overall, I seek to defer to them in all things for their good and my sanctification.

This might sound like I'm steam-rolled, but I think if you knew any of us you'd see that's not the case at our house. Everyone in our home has a voice and an opinion, and everyone in our home defers to the others 9.9 times out of ten. If that seems like a recipe for division, well, you're invited to come over anytime.

Because...

### ***MY HOME IS A PLACE OF PEACE***

The first words people say when they see our home is, "So cool!" or "So homey!" or "Love this place!" The second thing people say is, "It's so peaceful here." And it's true, for the most part. We're not perfect people and so one of us feels underfoot sometimes or maybe unheard or overcrowded, but overall, our home is home of peace.

Peace is not just a pretty painting on the wall, though, hanging there passively waiting to be disrupted. No. Peace is an **active** agent. There is a world of difference between being a peacemaker and peacekeeper. In our home we are *peacemakers*. We are makers of peace. Peace with one another. Peace with situations. Peace with the onslaught of the world that assaults each of us throughout our day. My aim, at the end of the day, when I say, "Goodnight family, I love you," is to settle it before bed: you are loved, you are known, and in this home, behind these doors, there is no onslaught toward you. This is important because...

### ***MY HOME IS MY PRIMARY PLACE OF MINISTRY***

I work for a busy non-profit, I lead a homegroup, I write this blog and for many other publications, I have lived in five states and still have close friends to keep up



with in all of them, I have a huge family all over the US who I see rarely, I go to a large church with many opportunities to serve,...the list goes on. Outside of my home there are opportunities to minister in a million places. But here's the problem with that, for me: if my home isn't in order, I'm not going to serve well outside of it.

Therefore, my home is my primary place of ministry. Whether that means I invite people into my home (ie. homegroup), or whether I give the best of my ministry (prayer, counsel, love, etc.) to my housemates, or whether home is simply the place where I sit deepest under the ministry of the Holy Spirit—whatever it is for that moment, home is where it's happening for me. If it's not in order here, it will not be in order when I leave & go do other ministry.

### ***HOW IT WORKS FOR ME***

Whatever I choose to do gets filtered through those creeds and if I choose not to do something, it's probably related to one of them as well. I do not hold to these perfectly (ask my housemates), but they are ingrained in my spirit deeply enough that they are nearly second nature at this point.

I said this to my friend in the hallway tonight: I'm 31 years old and I have more than a decade of housemates behind me. I have messed up royally many, many, many times. Even with these housemates. In no way do I have the corner on Housemate of the Year Award.

These have tightened up over time and displayed themselves in a myriad of ways depending on the home in which I lived, the people with whom I lived, and the season of life in which we were, but they have generally been kept over the past six or seven years. I have lived with (at last count) 28 housemates in a decade;

I have lived with crazy, kind, manipulative, wise, gentle, funny, and angry people, and *I have been all of those things in return*. No home is perfect and I'm not seeking perfection in my home.

If you're feeling like a bad housemate or an angry single person who feels like the best years of your life are being thwarted by having to live with roommates instead of the person-of-your-dreams, I'd encourage you to sit down and write out a creed for your life, your home, and your ministry. The enemy wants to steal, kill, and destroy, and he's going to start with the place you spend most of your life and the people with whom you spent it. Don't let him. Be proactive. Be on guard.

The pervasive presence of the gospel in your home is going to be your best weapon against the enemy. If you're feeding yourself a gospel of Cosmo or Sport Center or The Food Network or classic literature or social media, you're going to feel thwarted by the enemy. Preach the gospel to yourself, infuse it into your conversations with your housemates, speak it to whoever comes into your door. Be intentional.

Your lease isn't the only covenant you're living in right now. Don't let the opportunity for covenantal relationship pass you by.

# A PROFOUND MYSTERY

*“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Ephesians 5:31-33*

You don't reach the ripe old age of 30 without having worn sixteen bridesmaid dresses to sixteen weddings. (Actually, seventeen, I wore the black one in two weddings.) Standing beside seventeen women as they vowed to love, honor, and cherish the guy facing them, as well as walking through countless relationships with nearly all of my friends, you learn a thing or two.

This morning, as yet another friend and I were talking about how to handle a situation with a guy she recently started dating, it occurred to me that there would

be much more clarity in dating relationships if we really took the "profound mystery of Christ & the Church" seriously. That illustration is about marriage, yet, but shouldn't that be the aim of dating?

Christ pursues us from the foundation of the earth. He doesn't wait until it is less risky or for us to show interest in Him. Because of this, the Church knows Christ's love for us is true and will not be depleted when the going gets rough.

*Men, do not wait for a riskless situation, pursue anyway. Women, don't make it difficult for him to pursue you.*

Christ never wavered in His sacrificial offering. He wept in the garden, but did what His Father asked Him to do. Because of this, the Church trusts that Christ's word is true and trustworthy. There is no question or doubt about His intentions.

*Men, state your intentions, simple though they may be, right up front. Women, trust a man who does this and believe him without second guessing.*

Christ spreads wide the arms of love. He doesn't withhold until we are lovable, understandable, or beautiful. Because of this, we can take our unloveliness to Christ with confidence. He sees past our blemishes and we are lovely *because* He loves us. We love Him because He first loved us.

*Men, look past culture's demands for a perfect wife, love what the world calls unlovely. Women, you become lovely because you are loved first by Christ—rest in that loveliness.*

Christ intercedes on our behalf. He does not stop going to the Father in our defense and for our petitions. Because of this, we know Christ will fight for us. He will not allow anything to break us beyond His capable sight, so we trust Him.

*Men, don't give up on a woman because she is difficult to understand; seek the Holy Spirit for understanding. Women, be clear about what you need or how you feel, without making it difficult for him to meet your needs—trust him and the Lord's work in him.*

Christ reminds us of our sufficiency in Him. He doesn't make us wonder if we are enough or too much. Because of this, the Church can trust that every difficult and beautiful thing will be used for the fruition of His kingdom—nothing is wasted, nothing is too much, nothing is not enough.

*Men, find your sufficiency in Christ, not your girl's approval, respect, or admiration of you. Women, trust your "not enoughness" and "too muchness" to the finished work of the Cross, and know that in your weaknesses He is made great.*

It is a profound mystery, I think, Christ and the Church, marriage, all of it. But I think it could be a little *more* profound here on earth if we really took Paul's illustration to heart.

