

DID I KISS
Marriage
GOODBYE?

TRUSTING GOD
WITH A HOPE DEFERRED

CAROLYN McCULLEY

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Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?

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Carolyn's transparent, insightful, and wonderfully hopeful testimony to God's tender and lavish love for her will be an encouragement to every woman who longs to find God's joy and blessing in her singleness.

—Ken Sande, President,
Peacemaker Ministries

When a man married for twenty years can enjoy a book written for single women, you know the author has done something special. That's the case with Carolyn McCulley's *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?* Carolyn's sense of humor, biblical insight, and deft handling of Scripture, together with a refreshingly unsentimental view of sin and the human heart, has produced an inspiring and spiritually uplifting book. *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?* is engaging, honest, real, insightful, fun to read, and spiritually inspiring—all this, plus it has a perfect ending. I highly recommend this fine book.

—Gary Thomas, author of *Sacred Marriage*
and *Sacred Pathways*

Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye? is an insightful and cross-centered look at faithful obedience lived out in a life spent in singleness. Carolyn McCulley doesn't mince words about the real struggles singles face, but she won't leave you in despair, either. Instead, she consistently focuses on the gospel and the good news that soon there will be a wedding ceremony where the sorrows and disappointments of this life will be swallowed up in unbounded joy. In the meantime, though, happiness and delight can be yours as you learn how to pick up the basin and the towel and rejoice in the fellowship of believers.

—Elyse Fitzpatrick, author, founder of
Women Helping Women Ministries.

FOREWORD

By Joshua Harris

Here's a book that I've always wished existed—one that I've wanted to hand to specific people I've met. But I've never found it. And it's a book that I could never be qualified to write myself.

On many occasions since I wrote *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, single women have told me, “Josh, it's fine for you to hold these standards about relationships; you're a guy. You can initiate a relationship with a woman when you're ready. But I'm a woman, and I have to wait for a man to get his act together! And, Josh, you got married when you were twenty-two! You don't know the first thing about the challenges I face as an older single!”

Of course, they're absolutely right. That's why I'm so glad to say that Carolyn McCulley has written the book I've always wished existed. *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye?* speaks to single women of all ages, but particularly to women who are concerned that marriage may have passed them by. Carolyn writes with honesty, understanding, and a God-centeredness that keeps this book from being just about sympathy. She relates to your circumstances—she's right in the middle of the questions herself—but she constantly points your gaze upward toward the wonderful Savior.

I've known Carolyn for many years. We've worked together, and she's a member of my church. She's the real thing. She lives what she teaches on these pages. She's a feminine, godly woman. And I'm confident that the time you spend with her reading this book will leave you wiser and more confident in God's goodness.

PREFACE

No, I didn't come up with the title of this book. Joshua Harris actually did. As my pastor, colleague, and friend, I entreated him for help. A pithy wordsmith, I knew of few who could rival him for memorable titles. Halfway through this book, he sent me a short e-mail:

How about . . . *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye? Trusting God with a Hope Deferred*

I'm actually being serious.

After laughing a long time, I sent it to Crossway, and within hours the title was approved.

Some might wonder at the close connection of the title to Josh's best-selling book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, but to me, it's appropriate. I remember eagerly devouring his book when it first came out in 1997. At the time I was leading a small book study with girls ranging from thirteen to thirty-five. We had just finished another relationship book, one full of stories about missionaries in faraway places and romances from distant eras. I could tell the teens weren't quite connecting. So then here comes this book about relationships from a young, single man! The teens connected instantly, of course, and I read it with a sense of relief after years of confusion: *So this is what I'm supposed to be doing!*

That same year Josh moved from Oregon to Maryland to begin a pastoral internship at Covenant Life Church. A year later I moved from Richmond, Virginia, to Gaithersburg, Maryland, to join Covenant Life Church and work at Sovereign Grace Ministries. Josh later wrote *Boy Meets Girl*, which I appreciated even more—possibly because I knew many of the people he quoted and the relationships he profiled. I knew that the principles he outlined weren't impossible because I saw them embodied every day in the relationships around me.

But even so, I remained single. So did most of the women in that original book study. I began to wonder what Girl is supposed to be doing if Boy isn't meeting her. What good purpose could God have in keeping me single? Was there something wrong with me? Or with the men around me? Am I stunted in my femininity because I'm not a wife or mother? What about my friends—what should our lives look like? How are we to prioritize demanding careers, a home with a constant parade of roommates, shifting relationships as others marry, and so on? Should I continue to hold out hope, or did I kiss marriage goodbye without even realizing it? So many questions—and all those questions led directly to the most important one: *Am I trusting God with this hope deferred?*

It's my prayer that if you are asking the same questions, you will be refreshed and cheered through this book. More importantly, I hope you will close this book with an increased passion for our Lord and Savior, who is fully worthy of complete trust.

