

YOUR
SINGLE
HAPPINESS

RYAN PETER

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by Ryan Peter

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© 2006, 2008, 2014 Ryan Peter. Revised 2008, 2014.

ISBN : 978-0-9869965-1-1

Cover design: Ryan Peter

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Chapter 1

Crying at the back of a bus

There I was, ten years old, crying at the back of the bus as our school tour to the small town of Oudsthoorn ended. For months I liked this girl, you see, and plucked up the courage to buy her a necklace in the gift store. What girl wouldn't like jewellery?

"What's this?" she asked.

"I- I got it for you."

"Why?"

"Cause. Cause I like you."

She frowns and looks at me as if I've just told her the worst news she's ever heard.

"You take that back," she says, shoving it in my hands. "Don't give it to me. I don't like you and never will!"

By now a few people had gathered. I can hear their whispers. One laughs outright – her friend.

"You thought she would like *you*?" she cackles. "*You*? Of all people?"

A few minutes later I climb into the bus, trying my best to pull my heart together. Just my luck – there's only a seat left towards the back. I've now got to walk past everyone. As I walk there I can hear the murmuring and giggling. And it's about to get worse, because I can feel I'm about to burst.

Why? Why again? Why do girls just never like me?

That unanswered question of *worthiness* once again hits me like an oil tanker. Once again, I wasn't *worthy* enough. I didn't have the looks. I was a geek. I didn't play the sports. I wasn't funny enough.

I was just not good enough.

It sends me over the edge and I'm already sobbing before I sit down. My teacher doesn't exactly make it easier when she gets on the bus and says loudly,

"Ryan, are you okay?"

Everyone turns. More snickering and giggling. The shame of it all! But I don't care anymore – I've lost all dignity anyway. I might as well just carry on crying.

See, I always had a problem with girls. Since I was even four or five, I really liked girls. I wanted a girlfriend from as young as I can remember. I cherished girls and thought that nothing in the world could be more pure and innocent and desirable as a girl.

The problem was girls never liked me. Ever. I tried everything. One

of the most popular guys in my school had a fringe that curled and I tried to get mine to curl in the same way one day. All I got were laughs and questions. I mean, I know in retrospect it was a weird thing to do, but I just wanted to be accepted. We all do, don't we?

You see, shy guys finish last.

But I could never quite give up on these strange creatures called girls. I just liked them too much. I *adored* them. I loved the idea of having one one day; my very own girl. I loved the idea of romance and slow dancing and saying all the perfect things at the perfect time to my perfect girl who thinks I'm the perfect guy. I had *ideals*. But I could never live up to them – not in my eyes or anyone else's. My self-worth issues only ever got worse as I grew up.

We tend to think that only those who have gone through relationship after relationship are those who have a problem with the opposite sex. Not true. Self-esteem was my problem.

Then something happened in my Christian life. In my church it suddenly became godly *not* to date! Unless you were *very sure* that the person you wanted to date was the One. When I say sure it was basically that God had to have told you.

Well, I could do this I thought. I could hear from God and if He's going to tell me who the One is then I don't have to worry about rejection anymore! Because it'll be a done deal! What a liberating concept!

And there were enough testimonies to validate it. People came to our church and preached their story to show how well this worked. Youth conferences always had a slot to address dating. There were ways and means in which you could check if it was God's will – for example, speak to the dad first and tell her you want to date her. If he gives the go-ahead, it's God confirming it. Then speak to your elders. If they think it's okay, God is giving the go-ahead. But you need three confirmations – speak to your parents; or see if He gives you a verse; or something along those

lines. Then ask her out!

I followed the rules but so many didn't. And guess what? They even got to date the girls I really liked! Even if they dumped her a few times she would still go back. Why? I'm following the rules! I got all the confirmations! What is going on? Why does she still not like me?

My cellphone rings.

"I can't believe you would do that to me," says a voice from the other side. It's a girl I really, really like. I'm actually in love with her, although she actually doesn't know.

"Do- do what?"

"Speak to my dad without speaking to me!"

"What?"

"Yes! My dad says you asked him if we could go out! And you didn't even *respect* me enough to speak to me *before* my dad? I can't believe it. I would never go out with you!"

But, I'm thinking to myself, I followed all the rules! I was Mr. followed-it-all and-done-it-all-right, but I end with nothing. And my friends – well, they do it all wrong and they end with something!

And why doesn't she like me? *What's wrong with me?*

Most of the books I've read about this subject of singleness or the subject of dating come from people who have done the dating thing to death. I am the complete opposite. When I first wrote this book (2004) the total amount of official girlfriends I had had in my whole life was... two. Oh there was a girl I really liked in High School and she liked me, but I was too darn shy and too slow and too darn blinded by then to believe a girl could *actually* like me that she got over me. I only found out

years later she really did like me. But we never officially went out (although we spent lots of time together and I used to phone her a lot).

God does not work like a textbook. You can't follow the rules and then expect results. Life is a journey not a bullet-point document. Maybe you're looking for the secret for singleness or the top five keys for finding your partner. You won't find that here. If God was about formulas the scriptures would be written in bullet point. This thing is all about relationship.

Can you enjoy your singleness and be content where you're at? Can you find purpose in it? Is there such a thing as lifelong singleness, and is that a good thing? Is marriage better than singleness? Are married people better than single people? How can I find someone? How can I feel get rid of my self-esteem issues? How can I stop dating? How much of this is all about what I choose and how much is in God's hands? Am I supposed to know what I want in life and a spouse? Why does this seem to take so much effort and heartache but for others it seems so easy? Why are some people blessed so much with this and others not? How do I stay pure?

There are a lot of questions and many times our married friends forget all too quickly just how difficult this can be to navigate through. I hope I manage to lead you to God through this book in a way where you can hear what He says about your singleness. There is a way. The Bible does address this, and very practically. My prayer is that you will see that God has a special place in his heart for you, and that you will truly find He is the greatest treasure you could ever want.

Chapter 2

Your single happiness

In the words of Pascal, "All men seek for happiness."

And how true that is! Every boy and girl, woman and man, really and truly – deep down inside – long to be happy. And there's perhaps no clearer sign of this truth than the almost universal longing in us all to be married to the perfect partner. The partner who, we feel, will really complete us.

But can they? Is there really someone out there who can complete us?

So I ask the question: *What if God designed singleness for our happiness?* If that's true, how differently would you see your life, right now?

I don't want you to think I'm going to take a super-spiritual approach to this book. I know that it's not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18). This isn't going to be a book about how you must just put

a smile on your face and toughen up and fake it. God designed marriage for our happiness and the Bible admits that. But here's the clincher: marriage can make us happy but it can't *complete* us. These are two different things. God designed both singleness and marriage, and he designed both *for us*. Neither marriage nor singleness is flawed by design. Both are perfect. This is also what the Bible says.

It really isn't a coincidence that we're all born single – God didn't plan for us to be unhappy until our wedding day! Marriage was designed for our happiness, and so was singleness. They're just... different.

But I know it's not easy to just feel that way about it.

Celibacy, then?

Am I advocating that if singleness can make us happy that we should all decide to be celibate? Well, we need to recognise that some people do feel led in the direction of celibacy and *there's nothing wrong with that*. Celibacy is great – it's God glorifying, it's full of joy, it's wonderful – and it's difficult.

Sounds a lot like marriage doesn't it?

Marriage isn't everything and people who are married are not more spiritual than people who aren't. Let's just get that straight. Marriage glorifies God but so does singleness.

We're all single at some stage in our lives. And it's good for us to remember that we're all going to get married sooner or later. Really. It may feel like never, but to be honest most people do get married eventually, unless they choose not to. Even at the age of 75 marriage could really be around the corner. But my hope is that this book would help us enjoy our lives in the here and now, single or married. *Right now*, this is a good time in your life.

God created all things and called it all "good". This includes

singleness. God also 'richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.' (1 Timothy 6:17.) And this also includes singleness.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and with all your mind..."(Matthew 22:37)

Did it ever occur to you that you can love God with your emotions? Perhaps so. Or perhaps not. Perhaps you thought that real love doesn't include emotions. You wouldn't be the first. Perhaps you thought real love was all emotion. You wouldn't be the first either.

I once thought that if I was ever seeking my own happiness in a relationship, including my relationship with God, I couldn't say I really loved them. But I was wrong. And my thinking was destructive. I took this idea so seriously that one day I said to God, "Lord, I want to love you without feelings, so take any feelings away." This is precisely what he did and it was horrible! I never realised He had answered that prayer until months later, when I was wondering why my spiritual life had become so dry. It dawned on me that God never intended us to have a stoic view of love and relationships. Fortunately, after this realisation, God brought my feelings back.

When you love someone you enjoy being around them. And nobody says that you're selfish for acquiring the benefit of enjoying their company – or acquiring the benefit of the 'feeling' of enjoyment. In fact, the more you enjoy being around them the more there's evidence of the fact that you do love them. Yet when it comes to loving God many think that any enjoyment of this love (and of God) means we are loving God based on our feelings rather than on a decision to love. While it's true that love is a decision, this doesn't mean there are no feelings whatsoever. If I truly love God then I *enjoy* being with God and I will – quite naturally – acquire benefits from this enjoyment. This doesn't mean that my love is self-seeking, it means that I truly love.

But if I only love God when it feels good, well there's a problem

there too. It often won't feel good and it'll often be difficult. There will be times when God feels as far as away as the darkest corner of space. But those times don't last forever. Joy always comes with the morning.

This is the greatest commandment: Love the Lord your God - with everything, absolutely everything. (Psalm 30:5.)

I like to lurk around Christian theology forums on the Internet and once picked up a topic where a guy was arguing that most worship music in church these days stirs up too many emotions. Their point was that people should worship God with their head not their emotions. They were scared that people would have a shallow and emotional commitment to Christ.

Loving God without feelings seems like a noble idea. It means we can prove to God that we love Him despite His gifts. But this isn't real love. God never created love that way. God doesn't even love us that way. The Bible is full of references to God's emotional feelings about us. To not include your emotions in your worship is dry and not in line with the scriptures.

In fact, if we think about it, loving God with no emotion is actually a shallow way of loving. Emotions are a deep and very real part of who we are as human beings. We're tasked to love the Lord with everything – our minds, our souls, our strength, our heart (Mark 12:30). Are any of these parts of us without emotion? No, these are all part of the body. We are even tasked to offer up our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1) which means that God wants our bodies too – he wants our emotions to be involved. After all, the Bible commands us to "*Rejoice* in the Lord and be *glad*, you righteous; *sing*, all you who are upright in heart!" (Psalm 32:11) or "Let the godly sing with *joy* to the Lord, for it is fitting to praise Him." (Psalm 33:1.) These all include emotion.

But to make worship all about an emotional experience is to make something of it it isn't. Worship is not just one or the other, it's both.

Loving God is about loving Him with everything. You love with your mind, heart, soul and body (Luke 10:27). You don't leave anything out!

So then the reason for this first chapter, is to show that God wants us to pursue satisfaction and happiness in Him. This doesn't negate the fact that I said that marriage and singleness will make us happy, but what it does is ground our singleness (or our marriage) in a deeper happiness that completes us, and this happiness makes our singleness (or our marriage) fulfilling.

By looking to God to complete us we lose the intensity that we attach to a partner – that impossible intensity that says, "I need you to complete me." That intensity puts strain on our relationships that our relationships were just never made to handle. The result is that often people run away from us when we put them under that kind of pressure. It may work in the movies to say, "You complete me," but in real-life it's a scary prospect to hold someone's heart like that. The most unhealthy romantic relationships have that kind of unrealistic expectation.

Happiness is not selfishness

Our natural inclination to seek for delight and pleasure and happiness is not, as it seems, a sinful or selfish thing. Sin might be where we go to be fulfilled but sin is not the need in itself. Our longing for happiness is really a longing for a fulfilling joy, and God has put this longing into us as a tool for finding Him. This longing has been designed by God to show His glory, because He is glorified when He is found to be the ultimate and most fulfilling joy of our hearts. Yes, He is shown to be the only person in the universe who can truly satisfy our thirst for joy. It's only in God where we can find contentment, and it's only out of that contentment that our relationships can be grounded in real love.

I'm not over-spiritualising things. I've already stated that God made singleness and marriage for our happiness and there's nothing wrong with that. But it's important to remember that, contrary to what some Christian

teaching says, God's *desire* is for *our pleasure*, and He understands that the only real pleasure we'll ever get is in Him himself.

Listen to this again: God desires that you should experience joy and happiness. He asks you to come to Him because He knows that it's only in Him that you will find it fully. *Our happiness is His happiness*, and His Glory is our true pleasure. He created us this way. Jesus died so we could find God and enjoy Him and worship Him freely and forever. This is why He commands us to make disciples of all the world because He loves us all so much that He desires for all to find their true and lasting joy in the only place it can be found – Him.

Yet it seems many Christians are scared of embarking on an actual quest to find satisfaction, joy and pleasure in God, due to many misconceptions. We talk about God completing us but we don't really throw our all in with Him. Perhaps we think that God is not interested in taking care of our emotional needs, or that emotional needs are not of God. Or perhaps we have some guilty stoic complex about how true love doesn't mean the one loving the other should be looking for any joy from the relationship. Or perhaps we just don't really believe that God can fulfil our deep longings for happiness and joy. Or perhaps we just don't like to talk about our emotions and feel uncomfortable expressing them, especially at God. Or perhaps we are put off by people who say things like, "God is my husband and I don't need anyone else." Or perhaps we think we can never enjoy God as fully as we want because there's too much sin in our lives.

But if we are on a quest to obey God, as we should if we're a Christian, then we should also wholeheartedly seek to find our joy and delight in Him. It pleases Him when we do this because He loves us. God is not scared of any sin in your life and he wants to deal with it himself, if you'll come to him. Because pursuing and finding our joy in God is exactly what we need to do if we want to let God deal with sin in our lives. Joy in God quenches joy in anything else, including sin.

This is not selfish. This is God's gift to us. He has given us the gift of life and now the self-sufficient God is calling us to partake in His self-sufficiency as His children. He is calling us to partake in His own joy and happiness. As we become more like Christ in our walk we have to ask the question: where did Jesus find His happiness? Surely, if He was also really a man, He had the same in-built longings we do? And what is the answer?

Jesus found His joy in God.

"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:11)

So there is absolutely nothing wrong with pursuing our joy in God through Christ. The fact that we have emotions, desires, and longings is because God created us that way. And everything He created is for His glory.

What this has to do with singleness

This is our starting, central, and finishing point when it comes to living in our singleness. *Our single happiness is God.* We need to shift our goals to His goals, realising that marriage is a part of our lives but not *the* goal and heartbeat of our lives.

In Philippians 3:8,9 Paul says, "Everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, *counting it all as garbage*, so that I may have Christ and become one with Him."

The 'gain of knowing Christ' is more than just living forever - its eternal life with the eternal joy of God, the creator and sustainer of the universe. That eternal life is ours now, not just when we die. In John 17:3 Jesus defines eternal life as *knowing God*. This is for us *now*. We can experience God's joy now and in greater measure as we continue our Christian lives, in anticipation for the final day when Christ's glory will be revealed. (1 Peter 4:13.)

We can consider marriage as worthless when compared to the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord. I'm not saying that we should consider marriage 'worthless' or 'garbage' but we should be considering the *pursuit* of marriage a 'worthless' endeavour or goal when **compared** to the priceless gain of knowing Christ and being on His mission. It's just that there is no comparison – Jesus is better than marriage, although if you want to get married then get married! But be set free from it being your goal in life!

This sets us free from looking to marriage for our happiness but rather looking to making marriage happy. It helps to make us pursue Christ first. It doesn't mean that now we should feel guilty that we would like to get married; what it means is we understand that marriage isn't the highest form of satisfaction or intimacy in this life. Therefore, if God has a plan for us that does not involve marriage, we have faith that He will supply us all the joy and intimacy we would need so that it will never become a stumbling block to us. And If we do get married, marriage doesn't get in the way of how we pursue or love God and His purposes. It simply adds a different dimension to it.

The scriptures say "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness..." (2 Peter 1:3 NIV.) That means everything. Our emotional needs are satisfied in God already if we ask Him to do so. We might not experience the joy of God in a moment, but as we continue to align our lives in this direction we will find things change.

We must surrender our all - and this includes our desire for marriage - to God. Then trust Him to give us joy in Him instead. His joy is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10) and, "in You they trusted and were not disappointed," (Psalm 22:5 NIV). God will not disappoint us in this.

Marriage is not everything

Neither wealth, fame, glory or a wonderful marriage truly compares to Christ. The world, however, will tell us otherwise. That's why most of

the world struggles to keep lasting, fulfilling relationships going.

Marriage was designed by God to give us joy but not to *be* our joy. A satisfying marriage is not a marriage that ultimately satisfies. Much like everything in creation, actually. The glorious sunset, the fresh sunrise, the cozy rain, the superbly fragrant flowers – and the exhilarating kiss – were all designed to give us joy but not to *be* our joy. When the exhilarating kiss becomes our joy then we start having problems.

So God *is* our joy and everything else was created as pointers, reminders, pictures, sensations, to remind us of our true and lasting joy: God himself.

So if marriage cannot completely satisfy, why get married at all?

Because you might fall in love.

And falling in love is a wonderful, joyous thing, designed by God Himself to remind us of Him.

I like this phrase. *Falling* in love is something that seems unexpected, spontaneous; a wonderful surprise. It takes the pressure off of having to make things happen – of having to go through endless relationships to see if they're the one. I don't mean to say that we should be lazy and never take risks with anyone, but what I mean is that we should give God the freedom to write our story.

It's common for us to look for formulas and rules that will guarantee a perfect romance with no possibility of heartbreak. The rules often go around either being tough and unapproachable, or being loose and easy. It's all about making yourself desirable and living up to everyone's standards. In the church the rules are actually not very different, they're just coated in holy sounding language that isn't wrong but is taken out of context – such as 'guarding your heart' or 'being open' or 'taking a faith risk' or saying 'God told me I'm going to marry that one'

to writing lists of the kind of person you want to marry or doing nothing because 'God made Adam sleep when he made Eve and then God brought her to him.'

The great thing about falling in love, however, is that it hangs the rules! Love comes to us as a surprise – we allow God to bring it to us, we give Him space to write the story of our lives. But at the same time we make decisions and commitments. Falling in love is about your unique story and the unique decisions you will have to make in that story. It's not about being clinical or being too risky; it's not about over-thinking or throwing caution to the wind. It's about listening, waiting, and acting. This is about both you and God working together, much like everything else in life.

We also fall in love with a person, not an idea of a person. This is important because falling in love isn't a clinical, scientific thing – the other person in the relationship has feelings, hang-ups, and fears. The last thing they want is for you to treat them like a textbook or a lofty, romantic idea. I'm sure you don't want to be treated as one either.

But what if I don't fall in love?

Wanting to be married is perfectly normal, so there's no reason to be ashamed about that. But if God decides to give you the gift of marriage, He will. If He decides to give you the gift of singleness, He will. But if you don't see singleness as a gift you will always be unhappy.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:7, "One man has this gift, another that." (NLT.) But all of us, who believe in Jesus, have received the gift of salvation - and that gift is worth more than singleness or marriage, despite that those are gifts that God gives us too.

I know this may sound overly simple but that's the bottom line. Getting to that point in our thinking and emotions, though, takes daily commitment and trusting in God. Our main goal for singleness is finding satisfaction and purpose in God and trusting Him to give us the gift that

will be best for us. The good news is that, if you're single, you already have the gift of singleness! The question is: what are you doing with it?

Promises in Singleness

God is really in control and understands love more than all of us. This means we can relax, take it easy and not get ourselves worked up with worry, pursuing what will bring greater rewards – a deep relationship with Jesus. In our season of singleness we can use the time to learn how to find our sustenance and joy in God. This will have wonderful rewards. And if we get married one day we'll find that this will have wonderful rewards for our marriage, too.

We are to become, as the writer and pastor John Piper has called it, Christian Hedonists. A Christian Hedonist believes that "the chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever."¹ In other words, we are to actively pursue joy and happiness and pleasure in God.

This isn't a selfish, self-centered approach, as some would have it. This is what God commands we do.

"Worship the Lord with joy! Enter his presence with joyful singing!" (Psalm 100:2, NET)

"*Delight* yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4)

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (Philippians 4:4)

Joy is listed as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

And God himself takes joy and pleasure in *us*.

"The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save;

1 John Piper, *Desiring God*, p.18 (Multnomah Books) ISBN 1590521196

he will rejoice over you with gladness." (Zephaniah 3:17.)

"The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love." (Psalm 147:11.)

No one accuses someone of sinning if they came to the Lord because they were seeking for peace and joy and love. We would say, "Welcome! This is the only place you will find it!" So there's nothing self-centred about this approach at all; this is precisely what we are to do as Christians.

God's command for us to rejoice and find joy in Him liberates us because we finally understand that our in-built desire for happiness, peace, joy and love is in fact God-placed. These desires are used for His glory because when we seek to find all these things in Him and are not disappointed in Him, He is proved to be the only one in this entire universe who can truly fulfil and satisfy.

"*Happy* are those who hear the *joyful* call to *worship*, for they will walk in the light of your presence, Lord. They *rejoice* all day long in your wonderful *reputation*. They exult in your righteousness." (Psalm 89 : 15, 16.)

The Lord's reputation is linked into the fact that He is indeed able to abundantly supply what we truly need and desire – deep, unquenchable, joy. His reputation is at stake if He can't.

"The Lord is my shepherd; *I have everything I need*. He lets me rest in green meadows; He leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, *bringing honour to His name*." (Psalm 23:1-3)

Finding joy in God is something God does

God's commandments to find joy in Him is at once liberating, because we realise our desires for pleasure and joy is, in fact, God-

designed. But in the very next moment we look at our hearts and realise that we don't take joy in God at all but rather in a million other things. What is liberating on one hand can seem like a burden on another.