**"Singleness and marriage are both evidences of God's grace that are to be experienced and sustained purely by the strength which God supplies."**

**ALISTAIR BEGG**

# REAL MEN DON'T TEXT AND OTHER STUFF THAT DOESN'T MATTER

A boyfriend once asked me out for the first time on a Facebook message. Once he finally got my number, he texted me a few times with other suggestions for hanging out. Of course I turned him down every single time, though, because "Real Men Don't Text" (and other junk I thought about real men...). Girls, can I be straight with you for one minute? Whatever your idea of a Real Man is, it would be better for you right now to drop the man and just get real.

A real man is flesh and blood, made of dirt and the breath of God.

He was created in the image of God, made to reflect the many faceted aspects of God. He is merciful and just, he is gentle and fierce, he is strong and tender, he is

like a father but he gathers his young like a mother, he is holy, he is sacrificial— these are the ways in which he reflects his Maker.

He is also made. He was created from the ground, the dust, the particles of the earth's first rubbish. But nothing is rubbish to God and so He took something from nothing and made it good, real good. Real, tangible, touchable, malleable, fallible, but *real*. So real that you can stand beside him and know that all your realness, your curves, your imperfections, your flaws, your failures, are not more or less real than his. You are the same. And different. There is nothing else on earth as real as the two of you in this sense. Souls and bodies, minds and hearts.

*It's astounding.*

As I learn what it means to be joined with a man, I am having to unlearn what constitutes real men and real women. In our relationship I am the internal processor, he is the verbal; I am the risk-taker, he is the solid, steady; he is romantic and nostalgic; I am no nonsense and overlook his many expressions of love. There are so many ways in which we are not what could be termed as Real Men or Real Women, but we are the *realest* man or woman in one another's life right now. We are the *realest* expression of the image of God to one another—and also the realest mirror to our own selfishness.

The only way to be a real man or real woman is to be real in the very essence of what the word means.

*Actually existing or happening. Not imaginary, not fake, false, or artificial.  
Important and deserving to be regarded or treated in a serious way.*



You are real because you exist, you are happening. You are not fake or false or artificial. You are not wired for anything except to bring glory to your Maker—and even this is so vast and incomprehensible, how could it be contained?

You are important because you make much of the One who is Most Important.

You are a person, bearing the image of God, the Imago Dei—therefore I treat you seriously, whether or not you text first or email first or ask me out to coffee first or work from home or are a mother or a father or can bear children or will never bear children.

You are real because He took dust and bone and made you real.

Men and women, go. Be real.

# MY CHURCH HAS AN AMAZING SINGLES MINISTRY

I wanted to comment on something I wrote [this past week on singleness](#). I got a bit of pushback on it and some of it was founded; I also received some concern that I was pushing against my own church's model of home groups since we don't have extraneous ministries apart from home groups. I love my church and agree strongly with our leadership that less is more, and that a focus on programmatic within the local church can distract from mission. Some of my pastors have written a book on that [which you can find here](#). However, when I look at the sheer amount of divorces or marital problems within the Church at large, I can't help but wonder if we could do better for our singles before marriage.

If the divorce rate is rising—or even plateaued, because even *one* divorce is too many in my opinion—shouldn't we do more to prevent marriages of unequally yoked, immature, or otherwise unwise individuals? Of course we can't micro-manage the unions of everyone, but a few? As many as possible?

I don't think singles ministry is the answer, so let that be said. I actually agree strongly that singles should not be segregated off to themselves, but should surround themselves with marriages from every point along the way. Walking with young and old couples is one of my great joys. I'm able to enter into their joys and

mourning in a way I can't with my single friends. I'm able to pray for babies, for grandchildren, for discipline problems, for marriage difficulties, and they're able to pray with me through my single-specific trials. This is one of the beauties of the local church.

So if singles ministry isn't the answer, what is?

First a few observations:

1. Homegroups cannot be the means through which we *expect* marriages to be born. I am not saying that two singles can't meet, mingle, and marry within the context of a home group, I'm simply saying that by nature of the smallness of a small group, we can't expect the 2-5 possible singles who've put themselves there to find themselves face to face with their future spouse. It's certainly ideal, but not the norm.

2. Using an online dating service does bring a few **success** stories—praise God for them and pray for more of them—but as a whole there are more disadvantages to this than advantages. It takes a very wise believer to walk that path in a circumspect and godly way—and sadly many of our singles are spending more time crafting the perfect profile, responding to foolish inquiries, and dating aimlessly, than working on wisdom.

So about that answer?

First, do not be a parasite, sucking off the life of others, expecting your church to serve you in this area. They probably want to serve you here. It's not like your elders are sitting in a dark room scheming how to get more troubled marriages in their offices. They want godly marriages to happen and fortunately they've probably provided the perfect vehicle for singles to meet, mingle, and marry.

That vehicle? Ministry.

Within your local church—whatever its ministry model—there are things to be done. Trust me. I've worked for local churches and non-profits most of my adult life. If you can fold a piece of paper, sweep a room, hold a baby, pray for someone, you can serve. (If you're a Villager, go into Connection Central on your specific campus, and **there will be a list of roles and needs you can fill.**)

Here's why this is the singles ministry you've been longing for:

As you serve you will encounter those with shared visions, shared goals, & shared burdens. You will see work ethics, the heart of hospitality and mercy, the hands of service. You will not be distracted by perfectly crafted profiles or instagram images. You will see real people doing real things for their real God. You will see in motion the things we ought to value in marriages.

Your life of singleness will be richer, more full, more joyful. You will encounter someone's someday spouse. You will begin to systematically kill the little foxes. You will grow into what will be a better wife or husband. When you see all there is to do, you won't ever complain about a lack of ministry to singles again, trust me.

And you might just meet him or her.

# PEARLS AND PIGS AND GUYS AND GIRLS

After asking the questions (for research), "Can guys and girls be friends?" and then "Is it ever appropriate for the girl to initiate a date (or relationship)?" on social media, I wasn't surprised at the barrage of opinions. We had PhDs discussing ancient Near-Eastern culture, husbands saying, "If my wife hadn't initiated, we wouldn't be married," and wives saying, "We were friends for three years before I asked him to clarify—now we're married." I'm going to save my main argument for later (so suspicious, I know), but in the meantime, I wanted to share this page from [The Meaning of Marriage](#), by Tim and Kathy Keller. And also say this, I have utmost respect for the Kellers, not just as individuals, teachers, shepherds, but as a couple who is so obviously best friends with one another. They spar, they laugh, they interrupt, they cheer, they agree, they challenge. It's a partnership of two great minds—and for a girl who is more often valued for her mind than anything I'd rather be valued for, their marriage is an encouragement to me.