“YOU’RE STILL SINGLE?”

The LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.

PSALM 84:11



I stood outside in the crisp autumn night, rekindling twenty-year-old memories. As I hesitated, numerous laughing couples passed through the hotel doors. Would I be the only one attending my high school reunion alone?

Taking a deep breath and exhaling a brief prayer, I opened the door and strode purposefully to my target—a paper-skirted table with multiple rows of plastic nametags. With a sigh I pinned on the evidence: Twenty years had passed since high school, and my name was unchanged.

I was still single.

Back home various friends were praying for me—that I would be gracious, focused on others, and above all, that I would have evangelistic opportunities. My goals were much smaller: Keep smiling, keep moving, and keep the mascara in place. No tears, no quivering lower lip, no self-pity.

With a practiced smile, I entered the reunion, a collision of high school trauma and middle-aged reality. The music was loud, the lighting dim. Thankfully, the nametags were in large print, sporting our graduation pictures. I marveled at the number of people I never would have recognized without the tag.

I was making my way toward some familiar faces when I heard my name half-shouted, half-slurred on my right. Turning toward the sound, I was greeted by an exhaled puff of beery breath from lips O-shaped in surprise and disbelief.

“Carolyn McCULLEY? Is that right? You’re still single?!”

I looked at the unfamiliar bloodshot eyes and then stole a quick glance at his nametag. I barely recalled this man.

Dear God, please give me the grace I need to make it through tonight.

“Yes, I am.” *Smile. Look him in the eyes. Be gracious.* “It’s so kind of you to remember me. Where are you living now? Did you have to travel long to get here?”

After a few moments of small talk, I moved on to mingle elsewhere. The participants changed, but the questions didn’t vary: *So what’s a nice girl like you doing still single? Why aren’t you married? Didn’t you want to get married? How’s the single life these days—do you still have to hang out in bars to meet men?*

It was a singularly long night.

UNHELPFUL QUESTIONS

Extended singleness ushers in a season of difficult questions—questions for which few gracious and informative answers exist. (My definition for extended singleness is one day past the marriage of a close high school friend, your younger sister, or even your own niece or nephew.) Being single also requires a healthy sense of humor. This Top Ten list is from my witty friend Vivian Saavedra:

Top ten things never to say to a single woman at a wedding . . .

1. You’re next.
 2. Why aren’t you married?
 3. Maybe you should lose some weight.
 4. What about (insert name here)? He’s a nice boy.
 5. You’re next.
 6. Maybe you’re called to singleness.
 7. Can you baby-sit tonight?
 8. Did you ever consider being a missionary?
 9. Just don’t think about marriage, and it will happen.
 10. You’re next.
-

“Why aren’t you married?” Here’s a common question, usually posed by a brand-new acquaintance. Believing the best, I must assume they ask because they are genuinely interested in my situation. But because I often

lack a good, pithy answer to one of life’s mysteries, it *feels* like a tabloid reporter’s inquiry to uncover what’s really wrong with me.

“Don’t you want to get married?” Shortly after my fortieth birthday, a college friend wondered whether I was really serious about getting married. She wanted to know why I wasn’t more proactive about achieving that goal. Had I considered Internet dating? I couldn’t just sit around and expect it to happen. She was trying to be helpful, to express her care. But her words fueled a slow boil of despair in my soul.

“Don’t the guys in your church want to get married?” The only way to answer this one is with another question: “Why don’t you ask *them*?”

I’m sure the people who ask these questions don’t mean to embarrass me. Still I find myself awkwardly fumbling for an appropriate answer.

The questions others ask, however, can’t compare to the kinds of questions that bubble up from within me during a lonely moment at a wedding or late at night when the house is still but the emotions rage: “Does God really know what He’s doing? Is He really in control? Can I trust Him with my desires? *Has He forgotten me?*”

GODWARD ANSWERS

If you’ve ever been asked those questions, you have my sympathy. And if you’ve responded graciously, you have my respect. Well done! But if you opened this book hoping to find a specific, concrete answer to your own situation, then let me first introduce you to a mystery.

*There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden.*

(Prov. 30:18-19 NIV)

This biblical passage shows us that there are things too amazing, too wonderful for even a wise man to understand. Now you may say to yourself that modern science can explain the first three items. What’s the big deal? Number four still has us though. Wise men and women remain confounded by the mystery of attraction and romance. We really don’t know why some relationships bud and bloom, and others do not. It takes humility—a sober recognition of our limitations—to be comfortable with that mystery.

I hope you're not tempted to close the book right now because I have some good news for you: There is One who *does* know.

We don't know the ways of the heart, but God does. He perfectly understands the things that are too amazing for us to understand. He created the eagle, the snake, the high seas, and men and women. He knows how everything operates, and nothing is a mystery to Him.