Every commandment God gives in the Bible is also a promise. Joy in God is something God wants to give us, not something we conjure up in our own strength. God never commands something He doesn't do through us by His Spirit. This is something the Spirit does as we pursue God as much as we possibly can.

God is the one who changes our desires and re-orientes them to Him. We need only ask and watch as He does a work in our hearts!

But I can tell you one thing: rules and regulations and a mindset of duty are all going to stop us from being freely pursuing joy in God. Likewise, guilt and a reliance on our own works for our salvation are going to stop what it is we so desperately want. We don't get God through performance-oriented dry Christianity. We get God through by faith and grace.

We also don't get fulfilment and joy and pleasure in God by constantly involving ourselves in one romantic relationship after the next. We're not going to get it by constantly asking, "Who is it, Lord?" and "Is he the one?" Habitual dating and everything else that may go along with it is probably a sure sign that we haven't realised how amazing God really is.

There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) but we must realise that we are limiting our freedom in Christ by constantly looking for our deepest joys in other places.

When we look for joy and fulfilment in romance and the opposite sex and perhaps even sex itself as our central focus in life we lose the ability to be content and happy. We also don't treat the opposite sex normally but rather become intense around them or begin using them for our own pleasure (using people to make you feel good emotionally is also using them for pleasure). We start feeling that we're under pressure to

impress and perform. We struggle to build proper friendships. All the pain and hurt of past rejection causes us to distrust people. Perhaps we even struggle to trust ourselves! We feel we are inadequate. We might start feeling worthless. We might feel that there is nothing attractive, good, or desirable about us. We can feel like outsiders. We think 'it's always better for everyone else'. We listen to the lies of the enemy, and feel that perhaps God doesn't care. Perhaps He is punishing us. We start living under the false illusion that everyone else is so happy and we're the exception. We feel that we have a *right* to such happiness and start finding ways to get it, even if those ways involve hurting others or hurting our own bodies.

Idolising romance – which is what this is – brings us to look at men and women in unhealthy ways. We may begin to see people as nothing more than objects for our own emotional fulfilment. It can also often mean we start to question our own identity or sexuality. Pornography or romance novels (which are arguably a kind of pornography) or other means of sex can also look inviting because these are our only source to intimacy (or so we think).

But who will rescue us from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:24,25 NIV). We don't have to look to romance or the opposite sex for our joy, happiness and fulfilment! We can have what we want right here, right now, and through the contentment and joy we get in God our relationships become healthy and vibrant, making it easier for us to decide on a partner or to make dating work.

Am I being too extreme? Perhaps in some instances. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with romance or the desire for the opposite sex – but I am saying that if we make these things our central focus in life, our greatest treasure, we will, in fact, lose them. Or if we have them we don't have them like we really want them.

I'll deal with loneliness and fear and sex and idolising romance in more detail later in this book. But here I want to make the point clear:

we've got to start by asking ourselves what we treasure most in life.

Your treasure is your joy

Because Jesus said in Luke 12:34 that "wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be," I think that I wouldn't be far off to claim that our lack of joy in God is often the *result* of idolatry. Don't get in a huff – we all do this! We are all working through the idols in our lives! But I'm saying that "No one can have two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other." (Matthew 6:24.) We can't let the opposite sex or romance become our master. "What union is there between God's temple and idols?" (2 Corinthians 6:16.) If your aim and pursuit is constantly to find happiness and security in romance, then it must be that romance is your idol. Romance has become your joy, rather than *a* joy. It becomes your life itself, rather than just part of the experience of life. If the state of being in love is what you delight in most of all, romance is your idol. It is your treasure.

While many of us may claim that the state of being in love has not become a goal for us and dominated our mind, what other reason could there be for a constant state of loneliness? Or, if you are indeed in love (or, perhaps, infatuated) with someone, ask yourself how much thought you put towards this relationship? Does the thought of them actually consume your entire thought-life? Are you always imagining yourself with them in some form of romantic situation?

I'm not claiming that every feeling of loneliness is idolatry, because we feel loneliness for different reasons. Also romantic inclinations can be good, but they should have their time and their place. Romantic thinking outside of any form of real commitment to the person you're thinking of can be very dangerous. We'll talk about all that in the chapter on romance. But what I am trying to do is show the link between idolatry and pursuit of anything other than God. And I hope that I am showing clearly that any non-joy in God is probably the result of us having made other things more

important to us than God himself.

But how do I seek God then - consistently, contently, and with joy ?

"Give me happiness, O Lord, for my life depends on you." (Psalm 86:4.)

God is the one who saved us and brought us into new life. He promises a completing work in our lives (1 Thessalonians 5:23). This is about trusting in God – having faith in Him. We will not find this joy and happiness in God that He promises us by our own attempts - and the good news is that we are not left helpless. The central theme and place of our joy in God is this: Jesus. His whole life – his death – his resurrection – his ascension. God has come to *save* us! *He* has come to change our hearts to seek and desire after Him. He promises us more happiness and joy than marriage could ever bring – for as long as we believe in Him, trust in Him, and put our faith in Him! And He *will* give us 'everything we need for life and godliness,' (2 Peter 1:3) and give us the strength to put our faith and trust in Him. He will change our hearts and make us love Him more than anything else in this world.

He indeed is a real, true, and wonderful saviour. He saves completely! He doesn't even leave our desires up to us in our sinful state to try and change – but rather comes in and changes our desires himself! Philippians 2:13 says, 'For God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey Him and the power to do what pleases Him.'

You might be convinced that He will provide your external material needs, but you might not be convinced that our internal need for joy and happiness is fulfilled through knowing God. But knowing God is how Jesus defined eternal life in John 17:3. You might still think that God's means of providing happiness and joy is by giving you a wonderful partner and a good life of wealth, health and prosperity. I am hoping to convince you otherwise in the rest of the book. God's ways are higher

than our ways. His means of happiness and joy is through His provided salvation in Jesus, through His Spirit and through knowing Him - the God of the Universe. Everything else - marriage or celibacy, or even wealth or poverty, is His means of extending His Kingdom. Marriage can be a blessing, or a curse - it depends on where God is placed in the marriage. Money is the same. The bottom line is these things are the gifts - and the gifts are not what bring us true joy and happiness, it is the giver that does.

"And let not any Eunuch [a man who was not allowed to marry and who could physically not have children] complain, 'I am only a dry tree.'

For this is what the Lord says :

'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant - to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.'" (Isaiah 56:3)

Let us find that God's love is better than life and seek for one thing only - to delight in His perfections and meditate in His temple (Psalm 27). Let us believe God and His promises in Psalm 16:11:

"You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever."

Chapter 3

What sets free

"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)

I believe that Jesus was laying down a principle here in Matthew 6:33 that is not just about food and clothing (as important as those things are). Jesus is showing us how a life of freedom looks. A life of freedom is lived by faith and faith is a relational reality, not a magic formula or a force. It's a living, on-the-ground, risky reality of relationship between us and God. Faith is about taking risks because God is who he says he is and will do what he promises to do.

Seeking His kingdom first is a thing of faith – trusting in Jesus and resting in His work. We believe that God has an inheritance that is "imperishable, undefiled and unfading" (1 Peter 1:4) for us that is far greater than we can actually think up ourselves. To *seek* the Kingdom means you will *find* it – it doesn't mean you continue seeking forever! It means you will find it in this life, not just the next. And we have already because we are Christians – yet we can have more of the Kingdom! Jesus

is saying to us that there's something about this Kingdom that is worth everything we have. This is about finding the one thing that will truly satisfy and having one singular goal in mind: to find it.

This sets us free in our relationships because it gives us vision and purpose for our lives that our future partners can be a part of. They are our future *partners* – you do things together; fulfil a mission together; do what God has called you to do together. If, while you're single, you're able to get your focus set on the Kingdom then you will find it easier to know who you should marry and when and why, because you'll know what you're on about.

Why is the kingdom worth seeking?

I think this is best explained using the two parables Jesus used.

Matthew 13: 44-46 (NIV)

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in is joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

There are many ways that Jesus explained what the Kingdom was like and about, but these two are good for here. Let's outline a few basic things we can pick from these scriptures

1. The Kingdom of heaven is a treasure, or a Pearl of Great price

Notice that the man who found the treasure went *in his joy* and sold all he had and bought the field. Once you find this treasure you are filled with joy. Your search is finally over. You have found the treasure that is worth selling everything!

2. The Kingdom of heaven is hidden

A hidden treasure isn't a lost treasure, it's a treasure just waiting to be found. The Pearl always existed, it only needed to be found. It was waiting to be discovered; and God is the one who has brought it to the seeker. To find treasure we must get our hands, feet and body dirty so we can dig deep. The merchant had to pursue the Pearl, put effort into finding it.

3. The Kingdom of heaven is worth everything

Both the man and the merchant sold everything they had and bought the field or the pearl. They understood that everything they had was not compared, in worth, to what they had just discovered. Their search was over. Everything they had been looking for was now found! They were happy to dispose of their past life and give it all for this one thing. They made sacrifices *with joy*. They had found the goal of their life and were happy to let go of all they had.

God is showing us clearly that there is something about the Kingdom that is worth giving up everything else. Once you discover this everything else will seem worthless and petty in comparison. He isn't saying those other things aren't important or aren't nice, what He is saying is that they are secondary in worth to the Kingdom. Why? Because the Kingdom sets us free and brings us great joy and contentment. It satisfies our deepest human longings for purpose and brings gratitude into our hearts.

But this is not without a price - and probably not without suffering. After all, we must sell everything we have to get this treasure. We must lose our life. We must give up and lay down all of our desires. But God gives us the greatest treasure of this universe amidst our suffering. It may not be obvious, at first glance, that this treasure is really that great - but that is why it's hidden. In comparison to what God gives us, any form of suffering is worth it.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." (Matthew 5:6.)

You will be filled!

Seeking the Kingdom is something you can do, because God has given you His Spirit and grace. So, what is the Kingdom? We've discussed that it is a treasure, but what is it, and where is it exactly?

1. The Kingdom is something that nothing else in all this universe can give: *God himself.*

While we get the Holy Spirit, God himself, when we are born again and receive the Kingdom in our hearts, there is a real sense in which our Christian lives are spent getting more of God and receiving more of the Kingdom. We seek the Kingdom and we find it throughout our lives.

"Now at one point the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming, so he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' For indeed, the kingdom of God *is in your midst.*" (Luke 17: 20, 21 NET)

Jesus was saying that he is the very personification of the Kingdom of God.² Therefore, what is the pearl of Great Price? It is the same as what Jesus called eternal life in John 17:3 – *knowing God*. This knowing is an intimate knowing, something that Christian theologians call union with Christ. This is a union of joy and fulfillment and peace. In short, it's the entering into rest in view in Hebrews 4.

Those that have believed in Jesus have the Kingdom of God within them, and those that are seeking for the Kingdom need not go very far in order to find it.

2. The Kingdom is transformation of everything

The Kingdom is not, strictly speaking, a place, like heaven, or an idea or a hope, like seeing society transform, yet it brings heaven to earth and transforms people and, thus, society.

This is because where the Kingdom of God is is where the Spirit of God is, and where the Spirit of God is is where God's presence is, and where God's presence is there is joy and peace and hope and faith and love and so on. As a result, this transforms people and, subsequently, society – but these are the *results* of the Kingdom. Too many times we define the Kingdom by the results of what it does rather than define it by the person of Jesus.

Now we are to 'forcefully advance the Kingdom' (Matthew 11:12) which doesn't mean we are transforming society but means that we are bringing people to Jesus which, in turn, does transform society. If we get too hung up on transforming society we often start looking to other means instead of the gospel. So it is our duty to ensure that God's Kingdom, His presence; His rule; His ways, which are the ways of perfect love, are spread to every corner of this planet, and even beyond, if we ever get there. By advancing the Kingdom we introduce people to Jesus and once they believe in Him they have the Kingdom, Jesus, living within them too.

Jesus Christ commanded us to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28.) In other words, God's plan is to have His Kingdom firmly established in the hearts of all people.

3. The Kingdom sets us free to love properly

When we can love properly we are able to sort our own identity issues (we know how to love ourselves properly) and we can sort out our relational problems. In other words, we are free to enjoy our singleness.

We are told to "seek first his Kingdom *and* his righteousness". (Matthew 6:33.) His righteousness is the functioning of the Kingdom within us. God's Kingdom functions on His righteousness (not our own)

and therefore his righteousness is also at work within us. To seek righteousness is not to seek a law, formula or principles that make things work, bring success, or transform society. That would be to look to other things besides Christ (a looking to the Law, as it were). We are free from the Law as Christians (see the book of Galatians) and now love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10).

The Spirit now produces His fruit in us - love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self control. (Gal 5:22.) This means that we are set free to love properly. We don't love with an awkward and unhealthy intensity or a 'whatever' attitude. **We no longer love with hidden agendas.** We are able to forgive easier. We can finally love with abandonment - because our security is in Christ, not in others. In other words, we can love our brothers and sisters in Christ without all the additional baggage or awkwardness or skewed intentions. Even if they hurt us, we don't need to put up our walls. We can love freely, openly, with complete security.

So what does love look like as a single person? We're going to look at that in more detail the next chapter.

4. The Kingdom gives us focus and purpose for our lives

People generally want to marry people who have a focus and purpose for their lives that goes beyond just the person they marry. If our wives or husbands are our world our world will be very small indeed! Imagine the pressure you put someone else under by making them your world? This all might sound romantic and ideal, but in reality insular relationships like this end up only in disaster and can be, quite frankly, *weird*. There is a word for this: obsession. No one really wants someone to obsess over them, how strange!

When someone is your world and they hurt you (which they will, even if you're married!) your world comes crumbling down. Love moves to hate very quickly. Or it stays obsessive and possessive and constricting.

But if you are on an adventure with someone, doing something together, the relationship is healthier and much more fun!

We should be concentrating on seeking the Kingdom and not concentrating on finding out who we are going to marry. We should be dedicating our thoughts and actions towards the goal of Kingdom, not towards the goal of marriage. Because it's within this frame that we find purpose and focus for our lives and then are ready to *partner* with someone in what it is we're doing.

This changes how we look at marriage, because marriage becomes a decision we make based on the Kingdom and its advancement in this world. That doesn't mean marriage is a decision without emotions or falling in love, it just means that we are living in freedom from worrying about it. So our goal is Kingdom, not marriage.

This allows for marriage to be free from unrealistic expectations and, thus, love is free to be love. Marriage is not a goal but a blessing, not an expectation but a surprise.

As singles our goal is love and service - an attitude of 'charity starts at home' will simply not fly here. If marriage comes, great! If it doesn't, great! Marriage is merely part of the adventure God is taking us on, not the adventure itself. (And for some, dare I suggest, the adventure and story God has for them does not include marriage.)

5. The Kingdom allows us to enjoy our lives now

How many people after getting married have said "Oh, well. Now what?" The reason for this is because many of us since we were small thought this was the ultimate goal of life. Get married, have kids, and all that. While those are good things, and wonderful things, and things God uses to give Him Glory, those are not the sole purpose of life.

Our sole purpose while single is not to aim for marriage. Family is the central core of society, and we should continue to pray that God

moves the family back into the centre of our society. Once we sort out family, we will sort out much of our social problems. But, that does not mean it's the centre focus of our lives. The centre focus of our lives should be to seek His Kingdom and His Righteousness. Everything else does eventually fall into place once we get this as our focus. This frees us up to enjoy our lives now and get busy with what God wants us to do now. We don't have to wait until marriage before live begins! Who said that?

Then, truly, we give God the space to move and supply the 'these things' that the Bible is referring to. He will gladly supply the desires of our heart, because our number one desire is to find His Kingdom and His Righteousness. If this is our chief desire, God will indeed move and take care of the rest.

Simple logic will tell us so. Why? Because we will love properly, we will hear Him clearly. Anxiety is gone and we are free to allow God to move and act. We let Him write our story for a change. And in the case of relationships, we are no longer tense around people and start finally just being ourselves - freeing us up to fall in love and allow God to bring that person who will love us for who we really are. After all, we are no longer hiding who we are - we are secure and confident in who we are (which is the very thing that we need to be attractive to anyone!). If God has marriage planned for us, He is designing us to complement someone else. By seeking the Kingdom, we allow God to shape us into that person who He wants us to be.

We will also know how to hear what God is actually saying and not what we want Him to be saying. Psalm 19:7(b) tells us that, "The commands of the Lord are clear, giving insight to life." But unless we are seeking to understand His ways and know His commands, they will not be clear to us.

It's a strange thing that once we give everything up it somehow comes back to us - with a freedom and a joy that was never there before. Or in a way or a form we didn't expect. Because Christ is now at the

centre of it, not ourselves.

6. The Kingdom allows us to make decisions easier

When we put God's kingdom first we can begin to find the right partner easier, because what we're looking for in a partner begins to change. We start looking for more godliness. We stop looking for 'trophy' boyfriends and girlfriends (you know, the good-looking ones to show off at a party) and start finding godliness more attractive.

So, if God brings someone into our lives who He plans for us to marry we will probably be able to see that it is God's will for us to marry them a lot easier because the decision will be based on whether marrying them will bring God glory or not. We start asking the right questions like, "Will they cause me to seek the kingdom more?" and not, "Do they make me feel good?" Basing our decisions on the second question causes us to rely too much on our partners for our own securities rather than relying on God. They're not always going to make us feel good! It's okay that maybe they do, but we have to ask all the questions not just one. They are not there as our abundant never ending resource for joy and delight – only God can be that for us.

Seeking the Kingdom frees us up completely from looking for Mr. or Ms. Right (which really means Mr. or Ms. Perfect), and then... who knows, God might simply bring them to us before we even realise it! This is essentially what I think He wants to do. He delights to provide for us and therefore He will provide a wife or husband if that is what He wills to do... and not just for our delight, but also for His delight and His Kingdom. Truly, now we can follow the scripture of Psalm 37:4 "Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart."

Let's be set free from worrying about the ticking on our biological clock and finally live free from the anxiety and intensity and emotional baggage that unfocused-on-God relationships can cause. I trust God will set you free completely to finally celebrate your single status, enjoy it, and

never despise it or regret any of the decisions you make or have made. I pray that God will also set you free from any 'legalism' or 'formula' when it comes to finding a partner. This is what I hope God will do through this book: show himself to you and set you free to love Him and others for the glory of His name. As a single. As a whole and purpose-filled person. As a lover of God. To be what a Christian really is. To see Jesus truly live in and through you.

Chapter 4

Love

I've devoted a chapter to love in this book for a number of reasons.

Firstly because as singles, we may feel that we have missed or are missing out on love. The world's understanding of love is totally wacky compared to God's wisdom. We should find out what God has to say about it and how God's love is worth more and gives us greater happiness than anything this world could offer.

Secondly, love is the greatest. This is what we read at 1 Corinthians 13. It's also the first fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22. God's two 'greatest commands' were about love (love for God and loving your neighbour as yourself, Luke 10:27). Love is the thing that separates dry religious Christian living and true Christian living. Christian disciplines become a joy and delight if love is the focus. So we seek the Kingdom through love and not through dry man-made traditions and formulas.

Thirdly, love is the point. Love is how we live out the Kingdom in

this world. It's the principle way in which we carry out God's mission. "By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35.) It covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). Our lives become properly balanced and also more alive when we are full of love. Singles find joy in being single through love. This might sound strange because we want to get married in the name of love, but love is what gives us joy in singleness. Its just not the kind of love we *think* will give us joy, it's the kind of love that *does* give us joy.

Fourthly, perfect love casts out fear. (1 John 4:18.) There is no fear in love. We might fear that we'll live our lives being alone. We might fear that we'll never get to enjoy what many other people get to enjoy in marriage. But the antidote to this all? Love. The Holy Spirit produces love in us (Galatians 5:22) and as we love we find that our fears are unfounded.

It may seem strange that in a book where I am saying 'do not pursue marriage as your ultimate goal' I'm saying with as much force as I can to 'pursue love'. Maybe this seems like a contradiction. Surely to pursue love is to pursue marriage? No, romance and love are not the same thing. Romance is only romantic because of love, but love doesn't require romance. We do not need marriage to have love in our lives.

What is love?

Obviously love comes from God but there is a specific way that we are filled with love. While the world is capable of love it is not capable of the kind of love that God desires for us to have and give. This may seem a little harsh but hopefully I can clarify. The first thing that is of paramount importance is that we need to go to the scriptures to find out what love really is because the world often has a skew way of understanding love.

For it was God who showed us the greatest love and passion of all: "Greater love has no one than this, that He lay down His life for His friends." (John 15:13.)

Everything about God is love. That doesn't mean that God is some

cuddly loving bear up in heaven – if we think that then we're superimposing a worldly idea of love onto God. The reality is that God is powerful and full of justice, but even these are wrapped up in his love. God so loved the world that He gave His only son (John 3:16) who God loved and took delight and pleasure in (Matthew 12:18, Matthew 3:17 and many other places). So He both loved the world and His son - and was willing to give His son away to death for our sake. But, of course, His son rose victorious over death and Satan and sin!

Love is a wretched and bloody crucifixion, not acceptance of injustice and the sin in the world and fuzzy feelings. It's about sacrifice, not radio friendly sing-along songs.

God is the real and only source for true, perfect love. He loves perfectly and is all-sufficient. God does not need us to love Him to feel loved. He is not insecure. He finds complete love in himself, and so therefore is able to be an infinite supply of love for us.