**So if you're a guy and you're afraid of being friends with a girl** because the following conversation might happen: let it happen. It's good for the girl, and it's even better for you, maybe considering her as more than a friend could result in a great marriage. All friendship is intrinsically based on attraction (even same gender

friendships), so "I'm not attracted" is just the excuse you give when what you really mean is, "I can't envision having sex with her." So maybe get better vision. (That's simplistic, I know. I promise I have seven gazillion google docs floating around right now with that unpacked a bit more.)

**And if you're a girl and you keep hanging around, hoping and hoping he'll get the hint** (because it's so obvious to everyone else *but* him), have this conversation, or something like it. I've done it more than once and have no regrets. Sometimes it meant the end of our friendship, sometimes it meant we were able to get past The Question and become better friends, but maybe someday it will mean I'm the girl who is sharing the story about being friends and then being married. I hope so.

Here is the quote from The Meaning of Marriage:

“There came a time in our relationship, after we had known each other for several years, when Kathy saw that this was exactly what had happened, and so she gave me what has come to be known in our family as the “pearls before swine” speech. Though we were best friends and kindred spirits, I was still hurting from a previous relationship that had ended badly. Kathy was patient and understanding, up to a point, but the day came when she said, ‘Look, I can’t take this anymore. I have been expecting to be promoted from friend to girlfriend. I know you don’t mean to be saying this, but every day you don’t choose me to be more than a friend, it feels as if I’ve been weighed and found wanting—I feel it as a rejection. So I just can’t keep going on the same way, hoping that someday you’ll want me to be more than a friend. I’m not calling myself a pearl, and I’m not calling you a pig, but one of the reasons Jesus told

his disciples not to cast pearls before swine was because a pig can't recognize the the value of a pearl. It would seem like just a pebble. If you can't see me as valuable to you, then I'm not going to keep throwing myself into your company, hoping and hoping. I can't do it. The rejection that I perceive, whether you intend it or not, is just too painful.' That's exactly what she said. It got my attention. It sent me into a time of deep self-examination. A couple of weeks later, I made the choice."



# HOW TO FALL OUT OF LOVE

Someone asked me how to fall out of love with her ex-boyfriend. "You don't," I said. "The problem is not that you love him too much, it's that you love everything else too little."

What sets marriage apart from every other relationship is not the love between a man and a woman (although that love is a mystery, who can comprehend it?), it is merely *covenant*. Love waxes and wanes, ebbs and flows, and there are some days when we barely love ourselves let alone love others. Covenant binds the man and woman together when love seems an impossible venture.

So how do you fall out of love? What if your heart has been broken, your boyfriend didn't love you back, your girlfriend couldn't make her ardor match yours? What if you're the one standing there, empty hearted while they make off



with both theirs *and* yours? In the absence of covenant, how do you fall out of love then?

You don't.

Oh, there will be some sorting that needs to happen, some grasping and understanding. You will need to be able to discern what about your relationship was idolatrous or lustful and what was good and holy and right and true. You will need to be able to repent for loving the wrong things too much and the right things too little. But you will also need to be able to understand the nature of real love, biblical love, means you cannot stop loving another person, not ever.

The problem is not that we love them too much, but that we love others too little. We do not extend to them the same grace or walk with the same long-suffering. We are perhaps guilty of objectifying or only loving the way someone made us feel—and this is not love, but a cheap counterfeit, flimsy and fleeting, and we *ought* to fall out of that.

Falling out of love is an anti-Christian idea. Christians must love all the more—even and especially the ones who deserve it the least.

If you are standing somewhere, nursing a broken and bleeding heart, know this: God is willing and working His goodness in that brokenness. But also know this, the way through this is to love others with the same fervor and intensity and selflessness that you brought to your relationship. Nurture them, encourage them, delight in them, enjoy them. As your capacity to love grows, you will find that former flame no longer burning higher than all the others, but a mere light along the path that brought you into the most full and robust love there is. The love of God.



# COUNTING MARRIAGE AS LOSS

The quietest voice in my life this time last year was God's. He was saying, "I have more for you in your singleness," but I didn't trust Him. There were louder voices, more immediate voices, more pressing ones—even my own voice, certain that if **I did not get married on March 16**, I would lose my chance for marriage forever.

See how nagging the voice of doubt?

The belief that God won't come through. That He will leave me without the thing I want. That He will give me less than what I desire. That He hasn't heard my specific prayers and requests. That He doesn't care about my proclivities and inclinations and desires. That everything I love and desire is simply an idol, with nothing good in it. The belief that He has gotten it wrong.

Tim Keller said, "Worry is not believing God will get it right, and bitterness is believing God got it wrong."

This is the creeping doubt that festered in my mind most of 2014. The voices around me seemed louder and more persistent than God's voice and I felt myself sinking under their demands to be heard. I was the wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind, unstable in all my ways (James 1:6).

But the small voice persisted: I have more for you in *this*.

I feared that His "more for me" would be a life of begrudging singleness, alone, fearful, unloved, unseen. I feared His "more for me" would mean pretending to enjoy something that wasn't enjoyable, and felt eternal and long. I feared He would call me to a life of celibacy and I wouldn't be able to say with the Apostle Paul that it was better.

It has been a strange seeing that has happened this year. Singleness ceased becoming the lens through which I viewed life, and it became the thing that I have found myself most grateful for this past year. I fear even saying that because it may sound like I have resigned myself to a life I still would not choose for myself. But the truth is I have seen the great gift—and goodness—of my singlehood.

I may have said before that marriage was an equal blessing to singleness, but I struggled to believe that in my heart of hearts. How could having less ever be equal to having more?

This morning I was sorting through emails—requests for writing, speaking, interviews, job offers—and one persistent theme in them all is that I am a woman

and I am single. I have never thought my womanhood not a gift, why would I think my singleness not a gift? Just as God in His sovereignty made me a woman, He made me single today. The same attention and care that went into knitting me together in my mother's womb, with brown hair and blue eyes, this mind, this heart, all five foot one inch of me that I would someday become, He put that same attention and care into making me who I am today, February 19th, 2015, **unmarried.**

If that is true, that He is just as attentive to my womanhood as He is to my singlehood, then I have to see it as a gift. One unique thing I bring to my local church is my womanhood—and all the proclivities and oddities that make me me, but I also bring to my church my *singlehood*.

Yesterday I had a meeting with one of my lead pastors to talk about how we can do better in caring for women at our church and as the meeting was coming to an end, he asked a question about singles and if any of our blind spots in regard to women might be related to our blind spots in regard to singles. I left that meeting thinking, "What a blessing to be able to be a woman *and* a single today!"

Whatever it is you're afraid of today, whatever you're holding on to, despite God saying, "I have more for you in your lack than in your envisioned plenty," consider letting it slip through your grasp. Sometimes less *is* more. God's equations and equality cannot compare to ours—think of Christ, who of all men deserved to be exalted and yet did not count equality as something to be grasped, but became obedient to death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6).