Even better, He is lovingly involved in His creation—with the eagles, the snakes, the ships, and also our wily hearts. He didn't just make us all and then stand back to have a good laugh. He is Lord over His creation, lovingly ruling over all things to accomplish His purposes—even (especially!) in the affairs of the heart: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1).

Are you tracking with me here? This means if the Lord can direct the heart of an absolute monarch, He can certainly turn the affections of our future husbands to us.

(Silence.)

(Crickets: *brrrrpp, brrrrppp.*)

"Uh . . . well, does that mean God is holding out on us?" you might ask.

It can feel that way, can't it? But only if you forget whose heart He has already changed—yours. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, if your life has been radically changed by a personal relationship with Him, then you know this to be true. He softened your once hardened, rebellious heart and gave you affection for His Word and His people. You may remember what you were like before your Christian conversion. I certainly remember what I was like! I mocked Christians. They made no sense to me.

I didn't know I needed a Savior, but that wasn't a mystery to God. I didn't know then that my heart needed to be changed, but that wasn't a mystery to God—nor was it impossible for Him to do. What we can't control, what we don't even understand, is clear to Him. As hard as it can be at times to be single, doesn't that put it all in perspective?

Dear friends, the whole Bible testifies of God's faithfulness to us even in the face of our own faithlessness to Him. God has not forgotten anything at all. The gentle words of my pastor, C. J. Mahaney, are a good reminder: "Your greatest need is not a spouse. Your greatest need is to be delivered from the wrath of God—and that has already been accomplished for you through the death and resurrection of Christ. So why doubt that God will

provide a much, much lesser need? Trust His sovereignty, trust His wisdom, trust His love.”¹

A BETTER QUESTION

So the infamous question about why we’re not married is the wrong question to ask. It implies lack. But our heavenly Father has said He withholds no good thing from His children (Ps. 84:11; Matt. 7:11). The better question to ask ourselves is: *What is God doing with and through my singleness?*

Maybe this perspective is all new to you. If you’re uncertain of the statement I just made, or if you’re not entirely sure what the gospel really is (and I remember what that was like), then I encourage you to read the Afterword at the end of this book *before* you read further. That’s the foundation for this book, and the rest of the chapters will make a *lot* more sense after you read the Afterword.

Maybe the gospel doesn’t confuse you, but you’re living as though it doesn’t make much difference in your life. You don’t see how God could possibly have any purpose for your being single, and you’re wondering what you have to do to “earn” the privilege of marriage.

Maybe you don’t trust God to bless you. You look at your life and wonder at what age you need to shut down hope and start making long-term goals for solitary confinement—*oops*, that’s singleness, of course.

Maybe you *say* you’re content now, but your actions and decisions reveal that you are *really* waiting for your life to begin when a man comes along.

Maybe you are still young, and you’ve only recently started to wonder if you are going to get married. But you see lots of older, discontented single women around you, and you’re hoping this book will tell you how to make sure you don’t end up like them.

Maybe you’d honestly say you fit that description—an older, discontented single woman—and you have no idea how to change.

Maybe you just want to know what God has planned for your future so you could prepare for either marriage or singleness (because you would not prepare the same way, right?).

Maybe none of the above applies to you. You love the Lord, and His gospel is precious to you, but you need to be encouraged in how to apply His Word to your daily life as a single woman.

For all of you, may you find in these pages some answers and a sym-

pathetic friend. As we go along on this journey together, I'm not offering myself as a role model for "successful" singleness. But I have been the beneficiary of much rich, grace-filled teaching that has deeply affected my life, and I want to refract that through the prism of single adulthood. I hope if you ever receive a high school reunion invitation, and you are unmarried, that this book will help you respond with true joy—not ashamed of what God has done in your life throughout the intervening years.

So let's ask ourselves the better question: What is God doing with and through our singleness? If your answer begins with "Uhhh . . ." and then a long pause, I pray you'll continue to read. I believe there is much encouragement ahead!

- In the next chapter, we'll look at why God calls singleness a gift. We'll examine the definition, value, purpose, and context of this gift.

- In the third chapter, we'll explore why God is worthy of our trust as He sovereignly, wisely, and lovingly chooses which gifts to give and when.

- In the fourth chapter, we'll see that we don't need to know *now* whether we'll ever be married in order to prepare for our futures. The Bible shows us, married or single, that the emphasis is on our *femininity*. Our preparation is the same in almost every respect.

- Chapters 5 and 6 will look at matters of the heart and our relationships with men.

- Then we'll spend the rest of this book exploring one worthy role model who shows us how to make the most of our femininity now.