A bloody crucifixion is the kind of love God wants to fill us with – the kind that lays its life down for its friends. We share in the Lord's sufferings so we may also share in his glory (Romans 8:17). This is what true love is really about. True love is a looking away from ourselves and our selfishness and looking to God instead. True love is this because only by looking to God do we actually love properly. In other words, laying our life down is more important than having one! When it comes to possible marriage partners our first intention is to love them as Christ loves them and to build them up into Christ. Our second intention may be to get involved with them romantically and we need to work that out (we'll unpack dating later in this book). I don't want to over-spiritualise this. We need to be honest and real about being attracted to someone. There's nothing wrong with that. But the goal of our lives is to live out Jesus' love to others. When it comes to marriage we're going to need to have the same kind of thinking because we're called to build each other up in Christ in marriage. So, while we're not married, this is the perfect opportunity to practice this and seek God's Spirit to love through us.

This is what we started discussing in the previous chapter - the Kingdom of God frees us to love properly and with gladness. God is the very definition of love and goodness - therefore let us go to Him to find out about it. Only He can cause us to love perfectly as He loves.

The importance of relating this to the single life is we begin to be able to quench the obsession to love romantically. Our thirst for love is satisfied in God. Ever heard someone say 'I just want to love somebody'? I've said that myself. Sometimes it's not so much that we want to be loved but that we actually want to love someone else. As single people, we might feel like we miss out on this opportunity to love someone intimately. But we can't be further from the truth. The kind of love God is asking us to express in our lives is better than the romantic love we want to give and be a part of. There's nothing wrong with romance, obviously, but we can't look at everyone as a potential romance opportunity first!

This may seem like not much of an encouragement because if we are desiring romantic love then a 'better love' is still not what we are wanting - so it might not matter to us which love is 'better' or 'higher' or 'lower' - all we want is some romance! The thing with this is that unless we love God's way - that is, through his higher and perfect way - we actually are missing out on a much more fulfilling romantic love. What I mean is that we can love with abandonment when we love with the Spirit - which would make any romantic love increasingly more romantic.

We don't love to get, we love to give, and in our giving we get. And we love by taking greater risks for the other person. Way more romantic, if you ask me. The guy is happy to battle the dragons and climb the tower for the girl if he knows and understands God's love. If he only knows and understands romantic love, he might still climb the tower and battle the dragon - but his motive is not to *love* her, his motive is for romance with her. There's certainly a difference! If she does not fulfil all his needs he might just go and battle another dragon instead for another lady. When God's love fuels and fills our hearts our motives are entirely clear and full of love - selfishness has gone out the window and we love with

abandonment, faithfulness and complete security in God! The keyword for such love is *unconditional*, and this sort of love is the difference between the way God loves and the way the world loves.

But even if God does not desire to bring romance into our lives we find that this 'higher' way of loving is actually more fulfilling - because we find joy and peace in God. We actually don't need romance. Like I said earlier, it may be part of the adventure, or it may not. The truth is that it is not the adventure itself. God is the adventure; romance might or might not be part of this adventure He takes us on. We must trust Him that He truly knows what will bring us real joy.

Unconditional love

There *is* a big difference between the world's way of loving and the world's understanding of love - and God's way of loving and wisdom. The world does not understand unconditional love, and neither do we unless we daily lay ourselves down and pursue to know God above all else.

God doesn't have to 'do' love - as if it was something against His nature. He is not like us who need a motivating factor to 'do' love. Our love is conditional - 'if you love me, I will love you in return.' Or 'because you are beautiful, I love you,' or 'because you came to my rescue I love you.' Even 'because of your personality, I love you.' In other words, it is not in our nature to love someone just because we love them. There is usually some sort of motivation, some sort of need or want or desire of ours that has been met that causes us to love someone.

This is not so with God - He loves unconditionally. He loved us first. He doesn't love us because of what we have done or even who we are - He loves us because He loves us. He loves us because He is love and cannot do anything else but love. Not because love controls God, but because God and love are inextricably the same thing. Therefore the love that God is can only be perfect, because God is perfect.

"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, *for love comes*

from God. Anyone who loves is born of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God - for *God is love.* God showed how much He loved us by sending His only Son into the world so that we might have eternal *life* through Him. *This is real love.* It is not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins." (1 John 4:7-14)

God loves because He is God and God loves. His love is complete. His love is *perfect.* God gives which is His way of loving. The world's way of loving is taking.

We see this all the time. We are God's children. He loves us because we are *his.* We don't do anything to earn or get his love. In Genesis we see clearly that the reason God created us was so that He could love us. He created us to enjoy Him, thus showing His love.

The good news

After we come to faith in Christ God has more for us. He wants to sanctify us through and through (1 Thessalonians 5:23). He wants to make us partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). In other words he wants to fill us up with His perfect unconditional love so that we can love like he loves. After all - the fruit of the Spirit is love (Galatians 5:22). The kind of love that God fills us up with is exactly the kind of love that restores us to Him - because He fills us with Himself, and fills us up with His perfect love. Romans 13:10b says that 'love is the fulfilment of the law'. It is through the Spirit, by faith in Christ, that we are able to love properly as Jesus did and does.

This has massive implications because what it means is that God promises to sort out our heart and desires and make us like him. If we're battling with sin or motives we know are wrong, the good news is that, in Christ, God promises to sort it out. You don't need to let it condemn you (Romans 8:1) and you can trust that God is, by His Spirit, going to bring you into the inheritance he has for you – an inheritance of a whole

sanctification (1 Thessalonians 5:23), of a rest in God (Hebrews 4), of a change of your desires and a living out of his love by His Spirit living through you.

"All who proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. We know how much God loves us and we have to put our trust in Him. God is love and all who live in love live in God and God lives in them. And as we live in God our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgement but we can face Him with confidence because we are like Christ here in this world." (1 John 4:15-17)

Unconditional love totally baffles the world and is the ultimate witness to the world. It was the unconditional love for one another and for all people; despite if those people were persecuting them; that the early Christians displayed that shook the Roman world. In those early days there was a saying amongst the people that said, "See how they love one another."³ It began to be common knowledge that the Christians loved each other dearly, despite all their differences. It was truly a solid witness to the Roman world!

The world cannot understand or fathom unconditional love, because the world can only live out conditional love. It has no power to produce unconditional love - and so, therefore, evidence of unconditional love can only be evidence of something extraordinary and outside of the world - it can only be evidence of God.

This is how we are called to live out our 'love life'. It's not about just loving your spouse or your children. The big picture is about loving all. God causes us to love as He loves - it becomes not something we 'do' but something we begin to *live* naturally. As the scripture says - 'our love grows more perfect.' This is how we deal with sin and our motives – we

³ Latin Christianity: Its founder, Tertullian by Philip Schaff. Public domain, available freely at www.ccel.org. Last accessed January 2014. You can find the quote in Tertullian's Apologetic.

trust God to form his love within us. This is how we will fulfil God's mission in this world and live emotionally healthy as a single person.

So singles - be free to love

Because God loves you you are free to love yourself unconditionally, too. So no more worrying about what's wrong with you and why you're still single! No more insecurities! No need for someone else to make you feel secure! AT LAST, there is a love we can have that will never let us down and we can always rely on. There is a place where we can go where we will always be secure. We no longer need others to make us secure - our security is in God. And now, at LAST, we can love others freely and unconditionally - we do not need love in return in order for us to love. We can love because we love. And if God brings us a spouse we can love them unconditionally too. God's love sets us free to really love as singles, and in marriage we can really love as well. Neither marriage nor singleness is the doorway to experiencing and attaining love. ONLY God is, and this love is the source of all joy that we could ever need or want or desire!

This is the Christian life. This is faith working through love (Galatians 5:6). And look at 1 Corinthians 13. This isn't just a scripture for married people! It's for singles too! Love is also patient – so we don't have to be married tomorrow. We can be content where we are. And we can be patient with our future spouse too. Love is kind, so we can treat our brothers and sisters in kindness, and not because we need them romantically. Love does not envy, so we can really deal with jealousy, even when it's painful. Love does not boast and is not proud. It's also not rude or self-seeking; it is not easily angered and it keeps no record of wrongs. Relationships can hurt, but we can deal with it when we allow God to fill us with his perfect love. And love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.** This really speaks for itself. Even after having our heart broken, God sets us free to still trust. We don't have to build a wall around our heart and never trust anyone with it again. For our heart is

ultimately found in God.

Love NEVER fails. (1 Corinthians 13:8.) In all circumstances, love exposes truth and causes rejoicing. It baffles the world and causes it to come to repentance. Love baffles us and causes us to humble ourselves before our awesome God and come to repentance, and come to savour and enjoy Him. It causes us to live fruitful, joyful, glad lives even in the midst of suffering. It is a weapon against our enemy. It is the fruit of the Spirit. It is the very thing that will conquer our bitterness, jealousy, insecurities, fear of loneliness, and anything else that comes against you enjoying your life here and now.

God has made you free to serve others in love (Galatians 5:13). This is the key God gives us that sets us free to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ in purity and joy. It also is what sets us free from having any hidden agendas or motives, serving our brothers and sisters not because they are our *brothers* and *sisters in Christ*, not potential partners. Stronger friendships will form in this this. And guess what? The pressure is off you too! You don't have to be perfect, you can just be who you are in Christ.

Let God complete his salvation by filling you with his perfect love. Let his Spirit live his perfect love through you. Abide in Jesus. Remain in Him. Make this your life objective. Make this more important to you than getting married.

John 15:4 – 13

"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful apart from me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. But if you stay joined to me and my words remain in you, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted! My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to my Father.

"I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey me, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father and remain in His love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you.

"And this is how to measure it - the greatest love is shown when people lay down their lives for their friends."

Chapter 5

Content?

*"You will show me the way of life,
granting me the joy of your presence
and the pleasures of living with you forever." (Psalm 16:11.)*

God says that we can have the joy of his presence, right here, right now. We can enjoy the *pleasures* of living with him forever. But this doesn't mean that our life will be without sacrifice or suffering. As singles, we will experience times of loneliness, but we never need to live in perpetual loneliness. This is because the hopelessness of any of our suffering is taken away when we look to God to provide us with our deepest joy. What it means is that

When it comes to a healthy view of suffering we can either go two extremes: either we think that life is only ever meant to be comfortable and happy, or we think that life is only ever suffering and despair. Neither of these are true. Life is generally seasonal.

Our season of singleness can be a happy one but it may include

many sacrifices and even suffering. Our sexual desires will be one area that will involve both of these. But married couples also go through times of suffering in other respects. The truth is that the Christian life is a life of joy, yet a life of joy within seasons of suffering. We don't suffer all the time, but we must expect there to be seasons where things will be harder than other times. But God gives us joy regardless of the season we're in.

My take on loneliness is that loneliness itself is not the real problem. It's the *fear* of loneliness that is. What is loneliness exactly? If I feel lonely today, why must I feel lonely tomorrow? All it is really is an emotion. We get days when we're more emotional. We have ups and downs. That's normal. The question is: are we always feeling lonely? Why every Monday? Why every wedding? Unless there is even a bigger problem - we're afraid we will *always* be lonely, and this fear feeds our lonely feelings all the more to make us continuously *think* we are lonely.

In this kind of mindset fear or anxiety isn't a passing feeling, it's a constant nagging. It looms over us, even if we're not thinking about it, and constantly reminds us that it's there and that there is nothing we can do about it. Worrying is like a disease; it eats at our mind and causes us to 'not see the forest for the trees.'

Jesus talks about this clearly - "For who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matthew 6:27.) What Christ says is clear - your heavenly father knows you need these things. If He takes care of the birds and the lilies of the field, how much more will He take care of you? (Matthew 6:25-34.) Times of loneliness are inevitable. There are times when it would be great to share our life with someone! Not all of life is designed for the single person. But not all of life is designed for the married person either. Even in marriage there are times when being single would be great! While on this side of the fence we may feel that everything is geared for the couple but the truth is it's not. God holds us in His hands when we feel lonely. He will take care of you. He will give you more than what marriage can even bring.

We can't be constantly looking some place else except where we are. When we do that we lose out on all the good things God has in store for us now, because our focus is either on the future or in the past. We're not living the now, we're living somewhere else. So our entire lives we can actually miss all the joy that we can have right now.

This is how fear works. It makes us worry about a future that we don't even have the slightest clue about. We might fear that we will never have someone to share our life with, but is this true?

What we fear controls our actions

What we fear controls our actions. If I fear heights I stay away from them - regardless of whether I might fall off a cliff or not. The odds of me falling are usually very small, unless I choose to jump off. If I fear loneliness it will govern my actions. I will get depressed, wall off my heart, become bitter and closed in. Perhaps I'll run to all sorts of relationships I know aren't right, or I'll just use porn to assuage the pain because it's easier. But these responses are fruitless and will only increase our worries.

Having a girlfriend or boyfriend or spouse won't get rid of our loneliness, the same as having good friends around doesn't. It might help for a moment but when we get home or when our significant other is away, or if we're quarrelling with our partner or other troubles are affecting us, loneliness comes back. It's because we haven't dealt with our fears.

Thankfully, we don't need to deal with them – we need to trust God to deal with them! Acknowledge them before Him and let Him lead you!

Why would a loving God delight in our fear of Him?

All these anxieties and fears of loneliness must be addressed directly – our fear should be reserved for God only. Fear of God, actually, means we stop fearing at all.

"And now, Israel, what does the Lord require of you? He requires you to fear Him, to live according to His will, to love and worship Him with all your heart and soul," (Deuteronomy 10:12) and, "But the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His steadfast love." (Psalm 147: 11.)

How can we have the words 'pleasure,' 'fear,' 'hope,' and 'love' all in the same sentence? Why would God command we fear him? Why is it that this is what will deal with our fear? This all seems a contradiction.

God is perfect love. 1 John 4 tells us that 'perfect love casts out fear. What kind of fear is in view here? The kind of fear that we're discussing with regards to loneliness. Perfect love casts out that fear that says everything is hopeless. It casts out the fear of having no future. It casts out the fear that we are ruled by chance or sin or the devil or this fallen world.

But that still doesn't answer what fearing the Lord is all about. Remember, Psalm 147:11 talks of those 'who hope in the steadfast love of the Lord.' In other words, the perfect love of God casts out our fears of hopelessness (of always being lonely) because He gives us hope and a steadfast love that cannot be shaken or taken away from us - not even by death! Our fear of the Lord is linked to our *hope* in the Lord. What you fear is what you believe has the most power in your life. We fear the Lord because He is all mighty and 'it is the Lord who gives and it is the Lord who takes away' (Job 1:21) but we also hope in Him because we know He is full of love and He is *good*. He does not exercise His great authority and power over us unjustly. He doesn't ever discipline because he delights in our pain and sorrow (Lamentations 3) but only ever disciplines out of love for us (Hebrews 12:6). When you fear something hopeless, like loneliness, you are filled with hopelessness. When you fear someone who is an infinite supply of hope and joy, you are filled with hopefulness. To fear the Lord is to hope in the Lord, to fear loneliness is to hope in loneliness. We either have faith in God or we have faith in loneliness. We fear the Lord because He is all powerful and can do anything and he can destroy our loneliness, and we hope in Him because He is good and loves us. This

is why the scripture can say :

"Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him. Fear the Lord, you His saints, *for those who fear Him lack nothing.*" (Psalm 34:8,9.)

We fear God who forgives (Psalm 130:4) not God who punishes. All over the scriptures we see that the person who fears the Lord, and nothing else, is the blessed man. It is the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of all wisdom (Ps 111:10). It is the unfailing love of the Lord we count on, which makes us fear Him and hope in Him at the same time, with delight and worship.

"Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The unfailing love of the Lord never ends! By His mercies we have been kept from complete destruction. Great is His faithfulness; His mercies begin afresh each day. I say to myself, 'the Lord is my inheritance; therefore, I will hope in Him!' (Lamentations 3:21)

So, by fearing the Lord and not loneliness or sadness or a life lived without a special someone is exactly how 'perfect love casts out fear'. We begin to live our lives without loneliness affecting our attitudes, character, and love. We might feel it from time to time, but the time passes because the Lord is strong and sustains us and fills us with His hope and joy.

But here I must say where we can still get trapped. We must have the Lord as our hope, for if we are merely hoping for the Lord to bring us a partner to dispel our loneliness then we are still hoping for something other than the Lord. No, we must hope in the Lord to be our joy rather than believe Him to dish out the appropriate gifts for the appropriate need. It's not that wanting to get married is something God looks down upon, it's just that we need to ground that desire in a bigger desire – a desire for God and his holiness.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). Paul, who wrote that and who was single, is a great example of someone who

was content with Christ and Christ alone. He understood that holiness was great gain. In fact, like was saw in chapter one, Paul wrote in Philippians 3:8 that he considers "everything else as *worthless* when compared to the *priceless* gain of knowing Christ Jesus."

Everything we've discussed in the first four chapters of this book will help us to remain content as singles and not be shaken by loneliness or temptations and the world's opinions, realising that Christ's enabling power will give us joy, love, and peace in suffering if suffering comes.

The glory of God and the rewards of eternal life sustained Paul through suffering and helped him to see that he was at a unique position as a single person to do more for God than a married person can (1 Corinthians 7).

"Since I know it is all for Christ's good, I am quite content with my weaknesses and with insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10.)

Contentment is a natural by-product of seeking the Kingdom

If God's glory is our passion in life we will automatically find ourselves content. Why? Because, 'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' (Matthew 6:21, NIV.) If we *have* the treasure of our hearts, the thing we are seeking above all, we will be content. The good news is this: we can have it!

"What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matthew 16:26, NIV.) What good would it be if you gain the perfect spouse but forfeit your soul? You will never be happy. We can't let our lives be ruled by idealism and perfectionism, always unhappy because things aren't perfect and we can't find the ideal person – or, the person we think is ideal just doesn't like us. Our fears and our perfectionism all link in to cause us to lose out on the joy God wants to give us now and to stop seeing how wonderful the gift of singleness really is. Let us bring our fears to the cross and let them die there. Paul says in

Galatians 6:14: "Because of that cross, my interest in this world died long ago, and the world's interest in me is also long dead."

Because of Christ we need no longer be cowering, fearful slaves (Romans 6:15) but are now free to live! "Do not fear anything except the Lord Almighty. *He alone is the Holy One*. If you fear Him, you need fear nothing else." (Isaiah 8:13.) Loneliness may be a passing feeling, but it is not here to stay.

How God uses loneliness

God uses loneliness in several ways that turns it on its head. So even when we go through seasons of intense loneliness, we know God will bring something good of out it, which allows us to no longer fear it but let God do his work.

"Dear friends - don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad - because these trials will make you partners with Christ in His suffering, and afterwards you will have the wonderful joy of sharing His glory when it is displayed to all the world." (1 Peter 4:12, 13.)

When we experience intense loneliness we shouldn't be surprised as if this is something strange or that it will last forever! It would be easy to find a way to get rid of the pain, but if we choose to walk through it we suffer for Christ, who 'gives us everything richly for our enjoyment' (1 Timothy 6:17) He will surely bless us with His abundant joy in spite of our suffering. Christ always makes up for it. That is why Peter could continue to say in 1 Peter 4:19:

"So if you are suffering according to God's will, keep on doing what is right, and trust yourself to the God who made you, for He will never fail you."

And further on in chapter 5:10, 11 he says "In His kindness God called you to His eternal glory by means of Jesus Christ. After you have

suffered a little while, He will restore, support and strengthen you, and He will place you on a firm foundation. All power is His forever and ever. Amen."

Even further encouragement; Peter says in 1 Peter 5:7 that we ought to "give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about what happens to you."

God will give us a share in His glory which is our ultimate joy, always making up for whatever we may have had to suffer in this world. He gives us his joy now, and at the end of this life He will reward us even more as we finally share in His glory. He restores and strengthens us and places us on a firm foundation.

He uses it to make us realise our need of Him

Whenever we experience loneliness it is a reminder to us of what it means to live in this fallen world and how much we actually need God. We are not self-sufficient, but he is. God uses this kind of suffering for our good so that we can learn to depend on him and trust him for "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28, NIV.) He wants us to find out that there is no treasure that compares to Him – it's only in Him that we will be happy. He wants us to find that out first hand and "taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8.)

"God blesses those who realise their need for Him." (Matthew 5:3). When we realise that we need God we come to Him, asking for Him. And He gladly blesses us and supplies us with Himself. In this He is glorified - both to us, because we realise once again how wonderful He is, and to the world, because we become a witness to God's sustaining power and joy when we live joyful and grateful lives.

He uses it to make us mature

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of

many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-4 NIV)

God uses trials to strengthen us and bring us to a point of "not lacking anything." Loneliness can obviously be added in along with the many different trials we must face. 'Lacking nothing' refers to our happiness and joy – our inward state. It ultimately refers to holiness, our joyous goal and God's joyous goal (1 Thessalonians 4:3.) Our deepest desires are for God and to be like him. God's desire is to make us partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

Have you ever considered what it means to be a partaker of the divine nature? God is happy; God is content; God is full of self-sustaining joy. To become a partaker of his nature is to receive his very own happiness and contentment and sustenance! What could be better than that? That is far better than getting married! That, indeed, is "not lacking anything"!

He uses it for His glory

Because God changes our trials into things that will be for good, this glorifies Him. He is shown to be the abundant, happy source of everything we need, victorious over evil by always working everything for good. Because God is committed to His own glory and because He loves us so dearly, He is always ready and willing to be our joy and supply in times of loneliness. He is all sufficient. All sufficient in love; all sufficient in power; all sufficient in need. So we hope in Him. This glorifies Him because everyone sees just how much He is worth!

So we can consider trials of loneliness as "pure joy" because God will turn it all around for His own glory and for our own good. Loneliness is defeated.

Jesus is all-understanding

Jesus is not only all-understanding because of his infinite wisdom but because he experienced loneliness and abandonment more intensely than any one of us.

"But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me." (John 16:32.)

