



One is a whole number

Why am I single? Some would say it's because the statistics are not on my side: it's long been common wisdom that women outnumber men; but the facts say otherwise. Globally there is more or less parity in numbers between the sexes.¹

So, maybe I'm single because I'm not trying hard enough to find a mate, or I'm trying too hard, or I need to lose weight, or maybe it's because men like a particular type of personality that I just don't have. Too often, the fallback question for singles is: *"Is something wrong with me?"*²

Ronald Koteskey has a different answer: he says the reason I'm single is because I was born in the 20th century – the first one on record where marriage of choice (in western countries) became more common than arranged marriage.³ Add this to the results of emancipation and feminism, and western women are studying more, and working more, before they get married. As Jennifer Marshall says, *"While our feminist forebears were frustrated by barriers to fulfilling work, today we are frustrated by obstacles to lasting love, some of which seem to be the result of the feminist movement itself."*⁴

So, why am I single? The real answer is, "none of the above." I'm single because a sovereign God, who loves me so much He gave His Son, has decided that it should be so for now. He withholds no good thing from His children (Psalm 84:11), and He has promised that I am complete in Christ (Col 2:10). So if you're single as well, I hope you can take comfort from the fact that one is a whole (complete) number! Don't ask yourself *"why am I single"*; ask *"what is God doing with and through my singleness?"*⁵

Characteristics of singleness

What's it like being single? About the same as being married, with a few exceptions. In her booklet, *"Singleness: how to be single and satisfied,"* counselor June Hunt lists several characteristics that are common for singles.⁶

For example, singles often struggle with their self-image. This can be compounded by people who imply that singleness is second-best – a waiting period until we find a spouse. But no: Jesus made it clear that some people were not to get married (Matt 19:10-12), so perhaps the better prayer is for contentment within the will of God ... whether we are single or married, or single again after marriage.

Another characteristic of being single, says Hunt, is loneliness. While it's true that marriage is not a cure for loneliness, and many married people are desperately lonely, it's also the case that acute and prolonged loneliness is often the unique burden of single people.

When I was at Bible College, I was very happy in my close friendship with another female student. Then she met her future husband, and our relationship came to a screeching halt, as she spent all her time with him. I remember feeling shocked by the sudden change, and one night I went to the College chapel to enjoy a wallow in self-pity. There in the chapel, I had what seemed like a vision of the future – alone, all down the corridor of years. The prospect overwhelmed me with grief. Was the vision a true one? I don't think so. It was a deception, because while I am still single after all these years, I have never been alone. *"I am with you always,"* says Jesus⁷ ... and He is.

Rejection is another characteristic that singles may experience differently from married people. While rejection by one's spouse (or parents, or children) has to be among the worst sort of hurts, the rejection of never being chosen in the first place has its own pain. It leads us up the garden path (as my mother used to say). It tempts us to believe the myth that if only we were married, we would be fulfilled, accepted, and loved.⁸ The answer to this is found in 1 John 3:1 – God's great love for us goes beyond any acceptance (or rejection) by humans. *"See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are"* (NASB).

Sexuality is yet another characteristic of single people. Being single doesn't negate the fact that we are created as sexual beings, with the same hormones as anyone else, and with needs that married people are able to meet ... but we cannot. Single people often wonder how to deal with sexual desires, and many question God's lovingkindness for giving them such desires, yet with no way to fulfill them – the Bible is clear that sex is to be shared only between husband and wife. What does that mean for singles? We should recognize that our sexuality reflects who we are, and not merely what we do ... and strive to bring glory to God by remembering that our bodies belong to Him⁹. McDonald gives some tips that can help singles to guard not only our hearts, but our eyes and our minds – avoiding temptation in this area (1 Cor 10:13).

Bitterness is another common characteristic of singles. It manifests itself in accusations that God is punishing us, or that life is unfair. The truth is that life is unfair: God in His grace allowed you and I to be born in a great country with many opportunities, foremost among them the exclusive membership of His covenant community. We could have been born as Asian labourers and captured to work as slaves on a fishing-boat; we could have been north African women married off in early puberty to be somebody's second or third wife, with no chance to ever learn to read – let alone enjoy the freedoms we do today. Saying that God isn't fair for not giving us a happy marriage is in itself an unfair complaint. And remember the exhortation to the Hebrews: *"See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many"* (12:15).

This list seems filled with negative traits; the characteristics of single people. But every one of them can also be characteristic of those who are married! What married people can't enjoy is the freedom to be alone when they want. And I don't know of many young parents who have the freedom (or the money!) to go out for coffee now and then. There is definitely an upside to being single!

Finally, single people have always been vital to the missionary enterprise. If there had been no single missionaries, Christianity would be much less a world-wide religion than it is today. Imagine the world without the apostle Paul ... and without a quarter of the missionary force today.¹⁰ And imagine the world without the most notable single of them all: Jesus!