My prayer as you read this book is the same one I prayed as I wrote it: *Lord, please give me Your comfort, encouragement, and wisdom as I examine Your Word as a single woman. Impress it upon my heart that You are worthy of my complete trust, and change me as I study and write these truths about You. Then please use these words to inspire and edify my sisters—Your daughters—as they read. All to the praise of Your glory and for the advance of Your kingdom. I pray this in the compassionate and mighty name of Jesus. Amen.*

ESTEEMING THE GIFT

But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

1 CORINTHIANS 7:7



Mom blew out the lone birthday candle on her slightly lopsided, lumpy cake and then smiled at all of us. My sisters and I were just old enough to pitch in on family birthday celebrations, and as I recall, the cake was one of our first creations. I don't remember if it was any good, but I do remember how good it felt to do something for Mom for a change.

Although Mom had already opened all of her birthday gifts, my youngest sister suddenly announced there was one more. Darting upstairs, she scurried around in her room. Above our heads, we could hear the frantic movements of a four-year-old desperate to get a last-minute gift together. Moments later Beth came downstairs holding a heavily taped box with a hair ribbon wrapped around it.

Pleased with herself, she offered her gift to Mom, who opened it with surprise and delight, wondering aloud what it could be. Beth's smile broadened as Mom inspected the contents. It was a box of . . . tissue wads—not used tissues but thoughtfully pre-wadded, clean ones—ready for any action-packed day with the kids. I remember my mother receiving that gift as if it was the best present anyone had ever given her. I also remember snickering, as a know-it-all oldest child often does. *A box of tissue wads?! That's not a real present!* I was evaluating only the “worth” of the gift and not my sister's motivation in giving it.

A few months later, it was Christmas. I was eight, and I had scraped together enough money to actually buy my first “real” gifts for my parents.

I purchased them at our school holiday fair, an event created to help children buy inexpensive items for their families. Of all the items there, I selected an acrylic “thingy-do” to give my mother. I don’t think there is any other name for it because there is no useful purpose for such an item. This particular thingy-do had a clear acrylic base with about ten black six-inch wires springing up from it. Each wire was topped by a colorful acrylic half-orb. That’s it—a multicolored spray of acrylic blobs that swayed slightly in the breeze. No self-respecting household should be without one!

With my limited resources, this strange token of my affection was all I could afford. To her credit, Mom seemed just as delighted to receive the acrylic thingy-do as she was the box of tissue wads. At least my father, the pilot, got a model airplane made out of nuts and bolts. They received these gifts with sincere appreciation and effusive thanks, a sincerity that is evidenced by the fact that both of these items are still in my parents’ family room.

In both cases, we gift-givers were limited by our resources, abilities, and even taste. We wanted to give something extravagant, but we presented token gifts instead.

GOD’S GIFT OF SINGLENESS

This is how I can think about gifts when I consider the biblical passage that calls singleness a gift (1 Cor. 7). Calling marriage a gift doesn’t surprise me. I understand that. Over the years, I’ve tried to beg, bribe, borrow, and buy *that* gift. It simply can’t be done! I am now convinced I must wait to receive it. But how and when did I get this gift of singleness? I don’t recall putting it on my “wish list” or asking anyone to give it to me. I don’t remember opening it up and saying, “Ooohh, thank you! Singleness! How did you know? It’s *perfect!*” No, this is how I have viewed singleness: While others walk down the wedding aisle to receive the golden gift of marriage, I’m standing to the side, sullenly holding my useless thingy-do of singleness. (Unlike my mother, I’m not even grateful to get it.)

When we talk about gifts, it’s easy to think about them in self-centered, human terms. We evaluate whether we like a particular gift and want to keep it or return it. We at times wonder if the giver spent much money or effort on the gift. We consider whether we would ever use it. To call singleness a gift certainly opens the door for more questions—legitimate questions. Why does the Bible call it a gift? Is it the gift I will always have? And for what good purpose could singleness be given anyway?

This is why we're going to start this book with a discussion of the gift of singleness, as controversial as that can be. I bet you are used to thinking of yourself as I do: "I'm a single woman." The first word that describes you is single. The second is woman. I believe the Bible would put it the other way around. But because culturally we've been camped out on singleness, let's start there.

This is a meaty chapter—I'll be honest. But whenever I've engaged women on this topic, I've encountered a great thoughtfulness and eager scrutiny of the Bible about this gift. I've seen a real hunger to understand what God's Word says about it. So, ladies, in this chapter, we'll look at five important aspects of singleness:

- The context of the gift
- The definition of a gift
- Who assigns the gift
- The purpose of a gift
- The timing of any gift

SINGLENES IN CONTEXT

Did you ever notice that it was a single man who wrote the longest passage in Scripture about singleness? It's also the only place in the Bible where singleness is called a gift—and a *good* gift—which may be surprising to some.