Jesus told His disciples here that He would soon be crucified. He knew that they – his closest friends – would abandon Him and He would be alone on the cross. Everyone watched Him go to the cross, naked and deserted. But it's interesting to note what He says - "Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me." Here is a key to the promise God has for us: we might feel lonely but we are never left alone. He will always be with us. This promise continues in vs. 33:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

He has overcome the world! He has overcome loneliness and anxiety! But even so, he says 'in this world *you will have trouble.*' Christ hasn't come to bring us a gospel of comfort but a gospel of *peace*. These are two different things. He has promised to give us peace and joy even in the midst of our troubles. This is why He can say 'Take heart!' because He has overcome the world. Christ has overcome the sufferings and temptations of this world, and so we can take heart - trust Him - in the midst of our loneliness, and temptations; and He is able to bring us peace and joy within them.

Christ was not afraid to go to the cross because He feared God. In Hebrews 5:7 it says, "While Jesus was here on earth, He offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could deliver Him out of death. And God heard His prayers because of His reverence for God." In the AMP translation, it explains the word 'reverence' as "His

godly fear, His piety, in that He shrank from the horrors of separation from the bright presence of the Father."

In another sense, He must have been afraid at one stage because otherwise He would not have prayed to the Father to take the cup away from Him. (Luke 22:42.) He also would not have prayed with "prayers and pleadings" and "a loud cry and tears." There was a tension here but He overcame the world and never gave into the fear! He knew that God loved Him.

But there is more and this is why Jesus has experienced loneliness and abandonment in a way none of us have and none of us ever will – there *was* a point where even the Father abandoned Him. That is why He cries on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 15:34). In this he quotes Psalm 22:1,2 – as a way of saying that this was what was happening prophetically:

"My God, my God why have you forsaken me? Why do you remain so distant? Why do you ignore my cries for help? Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer. Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief."

Then verse 6-8:

"But I am a worm and not a man. I am scorned and despised by all! Everyone who sees me mocks me. They sneer and shake their heads, saying 'is this the one who relies on the Lord? Then let the Lord save him! If the Lord loves him so much, let the Lord rescue him!' "

Does this sound like the thoughts of man who is not in suffering? Who doesn't know what depression feels like? Who has never felt loneliness? Who didn't experience absolute desertion? Certainly not! Yet he knew that there was a great treasure and reward awaiting him at the other end of all this. Even though Jesus knew that He would have to suffer all of this, He still went to the cross willingly (John 10:11). Despite being abandoned by even the Father, He still trusted in the Him. Psalm 22:11

shows us this: "*Do not stay so far away from me, for trouble is near, and no one else can help me.*" Then verse 19 says, "*You are my strength, come quickly to my aid.*" He goes even further than just trusting God but then even *praises* God in verse 23: "*Praise the Lord, all who fear Him! Honour Him, all you descendants of Jacob! Show Him reverence, all you descendants of Israel!*" Jesus quoted this Psalm because all of this was happening in Him at the cross – he was still praising God despite being abandoned by all!

There is even more, because although Jesus knew prophetically that He would be raised up in the third day (when he says "destroy this temple, and I will raise it in three days" in John 2:19) He also didn't know *for sure*. He was a man, living in a world subjected to time, and so the only thing He could do was *trust* the Father that the Father would indeed raise Him up on the third day, as the Father had promised. This is why Hebrews 5:7 says "He offered prayers and pleadings... to the one who could deliver Him out of death." The scripture then says that God then delivered Him out of death "because of His reverence (godly fear) for God." Jesus didn't know the future exhaustively – he experienced the frustrating and difficult position of *not knowing* yet still having to trust in God, despite what he saw going on around him.

In this way He trusted God perfectly on our behalf. We can trust in Him to live His faith and strength through us in the midst of our suffering. He knows what it's like even more than we ever will! Jesus shows great faith in the Father – that the Father would raise Him from death – and, because Christ now lives in us, He exercises that same faith in and through us. That is His promise to us! He is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). We need only to rely and trust and obey Him, by the Spirit that longs jealously within us for our affection (James 4:5).

Jesus went to the cross for joy

If we're not convinced that God wants us to seek for joy from Him, perhaps we will be when we look at one way in which the Bible speaks

about why Jesus went to the cross.

"Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honour beside God's throne." (Hebrews 12:2.)

He knew He was going to suffer incredibly but He was willing to go through the suffering, knowing that God rewards and God gives everything we ultimately need. He was looking for the joy set before Him. He was looking for God's glory.

"Father, the time has come. Glorify your son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted Him authority over all the people that He might give eternal life to all those you have given Him. Now, this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." (John 17:1-5.)

By dying on the cross – by going through that suffering – God has been glorified for eternity. *There had to be suffering before glory.* It was through suffering that God was glorified. Likewise, through our suffering God will be glorified. We can go through seasons of loneliness for the joy that God has set before us. Because, afterwards, God will not only be glorified by he will glorify us, too – as He glorified the Son.

What this says to us singles

It would be good to summarise some of the key points of this last bit of this chapter before we move on.

Firstly, the suffering of Christ was far more than what we ever will have to go through. Jesus was eventually abandoned by the Father, but He promises that we will never suffer such abandonment in John 15. He will always remain in us.

Secondly, Christ understands our suffering and temptations - because He went through these in a much more intense way than we probably ever will. Not just in his death but also in his life. He knows exactly what we're going through as he has experienced loneliness firsthand.

Thirdly, if we have the same passion Jesus did - a passion for God's glory - then we will be sustained through suffering. If we 'seek first His Kingdom and His Righteousness' He will sustain us with His life, joy, peace and love. "The poor will eat and be satisfied. All who seek the Lord will praise Him. Their hearts will rejoice with *everlasting joy*." (Psalm 22:26.)

Fourthly, God uses suffering for His glory. This is why Jesus prays in John 17:15, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." God's plan is not always to take us out of the suffering but to take us *through* the suffering. He did not remove the cup of crucifixion from Christ as this would not glorify God nor Jesus. Jesus had to go through the cross, to be raised up on the third day and so be glorified, which glorifies the father, and bring His glory to us.

Fifthly, love and passion are the things that help us go through suffering with joy and gratitude to God. It wasn't out of dead religion that Christ went to the cross - it was out of perfect love. And because of Christ's death on the cross He will fill us with this kind of love by His Spirit.

Sixthly, faith is the key to contentment. We have faith in Christ who died for us at the cross. We fear God, not loneliness. We know He can supply us all the faith we need in God because He himself had to trust God that God would save Him. We see practically in Christ that faith works through love. We can now trust Him to give us the same faith in God that gave Him the courage to face the cross with hope. After all, faith is the evidence of things hoped for. (Hebrews 11:1.)

All in all this tells me that God is always trustworthy, always able to sustain us, always full of hope, always has the best plan in mind, and that "weeping may go on all night but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5). Jesus is able to sustain us by His Spirit in all our seasons of loneliness because He suffered on the cross. Any amount of suffering will be used for God's glory. The cross is our place of contentment. Passion for the Glory of God - seeking His Kingdom - will bring us peace and a life of purpose.

We needn't live our lives fearing loneliness. Loneliness will not last forever and we have far more in God than we can imagine. Maybe we will feel lonely here and there, but we needn't live in perpetual loneliness. We can be content and we can be full of joy.

God has given us a good gift: singleness. And we'll see in the next chapter why it is so good.

Chapter 6

The good gift of the single life

"Every good perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights who does not change like shifting shadows." (James 1:17 NIV.)

"God... richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." (1 Timothy 6:17 NIV.)

"Let those who desire my vindication shout for joy and be glad, and say evermore 'great is the Lord, who delights in the welfare of His servant.' "(Psalm 35:27.)

"Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life." (Psalm 23:6.)

"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." (Psalm 37:4 NIV.)

I could quote scripture after scripture about God's unfailing love,

His faithfulness, and His good gifts. But is singleness a *gift*? Has God given it to us? Or is it just the way things are until you get married?

Why does God say He will give us the desire of our heart (Psalm 37:4) but then seem to insist that we should not have any desire except for Him? Because, the actual *desire* of our heart is Him. That's what we really are longing for, even if we don't know it. We're hungry and thirsty and we think we know what will quench our thirst, but Jesus says that, actually, it's only Him that will quench our thirst.

"Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! 38 Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, 'Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.'" (John 7:37-39.)

The Lord 'delights in our welfare' (Psalm 35:27 above). He knows what we really need and want. He also knows how to turn everything together for the good – so regardless of how you might view singleness, God sees it differently.

Is singleness better than marriage or marriage better than singleness?

Of course marriage is also a good gift. In this chapter I'm not going to make celibacy a better gift than marriage (as some early Christian traditions did) but it's fair to say that, in a huge amount of Christian teaching today, marriage has been made to be better and even more holy than singleness and / or celibacy!

The one is not better than the other, they're just different. God is good and singleness is something that we can, and should, celebrate. Of course, some of us will be called to be celibate, and celibacy has its place in the Kingdom (even in Protestant circles, despite how some teach). But how do we know if we are called to be celibate or not? I hope to cover that in the last part of this book. The point for now, however, is that we are single and should celebrate our present season.

But how?

By getting a bit practical and, believe it or not, looking at what the Bible really says about the subject. The best place to pick this up is 1 Corinthians 7:7 –

"I wish everyone could get along without marrying, just as I do. But we are not **all the same**. God gives some the gift of marriage, and to others He gives the *gift of singleness*." (Emphasis mine.)

The NET Bible puts it this way

"But each has his own gift from God, one this way, another that."

Notice that singleness is said to be a *gift*. One day I actually *read* this and the Holy Spirit suddenly opened it up to me. I was wrestling with this whole thing at the time and God I felt God say to me clearly that, "*In marriage, I give you grace for marriage. In singleness, I give you grace for singleness.*" Both require God's strength and working, and in both God *is* working. In both, God has given us something which we can use for His Kingdom and which we can enjoy, for all of God's gifts are good! In fact, they're not just good, they are *perfect*. (James 1:17.)

Singleness is perfect for you, right now. It's what God has given you and therefore it is perfect. When marriage comes, marriage will also be perfect for you. This is not to say that either of these won't come with difficulty, it's just simply to say that you are in the right space right now – don't worry about your past, you are in the right space. After all, God is not a liar (Titus 1:2; Hebrew 8:18; Numbers 23:19). If He says singleness is good and perfect, it's good and perfect.

The purpose of both singleness and marriage is God's goodness and glory, His Kingdom and reign extending to all the nations of the world; and that Kingdom being about how God loves His creation and wants to see it all - us all - redeemed! Marriage and singleness fit perfectly into God's Kingdom, not one or the other is better or more effective. God will

use our singleness to extend His Kingdom and a time may come when He will use our marriage to do the same.

But it's not good for man to be alone

God did say. "It is not good for the man to be alone," (Genesis 2:18) and so created a 'suitable helper' for the man – Eve. But Paul seems to go against this by saying he wishes everyone could 'get along' without marrying (1 Corinthians 7:7). In fact, he goes as far as saying in verse 38 that "... the person who marries does well, and the person who doesn't marry does *even better*."

But notice *why* he says this in vs. 32, "An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord's work and thinking how to please Him."

We know that in the context of this chapter Paul insists this is his opinion (vs. 25) but we also know that Paul was given wisdom from God and he admits this himself in the same verse. All Paul is trying to do is save us from the complications on our time and focus that marriage brings. God is trying to get us to understand that in marriage we cannot be solely focused on Him but also need to focus on pleasing our spouses. Marriage can be a distraction and he is trying to get us to serve Him with as few distractions as possible.

As with most of the scriptures we hold these things in balance. It's not good for us to be alone, but if we can 'get along' without getting married we do well. In other words, if you're sure you want to be married, you still need to get along without it now and therefore do well. The way in which you can 'get along' without it will actually enhance this season in your life so that, when you're married, you would have enjoyed it and can enter into your marriage well, with a healthy view of life.

Why singleness is good

Here's a list of reasons why singleness is good which help us to live it out and enjoy it.

1) Your witness of Christ is unique

"Happiness or sadness or wealth should not keep anyone from doing God's work." (1 Corinthians 7:30.)

Marriage or singleness, loneliness or happiness, should not keep you from doing God's work. And, indeed, it need not! The Kingdom doesn't require these things but requires your heart.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6). It's not only great gain to you, it's great gain to others too because it makes your life a living testimony of God's provision and love. Now, while you are single, you have an opportunity to give God glory in this unique way - in a way you may never be able to do again. You have an opportunity to prove, both to yourself and to others that God truly is your all satisfying joy and that He can be the same for anyone who comes to Him.

Being joyous and grateful and totally secure in Christ is truly a great testimony to the world. As far as the world is concerned, the only way to get rid of your loneliness is to have a relationship with someone. But if our lives show clear signs to others that we are truly happy even without someone else in our lives, they begin to ask questions. For most happiness in singleness is truly a miracle. And it is.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need." (Psalm 23:1.) If the world sees us content in Christ we truly display God's worth. If we go through the lonely times with gladness and joy, because of Christ and a willing to suffer for Him, we truly display His worth.

2) You can celebrate true sexuality

If we can show the world that God can indeed make us so full of joy that we don't need sex, we display His worth for all of the world to see. This actually bears a bigger testimony as plenty of people in the world are not content and still lonely even in marriage. But to abstain from sex and consecrate ourselves to God completely is seen as simply

ridiculous - and impossible. The world doesn't believe it is possible. They laugh at the idea. "Humanly speaking" it is impossible, "but with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27). When we're married we have no means of proving to the world that God is more satisfying than sex in such a practical way as when we're single. This makes our witness as singles unique.

Think about the testimony of a virgin in their senior years. This is an amazing testimony that blows to pieces all of the present worldly theories about how important sex is in the greater experience of life. It blows the world's mindset out of the water. It proves all its movies, books, sitcoms and whatever that they are wrong. It shows that God is truly satisfying and truly good.

If you aren't a virgin there's no need to feel as if you're left out of this. After all, your testimony can be even more amazing because you will show that your new choice of life is better and can be done in the strength of God. We embrace our sexuality, as singles, by dedicating it to God and living, by the Spirit, in purity. This was an especially powerful testimony in early Christianity and I think we've largely lost the impact this can have, through the pop-Christian culture that teaches that marriage is better than singleness.

We are called to be drastically different, because that allows the world to see Christ clearly. This is what 'seeking first the Kingdom' is all about – being part of a revolution that is drastically different to the world and that changes the world.

3) You can celebrate friendship

God provides us with many friends and a family of our own in His Church. Being single is not a life lived in loneliness, but a life lived in rich blessings of friendship, love and commitment to a family God has given to us. Even this is a wonderful testimony. We serve brothers and sisters in absolute purity and with gladness. This baffles the world too. We love our

brothers and sisters unconditionally. Once again, the world doesn't understand this but knows that it's amazing.

The fact that God provides us wonderful friendships shows that God is indeed able to supply us everything we need in such wonderful ways. His ways are indeed better than ours.

The world finds it incredibly hard, or downright impossible, to keep things pure in relationships. However, as Christians, we can serve our brothers and sisters in a love that is pure and unselfish. This is an awesome testimony to others of the unconditional love of Christ. If we trust in God we can love our brothers and sisters not because they are potential partners, or because they are attractive, or because we get attention or they make us feel good. We love our brothers and sisters in complete purity - serving them out of love, regardless of who they are or what they've done for us.

Plus, we love with no hidden agendas. Not because they could be the person we marry, but simply because they are our brothers and sisters. "Treat younger men as brothers, older woman as mothers, and younger women as sisters, *with absolute purity*." (1 Timothy 5:2.)

With Christ we can love our brothers and sisters in this absolute purity. Such selfless and pure relationships baffle the world as they cannot get involved with people of the opposite sex without the issue of lust occurring somewhere, or sometime, in the relationship. Worldly relationships are just way too intense and complicated. Christian relationships are free and fun with love and service being the main agenda. We can just relax and enjoy each other's company. This is a fantastic witness to the world for the single (and even the married!)

4) You can have wisdom beyond your own experience

The witness and testimony of wisdom can be a powerful thing. The more we pursue God, the more He fills us with knowledge and wisdom. James 1:5 (NIV) says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God,

who gives *generously* to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."

Single pastors or elders often feel a little threatened to give marital advice. But many of them will also say that there has never been reason to, for the Spirit of God gives wisdom when it's needed regardless of own experience. If you are single but have a wisdom way beyond your years or experience, the testimony of God's reality and working is awesome. One only needs to read about King Solomon in the Bible and see how wisdom gave glory to God. See 1 Kings 10:9.

Paul was single, yet gave fantastic council on marriage. Jesus, who was single, taught better on love and marriage than any married person, or any person alive, ever has. God is able to give us wisdom for relationships and love even if we've never really had first hand experience. We can watch others and learn. We can watch our parents and learn. But, first and foremost, and most of all, we can read God's Word and listen to His voice - and learn, and know, and be able to share God's wisdom to others. This is a great testimony to all that God is real, living, and fantastic.

5) You can serve in a unique way

It goes without saying that single people can be more devoted to the Church in terms of their time than many other people. We can also take more risks for the Kingdom. We can go to dangerous countries and face persecution without needing to worry about our family.

"An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord's work and thinking how to please Him." (1 Corinthians 7:32.)

This is another reason why Paul said it was better to be single as he could devote his life to serving the church of Christ and not having to worry about an inheritance to pass on to his kids, but be concerned about the inheritance to pass onto God's children. Of course, this doesn't make us better than a married couple, but it can make us more effective for the Kingdom in very *different* ways. Too many people are waiting for

marriage before they get involved or before they embrace God's calling and use His gifting in their lives. But when they get married they find that their time and attention is hugely divided and they simply never get to do all the things they could have!

So let's get involved now while we have the time to do so. We can basically live less selflessly, in a sense. A labour of love in such a unique way becomes a joy and blessing to us, which is a powerful blessing to the world. As they see our love for Christ causes us to love others they will know God is real. Unity commands a blessing (Psalm 133:1) and "by this all men will know that you are my disciples - if you love one another." (John 13:35.)

We're also a great witness to our married friends in the church. We understand life from a different (perhaps sometimes simpler) perspective. We're a reminder to our married friends about taking risks, about living for the Kingdom, about serving and giving ourselves. We are a reminder to them of patience and reliance on God for strength. We are an example God uses to remind them of all these things. And God provides us with such joy as we serve others. When the world sees us serve with cheerfulness and joy, instead of sitting at home and sitting in loneliness, we're a witness to them of God's love and that He is real.

And, interestingly enough, we also have more money to spend on Kingdom needs. We can use our money in places where married couples aren't always free to do so. We can put up with a little more inconvenience.

6) You can honour marriage in a unique way

You will see in the chapter on sex that we singles honour marriage and show the world that God is good by keeping it holy and beautiful and exclusive and only within marriage. We hold marriage in high value. Our witness to the world of what sex and marriage is designed to be is a great testimony that marriage *is still good* and that it is sacred and delightful.

We also witness to the world that the body is worth keeping pure. Contrary to how many think, Christianity holds the body and human form in high value – so much so that we believe God Himself lives within us when we come to faith. Keeping the body pure witnesses to the world that it is good, wholesome, pure, and *beautiful*. People think we don't believe the body is beautiful because of our views of sex, but it's actually because we do think the body is beautiful that we believe it should be kept as such. We keep it beautiful by keeping it pure. As a single person we can show this truth in a unique way compared to married people.

7) You can devote more time to our personal spiritual life

We can actually devote much more time than married people to prayer and study. Even just our head space can be a little clearer – we don't need to be thinking about the day-to-day concerns of family life (is dinner for the kids sorted? Do we need to take the kids to their sports practice? Etc.). Of course we should look after ourselves and our homes etc., but our head space isn't as cluttered. We can stay up till four in the morning praying if God's Spirit beckons us to. When married, we may need to attend to our spouse's needs and wants for the evening, or a crying baby!

8) You can get ready for marriage, now

While we're single, we can form good godly habits that we can take in our marriage. We can have a healthy view of sex, we can have hearts hungry for God, we can become completely in love and reliant on God, we can get used to living a missional lifestyle, etc. Being completely reliant on God is a great stress-reliever for marriage, because we don't place unrealistic expectations on our spouses. We can give more than take. We can love, freely and with abandon, instead of having to be loved. We can sort out our insecurities, now, before we get married. We can sort out our identity issues now. We can work on our thought-life now, so that we don't drag negativity or any bad thinking into our marriage. We can figure out what we want to do with our lives, now.

Whatever we learn, experience, and whatever good habits we obtain can only be good for our marriage. God wishes for us to use this time to become more Holy and pleasing to Him, which in turn will honour our future spouses tremendously and make marriage a good deal easier.

Your singleness is a gift because God has given you time and space to work on whatever needs to be worked on before you get married. Use the time effectively.

The single life therefore gives glory to God

In these ways, I see God glorified through the single life. God is able to strengthen us and supply us everything we need as we go through this adventure. The single life is a good gift, because we can be such a great witness and we can serve the Church in such unique ways.

None of the points above were designed to make marriage look like a negative thing, or encourage singles to be complacent about actually pursuing a spouse. They were designed for us to see the positive aspects of our singleness and to realise the sacrifices of marriage. This doesn't mean (as I am sure we all know) that singleness is not a sacrifice – the sacrifices and the positive points are just different in marriage and singleness.

So, as singles, we have such wonderful purpose in this life! It's a life of love, lived out uniquely for our King. I pray that God would reveal to you more and more this awesome time He has for you, so that you will live life and life to the full now in His Spirit and with gratitude and praise to Him.

Chapter 7

Sexual stuff

As a guy it's obviously difficult to write on sex from anything else but a guy's viewpoint. I hope the ladies reading this will be able to still find this chapter relevant.

It's liberating when you realise that the battle with sexual lust isn't the biggest battle there is in God's eyes. We're often tempted to think that sexual sin is worse than any other sin but the reality is that it's not. The scriptures have a good deal to say about sins like greed or even gossip, to such a degree that you realise that sexual sin is just another sin like any other.