A theology of singleness

An interesting perspective on singleness comes from Barry Danylak, himself single. He has developed what John Piper calls a *"theology of singleness."*¹¹

Danylak looks at the role of marriage in the Old Testament. He traces the development of the concept, beginning with Adam and Eve, and continues on to show how vital marriage was under the old covenant: the blessing was passed through Abraham's seed (Gen 21:12). Even God's promise to David incorporated the idea of blessing through physical offspring (2 Sam 7:9b-16). In fact, this idea was so important, the Old Testament contains *"no known examples of those within Israel who voluntarily chose to remain single. To have done so would have been to voluntarily embrace God's judgment."*¹²

Moving on from there, Danylak describes how the sins of the Israelites led to the removal of covenant blessing through offspring, for both the royal line (Jer 36:30b-31a, Jer 22:30) and for the people themselves (Amos 8:1ff).

But, *"though both the people and their rulers failed, the hope embodied in God's eternal covenant promises remained. On account of their disobedience, the Israelites were subject to the loss of their land, their offspring, and, for some, their name ... but God would raise up David's offspring and establish the throne of his kingdom forever."*¹³

This new promise of God, rather than coming through offspring, was to be received by faith (Heb 9:15). Danylak explains several OT passages, including the prophecies of Isaiah that confusingly describe how the suffering Servant of God has offspring after he dies (Isa 53:10) ... and how the barren woman in chapter 54 has more children than one who is married. How can this be? Because the offspring are not related genetically, but spiritually.

All of this comes to fulfillment in the new covenant through Jesus Christ. He is the promised holy seed (Isa 6:13) and represents a change in the way the Bible treats marriage and singleness. As Danylak explains,

"The essence of this paradigm shift represented by the very core of the Christian gospel has profound implications for all areas of life ... whereas marriage and physical procreation were the

necessary means of building the physical nation of Israel, the spiritual people of God are built through the process of spiritual regeneration.”¹⁴

There's a lot more, but perhaps you get the point, here: God is not building His holy nation through physical birth, but spiritual birth. Marriage is more than having children, but marriage in the OT was the vehicle through which descendants were brought into the covenant. Now, that is no longer the case: we come to the covenant through Christ alone (Rom 8:28).

I can't do credit to Danylak's theology of singleness in such a short space (he took a whole book to do it, after all!), but the upshot is that singleness can be a powerful witness for the gospel, showing other people the sufficiency of Christ in our lives. So it's wrong to ask, "Why am I single?"

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Complaining about singleness is understandable – our hormones, our emotional desires, and seeing other people in relationships may militate against satisfaction with single life. But however understandable, it's still the wrong approach. In 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul (a single) calls singleness a gift. Who are we to say that God is mean or has bad timing in the giving of it?

Single people sometimes feel incomplete, that something fundamental about them is "not right." Our friends may suggest that the antidote is to get married. But this – however lovingly it is intended – can lead us to a works-based mentality¹⁵: we may think that if only we can succeed in finding a mate, we will have "arrived," and the reward will be happiness. But in truth we are complete already, because we are complete in Him (Col 2:10). So, singles: look for happiness where it is best found: in God Himself, and in his people, the family of faith.¹⁶

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¹ www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population suggests that in 2010, out of every 1,000 people on the planet 504 were men, and 496 were women. The increasing imbalance since then is largely attributable to India and China's preference for male children, and consequent abortion of female babies (www.qz.com).

² McDonald, S. (2005) *And she lived happily ever after: Finding fulfillment as a single woman* (iBook version). InterVarsity Press. Retrieved from www.christianbook.com Chapter 1.

³ Koetskey, R.L. (2011). *Missionary Singles Issues*. ebook. Wilmore, Kentucky: GO International. Retrieved from www.missionarycare.com.

⁴ Marshall, J.A. (2007). *Now and not yet: making sense of single life in the twenty-first century*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah, p.49.

⁵ McCulley, C. (2004). *Did I kiss marriage goodbye? Trusting God with a hope deferred* (iBook version). Crossway. Retrieved from Chapter 1.

⁶ Hunt, J. (undated). *Singleness: How to be single and satisfied*. Ebook. Hope for the Heart Ministries. Retrieved from www.christianbook.com.

⁷ Matt 28:20, NASB.

⁸ June Hunt, section 2, "Definitions."

⁹ McDonald, chapter 6.

¹⁰ Koetskey, p.15.

¹¹ Danylak, B. (2010). *Redeeming singleness: how the storyline of Scripture affirms the single life* (iBook version). Crossway. Retrieved from www.christianbook.com. Foreword.

¹² Danylak, chapter 2.

¹³ Danylak, chapter 3.

¹⁴ Danylak, chapter 4.

¹⁵ McCulley, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Chin, P. W. (2014). *Really, it's okay to be single*. (blogpost, 14 October 2014) Accessed from www.christianitytoday.com