Let's look at this excerpt, which is from chapter 7 of the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. As you read, please keep in mind that Paul was addressing some specific questions or views that the Corinthian church had previously sent to him—questions that we don't have access to today. Paul begins in verses 1 to 5 by addressing married people. In fact, he quotes a statement from the Corinthians that he's going to correct ("it's good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman"), and then he turns to singleness in verse 6:

Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion. . . . (1 Cor. 7:6-9)

The next part of this letter addresses those who are married, and the

commands that the Lord gave regarding marriage. Then he addresses those who are legally committed to marry but have not yet consummated the marriage, which is what betrothal was during those times. Now if you're like me, you might be tempted to skip over a long passage of Scripture, but I hope you won't—for God's words are the only ones with power.

Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. . . .

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. (1 Cor. 7:25-28, 32-38)

Why would Paul say this? As we look at this passage, it's helpful to understand the cultural context of first-century Corinth and the church there. With its busy seaport, Corinth was a major city and one of the most culturally diverse cities in the Roman Empire. It was originally Greek, but had been a Roman colony for about a century before Paul's letter was written. It was once prosperous, but history shows there were food shortages in Corinth during this period. As one commentary notes:

This is the longest discussion of sexuality and related matters in all of Paul's letters. It contains vital information on issues not touched upon elsewhere. Failure to understand the circumstances which gave rise to

the problems written about in 7:1 and 7:25 has meant that valuable teaching on singleness and marriage has been ignored.

Concerning the circumstances: one clue rests in the letter itself, for Paul refers to *the present crisis* in 7:26 which gave rise to Christians rethinking the appropriateness of engaged couples getting married (7:25). There is firm archaeological and literary evidence which indicates that there had been food shortages in Corinth during this period. . . . Tacitus also records earthquakes and famines. Many believed that these were divine portents. . . . Here Paul not only answers their immediate questions but also provides an important framework in which Christian marriage is to be seen.¹

Thus Paul not only addressed their immediate concerns, but also the clashing cultural perspectives on sexuality and marriage that affected this young church. His answer would have challenged the current thinking of both his Jewish and his Greco-Roman readers. To the Jewish mind, marriage was the expectation and the norm. A spouse and children ensured that the family line would continue, and caregivers would be available in one's old age; barrenness was seen as a point of shame. But Greek culture was being increasingly shaped by the idea that marriage was a distraction and that sex without marriage was acceptable, as long as one's sexual appetites didn't control the emotions. Additionally, the Roman law of the time not only permitted prostitution, but only forbade pre- or extramarital sex if both parties were of aristocratic birth.²

No wonder the young Corinthian church needed guidance!

Paul's answer shows how well he knew his readers and how skilled he was in presenting biblical truth in a relevant manner. In this passage, he validates marriage, promotes the advantages of singleness, acknowledges that not everyone will be equipped for singleness, recognizes the reality of sexual tensions and human passions, and advocates just two alternatives: self-controlled singleness or monogamous marriage with only limited periods of mutually agreed-upon abstinence. His primary concern surrounding the issues of marriage and singleness is found in verse 35: "I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, *but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord*" (emphasis added).

THE POWER OF A GIFT

Against this cultural backdrop, we read that Paul calls both marriage and singleness a gift from God. He doesn't refer to either as a state of being or

as a function, but as a gift. The Greek word Paul used here is *charisma*. There are several Greek words that could be translated as “gift” in English. One word denotes a gift presented as an expression of honor. A second euphemistically infers that a gift is more a matter of debt or obligation. A third denotes a free gift of grace, used in the New Testament to refer to a spiritual or supernatural gift.³ This is the word Paul uses in this passage—*charisma*.

Despite all the modern connotations of the word *charisma*, it means much more than the nuances found in either the Pentecostal/charismatic theology of spiritual gifts or the functional “identifying your spiritual gifts” lists common in evangelical circles. As a gift of grace, it stresses the fact that it is a gift of God the Creator freely bestowed upon sinners—His endowment upon believers by the operation of the Holy Spirit in the churches.⁴ Theologian Gordon Fee says that Paul’s use of *charisma* throughout this letter to the Corinthians stresses the root word of “grace,” not the gifting itself. Fee writes:

Thus, even though Paul has concrete expressions of ‘grace’ in view . . . and even though in ch. 12 these concrete expressions are understood as the direct result of Spirit activity, there seems to be no real justification for the translation ‘spiritual gift’ for this word. Rather, they are ‘gracious endowments’ (where the emphasis lies on the grace involved in their being so gifted), which at times, as in this letter, is seen also as the gracious activity of the Spirit in their midst.⁵

Are you still with me here?

This grammar lesson is important because we need to understand what *kind* of gift we are talking about when we discuss “the gift of singleness.” It’s not a gift that we have to spend time trying to identify, that we should worry about having. If we’re single, we have the gracious gift of singleness. How we may feel about it—“Do I like being single? Do I desire marriage?”—is not part of the equation. The emphasis here is on a gracious God who gives good gifts and ultimately on His purpose for giving them. It’s also not a “spiritual gift” in the sense we’ve come to use that term in our churches today. It’s not an activity or a role, but a blessing—like the free gift [*charisma*] of eternal life (Romans 5:15) that was given to us without any merit of our own.