Singleness is not a cross to bear. The final cross has already been born and because of it, we have been set free to count all things as loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Him (Phil 4:8). Whatever He is asking you to trust him with—job loss, singleness, barrenness, moving, your life—count it as loss, one tear, one painful pull, one crashing moment of grief at a time.

Knowing Him surpasses it all.

# MARRIAGE IS NOT THE MOST SANCTIFYING THING

Here's an exercise: let's keep an account of the words coming out of our mouths and filling up our hearts today. How many of them are informed by the word of God and how many of them are informed by Christian culture and how many of them are informed by the world's culture? Here's an example: "Marriage is the most sanctifying agent in a person's life."

Word of God? Christian Culture? World's Culture?

I'll give you a hint. It isn't the first.

More and more I hear married people touting that line, and more and more I wish people would add a two small words to it: "...for me."

What is communicated by saying marriage is the most sanctifying agent in life is that anyone who isn't married can't be as sanctified as a married person.

Marriage is not always God's best sanctifying agent. All of life is sanctification, and He may use one agent in one person's life and another in another person's life. At the ripe old age of 34, singleness has been the most sanctifying agent in my life. Perhaps at the age of 70 I will be able to say marriage has trumped it for me, but I think it will not have been marriage but life itself that did it.

God's children are sanctified through whatever means God ordains to work in them His pleasure, His discipline, and His glory. Marriage, for the one who married young, may be the agent doing it for one. Singleness, divorce, widowhood, parenthood, or handicap might be the agent doing it for someone else.

Marriage is full of distractions. Singleness is full of longing and loneliness. And both are full of the other. We will be sanctified in each season to its fullness just as God designed.

Singles, stop believing true sanctification is around the corner, holding out on you, taunting you with the illusion you're incomplete as a Christian unless married. You are incomplete—sanctification is progressive and no one has arrived. Embrace today's sanctification.

Married people, stop saying marriage is more sanctifying than long and difficult seasons full of other gifts from God. We rob from others the beauty of this: "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Philippians 1:6

If you're God's child a work was begun in you before the foundation of the earth and will be completed in God's best way for you in preparation for eternity with Jesus Christ. Marriage—union with Christ—is the signifier of the *completion* of our sanctification!

Single and married friends, *today* is God's *best* sanctifying agent in your life.



**“Our churches should uphold a high view of marriage, and we singles should graciously applaud those efforts. But let’s not forget it is a temporary institution; the Bride of Christ, the church, is the enduring one and every Christian —married or single— is gifted for her benefit.”**

**CAROLYN MCCULLEY**

# DON'T GET MARRIED

I have yet another single friend who is convinced if only this one little thing changes about the guy she's dating, they'd be perfect together. If he just didn't nag her so much. If she didn't just shut down emotionally. If they didn't argue so much. If his family wasn't so crazy. If she felt like herself around him. All those "ifs" and so many of my friends persist in the same pursuit. They have "chemistry" or "spark" with this person. They feel on fire around them. They just "know" them better than anyone else has. But settling for the sort of person who, in dating incites you to anger, brings out your passivity, makes you shut down, doesn't encourage you, and more, is foolishness, friends. Don't so long for the gift of marriage, or even marriage with a particular person, that you lay all that marriage is intended to be on the bench and pursue the lust of being not-alone.

We have swallowed the idea that marriage is hard because that's the narrative of the Church, "Marriage is hard. It's the hardest thing you'll ever do. It shows you your sin. You'll never know your selfishness until you're married." But I don't think

that's the picture God intends to illustrate the love between Christ and the Church —and I don't think that's the narrative we should believe or espouse. There is difficulty in life, yes, challenges, sin, brokenness, but those things exist in marriage and out. As long as you are unmarried, don't settle for the belief that being married is another thing on the long list of hard things in life.

Don't believe the lie that marriage is supposed to be hard and you have to choose your battles and just settle for the first girl who makes you feel alive or the first guy who tells you you're meant to be. If you didn't think it was "supposed to be like this" than maybe "this" isn't it. I beg you, singles, with the words of the man who married us, "It isn't done until you say 'I do.'"

Here is what the bible actually says about husbands and wives:

*The heart of her husband safely trusts in her (Prov. 31:11).* Brother, do you trust this girl? Trust her with your weakness? Your basest fears? Sister, are you trustworthy? Do you gain his trust by being one who cares for him?

*The husband washes her with the water of the word (Eph. 5:26).* Brother, do you respond with words fortified with the word or words fortified by the world? Do you point her to the gospel and the hope in God, or tear her down by comparing her to the world?

*A wife is not contentious or angry (Prov. 21:19).* Sister, do you incite him to anger? Do you nag him and criticize him? Is your natural inclination to defend yourself by tearing him down? To make yourself look better by shaming him?

*A husband is not bitter toward her (Col. 3:19).* Brother, do you take all those reasons for bitterness to the cross and leave them there? Do you carry your angsts and allegations against her?

*A husband cares for his wife's **body** as he cares for his own (Eph. 5:28).* Brothers, do you care for her actual body, the flesh and blood body, the heart that beats inside of her, her emotions, her mind, her stress. Or do you only care about how hot she is?

*A husband honors his wife (I Peter 3:7).* Brother, do you speak well of her in front of others? Are you proud to stand beside her and be hers?

*A husband lives joyfully with his wife (Eccl. 9:9).* Brother, does being beside this woman bring joy to you? Deep, lasting, comfort and joy? Do you go home and night and beam with joy at the thought of someday being with her forever?

*A wife is a companion (Mal. 2:16).* Sister, are you a friend? Not a floor-mat and not a fierce competitor, but a friend? A peer? An equal?

*A wife brings her husband gain (Prov. 31).* Sister, is one of your goals to see him gain, to see him grow, and to see him succeed? Or do you tear him down with your words and actions?

*A wife is respectful and pure in her conduct (I Peter 3).* Sister, do you respect this man in purity? Do you care more about the way he treats your heart than the way he treats your body? Do you present your body as a peace offering instead of offering your heart?

*A husband finding a wife, finds a good thing (Prov. 18:22).* Brother, is this a good thing? Ask yourself that hard question before you move any further in this

relationship. Does everyone around you, those who know you best: do they agree this match is a good one?

If you can't see yourself in that list above in the relationship you're in right now, get out. Seriously. You don't have to marry him or her. They might be really great people, but they might be really great people for someone else and that's okay.