Perhaps the biggest problem with sex is that it concerns our body in ways other sins don't. When you sin sexually, you really feel it – psychologically, bodily, emotionally. There is a mystery to sex and our sexuality, after all.

Christianity's history is full of thinkers, writers, teachers, poets, pastors, popes, bishops, monks etc. who have tried to address this topic.

There are many who define sexual sin in unhealthy ways that tarnish God's creation – they claim the body is evil; beauty is a kind of wickedness in disguise; sex itself is a sin, but perhaps only a necessary one; or that sexual desire is, in itself, evil.

It's perhaps the last assumption that leads to the others. But there are plenty of others that have offered healthy views of sex. I hope to offer some views that correspond to the last crowd!

What is lust?

Strictly speaking the word 'lust' doesn't mean anything but 'strong desire.' That's what the word actually means. This is actually a Biblical definition. Today the word has become a synonym for sexual lust, which isn't actually very helpful.

In Matthew 5:28 when Jesus speaks of looking at a woman with 'lustful intent' (ESV) the word for 'lust' in the Greek is "epithumeō". That is the same word used for 'desire' in this scripture:

1 Timothy 3:1

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he **desires** (epithumeō) a noble task."

In this case, 'lust' is a good thing whereas in the case of Matthew 5:28 it's a bad thing. See, sexual lust (desire) is nothing more than what it is – a desire for sex. That desire is perfectly normal and a part of God's beautiful creation. Really. God built us that way. The fact that guys are naturally attracted to womanly bodies is perfectly normal. Some of us have a stronger desire for sex than others and some even have no desire at all, but nevertheless the desire – lust – in itself is not sinful.

It's when we allow our sexual desire to become the central control of our lives that we run into problems. But that's true for everything else as well. The desire to provide for a wife or a family can easily become an

obsession with money, coveting, and greed.

The word 'sex', likewise, shouldn't just mean the physical act of sexual pleasure between people but also includes the intimacy and purity it was meant to have. In other words, we have to keep remembering that there is nothing wrong with sex or the desire for sex. But we also have to make sure we don't ever think of sex as just some physical, mechanical act. It's far more than that.

So is desire evil?

No, desire is not evil or sinful. There's simply nowhere in the Bible where desire in itself is labelled a sin. The first few chapters of the book were about how desire is a good thing, it's just that we are to desire God first and foremost. See, you do get sinful desires and you get godly desires. That's the difference between Matthew 5:28 (a sinful desire for someone's wife) and 1 Timothy 3:1 (a godly desire to look after God's people).

So when do our desires for sex become sinful and when do they become godly? That's the big question.

The God of pleasure

The problem many Christian teachers throughout the ages have had with sex is that it's pleasurable. That may seem like a strange thing to say, but it's true. Some religious teaching says that all things that are pleasurable are sinful and all things that are not pleasurable are not. This is built off a stoic, gnostic sort of philosophy and not a Christian theology. The problem is, in many cultures, Christianity and stoicism have become the same thing. Thankfully, that is changing.

If you don't know what 'gnostic' means I'll simplify it for you: gnosticism was an early heresy in the church that taught that we are saved by having secret knowledge. It also taught that the material world is evil and the spiritual world good. Therefore, everything material (our bodies, creation) is seen as evil. But created the material world! How could it be

evil? That's why, amidst other reasons, gnosticism is a heresy.

Because sex and even just the desire for sex is pleasurable, many Christian ascetics lump pleasure and sex into the same category, forgetting that there are many other forms of pleasure as well. God is not against pleasure; He is against the *love* of pleasure. I don't mean love in the sense of something you enjoy more than other things (like Mexican food over boiled chicken), I mean love as in something that you build your life around – in other words, an idol.

"But mark this: there will be terrible times in the last days. *People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.*" (2 Timothy 3:1-4.)

Notice something here. All of these external attributes all link to each other. People who are lovers of themselves are lovers of money. It's because self is the central point that they are ungrateful, disobedient, without self-control, unforgiving, lovers of pleasure etc..

There's a few interesting things to note from this list though. It's not *what* they love that is the problem (it's not that money or pleasure contains evil) it is how they have set those things up as a god in their lives. As a first example, they are lovers of themselves. Does this mean that God is against us, or against us loving ourselves? No, He sent His Son to die for us. He is not against us and he even commands that we should love ourselves. (Love your neighbour as you love yourself – Matthew 22:39). This loving of yourself in 2 Timothy 3 above isn't referring to the same kind of love in Matthew 22:39. Rather, it refers to people who make themselves the centre of the universe. It's referring to selfishness. It's referring to making yourself your own god.

Next, they are lovers of money. Is God against money? No, He

created it for a purpose and that purpose was to extend the Kingdom and to provide for families. I'm sure you are seeing what I'm getting at. Is God against pleasure? Does He hate pleasure? Evidently not.

"At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was *your* good *pleasure*.'" (Matthew 11:25,26)

"He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His *pleasure* and will-" (Ephesians 1:5)

"And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good *pleasure*, which He purposed in Christ." (Ephesians 1:9)

"Everything comes from Him; everything exists by His power and is intended for His glory." (Romans 11:36.) Pleasure exists because (a) God created it (everything exists by His power). (b) He created it to give glory to Him. (c) We experience pleasure because we are created in (or as) His own image.

Now, point (c) above might seem like an arbitrary statement I just threw in there. But consider this, if God experiences (and enjoys) pleasure, as the scriptures above show us, then if we are created in His image His plan is for us also to experience and enjoy pleasure.

We need to separate pleasure from sex in our thinking. These two words have been so integrated but pleasure is just a way of describing what sex is like. We describe sex as pleasurable but we generally don't describe pleasure as sex.

Pleasure is not something that exists outside of God as if it's an external experience that suddenly sprung up in creation after Adam and Eve fell. It's also not something the devil created, as if he could create anything at all! God Himself experiences pleasure even in Himself. Pleasure in itself is amoral.

"Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, *in whom I delight.*" (Matthew 12:18)

"This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well *pleased.*" (Matthew 17:5)

But what we can see is that this pleasure of God is out of His *love* for His son. What this tells me is that love is pleasurable (and indeed it is) and the kind of pleasure that love is, is godly. Therefore, we can begin to confidently say that the God who created pleasure knows and understands and enjoys it more than the rest of us. And we can also say that knowing Him is pleasurable.

We are far too easily pleased

With this in mind we can see that the problem is that we take pleasure in things that aren't actually of value. We don't value what is truly valuable. C.S. Lewis really brings this one home. When I read this quote from him in John Piper's book *Desiring God* I really had to sit back and think about it. Lewis' view here is so right-on that it really opened up a renewed understanding of sin and why God wants to see us freed from it.

"If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."⁴

4 C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 1-2

Pornography is actually a *far lesser* pleasure when compared to the intimate relationship between husband and wife. Sex outside of marriage is a less sensual, *far lesser* pleasure than sex within marriage. All misuses of sex are actually a *lesser* pleasure compared to sex within a marriage dedicated to God.

So what are the misuses? We're almost there.

The lesser pleasure

Sex itself, though, is also a 'lesser pleasure' when compared to knowing God. Not that this lesser pleasure was not designed by God to give us pleasure – but that this pleasure is *a joy*, not *the joy* of our lives. It must be put in perspective. There is nothing wrong with it, only something wrong with the way we might enjoy it. If sex is our joy, then we have a problem. If it is *a joy*, all *part* of the package of discovering and knowing God better, then God is our joy. His conditions for sex (that it is enjoyed within marriage alone) is so that we can know Him better, be completely refreshed and so enjoy both sex, and the Highest pleasure of all – God himself – all at the same time. All of the pleasures of life are only truly enjoyed when enjoyed in and with God. That's why I say that sex any other way is far less pleasurable than sex within God's ways.

We know that the 'wages of sin is death.' (Romans 6:23.) Death is a way of describing our mental, physical, spiritual state. Death means: we no longer have any senses, or capacity to experience anything. If we cannot experience anything we cannot enjoy or take pleasure in anything. Sin makes us numb to real life. It actually *kills* pleasure.

Life is the opposite. Life means that we are able to use our senses, and it is through these senses that we are able to experience and have pleasure. If God has come to give us life He has come to give us enjoyment, experience, and indeed also pleasure. And this life is found in Him.

I'm not blind to the fact that Christians go through dry spiritual

times that may even last years. I've been there. But the thing with grace, and here I think is a mystery, is we can't try and make God pleasurable ourselves – we have to trust Him to make us enjoy Him. This is part of what a life of faith (trust, relying on God) is all about. Sometimes even trusting in God is hard, so we actually have to trust God to make us trust God. And this is grace, once again. It is one of the joys and mysteries of the Christian life.

But can you see something really extraordinary here? Something I missed out on most of my Christian life? *God is actually inviting us to enjoy pleasure.* As Psalm 16:11 says, "You will show me the way of *life*, granting me the *joy* of your presence and the *pleasures* of living with you forever."

And the promise of this experience is *now*, not later. Everlasting life starts now, and God's promise is that we can have these pleasures now. The Lord is our *delight*, after all. When last did you pray that God grant you the *pleasures* of living with Him forever?

Now let's answer the real question

Now that we're able to place desire and pleasure in their right contexts it's time to start addressing what really is sexual sin.

There is a big difference between desiring for sex and desiring someone. I don't just mean someone you've made up in your head, I mean a real person you know.

And that's the crux of the matter – sexually desiring an actual flesh and blood person or simply desiring for sex and a body. There really is a huge difference between these two aspects.

Is looking wrong?

This leads us into a core scripture around sexual lust in the Bible. Christian morality around sex really hinges on Jesus' teaching on the

subject in Matthew 5:27 – 30. I quote it here from the ESV: (Note: it's a pity that the ESV translators used the word 'lust' incorrectly in the heading, but that's just a small irritation).

"27 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

The context of this scripture is paramount. As with the whole Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is really expounding on the Jewish Law (Torah) and uncovering the intent of every law. In this case he brings the seventh and tenth commandments together ('you shall not commit adultery' and 'you shall not covet your neighbour's wife') and points to how adultery and covetousness are linked.

It's interesting that he speaks about adultery – he could have said that whoever looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed 'fornication' with her in his heart, but he focuses on adultery. Why? Because he is actually talking about marriage! Right after this he continues to talk about divorce. The context is *marriage*. Jesus is not saying that all looking is sinful, he is saying that a particular kind of *intention* is sinful – namely, the intention of divorcing your wife for no good reason except for the fact that you're bored, tired of her, over her problems, and you now want someone else's! And that's precisely what they were doing in those days and it's precisely what people still do today.

Jesus is condemning a heart that sets itself upon a person who doesn't belong to it. In other words, a married man who sets his heart upon another woman (married or unmarried). In those days divorce was actually quite easy – if your wife didn't please you then you could easily

divorce her and marry that other girl you've been looking at with sexual intent. You could do all this legally and think yourself a pretty holy person because it was all done within the law. But the problem is that it completely misses the *heart* of the law. What Jesus is saying is that the moment you set your heart upon having someone else's wife you sinned already – you can get around the law as much as you want but your heart is still sinful. You're as guilty as the person who did everything illegally and bedded her while he (or her) were married to someone else.

With this context in mind what else can we see? Jesus isn't condemning sexual desire! *God created us with a particular sexual drive so that we would get married.* Your struggles with sexual desire are saying that, perhaps, you're not called to a life of celibacy!

I admit that's not all a person should get married for, but it's certainly a part of it. Paul encourages men to get married in 1 Corinthians 7 precisely because of sexual desire. Even though he says it would be better if they were single, he says that if they can't restrain themselves they should get married. We can't seek to be holier than God – sexual desire is good; sexual desire for a particular woman you might know, as a single guy, is actually good. Don't let it move over to fantasizing and so forth, but let it have its place. As Martin Luther says:

"For when should people marry, if they would not have desire and love for one another? Yes, that is the reason why God has given this eager desire to bride and bridegroom, otherwise every one would flee from and avoid marriage."

If this offends you then you may see sexual desire too narrowly. It does include (even for men) the desire for intimacy, closeness, partnership and friendship. But men also do just desire sex for the sake of sex and Jesus doesn't condemn that either.

I've outlined in this book why we should pursue God more than marriage, but that didn't mean that I thought that we shouldn't get married

or we shouldn't put any effort into getting married. Sometimes we just need to get on with it.

What this means is that God's main definition of sinful desire begins with our heart and intention. The Bible isn't saying that sex outside of marriage is good but it is saying that, when you're single, the desire for someone (who is not married already!) is perfectly fine. The question is: are you going to do anything about it? If not then move on because one day that person is going to be someone else's spouse! Stop desiring after them if you're not going to marry them. Why bother?

What the Bible is also *not* saying is that looking is a sin. If you're physically attracted to someone then being physically attracted isn't wrong. Not even looking and acknowledging their good looks is wrong. What is wrong, however, is going home and choosing to fantasize about them – they are not your wife or husband! If you desire them that much but don't want to marry them (or can't) then move on. Get over it because it's not going to go anywhere!

What is also wrong, however, is to go home and indulge in porn and say 'you're just looking'. You're doing far more than that and you probably know it. Pornography is designed to make us see sex in ways that are unrealistic and unhealthy. We'll get to that in a moment.

The desire for sex because it's sex

The way to act on our desire for someone is marry them. But we don't just have a desire for sex only when we find someone eligible for marriage. Guys, especially, just desire to have sex and see a naked girl. That desire can often have nothing at all to do with anyone – it's just a desire for sex. I know some girls do as well so I'm not just saying this is a guy thing.

We cannot serve two masters - either we will love the one and hate the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13) so we cannot be ruled by this desire. But that still doesn't

mean the desire is wrong. There's nowhere in the Bible where the desire is condemned precisely because the desire is part and parcel of what will get us to get a move on and get married.

But if anything we do falls short of love of God and love of others then we ought to stop it. Sexual desire is not against love – if we think that then we'll simply never manage to get it under control. Sexual desire is not forbidden. But what is? This is now when we have to speak openly about masturbation, fantasy, and pornography.

Let's first get one thing out of the way: these three things are not really all the same thing. The mechanical act of masturbation is something that can be used to heighten the pleasure of watching pornography or a fantasy, but that doesn't make masturbation in itself a forbidden sexual act any more than it makes any body part sinful. There's no such thing as a sinful body part – there's only body parts used sinfully.

So let's look at each one separately. Firstly, masturbation is a sexual act but it's not necessarily a sinful one. It depends on context. If a guy goes to a doctor and is asked for a sperm sample, would it be evil for him to give the doctor one? If someone can masturbate without sexual fantasy, is it still a sin? Why? What would make it a sin?

The Bible never mentions masturbation *anywhere*. In fact the only time we can see something along the lines mentioned is when God says that when a man has an 'emission' (Leviticus 15:16,18,32; 22:4; Deuteronomy 23:10). Medically speaking it's true that men have nocturnal emissions (what we call a 'wet dream') and it's usually (but not always) accompanied by a sex dream. It's pretty normal and just the body's way of getting rid of the sperm it has produced.

Masturbation coupled with pornography, however, is a very different thing; and masturbation coupled with fantasy something else too. Jesus addresses both the fantasy element and pornography element in Matthew 5:27 – 30. Given that pornography encourages you to desire for

another person sexually who may actually be someone else's spouse (and even if they aren't, they're not anyone you can marry) and given that pornography is prone to inciting and encouraging violent, unhealthy and unrealistic views of sex; and given that pornography is really a kind of prostitution; and given that pornography is notorious for being an unjust industry; and given that it has a very real effect on our psychology (there is plenty of science starting showing this to be true) and our body, which has an effect on our family and social life, which has an effect on our society in general (pornography is having a very real effect on our society today – that is also starting to be shown scientifically) there is simply nothing to justify pornography. It's safe to say that pornography simply never goes in the way of love outlined by Jesus but only encourages the exact opposite.

Medically speaking, studies are now showing that pornography even prevents a man from actually desiring a real woman. Pornography is actually not needed, not even for a man who's not "getting any". There's no way to justify it: everything about it simply leads to sin in one form or another.

I'm not referring to simple nude photography or nude art, but to the modern pornography machine. And it's true that even nude photography is probably something that most men will find difficult to look at without wanting to move right on to pornography. But each person can make up their own mind about that.

So now let's talk about sexual fantasy. Let's get this out of the way: masturbation without fantasy is not impossible. The only reason why it may seem difficult is because we equate masturbation with sin and then think, "Well if I'm going to sin I might as well just do it properly." The fact that some people can masturbate without fantasy and other people can't simply means that some can and some can't, but it doesn't mean that masturbation is wrong. But I do realise that, truth be told, if masturbation was merely just a biological bodily release we certainly wouldn't even be talking about it here (and it wouldn't even be a topic of debate). It would be about as interesting as discussing someone's loo habits. The fact that it

is a topic of debate lends some suspicion on it.

Motives are the important player here. Some people say masturbation helps them to stop looking at porn. Others say it makes their pornography problems worse. You really have to decide for yourself.

Sexual fantasy, if we are going to classify it narrowly as 'thinking about sex' as opposed to 'thinking about sex with someone in particular' is not really wrong (if it was we would have to claim that sex is wrong or evil). This is probably controversial, but the Scriptures are always positive about sex and so it shouldn't be an evil thing to think about sex. God created it, after all, and it's beautiful. It should be no different, really, to thinking about a beautiful sunset or the wonders of the sea.

Sexual fantasy, if we mean fantasizing about having sex with a specific person – whether we know them or saw them on the street – is not helpful, is probably going to become a problem for you and your relationship with that person, and is probably going to lead to sin when opportunity arises (if someone at a party offers you sex, are you ready to say no? If you spend a lot of time fantasizing about strangers on the street, saying no will be very difficult for you).

That person you fantasize about may not be married now but they will be one day, and what are you going to do then? Continue to fantasize about them? What's the point of fantasizing about someone who you will never have? The point is sin, that's what. Other than that there's no real point.

Our thoughts should line up with how we should live. Our imagination has a way of making us want to really do whatever we imagine – in other words, you will find yourself less able to restrain yourself. Also, you couldn't fantasize about having a bunch of partners and claim you are not lusting because you're just 'thinking about sex'. You're not just thinking about sex and that's obvious. Our thought life must line up to God's word as much as our real lives do.

Complete avoidance makes it worse

Some people advocate complete avoidance – no masturbation, no thinking about sex, no acknowledging sexual desire, and turning a blind eye to anything remotely attractive. But this makes matters much worse – you are trying to subdue a natural desire for one, and secondly when you finally cave in you're probably going to just go all out and binge on pornography, leading to an unhealthy lifestyle that will bring many different unwanted consequences. Why not just acknowledge the desire and be wise and godly in what you do about it? And best of all: why not just get on with getting married if you are unable to remain single?

God doesn't appear to be into classifying every part of morality. He wants to rather work in relationship with us - so work it out with Him. The reality is this: don't fall for the world's licentiousness where absolutely everything is okay and everyone else is just an old-fashioned prude, and don't fall for Christian asceticism where nothing – not even desire – is okay and the entire world is evil. This is living under Law, which we'll get to in a moment. There is a middle road you can walk and that road is freedom and grace. Jesus said "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:30.)

In the words of Martin Luther:

"Therefore he says plainly [Matthew 11:30]: If thou lookest upon a woman to lust after her, thou hast committed adultery with her in thy heart. He does not forbid your looking at her; for he is speaking to those who must live in the world among the people, as the whole previous teaching of this chapter and also that which follows abundantly shows. But he means that we are to separate from each other the looking and the lusting.

"You may look, indeed, at any woman or man; but only be careful that there be no lusting. For to this end God has ordained that every one should have his own wife or her own husband, so that every one may properly gratify both lust and desire. If you do not go beyond this you have

his sanction, and he adds his blessing to it, and is satisfied with it, as his ordinance and creature. But if you go beyond this, and are not satisfied with what God has given you, but go lusting and gaping after others, then you have already gone too far, and have confounded the two, so that the looking is spoiled by the lusting..."

"So you understand when looking at a woman is sin, or is not sin, namely, that one is not to look at another as every one is to look at his wife."⁵

What do we do when we fall?

Now we're going to get into some theological matters to help us with sexual sin, because we are going to fall into it in some way or another. In fact, the more we try to subdue it or stop it, the worse things often get. So what do we do?

Firstly, we know that the Christian life is lived in God's grace and by the Spirit, not the Law. What does this mean? We'll explain in a moment.

Secondly, we have to know that God is changing us and sanctifying us. His goal is to sanctify us completely. (1 Thessalonians 5:23.)

We'll get to these in more detail below. God has a remarkable way of turning sin on its head: every time you fall you are reminded that you are to rely on Jesus' work for your salvation and not on your own. Use the opportunity to be awed by God's amazing grace that he would save you. The process of becoming holy (sanctified) isn't a fly-by-night process. God isn't in a rush.

God's grace, not Law

5 Martin Luther's *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*. Translated by Charles A. Hay, D. D. Public domain. Available at <http://www.godrules.net/library/luther/37luther0.htm>, last accessed May 2014.

"For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law--I stopped trying to meet all its requirements--so that I might live for God." (Galatians 2:19.)

This verse in the NLT summarises what Paul is getting to in Galatians (and Romans 6, 7 and 8) quite nicely.

Romans 7:4 reiterates: "So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God."

We live by God's grace, not Law. Law not only means certain commandments of the Old Testament, but all the commandments of the Old Testament. It also refers to any religious code whatsoever.

While sexual lust is wrong we don't stop doing it because it's wrong and against God's moral law, we stop doing it because we are filled by the Spirit of God and have been given new desires – desires which now want to align with God's love. Sexual lust is not love. If we want to love, we don't do it.

But don't ever try and use the flesh to stop the flesh. In other words, you don't stop by trying in your own strength, you stop by living in the Spirit of God – which means you stop by no longer living under Law but living under God's grace.

"My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die." (Galatians 2:20.21.)