What about the future? To paraphrase verse 17, “Only let each [woman] lead the life that the Lord has assigned to [her], and to which God

has called [her].” God may change your assignment and calling. Or you may find that, as the years go by, you are increasingly contented with being single. *There’s grace for being so gifted either way.*

GOD ASSIGNS THE GIFTS

That truth might help you rest in God’s current assignment for your life, but you may be wondering what purpose God would have for anyone being single. Paul addresses this question a few chapters later in this same letter:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Cor. 12:4-11, emphasis added)

Paul uses the same word—*charisma*—here that he used in 1 Corinthians 7:7. As Gordon Fee notes, the emphasis here in Paul’s writing is not on the list of gifts, but on the God who gives them:

Diversity within the unity belongs to the character of God. Although there is but one Spirit, one Lord, and one God, a great variety of gifts and ministries characterizes each of the divine Persons (vv. 4-6). Such diversity in God manifests itself, Paul argues further, by God’s distributing to the many of them different manifestations of the Spirit for the common good. Paul then offers several of these as illustrations (vv. 7-11).⁶

We have each received a *variety* of gifts. First Corinthians 7:7 says that as a single woman, I have received the *charisma* of singleness. First Corinthians 12:4-10 lists other gifts that I may also receive. I may yet one day receive the gift of marriage. However, two things are important to remember about any spiritual gift:

- “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor. 12:11);
- “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7).

Let's look at the first point. God apportions gifts as He sees fit in His infinite and sovereign wisdom. Here Paul is returning again to the point he raised in chapter 7. God gives us our assignment, and He calls us to the task. Here now we see that He apportions gifts to each of us to accomplish these purposes.

Do you see God's will at work here? *Ultimately, we are single because that's God's will for us right now.* That's it. It's not because we are too old, too fat, too skinny, too tall, too short, too quiet, too loud, too smart, too simple, too demanding, or too anything else. It's not wholly because of past failures or sin tendencies. It's not because we're of one race when many of the men around us are of another. It's not because the men we know lean toward passive temperaments. It's not because there are more women than men in our singles group. It's not because our church doesn't even *have* a singles group. Though perhaps these things seem like valid reasons, they don't trump God's will. One look at the marriages we know or the ones announced in the newspaper will assure us that these factors are present in many people's lives, and they still got married. We are single *today* because God apportioned us this gift *today*.

One more thought: I've often heard married people say to singles that we won't get married until we're content in our singleness, but I humbly submit this is error. I'm sure that it is offered by well-meaning couples who want to see their single friends happy and content in God's provision, but it creates a works-based mentality to receiving gifts, which can lead to condemnation. The Lord doesn't require that we attain a particular state before He grants a gift. We can't earn any particular spiritual gift any more than we can earn our own salvation. It's all of grace. However, we *should* humbly listen to our friends and receive their input about cultivating contentment; we just shouldn't attach it to the expectation of a blessing.

(If you are single again due to divorce or death, I realize it can be challenging to reconcile your current experience with the concept of a gift that God has allowed or even willed, but this is the testimony of Scripture. I trust the expanded definition of "gift" has helped you to understand better your current situation. And I hope you'll stick with me as we explore this idea in the next chapter.)

GIFTED FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Now let's look at the second point: Spiritual gifts are given for the common good. The good news here is that the singleness is not about you—either

your good qualities or your sinful tendencies. You have a “gracious endowment” that is for the good of those around you! (So the next time someone asks you why you’re still single, you can reply with a straight face, “It’s for your good!”)

To amplify Paul’s point, let’s look at 1 Peter 4:10: “As each has received a gift [*charisma*], use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” The New International Version translates this passage as “faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” A steward is a good administrator. She knows her purpose, employs her resources, and brings in a good return. Theologian Wayne Grudem notes that the word *varied* here is *poikilos*, which means “having many facets or aspects; having rich diversity.”⁷ Not everyone is going to receive the same gift, but the ones we do receive are to reflect the many facets of God’s character. Even though this gift of singleness is not a *charisma* defined by an activity or an obvious role as other gifts are, it’s still meant for the common good—the implication being the good of the local church.

Friends, we have to stop here and ask ourselves if being gifted for the benefit of the church is important to us. This passage from 1 Corinthians 12 shows us that singleness gives us a *context* for the other spiritual gifts we may have and is a *resource* to be faithfully administered. This is what we’ll explore in chapters 4 through 13. But this biblical passage also goes on to give us a *place* to invest our gifts. Verses 14 through 26 present the analogy of the church as literal members of a body and emphasize the interdependency of the members. Verse 15 says, “If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body.” Do we ever act like that foot? Are we saying (in thoughts, words, or actions), “Because I am not part of a couple, I do not belong to the body”? We *are* part of the body, and we have a vital function within our churches. Those other members need us, and we need them.