I wish someone had told me this in every single dating (and engagement) I had. Or I wish I had listened. Marriage to Nate is the best thing I've ever experienced. It is a blessing every single day, without exception. I know there are those who would say our time is coming, but if you knew a half of the hell we've walked through already you'd probably close your mouth. Sin has been crouching at our door since day one and God has put his Holy Spirit inside of us and the gospel in us, and by His grace, we rule over it.

Pray over that list above if you're in a relationship heading toward marriage. Taking off that ring, making that phone call, asking for the ring back, having that last conversation could be one of the best things you ever do for your future marriage.



# AT LEAST YOU'RE MARRIED (OR SINGLE)

Marrieds love to tell singles going through transitions and hard times, "At least you're not tied down! At least you're free to be flexible! At least you can make your own schedule, etc." Singles love to tell marrieds going through transitions and hard times, "At least you have each other! At least you're married! At least you don't have to do it alone!" The truth is that painful circumstances in our own lives can bring offensive, short-sighted, and dismissive platitudes to real struggles in the lives of other people. Freedoms that exist within singleness come with a cost and the partnership that comes within marriage can mean a similar cost.

In singleness, the freedom of scheduling means more time spent walking through dark and difficult things with many different people. It can feel incredibly isolating to walk through hard things in other people's lives and then come home alone to a lonely home and an empty bed. That freedom you envy in your single friend's life comes with a cost.

In marriage, the partnership of a spouse means you can't go home at the end of the coffee date, you can't schedule your life in compartments of ministry time and personal time. It's all ministry time, making dinner, raising children, making money, even having sex, it's all ministry—and sometimes it's incredibly difficult ministry. That partnership you envy in your married friend's life comes with a cost.

In singleness, the freedom of flexibility means sometimes there is a very strong lack of stability. There isn't a family *needing* to be provided for, so it can feel like your job is expendable to your employers, it can feel like you're the only one paying all the bills, and it can feel like life is just one lease to another. The situation in your marriage might be the same, but "Until death us do part" gives one form of stability many singles desire and do not have. That flexibility you envy in your single friend's life can mean an isolating instability for them.

In marriage, the partnership of fidelity also means there is a strong temptation to hope in that stability instead of in God. There's a constant wrestle within marriage to console yourself with the belief that "at least we have one another," when in truth that is a ploy from the enemy. We have God. The same as when we were single. The gift of a spouse can become a gift we begin to worship, to find comfort in, and trust in, instead of the Giver. God alone is faithful. That partnership you envy in your married friend's life can mean a constant and strong temptation toward idolatry.

Marriage and singleness are both sanctifying, neither one is more or less. If you ask me where I was more sanctified, marriage or singleness, I would tell you the sanctification doesn't even compare because *it is precisely and exactly the same*.



In singleness I struggled with idolatry, selfishness, fear, pride, self-sufficiency, and so much more. In marriage I struggle with all of them still, not more, not less, the same. God, in His goodness, shows me that He is the same whether I am single or married by showing me that *I am the same too*. The only difference in these sanctifying agents is that for 34 years singleness was the best way to prove, distill, and refine me, and now marriage is God's best way to prove, distill, and refine me.

Friends when we are tempted to start a sentence to anyone walking through a different and hard season with the words "At least..." remember the God we serve only and ever gives the *best* in every season. He is not doing the least of anything in your life.



# YOUR TRAIN IS COMING

The train depot is two blocks from our house and I am learning to tell time by the sound of the train whistle.

When I was single every few months I'd ask the Lord, "How long? How long do I have to wait for marriage? Will it ever happen?" Then in the space of three weeks from conversing to knowing, there he was: the guy I'd marry. When Nate and I were dating and engaged, saying goodnight every night felt like agony, "How long do we have to be apart?" Hyperbolic maybe, especially since from first date to wedding date it was three months. Now, a full year into life together, he spends more than eleven hours a day apart from me. The best part of my day is when he gets home, but the second best part is the text message he sends me before he gets on the train for the trek back to me.

The wait is always worth it.

A friend of mine is married to a man from Belize and for various reasons, they've been apart for ten months. Another friend says goodbye to her husband every week while he flies jets around the world and back. Another friend is married to a captain in the army—he's deployed more than he's home. And many more friends are married to men who are married to their jobs; men whose faces light up when they sit across from new friends, co-workers, or parishioners, and darken when they get home to dishes in the sink, toddlers, and tired wives.

But I have one friend who has been married to her man for 47 years and she told me once that the longing only grows and it only grows if you encourage it.

Harry Burns was right when he said to Sally, "I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."

For many years I believed the lie that I needed to squelch the desire for marriage. That the longing for it only contributed to the sadness I felt at missing out on it. Then I believed the lie that the first stirrings of love and sadness at being apart from Nate would soon wear off in marriage. Sometimes now I am caught up in the belief that this still present longing to be with him will soon die off.

All of us are waiting for something and the closer we get to the getting of it, the more the longing grows. Christ knew this and this is why He likened us to the Bride and Himself as the Bridegroom. Weddings are so brimming with expectancy, longing, and celebration—the culmination of so much waiting. At last!

But we let dashed hopes and hardened hearts get in the way soon enough. Disappointments, fears, unmet expectations—they grow resentments instead of longings if we're not careful. Last week Nate was late coming home two days in a

row and I wanted to blame traffic, trains, work, and even him for my disappointment, but this is no way to grow longing, I reminded myself.

It is like this with God too. This year has been a year full of dreams let go, mounting frustrations, disappointed hopes, and severe misjudgment. I have sinfully directed my resentment toward God more these days than I have since He saved me. My longing for Him lands silent and limp, like forgotten toys or too small jeans.

Today I pay attention to the train whistle all day. Only one of the trains will bring my love home to me, but all of the whistles incrementally remind me to fan the flame of longing for my King. He too is coming home for me and I want to stand ready, waiting, my longing found completely in Him.

# WHY SEX ISN'T THE BEST THING EVER

One of the best blessings to me in my singleness were friends who did not make marriage an ultimate thing in my eyes by only telling me the beautiful parts of their marriage, but who told me the difficulties of it as well. They also prayed for me actively to someday have the gift of marriage. I hope I am doing the same for my still single friends who desire the gift. I want them to know its not all romance and intimacy and good feelings and great conversation. But I also want them to experience the gift themselves so they can both see it and minister out of it. One thing it is very easy to believe during the long fast from sexual intimacy that is godward singleness, is the *option* to have sex will make things better. Most of us wouldn't be so foolish to say having sex makes things better, but it's darn easy to believe the option and permission to will make it better.

But sex doesn't make things better.

Not in the way you think it will.

Sex is good, God created it, he blessed it. He made it the integral piece in the procreation of humanity—science thwarts it and succeeds it but even science admits the masterful design of two humans making more humans. Sex is great, but it does not make all the angsts of longing for intimacy before marriage go away. All those angsts still exist within marriage, they just take different forms.