The Christian life is a miracle. By God's grace and Spirit – by the miracle of the new birth – we've been given new desires. Even if you still find you have some of your old desires, the truth is you've also been given

new desires. But the minute you try and live your new desires out in your own strength, or as soon as you try and use any kind of law or religious code to live them out, you stop living by the Spirit and start living by the Law, which doesn't work. In fact, it makes you sin more.

"When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death. But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit." (Romans 7:5,6).

How do you stop living under the Law and by the Spirit? By resting in God and looking back at his completed work on the cross where you've been forgiven *forever, regardless of what you do in the future*, and where God has also promised to do a *complete sanctifying work*, so that your desires will change so completely, over time, that the old desires will be no more.

"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" (Galatians 5:22, 23.)

Notice that it's the *Holy Spirit* who produces all this fruit in you, not you. The minute you try and do this yourself you put yourself under law and short-circuit the whole process. This is when you're no longer living by the Spirit. But when you live by the Spirit then you put to death the deeds of the flesh (Romans 8:13).

The faith we have in God is that his grace is always sufficient. Christ's work has done it all and will do it all.

"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again." (1 Thessalonians 5:23.)

God has promised us an inheritance – a complete sanctifying work in this life. This is the same as the rest he promises us in Hebrews 4. Make every effort to enter God's rest – don't fall into unbelief but live in faith. Unbelief is when you put yourself under law or some programme or philosophy to get things done. But faith is when you know that his grace is sufficient and his power more than able to sort out all your desires to be only desires for Him.

If you sin tomorrow it doesn't matter – he still loves you and abides with you. It actually doesn't matter whether you sin or not, what matters is Christ crucified. Strangely, once you decide that your sin makes no difference to your relationship with God, your sin starts to go away, because you stop living under law and start living by faith and in the Spirit! That's the strange miracle of the Christian life!

So when you are tempted say, "Lord, I know that if I do that thing I'll be forgiven." Because you will be. Nothing will separate you from God's love. (Romans 8: 31 – 39.)

"And now, may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, equip you with *all you need for doing His will*. May He produce in you, through the power of Jesus Christ, *all that is pleasing to Him*." (Hebrews 13:20, 21.)

Indeed he will! In fact, he will save you to the uttermost! (Hebrews 7:25.) He will root out the sin from your life!⁶

As mentioned earlier, Romans 6:22 says "Now you *are free* from the power of sin and *have become* slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life." (Romans 6:22.)

Fear

⁶ In my book *Holy Sin* I expand on all this in considerable detail. See www.ryanpeterwrites.com

Therefore, we need not fear the devil or temptation or sin. Jesus has dealt with it all! We need not fear God's judgement and we need not fear any suffering that might come under temptation, and we need not fear that we're missing out on anything! Perfect love casts out fear! (1 John 4:18.)

Sex is wonderful but it really isn't everything. God gives us much more. He promises to "Meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19 NIV). The fires of God's love are able to engulf and overthrow the fires of the body, even though the fires of the body are not evil. God gives us everything we need for life and godliness. (2 Peter 1:3.)

Purity

Do not think that we must be pure to know God. The truth is the opposite – we must know God to be pure. Don't think that you need to be pure before you can pray – the truth is, you must pray to become pure. The Lord never asked us to be strong and able, He has told us (and instructed, commanded, urged and willed) for us to go to Him and let Him live through us. Stop trying to do this without the Lord, as if He is giving you points for something. God isn't interested in being impressed with your willpower. All He wants is you, and for you to rely on His work, past, present, and future.

Whether we are single or married, we have to deal with sexual sin the same way. Marriage does help our sexual desire – God has created it that way and uses our sexual drives to get us to get married. But Jesus went under all the temptations we do. (Hebrews 2:18.) He overcame them. He lives in us. We are changed. We will be changed.

Chapter 8

How singles celebrate sex

Huh?

Yes, you can celebrate sex when you're single, and not by having sex! God wants his people to walk in love and sex before marriage falls short of the revolutionary way of the Kingdom and is actually worse off for you in the long run. God isn't out to spoil our fun. In fact, he wants to make life more fun, and this is one way he does it.

Even if you are in love, sex before marriage is not the way of expressing that love. It doesn't matter how sincere you are – sex before marriage does damage. The right thing at the wrong time is the wrong thing. Sex in marriage alone is the proper expression of that love because it has freedom to be love. There is extraordinary joy waiting for us if we accept God's way in this.

As singles we celebrate marriage and thus celebrate sex. So let's talk about sex before marriage first so we can get an understanding on how we honour sex properly.

Covenant comes first

In the first chapters of Genesis we see that God's intention is for covenant to be in place before sex takes place. Sex consummates the covenant, it doesn't create the covenant. You don't consummate and then decide if you want to covenant because the consummation was good! That's having it backwards.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 1:24 NIV)

They are to become one flesh, from being two, and there is no mention of them becoming two again and then becoming one with someone else later. Once you're one, you're *one*. (We're focusing on singleness here – there's no space to get into divorce in detail.)

I see marriage like two droplets. They are completely separate and individual. But if one droplet falls on another, both droplets form into one droplet and you can't separate them. If you take a knife and try to separate the droplet back into two, you can't. If you freeze it and melt it back down, it will remain one. If you freeze it and cut in half, you might have two, but the two pieces will still have a part of each other inside and part of them. So it is with marriage. Sex is a bodily expression of a spiritual reality. The two have become one, "and let no one separate them" (Matthew 19:6). Even if you try to separate them, they will always carry a piece of the other within them just like the droplet. Once they have become one flesh they cannot again become two. Marriage is really designed to keep them as one. This, too, is a mystery: but certainly a beautiful one.

"Drink water from your own well- share your love only with your wife. Why spill the water of your springs in public, having sex with just anyone? You should reserve it for yourselves. Don't share it with strangers. Let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you. Rejoice in the wife of your youth. She is a loving doe, a graceful deer. Let her breasts

satisfy you always. May you always be captivated by her love. Why be captivated, my son, with an immoral woman, or embrace the breasts of an adulterous woman?" (Proverbs 5:15.)

The Bible's language to describe sex between spouses here is wonderful. Firstly, it says we should "share your love only with your wife." Of course, the principle is for woman too - share your love only with your husband. Plus, men are to lead, so the command is to the man so that he can lead it and not allow a woman to fall into adultery or fornication with him. So it mentions nothing of 'girlfriends' or 'true-loves' or 'soul-mates'. It mentions spouse only.

Secondly, it refers to sexual strength (or sex) as water. This gives the impression that it is a refreshing, satisfying, clean thing (plus, it also fits my description of the two droplets earlier). It says "let your wife be a fountain of blessing for you." In other words, sex should be a blessing, not an ensnarement or addiction. It was designed to be *refreshing*. When it becomes anything else it's not what God designed it to be.

We celebrate sex as singles by knowing that it is refreshing. It says 'let *her* breasts satisfy you always.' So we see that God supports sex and that we should be *satisfied* in our spouse's bodies. This is part of his beautiful design in marriage.

"May you always be captivated by her love." The word 'captivated' is a wonderful contribution to the imagery God is creating here - He supports the idea of just losing ourselves in each other - captivated, enthralled, by our love for each other. The word bursts forth images of 'captivity,' of being bonded to each other alone. If we are captivated by one we cannot be captivated by another. We get married because we are captivated by this one - not another. We cannot escape. We don't want to! Be captivated and enjoy the breasts of your *wife*. Not your girlfriend, or your 'true-love' or your 'lover' or your 'soul-mate' but your *wife*. Obviously, God is saying to women to let their *husband* and their husband *only* be the one who enjoys their undressed beauty.

As we will see, God uses marriage and sex as an illustration of the love of Christ for His church. Can you see something wonderful in this text? This verse is also telling us to be *captivated* by God's love. God's love is therefore also *refreshing*.

There is also more, because if husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25) then we can say that it is not just us that are captivated by the love of Christ but also that Christ is captivated by *our* love. So much so that He laid His life down for us. Plus, it means that we all share a certain exclusive intimacy with God – we all have our own relationship with Him. (We'll talk more about how Christ loves the church a little later.)

Proverbs 5 now goes further to speak of the results of sex outside of marriage.

"For the Lord sees clearly what a man does, examining every path he takes. An evil man is held captive by his own sins, they are ropes that catch and hold him. He will die for lack of self-control, he will be lost because of his incredible folly." (Proverbs 5:21.)

There's that word 'captive' again. But this time the man is not captivated by his love for his wife but by sin. He is sin's prisoner, a slave to sin. When did this happen? It was when he decided to indulge his desires (which have been placed and put inside of him by God) in an ungodly and disobedient way. Therefore, God commands we be satisfied by our spouses alone because anything *outside* of that will cause us to be captive to *sin*. The so-called forbidden fruit as it were takes us captive and only God can rescue us from it. But, if we go to God to rescue us, we must then confess that what we did was sin and turn around and follow in His ways.

Sex before marriage enslaves us to sin. It soon moves from expressing love to something else entirely. God created sex within the covenant of marriage so that we will not be held captive by sin but rather

'captivated' with each other in love. **We celebrate sex by not letting sin take us captive but by letting God take us captive, and being captivated by our spouse when we get married.**

"Keep the marriage bed pure" (Hebrews 13:4 NIV). The Message says, "honour marriage, and guard the sacredness of sexual intimacy between wife and husband."

The whole picture of marriage and sex is the very description and illustration God uses to describe the relationship between the Church and Jesus. One day the Church, which is us (the Bride of Christ – Revelation 19: 7-9) will marry Jesus. This is another reason why God views this whole thing as very sacred. If sex is a picture of the intimacy between the Church and Christ, then it ought to also be enjoyed within covenant.

Outside of marriage, sex is a premature bond between two people. It's too early for the relationship to handle the intensity of sex, and this is what allows many fears and insecurities to step in. Inside of marriage, our sacred vows to each other and God causes the relationship to be at a level where it can manage the kind of intensity involved with sex. Sex becomes an expression of love, truly, within the bonds of marriage. The intimacy is made greater because of the greater trust. Outside of marriage it is all too easy to just break up and never work on the relationship, because there are no covenant vows keeping us together. Also sex within marriage – within that kind of trust and promise – actually does mean better sex. Many studies have shown this to be the case. I believe them.

We celebrate sex by allowing it to be free. Outside of marriage, it isn't free, inside of marriage, it is. Outside of marriage it always becomes something else, inside of marriage it always becomes something better.

Up to now we've spent a great deal speaking about what sex isn't (pornography etc.) and what we *shouldn't* do. It's time to move to the positive. We need to talk about what it *is*, because only then can we celebrate it healthily and let it have its place in the business of life. Some

of us have had our culture and pornography and so on form our view of sex and we need to let all those ideas fall away so that we can get on with enjoying our life.

Celebrating sex is celebrating the good thing God created and guarding it because it is so precious and good. Effectively, by not having sex before marriage, we are saying that sex is precious and a treasure worth keeping safe.

I didn't talk about sex in the chapter on love because although sex is an expression of love to our spouse, love is much more than sex. Love is also the bigger, or higher, factor here. Sex is such a big deal in this world and has been exalted to an almost 'god-like' status in some places. But in reality sex is just a part of a much more awesome and wonderful thing.

'Holy Matrimony' and 'sacred singleness?'

So although sex is to be enjoyed within the sacred vows of marriage that doesn't mean that it cannot be celebrated outside these vows. Celebration doesn't mean that we experience it ourselves but it means we raise a glass to toast it as a wonderful creation of God. We give God glory when we acknowledge sex, not as something dirty, but as something wonderful, pure and beautiful. We live our lives, not ignoring it, but agreeing with God that it is good. But how we live this out practically might not be obvious, given our cultural influences.

It's called holy matrimony for a reason. I wish we would use terms like that more these days. They help to reform the image in our minds of just how important marriage is to God and should be to us. It is not some passing feeling or emotion. It is a decision, a life commitment, to each other and to God. It is a commitment to God saying 'this marriage will be built and lived out to give God glory.' It's also saying 'these two people have been brought together by God.' The marriage is dedicated to holiness and God's glory, with gratitude to God for bringing it together. It's a pointer, an illustration, a picture of the holy love Christ has for us, His

church.

Does this mean singleness isn't sacred? No, absolutely not. The early Christians had a great phrase for singleness. They called it 'holy virginity.' This doesn't mean you don't qualify if you have had sex before, but it means you've now dedicated your sexuality to God alone. I like to call it sacred singleness so no one gets hung up on the fact that they may no longer be virgins (although, they can now live as one!). Our sexuality is holy and understanding that gets us excited about living a pure single life – this is an area that is going to contribute to our healing and to giving the God of the universe glory.

There is something incredibly beautiful, deep and mysterious about this sort of dedication. And there is something incredibly beautiful, deep and mysterious about sex. They're just different. The sacredness of our singleness is something I think most of the Church these days needs to give more attention.

Both marriage and singleness are there for the *same* primary purpose: to give God glory and extend His Kingdom of love. Kingdom is nothing but joy! What a call God has given us!

More ways to celebrate

If we keep sex as something that lives only within the covenant of marriage it helps sex itself to be seen as something mysterious, exciting, and full of anticipation. Our bodies are reserved for one and one only... there is a beauty and excitement in this that the world cannot match. God's very idea of guarding our sexuality helps to increase our own excitement of sex once we get to enjoy it. Sex is certainly at its very most best, and can only get better, when shared for the first time on our wedding night. It is the opening of a whole new chapter in our relationship with the one we've fallen so deeply in love with. If there was no anticipation, no mystery, where is the excitement of the wedding night? Gone out the window on the third date, in our lonely apartment, on a night

that can never be repeated again.

We celebrate sex by keeping this anticipation going. Also, if we hold such a high view of sex then we are celebrating it, even if we're not having it. We're showing the world that there is a better way. Sex is supposed to be refreshing and mysterious.

Sex is also used by God so we can know Him more fully. Maybe you think that's a strange idea, but Romans 11:36 says, "everything comes from Him; everything exists by His power and is intended for His glory." The way a husband and wife come together describes the mysterious union with Christ that God has established by His Spirit in us, and that he is growing and maturing in us. As single people, we don't experience that intimacy with another person, but married people don't get to enjoy the experience the committing of their sexuality to God alone. There is something *different* about this that is difficult to describe.

"As the Scriptures say, 'a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one." (Ephesians 5:31.)

So we celebrate sex by not indulging in it prematurely and by guarding it against misuse. We celebrate it by keeping it for marriage.

"God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." (Hebrews 13:4.) Corrupting the picture that God has chosen to use to describe his relationship with His Church is very serious indeed. We are not only sinning against our own bodies, or sinning against others by mistreating them in sexual lust (and not loving them, and therefore contributing to the darkness of the world), but we are distorting the very illustration God is wanting to use to show His ultimate plan for us. So, in the end, married couples enjoying sex together glorifies God; and single people abstaining from sex glorifies God.

We celebrate sex by how we elevate the human form. The body was designed to be good and glorify God. Yes, it may seem a little strange, but also the 'less presentable' parts of the body are designed to give God glory.

This helps us understand the higher use of the body – why it is so attractive in the first place. Also, it helps us to understand that there aren't any parts of our body which are dirty or offensive to God. God made our body pure through and through. Humankind is a fallen race but the design of our bodies is pure and holy; and Christ saving us makes us righteous - body and all - to God. Therefore, this body - less presentable bits too - can be presented to God as a living sacrifice. (This is a great help when dealing with sexual lust.)

"Therefore, I urge you ... in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship." (Romans 12:1 NIV.) **By offering our bodies as living sacrifices, we celebrate sex.**

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2 NIV.) We need to have our minds renewed with regards to how we *see* the *whole* body *and* sexuality.

"Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honour God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:18-20.)

We elevate the body. We say that God Himself – the creator of the universe – lives in it. People who think Christians are prudes and ashamed of the body have it wrong. **We aren't ashamed of the body because we insist the body shouldn't be shamed!** Our modern culture shames the body with its views of sex. If you are ashamed of your body, stop it. Ask God to let you see what He sees – He created us and said it was very

good. (Genesis 1:31.) God created us in His own image! Our bodies represent the beauty, mystery, excitement, anticipation and thrill of God.

When you see someone incredibly attractive walking at the mall – and guys, you happen to spot certain parts of the body that are more 'exciting...' - remember that the body was designed to show you something about God. Consider what that is. Consider how what your attraction to this body is actually saying about God. Really – let's have God sanctify our thoughts at all times. I'm not saying we should stare at bodies all day, but I am saying we find beauty attractive and if we see a poster on the side of the road exposing a body more than what it should, we can see that body as a reflection of *purity* and not a reflection of something *dirty*. We can also understand that our own attraction to it is actually pure at its core, regardless of how we and others may corrupt it. What we do with that attraction (or, how we start thinking afterwards) is where we either *lust* or we *love*. God created the body attractive because the body is created in His image. The body is to remind us of God: Remember, His initial plan was to have us walk around naked. It was only after Adam and Eve sinned that they had to cover up their bodies in shame. Surely, He is saying something very important to us through the body!

God celebrates it!

The single person celebrates sex because God celebrates it. We celebrate it in the ways God does: by keeping it pure; by praising Him for His creation; by guarding it; by regarding it as pure and beautiful. We celebrate it by understanding that it is a precious gift. By committing our sexuality and bodies fully to God, we witness to the world that God is better than the experience of sex; and we witness to the world that sex is sacred. We celebrate it by abstaining, because we're an example to others that sex is such a wonderful gift that it *must* and *should* be guarded and kept holy and intimate.

The same way that you wouldn't park your brand new sports car in the rain and hail, but rather keep it in the garage where it can be safe and

protected from damage, so should our attitude to sex be. By keeping it pure it's always shiny and new when we take it out of the garage. When we finally get married, our testimony from when we were single continues to produce fruit in our sex lives as married people.

Because our treasure is Christ and our passion is the Glory of God we are able to suffer under any bodily temptations with joy and gratitude in our hearts, because we know that by keeping sex sacred we are bringing glory to God - who is our true treasure and joy. Indeed, we are living sacred singleness. Guarding our own sexuality brings us closer to God because we experience His ability to provide for us a greater joy and satisfaction by His Spirit. We become utterly reliant on Him and He fills us with greater joy. Don't think that God is unable to supply us with more abundant enjoyment in His Spirit than sex could - the fact that He will is precisely the point. Let us pray that God will give us the gifts of joy and fulfilment in purity. Jesus was a chaste man yet He knew God's glory was the greatest pleasure in this and the resurrected life.

Chapter 9

Dating

I hear you. Not another book about dating!

I really don't want to focus on dating but dating is a reality and could be a step towards marriage. Could be. Could not be. It's all very complicated. Or perhaps not. If it is God's will for us to be married, or He wants to move us into marriage, we have to date in some form or another – perhaps you prefer to call it courting or something else, but it is really the same thing. There's no way around this except in the cases of arranged marriages of course! Hmm... but aren't all the marriages in the Bible arranged? Well, it's all about context and culture and there are plenty of things we can say about both of those.

I can't really find something incredibly consistent in the Bible when it comes to finding a spouse. Relationships in the Bible don't always serve as an example for how this should be done – they're all very different and are really pointing to a much larger story.

We might be able to say that God ultimately does "arrange our

marriages" in his sovereignty, but how does He do it? Does He strike you with lightning and write 'the one's' name in the sky? If that's what you're waiting for you're probably going to be waiting forever. Does He wake you up one day in the middle of the night and say 'you need to marry so and so'? For some, maybe; for most, no. Does He expect us to date one after the other until we find the right one? Well, that comes with a heck of a lot of problems. Does He want us to sleep on it, like the illustration of Adam (who was asleep when God made his wife, and brought his wife to him) or does He want, the guys especially, to simply pick someone and pursue them relentlessly? Because – after all – we are to love our wives as Christ loves the church and Christ pursued us even when we wanted nothing to do with Him.

These are questions I don't really know how to answer, especially the last one. Just how much do I, as a guy, leave up to God to sort out, and how much should I actually be the man and go rescue the lady from the evil dragon? (Usually in the form of some other, better looking guy.) Perhaps, I should be doing both, but is that possible?

Perhaps not knowing all the answers is in fact the answer. The fact that I really can't find something consistent in the Bible is actually God saying something important - He doesn't intend for falling in love to be a formula-type process. There is something about falling in love that is meant to be spontaneous, surprising, and altogether original. This is a *story* He wants to write, and He wants to write it differently for all of us.

Falling in love is the point. That might sound overly sentimental or hopelessly romantic, but it's not some new concept. People did fall in love even in the Bible! Whether it be love at first sight; a voice from God; a friendship that develops into romance; a dream about some girl; or just an obvious conclusion that you need to marry that person, the fact is that God wants it to be about falling in love, not about looking for the right formula and playing by the rules. There is an element of danger and surprise and wonder here. Mistakes, believe it or not, *are* actually allowed. At the same time, God – believe it or not – is a part of the process. But of

course we can stop him from being a part of it.

Spotting the extremes

There are two extremes in the Church. Either we see dating like the world does – a casual fling; a just-looking-around-with-no-commitment kind of thing; and so forth, or we have an intense view of dating and courtship that puts things under tremendous strain and just plain awkwardness.

The former view of dating is obviously problematic, but the latter view is the one that gets most Christians in difficulties. So, here are my views (and they really are my views).

Stop being so intense about dating!

I don't think dating was ever supposed to be about holding hands and kissing or talking about your relationship. It's more like a friendship where it's obvious that you're both wondering what it would be like if you were to become more than friends. In other words, it's a step towards what we might call courtship and a step forwards from just being "friends".

Dating is not really courting, in my view. But dating is also not just friendship – it's more than that. Our culture has elevated dating to such a degree that people think it's okay to have sex on the first, second, or third date. The world is 'dating' the way married couples 'date'. But Christians are very much 'dating' the way engaged couples date – as if we're supposed to know the end of it at the beginning! And Christians are 'going out' with each other the way courting couples 'go out,' as if we're supposed to be fully committed until death-do-us-part before we've spent any significant exclusive time with another person! (And might I add, a successful courtship doesn't always end in marriage – the idea was to see how well it would work and if you found out it didn't work, that's a success.)