As I’ve become older, I’ve grown in my gratitude for my church. Many times I’ve looked around the Sunday worship service or at my friends in a small-group meeting and silently thanked God for the fellowship I have there. Not only am I grateful for the wealth of relationships, but I am grateful for the grand vision before me. When I think of how much Christ loves His bride, the church, and how in His merciful kindness He has rescued me and made me a part of this body, I am even more grateful for the purpose I find in the church.

Without the context and eternal purpose of the church, singleness can

seem like the waiting room of adulthood. *Within* the context and eternal purpose of the church, singleness truly is a gift for the common good of others. We can love the bride of Christ by joyfully investing the “firstfruits” of our resources, affections, and time in our churches. In the coming chapters, we’ll look at specific examples of how we can invest this gift into the body of Christ.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MARRIAGE?

I hope you are encouraged as you read this chapter and see the loving purposes God has in the gifts He gives. But you may be wondering if it’s okay to still want to get married and even have children. Yes! Those are also good gifts from God. It’s not wrong to desire marriage or to ask God for it. The problem is when we do not humbly and peaceably accept God’s will for our lives *right now*.

Paul started chapter 12 by writing: “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led” (1 Cor. 12:1-2). Many of the singles I know were converted as adults, as I was. I have a very clear memory of being “led astray to mute idols.” They may not have been little metal or wood figurines, but I still worshiped (exalted) them for the privileges I thought they could bestow. The most dominant was the idol of self: self-centeredness, self-fulfillment, selfish pleasure, selfish freedom. Though I had been raised attending church and participating in those rites, I hadn’t yet repented of my sins and trusted Jesus as my personal Savior—so I really was an unbeliever. Throughout my twenties, I pursued various sins. I can remember laughing at the “old-fashioned ideas” of the few Christian women I knew who were willing to abstain from sex until marriage. I was blinded to the selfishness of the men I was involved with and completely deceived by my own desires. I thought I would get married at some point, but I didn’t have any compelling vision for marriage.

That changed when I became an authentic, believing Christian at age thirty. My pastors taught their flock well about God’s purpose for marriage and family. What had once been a washed-out, unfocused concept took on contours and hues that I had never considered. So I wanted it. *A lot*. Thus, a new idol was created: Husband of My Dreams, the reward for my new obedience in chastity. When this wonderful husband didn’t immediately mate-

rialize, I sometimes found myself shaking my puny fist at the Lord of the universe, unhappy with His provision for my life.

You see, even as a believer indwelt with the Holy Spirit, my heart is a “factory of idols,” as sixteenth-century theologian John Calvin noted. Because of this, good gifts are in danger of becoming idols, too. “The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much,” Calvin wrote. Our desires so quickly turn into demands. When these demands are not met, it’s tempting to create another set of “mute idols” that may bring about what we want. If I see younger, thinner, more reserved women being pursued and wed, then I think those must be the keys to marriage. If I see more engagements in one church or singles group, I can think the pastors there are better at encouraging the men to step out and pursue. If I perceive that one kind of man is more often getting married than another, I can be tempted to disrespect the men around me who are not like that. That pattern of thinking reveals where I’m wrongfully putting my trust. *When any of us is tempted to think that the power to bless and satisfy resides in something other than God, this is idolatry.*

Ten years after my conversion, I remain single. I find myself thinking that marriage and children, while still possible, are unlikely. (I like to joke with my friends, though, that now I’m in good company with Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah, Elizabeth, and other biblical heroines who had to rely solely on the God of the impossible.) If I peer into the future, all sorts of things seem uncertain and, well, lonely. Left to the clichèd outcome, my future looks suspiciously like a one-bedroom apartment with two cats named Bitter and Resentful. But then I remind myself that’s a cultural view, not a biblical one.

FORECASTING THE FUTURE

Will I always be single? I don’t know. But I do know that singleness is a gift that *everyone* has at one point. Marriage will be given to most, but it’s only a gift for this world. Jesus made that clear when He said, “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt. 22:30).

I also know that I can trust God with my desire to be married. The same grace extended to Paul, when the apostle petitioned God three times to remove the “thorn in his flesh,” is available to me today. As Paul wrote, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor. 12:8-9). I have no proof, but I suspect these weren’t three quick prayers in a row. I assume Paul learned the reality of God’s sufficient grace over a period of time.