I know it's easy for the married person to say this, you protest, because at the end of the day I can still have sex. But what I wish I could tell every unmarried person I know is until we realize our issues are much deeper and more profound than a sexual itch for satisfaction, we will still find our desires unmet. Within marriage and without.

The blessing of sex between a husband and wife is not to relieve stress, to make me feel desirable, or to make my husband feel strong and manly. It is not even to conceive and bear children. These are all benefits, but none of them are guarantees. God doesn't owe us relief from stress apart from him, the guarantee I will always feel desirable (I don't), my husband will feel capable and sufficient (he doesn't), or children will be borne. God doesn't even owe us sex within marriage. None of the things we think sex will accomplish (and indeed try to chase inside and outside marriage), are guarantees.

When I hear those who are not married say "But at least you get to have sex! And live with your best friend!" Well, first, I'd warn against saying at least in regard to much. But second I want to say your words betray a much, much deeper need and the fact that you think sex or living with your best friend fixes it tells me you don't see your need as clearly as you think. If you think I'm just saying this because I'm married, trust me, I've been saying things like this for years and years as a single.

I've heard the illustration of the gift of sex for a man and woman in marriage like this: it's glue holding you together. But in my limited view sex is more like a reminder: I am not my own anymore, I am part of someone and sex is a tether to remind, seal, and strengthen the binding. Outside of marriage there would actually

be no reason or benefit for sex because union with this specific person—my husband—*doesn't exist*. What I mean is, until he was my husband, he wasn't my husband and sex wasn't necessary (1 [Corinthians 7:2](#)).

I know this sounds very pragmatic but I want to be a bit pragmatic if I can. Our view of sex has been so colored by films and imaginations and images, and in many ways I want to sit down and say: sex just isn't as great as you think it is, and we don't need it like we think we do. It's greatness is not in how it makes us feel or how it destresses us or how awesome our orgasm is. It is only truly *good* in relation to the person with whom our body is intended by God to be joined with. Can sex outside of marriage feel good? Yup. Can masturbation curb the itch? Yup. But do either of them express worship of God with the gift He's given in the right context of covenant? No. Therefore, outside marriage it is not good. And inside marriage it is only good if it points to our incompleteness apart from God.

Unmarried friends, the sex you desire and think will satisfy your longing will not. Married friends, you still feel unsatisfied? Like your longing for *something* is never fully realized? All of this emptiness points to a greater need and a greater longing. Sex within marriage, if anything, makes the lack of complete culmination even more profound because no matter how perfect it is, it still isn't enough to still the longing in our hearts for God. Fasting from intimacy outside of marriage is preparation for how even within marriage we are still apart from our Groom until the culmination of all things.

My need is for Christ. In marriage and out. Sex is a gift from God but it isn't the ultimate gift and it certainly doesn't come without baggage of its own. We live in a

broken world, my friend. If it doesn't feel perfect it's because it's not, and it's okay.  
Christ, our perfection, knows our longings and knows we are dust.  
And that's better than sex.





# REALLY, TRULY, DEEPLY? REALLY?

I read a quote from two of my favorite people the other day: "In a gospel-centered marriage, we can be really, truly, deeply known and at the same time really, truly, deeply loved." I've learned more about the gospel from one of those people than anyone in my life so I'm reticent to push back on this idea, but it wouldn't be the first time I've given him a hard time, so here's my careful pushback to this common idea in the church. 1. Even within marriage you will never be wholly known by one another. 2. Outside of marriage you are still known and loved.

Within earthly marriage, which is a beautiful *picture* of the gospel, we are still clinging to these earthly tents. We can never be truly known inside any human relationship and indeed we are not meant to be. There is beautiful *ahava*, a give, a

love within marriage. A selflessness, a caring, a joy, for sure. But there is not the elusive juxtaposition of being fully known/fully loved. This only exists within life in Christ. When we say this what we communicate to married people is they're missing something if they don't feel truly known by the other person. And we communicate to unmarried people they can never be really known outside of marriage.

The church should be the place that gently lifts the heads of two people in a less than perfect marriage (which is all of us) and sets their eyes on Christ as the one who knows and loves them fully **now**, so they can be set free to love and know one another as fully partially as they're able here on earth.

The church should be the place that gently lifts the heads of unmarried people and shows them how men like Paul and Jesus and women like Lydia and Mary were fully known and loved by their Father, but fully misunderstood by the men and women around them—*and yet they still pressed forward in love doing amazing acts of church planting, bearing the Son of God, miracles, and writing more than half of the New Testament.*

Neither married people, nor unmarried people will ever feel as really, truly, and deeply known as the ache in our hearts tells us we ought to feel. It is so easy to paint the picture within the Church that marriage can be the nirvana of earthly existence—but friends, if marriages quells all the longing inside of you for *something more*, than your marriage is not actually gospel-centered, but earthly-centered. Marriage should smack of a holy discontent and a fervent desire to be fully known and fully loved by Christ alone, who then empowers us to walk by the spirit in how we love and know others incompletely.

In the same vein, singleness should meet that holy discontent in the middle and know with full assurance that waiting for marriage to feel known and loved is foolish. Start now. First, Christ does it with more ardor than any spouse ever will. Second, the relationships you have in your life *right now* can be some of the richest you will ever know if you will submit yourself to being known and loved in them. It's an act of submission, to be sure, letting your weaknesses be seen, challenged, and pressed into, but Christ has set a good example for you in His submission to His Father on the cross.

Friend, you may be in the happiest marriage known to man or the hardest, you may be joyfully single for life or you may be limping through every day in your wait, but you are fully known and fully loved *now*. Go now, and love and know as truly as you're able—albeit imperfectly—knowing the gospel is no respecter of marital status even as it displays the perfect union of Christ and His bride.

# HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M SETTling?

For a lot of years I thought I was going to have to settle for a husband. I was never the girl getting asked out dozens of times and having to perfect my "I think Jesus is calling me to be single...for now" refusals. I dated occasionally, lots of first dates, usually with men I knew fairly well already, but nothing ever really seemed to fit. I began to think maybe my expectations were wild, maybe my requirements were too extreme, maybe I was waiting for some guy who didn't exist.