It almost seems that a significant step has been skipped. If dating is

made too intense we can get hurt easily (and perhaps will avoid it in the future); if dating isn't seen seriously enough we can also get hurt easily (and will perhaps avoid it in the future). So we've got to let it be that step in the middle where we're not sure where it's going but we're going to risk it a bit and find out.

If dating as so intense and serious we throw our hearts and emotions into a relationship that simply wasn't at the level to sustain the pressure. But the problem with dropping dating completely is that it seems to have produced the result (in a lot of cases) where we are just simply over-cautious about who we are seeing and spending time with. I think Christian girls who tend to subscribe to the good-old fashioned idea that the man must initiate (which I think is a very good ideal) are getting frustrated because so many Christian guys are just too darn scared to take a risk, often because of how serious dating has become. The girls think the guys are uninterested, resulting in a lot of girls getting involved with the guys who *will* initiate, who probably have different values to what they do. Some girls even feel that they are simply not attractive enough to Christian guys.

An intense view of dating results in too little dating and guys in this environment just don't learn how to properly relate to a woman one-on-one. I know this from experience. This is unnatural. If they *are* interested in anyone, they simply don't know enough about them to understand how they can initiate a serious relationship. Or any form of relationship, mind you. This is because they don't have much of a relationship with the girl anyway.

The other issue is that it can result in just plain laziness. If God is going to 'bring her to me' (often this idea is built off the scripture in Genesis where God put Adam to sleep and then brought him his wife) then I can just wait around and do nothing. Everything will fall in my lap. This is wrong and hardly how God made men to be. If you like the girl, make a move!

The best advice I ever heard in church was when they asked a seventy-plus year old on his anniversary what he would like to say to single guys and he answered, "Get on with it." God wants men to be proactive and to ultimately love their wives as Christ loves the church – this means for me that we are to love first and pursue our girl, as Christ pursues His bride! Men should take risks and be prepared to look like an idiot. (We're going to look like idiots all of our lives anyway – we may as well get used to it!) Men are supposed to lead. That's what God made us to do. We're supposed to be the knight in shining armour who battles the three-headed-dragon because we know who we want.

I realised fairly late in life that this is part of the reason why the dodgy guys back in school would always get the girls. They didn't mind looking like an idiot and being denied over and again. She would always give in. I could never understand it - even though he had dumped all her friends and treated all of them badly and without respect, the girl would still fall for his charms eventually and - as predicted - he would dump her soon enough leaving her broken-hearted. He knew what he wanted – even if what he wanted didn't include the best intentions – and won her over. Women seem to like being pursued and I don't think its necessary a bad thing. They obviously want to know that they are a precious treasure and worth battling dragons and evil wizards for. And the romantic in me says they are.

Non-exclusivity

Now don't get me wrong, the idea that we can get to know those in our friendship circles and see if we like anyone specific by going out in groups, hanging at church or home groups, or youth groups etc. and doing things together is a good idea. I think this idea is wonderful and proper especially when we're in our teens because it prevents us from falling into the temptations that we should be trying to avoid. When we're in our teens the emotions are running high and we're keen to experiment. This is why most churches are saying 'no dating' to prevent us from getting mixed up emotionally - or even sexually - in our teens. We simply can't date while

in our teens because we're too young to get married. So it makes sense not to be dating while in your teens as the relationship is not going to go anywhere serious any time soon. If you are meant to be together, this will probably happen when you're of age to be married. If you're not going to be together, then dating is certainly not going to help. It will probably ruin a good relationship with that person because now there are bitter feelings and that sort of thing.

We also don't know how to maturely deal with our relationships when we're going through our teens - at least most of us don't. You don't want that baggage, it's simply not worth the experience of having a girlfriend or boyfriend - or the experience of kissing or whatever else. It makes sense to go out as friends in a group and so you start getting to know each other.

However, practically this gets more difficult as we get older. Doing all sorts of things together at church and other places is a great way to get to know people... to a point. But as our friends start getting married the circle of single people gets smaller. (If you're always hanging around married people you're not going to be very successful at meeting single people.) As we get older we start having work and study commitments. Perhaps this incorporates some hectic travelling. You begin to hang out less in groups simply by default and friendships take more effort, meaning it's far more difficult to let anything romantic grow out of a friendship. Dating now becomes more practical.

While I was writing this book I was in a shopping mall and overheard a woman say to a friend, "To be honest, I'm not interested in hearing any preaching about dating in the church anymore. It's not a rebellious thing or anything like that, it's just that I'm tired of it. I just want to get out and meet people, so if an attractive guy asks me out on a date I'm not going to say no."

Dating has become so serious and intense in some church circles that we might think it's some mortal sin to go out on a one-on-one with

someone of the opposite sex if we're not sure if we're going to marry them! And a lot of church people put enough pressure on people if they do go out to define what the relationship is about and what the intentions are... and when the wedding date is. We can't live under this kind of scrutiny, it's not healthy.

We're never going to really know if we should marry someone if all we are is just friends and then we suddenly jump to "courting". For some people that jump may seem right and natural, for others there needs to be something inbetween. That's what dating is. You're seeing each other but you're not courting yet. And sure, for some people there is such a thing as love at first sight, but usually only one person feels that way and the other needs a bit of time. What we need is to create enough space to find out. Dating doesn't mean kissing – dating means deciding that you want to go to that level.

Dating isn't really supposed to be as romantic as courting. That's fine – let the romance grow and when the relationship is ready, let the courting and that part of the romance begin. There needn't be defined lines but maybe defined lines work for you. Getting to know someone – which is what you're trying to do in dating – means you spend time together exclusively to see if there is space for the relationship to grow into something more romantic. Do whatever seems natural for the relationship for wherever it is. Give the relationship space and give God space. This isn't about doing everything "the right way" this is about doing everything maturely and with honesty and integrity and with love under God's loving care and direction. Listen to the Spirit in your relationships.

'Friendship' dating is a bit lame and superficial. Plus, it's open to the 'really good friends' debate. You know – "we're *really* good friends." Whatever. You guys are dating! "No we're not, we're just good friends! That go out a lot... often exclusively... and enjoy each other's company a lot... and, like to laugh with each other... a lot... we're just good friends okay?" Six months later, wedding bells. Quite honestly, they should have just admitted that they really were interested in each other. They were

dating, fair and square. No use in hiding it, just be open about it.

Sisters and brothers

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that anyone in the body of Christ are 'really good friends.' The body of Christ talks about family – brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. Therefore, as Paul says to Timothy– '...treat the younger woman with all purity as your own sisters.' (1 Tim 5:2.)

This of course helps us to understand the kind of purity we should be approaching in our relationships. It also helps us to understand how we should relate to one another. If we really, truly, and honestly see each other as brothers and sisters things go to a new level. Brothers and sisters talk to each other and do things together. Sometimes, even alone. Purity doesn't mean no relationship. Brothers and sisters should be able to relate easily to one another – openly, honestly, unconditionally. And God is the one who'll bring two people's hearts together in a more romantic way. Purity is not denying that someone is attractive. Purity is about respect and love- in our *hearts*, our *minds*, and with our *bodies*.

So I think there should really be some real honesty and communication in this. If you are feeling that you are becoming romantically inclined toward someone – speak to your pastor and let them know (they are the shepherds of your church and deserve to know) and then talk to the person! Even if it's clear they don't feel the same. I think this is good, because then there is always honesty, and always understanding, and real communication happening.

But, what do you do if you both feel that God might be doing something here? I say 'might' because it is perhaps, quite often, not abundantly clear. Perhaps then, you should be 'going out' – hanging out, getting to know each other a little better. Not entirely exclusively, but at least a little more than you might with other people. And perhaps, even, at times, just the two of you. This is what I mean about dating.

It's not the same for everyone – keep it that way

So when have we moved from dating to courting? Is it okay for me to think my sister's body is attractive? Well, you probably do already – but the chapters on sex cover this in detail. See, if we're not careful, we really do get into defining everything and living our romantic lives in a rules-by-rules basis. Meanwhile, like I said earlier, God intended for us to *fall* in love. What does that mean? Well, *falling* in love means that there is a certain mystery to this process. Sometimes it could be immediate – love at first sight. Sometimes it can be slower and can't be defined or understood straight away. It could be a friendship that develops into something else. Sometimes, there may be no feelings whatsoever and suddenly there are. Sometimes, God tells the one person that they are going to marry that person and not the other. Sometimes, He tells both of them at the same time and they fall in love instantly. Sometimes, He tells both of them and they both quite dislike each other, and God changes their hearts over time. Sometimes, the minute the guy walked into the room she just knew he was the one. Sometimes, a guy knows a girl, and really likes a girl, and he has to wait years before she makes a decision about him.

There are millions of stories out there: Good friends as kids, moved away, met up in a mall years later and fell in love. God told her in a dream. God gently nudged him in the right direction. There simply is no telling what God is going to do – and that is the point! The idea of falling in love usually means that it was a surprise, it was unplanned, and sometimes even took some time before the couple even realised that they were in love.

As a side note, it's perhaps a little more healthy to see 'falling in love' as a process of two people rather than just one. I know that sometimes a girl has 'fallen in love' with a guy who doesn't really even know her name, and God tells her to wait for him. Sometimes that happens. But, for me here, and to help my analogy here I think that if you have *truly* fallen in love, then what that means is that two people have fallen in love. The process of two people growing in affection for one another – whether it was at first sight or over time. Not the idea of when a girl likes a guy, or even 'loves' him. She may have 'fallen in love' *with him*,

but she hasn't 'fallen in love.' He hasn't fallen *with* her. *With* is the word. Together. When it is one sided, then it *can* be weird. So 'falling in love' is truly the process when two people grow in affection towards each other – and this also implies that falling in love doesn't culminate in marriage – it happens for the rest of our lives. In other words, this thing takes time.

We need to relax, take it easy, let God do His thing, and be mature and make mature decisions about our relationships. But by relax I don't mean we just let things run wild and before you know it you have a kid on the way! I think by now it should be clear that this is not what I mean!

Premature romance

Premature romance is what I think we should be trying to avoid in our relationships. It causes a kind of awkwardness and intensity that seems to take the fun out of falling in love away. We've got to watch our romantic feelings and let them grow in proportion to the relationship.; You see, I think we can spoil the natural development of a friendship with romantic feelings. "...We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5.) Watch your thoughts a little bit – I'm not just talking about sexual lust, I'm talking about how much we think of someone or romance with them. We've got to watch our daydreams. If our thoughts are becoming so consumed by romantic daydreaming, especially about a specific someone, we start building our romantic feelings for them - plus, we are building an image in our minds of the kind of person they are, which could be (and probably is) far removed from the reality. This whole thought process can make us very intense when we are around them, or if we are going out on a date with them. Perhaps we're waiting for them to respond in a particular way and they don't. We start thinking all sorts of things, meanwhile they're behaving perfectly normally. Plus, we might even start finding ourselves jealous when they are getting along well with someone else, or getting to know someone else better as well. The keyword is *expectations*. Make sure your expectations are realistic for where the relationship is at! You don't want to put someone under your unrealistic expectations!

Now, at the same time I'm not ruling out the idea that both of you could have fallen in love with each other at first sight. This is entirely possible. If this is the case you would obviously start your 'friendship' with a high level of romance as it is. But, I think you just need to make sure it is not premature in its intensity and that's really what I'm trying to get to here.

No one is a bad Christian or has a bad relationship with God if they are not able to hear God tell them clearly who it is they are going to marry. In some church circles, we have to know everything. People tend to subscribe to this view that God is going to tell them flat out and then they can go for it. This is simply not going to happen for everyone, so we need to deal with this as maturely as we can and understand that God works in a unique way with each of us and has a unique plan for each of us.

You'll see me mention in the final chapter on God's will what was a startling revelation for me – God is our Father, not our Oracle. He wants to teach and guide us and build a relationship with us. He seems far less interested in telling us our future, who we're going to marry, where we're going to work, than He does in the actual journey of getting us there – because its in the journey He builds relationship with us, not in fortune-telling.

Law dating

Now, with my views on dating, let me be clear: I'm not saying date three people at once! Date with integrity. There are many people who think we should date whoever we want whenever we want as much as we want. They say they want to 'get to know what I want' but this kind of dating actually limits freedom, it doesn't enhance it.

Our relationships with the opposite sex, in this thinking, can have the dangerous tendency of either being 'plutonic friend' or 'girlfriend / boyfriend.' But what happened to *sister*? We only know shallow or deep.

Meanwhile, the body of Christ is about family – deep, meaningful relationships. This kind of dating is often governed by secret rules that we need to learn to navigate the world of love. I'm quite oblivious to the rules of love and happy to stay that way. I want to fall in love, not play by the rules.

I'm falling in love

So let me end off this chapter with what it is I'm trying to get across in this book: Let's give God the freedom and space to have us fall in love. Allow romance to grow as the relationship grows. Allow romance to mature as the relationship matures. Make decisions when the right time and situation calls for it. At all times 'keep in step with the Spirit' and have God guide the relationship to where He is intending to guide it. Song of Songs 4:5 says, "Not to awaken love until the time is right." God is glorified when He is the one that caused you to fall in love, in a unique way, and awakened love at the right time.

Do you think you will find this difficult? Do you find it difficult to rein in your heart? Or difficult to give your heart? Do you find it difficult to date or even speak to the opposite sex? Or do you find it difficult to never be dating anyone?

We all do and the problem is very often that we've made an idol of romance. And that's what the next chapter is about.

Chapter 10

Romance

Sex is romantic. But romance is not sex. It's called "climax" not just because of sex but also because of all the foreplay beforehand, and because of all the romance before the foreplay. Romance encourages foreplay although it doesn't automatically lead into it, of course. But this is why I think too much romance too early in a relationship is out of place, even if it doesn't go any further. It's just that it can make things too intense too early. Romance is intense, but fun. So is kissing. You should see where I'm going with this. The problem with romance is that if you indulge in it too soon you could be trying to manufacture love too soon, causing the relationship to fall into a situation where you can be incredibly romantic with each other but have no friendship to fall back on. Romance is fun when it has developed out of a friendship (because we always end up having the most fun with our best friends). Romance can be way too intense when it has not developed from a friendship because you don't know each other well enough to know if the other person finds your jokes funny, enjoys your company, enjoys your mannerisms and quirks, and understands your mood swings. So, you begin to worry about the way you

act etc. and you're scared to be yourself - you're too worried about whether you make the right impression. This places unnecessary strain on the relationship and takes the fun out of the romance. All that's left is the intensity, which develops an awkwardness.

Of course, I've already said I support dating – but in dating you are building a friendship as well as a romantic relationship. As I mentioned in the previous chapter I do get this idea about waiting for love to develop naturally (and by God's direction) from the Bible in Song of Songs 2:7 "Do not *arouse* or *awaken* love until it so desires." (Also seen in Song of Songs 3:5 and 8:4.) We do ourselves a great injustice, actually, when we want to enjoy the feelings and excitement of romance too early in a relationship.

I love being in love

Ever heard the phrase "I love being in love?" This is what I mean by the idol of romance - it's a love of romance, not a love of the other person (necessarily). This is the main reason why most of us want to be in love. We want romance and the feeling and experience of falling in love, but we're not entirely concerned (at first) with who this will be. As long as they are able to satisfy what we feel is attractive or meet our emotional need. But the main thing that causes us have the hang-ups and issues in this area is we're chasing after 'love' (romance) instead of chasing after the one who God wants us to love (which is, firstly, himself!).

I call it idolatry because we can become so consumed with this idea that we run our lives on it. Everything is about 'finding the one'. We're always thinking about it, wondering about it, petitioning God to bring it to us, and basing most of our decisions on it. If we become so totally consumed by it then we aren't seeking first the kingdom. It's become an idol.

"Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and *thoughts* will also be." (Matthew 6:21.)

Romantic thinking causes our feelings for a particular person to grow, and if we don't know them well enough, too much can develop an image of them in our minds that is probably completely out of touch with reality. We of course know that we're only daydreaming, but our thinking almost 'trains' us to react or see them in certain ways.

If our thoughts are consumed by romance there is idolatry involved. I've experienced this: Liked a girl, thought about her a lot, began to think all sorts of romantic things about her and so on. Simple stuff actually, like "Sheesh, I love the way her fringe falls slightly over her left eye like that," or "She's so pretty when she laughs like that." These thoughts are all internal – but if I had to tell any of these romantic thoughts to her, she'd probably think I'm some sort of obsessive freak. Why? Because she hardly knows me and I hardly know her. This kind of thinking was just way out of place and way too premature. It's okay to be thinking about that kind of thing later (and, it should be encouraged!) But here we haven't fallen in love with each other so how can I (even in my mind) be in love with her? She could be someone else's future wife, you know. And this kind of romantic thinking can sometimes very easily go from 'nice hair' to 'man, I wonder what it feels like to kiss him' to... well, you get the picture.

Much of this kind of romantic thinking really would be wiser (and more fruitful) to do within marriage.

Now perhaps we may not even be thinking of a particular person, but we might think of situations, places, kinds of people etc. I'm not saying all of it is dangerous, but we should take each thought captive to Christ and make sure that it is indeed God-exalting more than just a nice feeling we're enjoying.

The reason why I say this is because we start forming an ideal in our minds, which is going to make the surprise less wonderful for us. It really can. Your ideal for when you want to fall in love, and with whom, might be 'brown hair, gorgeous body, cute eyebrows - on a beach in Spain, at a

Justin Bieber concert.'

God's plan for you might be 'Blonde, a little pudgy' and a life-long friendship that developed into a romantic one. You might miss it if you are that serious about what your ideal is. I say: Let it be a surprise instead.

I remember one time when it seemed to be the popular thing to write down a prayer to God about your ideal partner, and put it in an envelope or in your cupboard door or something – and practically every day pray over it and confess that God will bless you with this ideal partner. Some of you may not have a clue what I'm talking about, and some might. I think that's just flat out wrong. God might have another plan and you might miss it (or not enjoy it as much) because you had a plan of your own (that included a Justin Bieber concert).

Are we so passionate about God's desire for us and His Kingdom that we will be willing to give up our unrealistic ideal for the one He wants us to marry instead? Is our ideal really that ideal that it's better than God's ideal?

When the state of being in love has become our main goal and completely dominates our thinking, we are under the idol of romance. The problem with this idol – unlike money or other idols – is it's quite subtle and comes under the guise of what is 'innocent' and 'beautiful.' When we make romance or love itself our treasure we actually lose the true beauty and innocence of it. Innocence lost, because it is now an idol and it rules over us. Beauty lost, because romance can only be beautiful with God included, orchestrating and moving, and the beautiful glory of God in mind.

Why are sunsets romantic when shared with another? Perhaps because sunsets remind us of the beauty of God...

The true beauty of romance

Because God is love, He knows what falling in love is really about -

and how it should work perfectly. He also is the true beauty behind it all. If God says in Song of Songs 2:7 "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires," we ought to listen and not force matters. Love and romance are only beautiful with God in the picture. Once we take God out of the picture, love and romance have taken His throne in our lives and therefore claim themselves to be God.

C.S. Lewis reiterates this in his book *The Four Loves*:

"The loves prove that they are unworthy to take the place of God by the fact that they cannot even remain themselves and do what they promise to do without God's help... Even for their own sakes the loves must submit to be second things if they are to remain the things they want to be. In this yoke lies their true freedom; they 'are taller when they bow'. For when God rules a human heart, though He may sometimes have to remove certain of its native authorities altogether, He often continues others in their offices and, by subjecting their authority to His, gives it for the first time a firm basis."⁷

He goes further to say that the statement 'all for love,' is 'love's death warrant.'⁸ This is because love is not love - God is love (1 John 4:16). Therefore, once we elevate love to the level of God it actually loses the beauty and attractiveness that originally drew us to it. With this, all that is left is the outward appearance of love, but not the fullness of love. Love cannot be love, and romance not romance, unless God is the one aiding it on. He is the true beauty behind it, not romance itself.

Fear is back

Whenever there is idolatry involved there is fear involved. This is because we idolise whatever we think takes our fear away. We will idolise it because we will presume it to be most powerful thing that is able to take our fear away. In the case of romance, what we fear is that we will not

7 CS Lewis, *The Four Loves*. Pg 144. (HarperCollins Publishers) ISBN 0-00-628089-7

8 Ibid, pg 144-145

ever experience falling in love and so we idolise the idea and chase after it. This may be because we also fear being lonely (which we covered in a previous chapter). If there is someone in our lives who we have fallen in love with, we'll fear losing them. It's not so much losing *them* that's a problem as much as it's the fear of losing how they make us feel. We are fearful about losing romance.

When we fear God, we need not fear anything else. God makes us secure in who we are and give us purpose, so we need not fear never having romance. The minute we attempt to place our security completely in someone else we'll find that we lose security. Security can only be found in God.

For this reason I move onto vulnerability. We cannot have a proper, healthy, relationship unless we're willing to be vulnerable. But stepping into premature romance can cause us to be way too vulnerable way too early, in which case if there is a break-up we'll get hurt much easier.

So, we fear a break-up. The fear is what causes the relationship to become too intense and awkward, because *we* become too intense and awkward. Our love for the other person can even develop into obsession because we're so afraid of losing our security that we've found in them and we're so afraid of getting hurt. If a break-up occurs, we say to ourselves "next time, I will be less vulnerable," and so (after many relationships) we harden our hearts more and more, ending in bitterness and loneliness and perhaps even depression.

If we end up getting married, however, the fears can grow and so will selfishness. This can cause problems in our marriage because we're still, unfairly, looking to someone else to make us secure instead of God. As long as we fear Him alone and worship Him alone and trust in Him alone, however, "Perfect love casts out fear." (1 John 4:18.)