Am I “called” to singleness? I’ve been asked that question several times, although no one asked until I reached my late thirties. I still don’t know how to answer. Honestly, I don’t know if one can apply that phrase to singleness. We’re all *born* single; so don’t we have to be called to something different? In my opinion, the question is not whether we’re called to singleness but whether we’re called to marriage. The weight of evidence—both in the Bible and in what we can observe around us—is that most people *are* called to marriage. But that’s only proven through the experience of receiving the gift of marriage. Everything else about it is unreliably subjective until that point. (My anecdotal evidence: The numerous testimonies I’ve heard from men now married who, upon conversion, were convinced they’d be “bachelors ‘til the Rapture.” They felt “called” to remain single, but God obviously had other plans.)

Sometimes I ponder the assumptions that appear to lie behind that question. I wonder if we can assume that being single requires us to live differently from other Christian women who are married. I’ve thought this, too, in the past—and even wondered when I might need to make some sort of shift to living permanently as a single woman. I suspect that this concept has worldly roots—roots planted during the late nineteenth century when many women were shaking off both the institution of marriage and the authority of God to carve out a lifestyle independent of men and religion. While I am grateful that these women demanded changes in the law that benefit me today—such as a woman’s right to vote—I see where they also introduced the model of lifelong singleness that spurned any aspect of traditional femininity.

We want to emulate a biblical model. We need to think of ourselves not as single women, *but as women who are single*. The emphasis in Scripture is first on our femininity. The Bible gives us one seamless portrait of femininity. We don’t see women in the Bible making a wrenching switch from singleness to marriage—as though these states are completely foreign to one another. Obviously, there are different roles in the various seasons of our lives, but roles are all built upon the same bedrock. (This is what we’ll explore starting in chapter 4.)

I like Elisabeth Elliot’s perspective:

If you are single today, the portion assigned to you for *today* is singleness. It is God's gift. Singleness ought not to be viewed as a problem, nor marriage as a right. God in His wisdom and love grants either as a gift. An unmarried person has the gift of singleness, not to be confused with the gift of celibacy. When we speak of the "gift of celibacy," we usually refer to one who is bound by vows not to marry. If you are not so bound, what may be your portion tomorrow is not your business today. Today's business is trust in the living God who precisely measures out, day by day, each one's portion.⁸

My business today—what I know now—is that I'm single, and I'm called to do something with this *charisma* for the common good and the glory of God. If God has marriage for me, He will bring it about. In the meantime, I want to live to the fullest of this "gracious endowment," pouring His gift of singleness into the church—the place and people *He* loves.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

❖ If you are struggling with what other people think of you because you're single, you may want to read *When People Are Big and God Is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man* by Edward T. Welch (P&R Publishing). I highly recommend it for everyone, but I would consider it a "must read" for single women.

❖ *Singled Out for Him* by Nancy Leigh DeMoss was one of the first encouraging resources for single women that I encountered. This combined audio message and booklet is based on some interviews she did with the FamilyLife Today radio show. You can order it from either FamilyLife Today (www.familylife.com) or Nancy's ministry, Revive Our Hearts (www.reviveourhearts.com).

❖ *The Rich Single Life* by Andrew Farmer (Sovereign Grace Ministries) is one of the most grace-filled books ever written for singles. It contains helpful advice for both men and women, written with Andy's wonderfully wise and humorous words.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1: “YOU’RE STILL SINGLE?”

1. Joshua Harris, *Boy Meets Girl* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2000), p. 213.

CHAPTER 2: ESTEEMING THE GIFT

1. *New Bible Commentary*, ed. G. J. Wenham, J. A. Motyer, D. A. Carson, R. T. France (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 1170-71.
2. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, ed. Craig S. Keener (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 464-66.
3. W. E. Vine, *The Expanded Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, ed. John R. Kohlenberger III (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), pp. 476-77.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 477.
5. Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), p. 86.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
7. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999), p. 399.
8. Elisabeth Elliot, *Quest for Love* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming H. Revell, 1996), p. 215.

CHAPTER 3: GOD’S QUIET PROVIDENCE

1. Mark Dever is senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, D.C., and founder of Nine Marks Ministries.
2. Quoted in *The Student Bible New International Version* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), p. 250.
3. Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1988), p. 18.
4. Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1967), p. 145.
5. Bridges, *Trusting God*, pp. 49-50.
6. *New Bible Commentary*, ed. G. J. Wenham, J. A. Motyer, D. A. Carson, R. T. France (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 292.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

CHAPTER 4: A WOMAN OF NOBLE CHARACTER

1. I acknowledge my debt here to Elizabeth George’s book, *Beautiful in God’s Eyes: The Treasures of the Proverbs 31 Woman* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), pp. 11-12.
2. Douglas Wilson, *Her Hand in Marriage* (Moscow, Ida.: Canon Press, 1997), pp. 84-85.
3. *Strong’s Greek and Hebrew Dictionary*, in English Standard Version software, Hebrew word 802.
4. *Ibid.*, Hebrew word 2428.
5. *Ibid.*, Hebrew word 6443.