I don't know when it happened, somewhere in my 33rd year, but I began to believe being single was actually better than all the mid-life marriages I was surrounded by. Many of my friends were getting divorced or on the brink of divorce or just sort of "meh" about their spouses. I heard more about how hard marriage was than about how good it was. I watched couple after couple face circumstances they didn't expect and end up in the arms of another or just passively facing life together as roommates. I knew that wasn't what I wanted, but I also knew I was getting older and the pickin's seemed slim. The question, for me,

became not "Should I settle?" but "What *is* settling?" That's a hard question to answer for any unmarried person because it doesn't really have a solid answer. You have nothing to compare what *not settling* looks like because, well, for obvious reasons, that person isn't on your radar. There were plenty of guys I admired for their work and theology ethic, and for their love for the local church and their families. But either they were married to someone else or they hadn't noticed me in any fashion. It was easier to answer the first question (Should I settle?) than to answer the second: What *is* settling?

It turned out that I didn't need to ask the question or find the answer, because *at the proper time* and not one minute sooner, Nate and I began to have conversations.

Friends, there was no spark. There was no voice from heaven saying, "This is the one." There was no giddy butterfly in my stomach fluttering up into my heart. There was no chorus of angels announcing my wait had come to an end. There was none of that. There was not one bit of assurance that this guy would be anything other than a guy with whom I had a series of cool conversations about pacifism. The question of settling didn't come into the equation, it didn't have a chance to, because in the space we'd embarked on, I began to think of him as my friend.

Without doubts, without questions, without "What ifs?" Nate was simply my friend. I won't deny there was the hope of something more, but there wasn't space for it to breathe, not much. Not really at all. He was so completely clear with me from the very beginning that it was friendship, and not until he picked up his phone and called me to ask me on a date, could I assume it was anything more. And once it was something more, he continued to use his voice to ask me on more dates, ask

me how I felt about continuing to date, and then ask me to marry him. And since then, there have been thousands of more asks from him to me.

He was not the first to ask me on a date, but he was the first for whom there was a complete absence of doubt for me. People ask: "When did you know he was the one?" I never knew he was the one (I don't even know if there is a such thing as *one*). What I knew was day to day to day to day, I was going to walk forward as long as I had faith as it led me to the altar. And then, only then, would he become my one, the question of doubts and fears and what ifs and expectations *always* taking a backseat to the vows we said standing in front of our friends, family, pastors, and elders.

We have a really beautiful marriage. It's not perfect. It's not without disagreements or failures or misunderstandings. But it's a really beautiful marriage built on a singular point: faith. Not faith in one another to never fail us, but faith in God that we came together without doubts, with the confidence of our church family and elders, with the joy of our families, with the cheers of our friends. There was faith that we weren't settling.

God, in his goodness, gave me a husband beyond any of my wildest hopes and dreams, with specificity and precision, with attentiveness to my needs and my wants. God crafted a husband for me as specifically as he crafted me himself. I have not one single doubt that my beloved is mine and I am his, and I never have had one doubt.

I wanted to say this because since we've been married, I've encountered so many couples for whom doubt was a big part of their dating and engagement. A feeling they couldn't flee from, an uncertainty they couldn't get past, a sense they

couldn't shake, a feeling of *settling*. Or there were doubts of others: concerns of immaturity, fears of unequal yoking, desires to protect from what seemed not good. And yet, they got married just the same, and every day since then their marriage has suffered for it.

These marriages began on what they could see and feel (looks, money, chemistry, security, appearance of godliness), and not on what they could not (faith from God and in God, hope from God and in God, love from God and in God). They made a pragmatic decision to marry for whatever reasons, and now their marriages have suffered for it. It might have seemed to them and others that they were not settling as they said their vows to one another based on appearances, but deep in their hearts they were settling for less than "perfect peace" (Isa. 26:3).

Listen to me: if you are married or will be married, there will come hard times when money will be scarce, looks will falter, houses will be lost, jobs will be gone, churches will be difficult, and children will be a source of ache: what sustains you in those times is that strong and certain faith in the God who drew you to one another. If you married your spouse, or they married you, without a certain faith and an absence of doubt, ask God today to give you the gift of faith that this is your beloved and ask him to give your spouse the same gift of faith. God *wants* to give you that gift! He's longing to give it to you.

If you are unmarried, trust God. You *will know* you are not settling because there will be not only an absence of doubt in you, but an absence of doubt in them, and *an absence of doubt in your community*. If you do not have community, then do not get married. I mean this. Wait. To get married without a strong, loving community who will speak truth to you even if it's painful, is to invite trauma into

your marriage before you've even started. If you feel the presence of doubt, the question of whether you're settling, might that be the Holy Spirit, protecting you from future angst and trauma? Marriage is so full and so fun and so wonderful. I want that for you, but you have to want it for you and you have to believe it can exist for you. God wants to give *good* gifts to his children! Believe that he wants to give you bread and fish instead of a stone and serpent.

*Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! Matthew 7:9-11*

The enemy is crouching at your door, waiting to devour you. He's waiting to devour your singleness, your future marriage, or your present marriage. Do not give him a foothold by moving forward without faith. Trust the Lord: it would be better to remain single than to be in a marriage headed for divorce as soon as the vows have been said.



# THE HIDDEN GRIEF OF SINGLENES

I caught myself staring at my husband the other day. Gray is creeping into his full head of hair, small wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes, a tiny patch of white in his beard. There is a dignity in aging for men, I think to myself, as I think ahead to my next cut and color, dabbing vitamin E oil onto the darkening age spots of my face. Men grow more attractive the older they get and I think women do too, but the world is telling us our bloom came and went, it is time to droop and drop and become the ground from which the next crop will come.

The name Eve means "the mother of all living," but it does not mean "always mothering all that is living." There is not a woman among us who does not feel the age of fertility closing, the gap between *fully alive* and *to dust we shall return* ending. Most of us have a monthly reminder of one more opportunity lost. We are all coming to the last chapter of motherhood, whether we bear children or not.

I am leaving in a few hours to pick up my oldest friend from the airport. There is no one in the world who knows me as well, as deep, as long, and as wholly as she does. How could anyone, even my husband? She held me through fitful nights after my brother was killed. I have listened to her for years mourn things she cannot control. She was equal parts older sister to my youngest siblings and I to hers. There is no scent in the world as familiar to me as hers. I have always assumed she would marry first. She is cute, vivacious, tiny, adventurous, nurturing, full of life, bringing joy wherever she goes. She gives of herself in every possible manner, always pouring out, never lacking in love to give. I have learned more about motherhood from her than anyone in my life. And yet, she is not married, and I am and it pains me. I physically ache for her in this sometimes. She was made to mother, to be a wife. I don't know anyone made for it more.

...