We need to be vulnerable in our relationships. A strong, healthy, enjoyable relationship is based on trust. But trust is not attainable unless

we're willing to be vulnerable. And vulnerability will not come without the potentiality of getting hurt.

As C.S. Lewis says:

"There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell."⁹

Those are strong words. "To love at all is to be vulnerable." If we want to protect ourselves from getting hurt, we have to stop being vulnerable and give our heart to no one. But it's not possible to really live like that. Love is about risk, abandon and giving. Selfishness is about, well, the self - taking what you want and giving nothing. The only alternative to suffering any 'tragedy' as C.S. Lewis puts it, is to not love at all. To not love at all is to be selfish, and selfishness is also idolatry.

Love brings along with it the potentiality of pain, and it can only truly exist with vulnerability. We have to accept this. But there is hope in love. That hope is God. Because, if we fear God and put our trust in Him, He fills us with perfect love and so empowers us to love unconditionally the way He loves unconditionally. This kind of love can come with hurt but the good news is God will sustain us and be our joy through any hurt. If He is our focus, we may be hurt, but weeping will go on all night, but joy will come in the morning. (Psalm 30:5.)

Here is another reason why friendship (seeing others as brothers and sisters) is so important before romance. In friendship we build trust

9 Ibid, pg 147

with each other so that we can be more vulnerable. More vulnerability, in a strange way, means truer romance because we start falling in love with the person with all their weaknesses and strengths. We start falling in love with *who they actually are*, and not who we *think* they are. If we try to be too romantic too early, we open ourselves up too easily to the fear that the other person will not like who we are and our weaknesses. Or they may even take advantage of us. Or, we try and conceal our weaknesses and become fake in the relationship. Honesty and trust builds a good relationship, but being fake is not honest and because we are not exposing our weaknesses there is no trust being built.

So let us not idolise romance

You cannot serve two masters. (Matthew 6:24.) But whom the son sets free is free indeed. (John 8:36.) Don't let romance rule you – you will go nowhere and it will always avoid you. When you love money you never have enough; when you love love you never have enough.

The idol of romance takes away the fun, joy, surprise and freedom that all come with falling in love. Let love awaken when it desires. (Song of Songs 8:4.) Let God do the awakening. Let's not force it or long so dearly for that awakening that it rules every part of us.

As a practical idea, if you're struggling with this, maybe you should take a look at what you're reading and watching. Be strict if you must. But let God deal with this – let His Spirit lead you – live by His Spirit and not by law. Pray that God will give you a good, godly, well rounded and patient view of romance and that He would write your love story for you. Make Him your treasure. Consider it rubbish when compared to knowing Christ Jesus your Lord. (Philippians 3:8.) He will sustain you with joy far better than what any romance could. Let the divine romance be your first romance!

Ask God to surprise you. You don't know what He might do.

Chapter 11

Singleness or marriage?

By now we should have come to three conclusions.

Firstly, that God's will for us all is to find our most delight and joy and desire in Him completely, firstly, and only. We've seen that everything that God gives us is for His Glory, and that His Glory is our joy.

Secondly, we've found that singleness and marriage are good gifts from God and both are designed to give God glory; and therefore both equally as desirable.

Thirdly, we should be getting the sense that God's reveals His Will for us all in many different or surprising ways.

But what is God's perfect will for me? How do I know? What must I do? what must I leave up to God? Can I still miss His perfect will?

And that's what this chapter will look to answer.

Which one is for me?

Once we've reached the conclusion that marriage and singleness are neither better or worse than the other, just *different*, how do we know which one is for us?

I think the answer starts in Matthew 19 (NIV):

Some Pharisees came to Him to test Him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

*"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said 'for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. **Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.**"*

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

The disciples said to Him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

*Jesus replied, "not everyone can accept this word, **but only those to whom it has been given.**"*

*For some are eunuchs because **they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.**"*

As I've said before, this book isn't the best book to discuss divorce,

so we won't get into that. But let's highlight a few things:

1. "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

Marriage is *God's* idea. We didn't come up with this! On a more personal level, God orchestrates our marriages. Actively, not passively. He is involved.

This raises many questions because at face value it seems that our choices - or at least this choice - is not ours but God's. Where does God's choice end and ours begin? It seems to me that most of us subscribe to either one of two extreme views. Ecclesiastes 7:18 says we should avoid extremes.

The extreme thinking on one side is that every choice we make isn't really our choice at all but all God's. The other extreme is to deny God's working in our lives and reduce His sovereignty merely to a something he knows instead of something he *shapes*.

If God just knows the future he isn't really involved and the future is set in stone. Can you see what both of these extremes views do? *They both turn us into fatalists.*

Fatalism on either side downgrades God's power and prophetic word. God says the He works and His Word does not return to Him void, but accomplishes what He desires (Isaiah 55:11). This would make no sense if God was merely watching and able to *predict* the future. God is actively involved in shaping the future, including yours and mine.

I've chosen the word *shaping* very carefully. The future is not set in stone – it is being shaped. Your decisions affect God. His decisions affect you. You live in a relationship with Him.

Fatalism can land us in the dangerous area of blaming God for our foolish decisions. Or, it can cause us not to make decisions at all because

God is just going to make them for us. It can mean we make shallow commitments. This is clearly not what the Bible is saying, as it says "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now *choose* life...." So, it's important to note that there is a sense that God expects us to make a choice and a sense that He will *always* accomplish what He wills.

In terms of marriage, if we're not fatalists, we can often think that it is *all* our choice. This has probably been the predominant problem in the church as this is the one that causes most people to date around relentlessly to find the 'the right one.' The problems with this thinking is obvious - too much baggage, to be quite honest. God's grace is sufficient to dispose of that baggage completely, I believe, but if we can avoid it then let's avoid it.

Thinking everything is our choice also can cause us to fear that we might have missed it or messed up and there's no real hope for us, the moment of opportunity has passed. Maybe we think we are terrible at our relationships and our charms will never win anyone over. Worse yet, maybe we think we've blown it so badly with the person we "really loved" that we can never love again and we acquire endless emotional problems when it comes to relationships, sometimes not just romantic relationships, but all relationships! Because our hearts have become hard. The other problem with believing it's only our choice is that we could end up marrying whoever is convenient or available, which is most definitely going to bring a host of problems of its own.

There's no such thing as a soul-mate

There really isn't such a thing as a soul-mate. Why do I bring that up here? Because when it comes to knowing the future we often tend to have this idea of "the one" out there – our "soul-mate" – and if you're a fatalist or not you live in this fear that you're never going to meet them or that your last girlfriend / boyfriend was them and now you've lost them forever.

I'll never forget the story someone told me of a Christian Youth Conference they were at where there were many workshops you could attend and one of them was 'how to find your soul-mate.' Where did this come from?

It actually comes from Plato who had this idea that humans originally had four arms and four legs and a head made of two faces. Because humans were getting a bit too much for the gods, Zeus decided to split them, making us long for our other half.

I've heard plenty of stories of people who have committed adultery because they said they found their "soul-mate". Really? The idea of a soul-mate makes love to be some mystical, cloud nine emotion that is beyond our control or understanding and has nothing to do with our commitment. As if love becomes this strange 'force' that has power and control over our lives, reasoning, and actions. As if love itself has become some form of god. It can make love out to be something that we needn't work on, because once we find our soul-mate it will all be perfect and we can live happily ever after.

Some of us obsess over this idea while, for others, this idea makes us plain lazy. We're waiting for lightning to strike and for God to paint 'the One's' name in the sky. We think that 'the One' is must be perfect and so we lose sense of reality and forget that love is something that requires commitment and work on our part. "We were made for each other" is a dangerous line because what happens when the One isn't perfect? When you hit trouble in your relationship? Here's what we say: "I realised they weren't the One." Or "It was a mistake." Or how about "It wasn't God's will."?

Love is not easy even though it's wonderful. So there is always a sense in which *we* must decide to love someone and a sense in which God brought that someone into our lives and caused us to fall in love. God always works in the little, day to day things, and the big, future and past things, at the same time. He is eternal, so He can – and He does!

Not everyone can accept

Let's go back to Matthew 19:11

"Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given." (Remember, Jesus is talking about marrying one person only for life.)

Jesus is saying that not everyone can accept the responsibilities of marriage. In other words, If you can't accept that you shouldn't divorce, don't marry. This is precisely the conclusion the disciples came to. That's why they say in verse 10, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

This is an interesting response from the disciples. It's as if they had already accepted (like much of our world today) that divorce was normal. So to counter the problem of divorce they say 'it is better not to marry.' A large part of the world is beginning to accept this view. They are seeing the advantages and freedoms of staying single and so therefore are staying single and just perpetually dating or just living together.

For Christians, though, Jesus saying this is staggering. We can't enjoy the benefits of marriage outside of marriage (however, we can enjoy the benefits of being single and chaste). So it's interesting to note that only those 'to whom it has been given' can accept that they should not divorce. What this is saying, then, is that *not everyone* has received the ability or the power to accept this word. In other words, not everyone has been given the gift of marriage. Some will be celibate for life and that is also a gift. To accept this is 'given' to you. Verse 12 continues:

"For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

Here we see that both choices and non-choices have been involved. If this is getting too technical, just hang in there – it'll all make sense in a

moment.

Let's take a look at all three mentioned here.

1) Some are Eunuchs because they were born that way.

This can be taken both ways. Firstly, some people would have been born into a family or were promised to a King as servants from birth. They didn't have a choice. Their parents decided they were to be Eunuchs (remember a Eunuch was a chaste man that served in the harems or in the courts of the King). This is, of course, only relevant for Jesus' time period or for countries where this is still practiced. This is the face-value sense.

But the spiritual sense could suggest that some have been born with no desire for marriage. Or they were born to be single whether they liked it or not. Perhaps they were born in a time of war or in similar circumstances. This suggests a providence of God, i.e. His choice, not ours.

I'm going to add something difficult here, merely for consideration. Some people find themselves not attracted at all to the opposite sex. Because society insists people should be married or should desire for a partner, it tends to also insist that those who don't have this desire have something wrong with them. Many people in this kind of situation are told they must be homosexual. This is because the world doesn't understand that everyone has a different calling. Jesus makes it clear: some people are *born* with no desire for a partner. What a great gift in itself! He is saying that this has nothing to do with homosexuality, but everything to do with Kingdom. Homosexuality is an entirely different issue (which this book cannot address entirely).

2) Others were made that way by men

Well, almost the same as the first (as in, they were hired to be servants, or sold as slaves etc.) but also because of certain traditions that they were born into or believe they must follow. For instance, there are

Christian traditions which believe in a celibate clergy. In one sense we could say that these Eunuchs were made so by men. If they were born into that Christian tradition or feel called to that particular church denomination / tradition / group / movement (or whatever!) then they would have had to make that sacrifice because of the man-made traditions.

Now, please hear my heart. I'm not saying anything against those traditions, many Christian traditions are good and add much colour into Christianity as a whole. Earlier on in this book I mentioned that we ought to embrace celibacy in the church as much as marriage and singleness. I'm just saying that in this case we could say some were made Eunuchs by men. But perhaps someone was 'made a Eunuch by men' if they were also born during a time of war etc. This would all be in the natural sense.

In the spiritual sense perhaps they decided to remain single because of all the hurts and emotional problems they have experienced. The decision here is not God's entirely but is theirs.

There's also a deeper encouragement here – if you have been made a Eunuch by men, that's okay. You're not actually 'outside of God's will' in any way.

3) Renounced marriage for the Kingdom of Heaven

This seems more like a choice - where a person makes a choice to renounce marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. In other words, they saw that it was best (for them) not to get married because their involvement in the Kingdom called for it. Perhaps they are called to very difficult countries, or into very difficult callings (lots of travelling, time away from home etc.) or into a particular Christian tradition.

Persecution is a good reason not to marry as marriage could add many complications to our stand for Christ. Or perhaps they just felt that they shouldn't marry and want to dedicate their entire lives to the family of the Church completely. This is a really admirable, honourable, and

wonderful thing to do. Not that marriage isn't. But we should encourage those people who make this choice that they are indeed well appreciated.

Lastly in this verse we see Jesus ends it off with '*the one who can accept this should accept it*'. This doesn't necessarily mean that if you have 'trained' yourself to accept it then you should. It lines up with what he was saying earlier that only those who can accept this are the one's who it has been given to accept (vs 11). In that sense it was referring to marriage, now he is referring to singleness (or, to be a Eunuch).

And this lines up precisely to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:7

"I wish that all men were as I am. But each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that."

So to accept marriage is a gift. To accept singleness is a gift. And yet, both are *also* a choice.

Some renounce marriage for the *sake* of the Kingdom of heaven. It was a choice, but made on the basis that the gift was given by God to make that specific choice. Notice that Jesus doesn't necessarily say that some *choose* to be Eunuchs, but merely that some have renounced marriage for the *sake of the Kingdom of heaven*. In other words, them renouncing marriage was what they had to do (as if it was obvious that they had to).

So here's the clincher: His statement that 'those that can accept this, should accept it' means that *we still are given the choice to accept what it is we should accept*. Whatever gift it is we have been given we should *accept*.

What I'm trying to show is that the role of choosing to be married is both *passively* decided by us (i.e., God has been the one to give the necessary gift) and also *actively* decided by us (i.e., we must accept the gift we have been given - with thanksgiving and a cheerful heart).

I'm also trying to show that this choice is both passive and active

from God's part. The two work hand in hand, so it's important that we keep both in mind always.

As an example

An unsaved couple falls in love and marry. Years later, they become saved. Soon, they feel God's call on their lives and become elders at their local church.

Now the decision they made to marry was made without the consultation of God (as they were not saved). Did they make the right decision? Well, they must have. If you think they didn't, then why did God call them both to leadership? Surely they would have had separate callings if the marriage was not God's will? Did God simply compromise? Did He say "Okay Mr. Smith you were supposed to lead a church in Cambodia, and you Mrs. Smith were supposed to be in the business world. But because you both married before you knew me, and made the wrong decision, I'm going to compromise and get you to be on eldership in the church you're in. Plus, I'm also going to give you enough grace to love each other, even though you're the wrong people for each other. And now, I'm off to go and make a whole new plan for the people you were supposed to actually marry, as they are now also not in my perfect will because you made the wrong decision."

The logical semantics in this thinking are impossible. God would have to constantly change His plans and purposes, almost as if all our decisions took Him by surprise. My point in this example is that they still made the choice to marry - and yet, it was God's choice. Even though *they* chose to marry each other (because they did not consult God) the choice was actually not *really* their choice but God's. He must have nudged them in that direction. So they cannot congratulate themselves for choosing wisely they can only praise God for working in their lives even when they never even trusted Him!

There is a major difference between 'blueprint' and 'purpose'. God's

purpose is His plan – and He will achieve that purpose. He has a purpose for your life and we can call this a 'plan'. I believe, Biblically, that no matter what His purpose for you will prevail – and my example of the couple here is how I am trying to show it.

We could go through thousands of theories and semantics. The logical thinking when we try to comprehend God's predestination and His foreknowledge (which this is really talking about) is quite incomprehensible in our minds. Before we start bringing out our theological textbooks and philosophies about life and the universe, I want to stop it right here and bring us down to what I think God is saying to us simply: Put our trust and Faith in Him, and trust Him to work it out. He *is* God. Secondly, make mature decisions that are guided by Him. It'll all make sense one day so just live it.

Trust God and give Him the space to move. Let God show you the gift He has given you at the right time, when it's the right time. Stop asking Him if it's singleness or marriage, and start just getting to know God instead. Stop longing so dearly for the gift you don't have, but enjoy the gift you do. Stop comparing your gift with someone else's gift! Tomorrow may be the time when he gives you the gift of marriage. Start focusing on His Kingdom only. Wait for His time. He could reveal it to you in any way, at any time. Chances are you will probably just 'know' as they say. And then, make a decision and a commitment. Be mature in decisions and listen to God's guidance.

And whatever His choice is, accept that with a grateful heart and full of Joy for Him - your one desire and greatest treasure anyway.

Let God shape you

Let God be God and shape you and thus shape your future. It may be that he wants you to be mature and ready for marriage, but you're not letting him do that because you're so desperate for marriage. It may be that he wants you to be mature in accepting your singleness, but you're

getting in the way and can't see the life he has for you! Put your idealism aside and let God write your story *with* you.

In Romans 1 it says that we can see God and his invisible qualities through nature. He is more like a gardener than a civil engineer. Nature is random and organised at the same time. God has a plan and purpose for you but he wants you to make decisions as well and walk with you; then he makes a decision and you walk with him. *God wants to be our Father, nor our Oracle.* He's not here to tell us the future. He doesn't deal in fate. He deals in relationship – hour after hour, day by day, month by month, year by year. He walks *with* us and shapes things as we go, opening it up a little bit every step of the way.

Relationship means we go through life together, including mistakes and hard times. Sometimes God wants us to make a decision for ourselves, so that if we make the wrong one we can learn from it and be taught through it. And He can be there with us going through it. He wants us to trust Him and risk with Him. We then love and appreciate and enjoy Him more through it all.

Let God *grow* you. Follow His leading. Let God *grow* your life. He is the great gardener. (John 15:1.)

Chapter 12

Our single hope

As we bring this book to a close I want to offer the last two keys that I think help us in living joyful single lives in God: gratitude and hope. These two might seem strange to include when talking about singleness, but I hope that by now this book has brought you to a place where you can see that they are just the ticket. If you are thinking, still now, that there is nothing to be grateful for in singleness, please read this book again or find a better one! Or, better yes, spend time in prayer! You're missing out!

If you think that perhaps we have nothing to hope for in singleness except marriage then I hope to, for one last time, show you that our hope is God and not marriage.

Gratitude

Although we've spoken about how the single life brings glory to God I wanted to mention gratitude here specifically. We can forget to be grateful and forget the wonderful things God has given us singles. So let me leave you simply with the word 'gratitude' as a buzz-word or reminder

for you when you feel a little lonely or down. It's helped me a great deal. When I start getting fearful that I will be lonely, or start focusing on myself too much, God always drops that word on my heart. Gratitude. We have so much to be grateful for. The Bible is stock loaded with the awesome promises of God to us - He has saved us eternally. We are going to partake in His Glory. We have joy, peace, love, and everything we could ever need. He himself is all we ever need. Surely, we cannot ask for more than a life with the Eternal God of the Universe - and an eternity of joy? Any amount of suffering in this world does not compare, and so we are grateful to God for the cross and His love to us. Colossians 3:16 (NIV) says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

If you are feeling a little ungrateful, don't feel guilty. There's nothing worse than a preacher that shouts, "You should be grateful!" I don't mean that. Gratitude isn't fostered through guilt. But I want to encourage you, one last time, that there is so much to be grateful for – really! Open your Bible and read God's awesome promises. They're for you! Take note of the wonderful things He has done and promised, so that you can go back and read your notes again when you are in doubt. Remember the cross, always. I find that it always reminds me of how much I am indeed grateful for. God has an inheritance for you! And if you're struggling with sin, don't worry, he will save you to the uttermost! (Hebrews 7:25.)

Admonish others. Go to church. Love and serve your brothers and sisters. This helps us to be grateful as well, for all the wonderful things God has given us out of His love for us and all the wonderful friendships we have. We see how He works in our friendships and how He can change our hearts from selfishness to unconditional love.

Worship God with psalms hymns and spiritual songs. They also help to remind us of His goodness. (Ephesians 5:19.)

Hope

God's love is better than life. (Psalms 63:3.)

We have hope, whether we are married or not. Our hope is God – for the eternal life he gives. For the joy He brings. To go this road of focusing on Christ and the Kingdom above all – even above marriage – will bring much joy, even though it means a sacrifice. The single life is about love, joy and *life* in Christ. You might say, "Why should I give up my dreams? Aren't my dreams important to God?" but if you give your dreams up you will find a better dream. Whether this better dream includes any part of your original dream will only be seen when God rolls up the universe. But, what is more important to you? Your dreams? Or God's dream? The latter comes with greater reward and greater joy. The former - well, if the former is your focus - then you will lose your life by trying to gain it. (Luke 17:33.)

We hope for the very Glory of God, and for His Kingdom to come in its fullness. I sincerely hope that this book has brought you to that place where you hope for the better hope - to partake in the Glory of God and to see, savour, enjoy, delight, worship and love Him forever. We have this promise from God, that "His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to himself through Christ Jesus. And this gave Him great pleasure." (Ephesians 1:5.)

Indeed, we now hope to be with Him forever - and know that our hope will come true because of our faith in Christ. What are we hoping for? A partner? Or to partake in the glory of Christ? The answer could mean the difference between joy and despair.

Yes, you might find yourself in a broken place, where it seems your dreams have all deserted. I am no stranger to this place. Not even Jesus is! But "The Lord is close to the broken-hearted; He rescues those who are crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18.)

1 Corinthians 13:13 (NIV) "And now these three remain: faith,

hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

God has brought me through much brokenness and loneliness. As I'm sure He has us all. But in all this, He - in His loving grace and kindness – has shown me a truth that I can now never let go of. Not for anything. Not even for all my dreams back.

And it is this: *God loves me*. I am worthy! I am worthy! I have nothing, but I have everything, because I have Christ.

If through all your life God decides in His wisdom and goodness and love not to bring you into marriage he still promises *more* to you. He promises His very glory. He has a special place for single people in His heart. Yes, with Christ, there is always hope and love.

"And my blessings are also for the Eunuchs. They are as much mine as anyone else. For I say this to the Eunuchs who keep my Sabbath days holy, who choose to do what pleases me and commit their lives to me: I will give them-in my house, within my walls- a memorial and a name far greater than the honour they would have received by having sons and daughters. For the name I give them is an everlasting one. It will never disappear!" (Isaiah 56:3)