It occurs to me more and more recently that the barrenness of singleness is a silent pain. In our singleness we feel the lack of a partner often and others' suppose it is our deepest ache. It can be tempting to see it as the only barrier between today and joy. Yet there is another, sometimes more difficult, pain unmarried women face and this is the pain of barrenness. Some find ways around this ache, adopting or fostering children. But for most unmarried women that monthly reminder of aging reminds them again and again that time is running out. Men can prolong marriage as long as they like, but women know there is a deadline and it is half of a man's life-span. Men wonder why, sometimes, some women are anxious to be united? It is no mystery to me: we are dealing with only half the time and must move doubly fast if we are to become mothers of what is living.

The older I grow, and the more familiar I grow with my own body's failure to make and hold a child, the more I talk to my unmarried friends, the more I hear it is not the lack of a partner that pains or has pained us all most, it is the lack of motherhood.

There is a very real ache for children that cannot be replaced by mentoring, discipleship, practicing hospitality. Nothing can be substituted for hearing the words "Mama" or "Daddy" from the lips of a child. Yet, I think, we cannot look at the substance of our being mothers as only within the gift of children. Nurturing others is not some consolation prize for the barren, it is the call for every Christian. Our problem is not that we are being withheld from, it is that we view the gift of nurturing too narrowly. We think it is only—and best—done with children we bear, but that is not the call to the New Testament family. In the Old Testament the family of God was nuclear and extended, but limited to one lineage. In the New Testament, the family of God is corporate and available to all, mothers and fathers and sons and daughters and brothers and sisters—this is the language of the New Testament Christian. We are all family now.

Eve was created to be a helpmeet, but she was named to be a mother. She was called *to* a man, but *called* mother. Her very identity, the way she specifically imaged God, was to conceive, birth, mother, nurture, grow, care for, and gather her offspring to herself. We may feel called to marriage (even if we have not been given the gift of it yet), but our identity, our substance, who we are is not some future event: it is now. Mother. Now.

If you are unmarried today and the secret pain of barrenness haunts you, I want to encourage you to face that pain. It is a very real and legitimate ache. You were

made to ache for this. A friend of mine talked recently about how the pain of singleness/barrenness doesn't haunt her, but sometimes it hits her and I loved that. I think God wants all of us, regardless of our season in life, to be hit by true, real, and good longings, but not be haunted by them. This friend went on to talk about a situation in which I've found myself too: buying a baby gift for a friend and going out to her car in tears.

John Piper **said**, "Occasionally, weep deeply over the life that you hoped would be. Grieve the losses. Feel the pain. Then wash your face, trust God, and embrace the life that he's given you."

The Bible gives us permission to weep deeply over the life we hoped we would have, and to not feel ashamed of that hope *or* disappointment. It is okay to grieve those losses and feel that pain. Go out to your car armed with tiny onesies you just bought for your friend, the scent of powder and sweet baby things still on you, and weep, cry hard aching sobs. *You were made to mother*. You are built for it. And it is not happening for you right now. And that is sad. Deeply sad. And that is okay. Really okay.

...

I'll pick up my friend today, my oldest and dearest friend, and for the next ten days we will do all the things we love to do together, make, create, laugh, cry, be, dream, cook, talk, or not. She will nurture me and I will hopefully nurture her. It is our identity to do so. We are daughters of the post-fall Eve, bodies broken, dreams unrealized, fears alive, but we are also the daughters of pre-fall Eve, imaging God, tending to life, nurturing growth, mothers of what is living.



# A CASE FOR MARRYING LATER

I have **read** and **heard** and **read some more** of the case for marrying young, but the more I think about it, and the more I see faithful singles in their late twenties into their thirties and forties and beyond, the more I actually do believe **with Paul that it is good to remain unmarried**, if not forever, at least then longer.

What I am not saying is prolonged, aimless, meandering singleness serves anyone (including, if God wills, your future marriage). What I am saying is the purposeful, intentional, poured out life of an unmarried person for the good of the church, the community, and the earth, is a very great gift and should not be squandered or squelched by the growing concerns of married people about late marriages.

I think the reason many—in the church especially—are concerned about this trend of later marriages is because for so long the main medium and message has centered around the family instead of around faithfulness. Procreation of children, family morals, concerns about marriage issues—these have formed a boundary line

of sorts around the sort of things Christians care about. This is why singles have felt alienated, marginalized, and overlooked within the church for so long: unless they both *want* marriage and are *actively involved in the getting of it*, there isn't a box for them. Which is unfortunate. No, it's something more than unfortunate.

I know I don't know much about marriage yet, but I do know a thing or two about being single far longer than I originally hoped. What I found in the prolonging of my singleness was not less fruitfulness, but more as time went on. I found a curious and surprising freedom of flexibility. I found I was able to love the Lord and others with fewer distractions. I found I was able to give of my finances quickly without question. I could travel easily, serve easily, and spend long periods of time in thinking, processing, and praying. What I am not saying is the often quoted line that "singles have more time and finances than married people." What I am saying is I had the same 24 hours in my day then as I do now and the same tight budget then as I do now, but I was able to spend those hours undistracted by the things marriage has called me to now.

Some of the most faithful Christians I know today are unmarried. They are using their gifts to show a different side of what faithfulness might look like when one doesn't have children, a spouse, a mortgage, or some other constraints. **They are making a case for late marriages not simply because of the kind of marriage they might have by delaying it (hopefully more mature, grounded, wise, and sanctified than if they'd come into marriage at 20 or 22), but by being extraordinarily faithful in their singleness.**

To all my readers who are unmarried, thank you for being faithful and I pray you grow only more so. The Church needs to see your example of faithfulness. The

Church needs to learn marriage isn't the most sanctifying agent, but age, maturity, and submission to God are, and no one is exempt from those three things. The Church needs your hands, your minds, your insights, your passion, your longing, your gifts, not because we are needy and greedy, but because for too long we have not valued what you bring to the Christian life.

You stand in the company of Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C.S. Lewis, Amy Carmichael, Joni Eareckson Tada, Mother Theresa, William Wilberforce, Florence Young, Gladys Aylward, Lottie Moon, Corrie Ten Boom, my sweet friend Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, the Apostle Paul, and **Jesus**—men and women who married late or never married at all, and of whom the world is not worthy in many ways. Faithful men and women who gave their most fruitful years not to bearing children or pleasing wives, but to the bettering of the Church and world. These are giants in my mind and they make the case for marrying late all on their own.

Marriage is a gift and it is not wrong or sinful to long for it—it is a gift I wouldn't trade today for anything, but those years of singleness were a gift too, not just to me, but to others I hope. If you have not married young, there will be sacrifices and it is good and right to mourn over those unmet desires, but then, friends, stand up in the company of those men and women above. Your undistracted, unhindered, anxiety-free faithfulness can be a gift without compare. You have not been wasted and God has not wasted you.

Marry late or not at all—God will not waste you.





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