

# Singleness in the revolution

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[ 0 : 00 ] Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us. Heavenly Father, we recognize that you are our good creator so that your words are good words.

And we pray, Father, that you would help us by your spirit to process and understand what you're saying to us and give us hearts that are willing to follow your will.

In Jesus' name, amen. So just a little clip from a recent Pixar film just for you to watch. Okay, that's what my five-year-old watched with me the other night.

I'll leave you to watch this. It's only five minutes long. So we had to play Spot the Lie. I don't know if you play Spot the Lie when you watch things on the TV. Apart from the obvious one that volcanoes can sing.

Obviously, just an example of how the wallpaper of our lives says that we should have a dream that we hope comes true, that there'll be a special somebody, a marriage partner, even for a volcano.

[ 1 : 14 ] So in lava, the male volcano seems to assume that will be a female as the story develops. But you can see that if that is what you have thought your whole life, and then you're not wired that way with attraction towards someone of the opposite sex, but you've bought into that vision that we all need a partner to love and we all need sex to be fulfilled, it looks pretty implausible to see a worldview, the Christian worldview, that says, no, sex is God's great idea for a marriage between one man and one woman, and it might not be for everyone.

And in the church today, we might be just as bad in our own way, maybe even worse than Disney Pixar, at promoting that dream. We create a culture as a church where the idea that you can enjoy life to the full as a single person looks implausible.

I remember a young woman in her early 20s in my church small group saying to me, Martin, I'm terrified of being single. I'm absolutely terrified of it. Now, the Corinthian church wrote to the Apostle Paul with a number of questions, and he's writing back to them.

He starts chapter 7 with one of the things they've said. I don't know if you noticed that. Now for the matters you wrote about, it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman. That's what they've said to him.

And Paul responds with this teaching about marriage and singleness and sex for God's people. And to understand what he says about singleness, first we're going to jump ahead to verse 26.

[ 2 : 49 ] Our first point, I think that might be inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful. Our first point is, adapt to the present crisis and live under God's as if not. Adapt to the present crisis.

So Paul addresses the unmarried, virgins, in verse 26. If you have a look at that, he says, because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

The question is, what is the present crisis? It's a crisis that means Paul thinks, if you're married, you should stay married, certainly. But also, if you're single, you might well be best off staying single.

He explains a bit more in verse 29. What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on, those who have wives should live as if they do not. Those who mourn, as if they did not.

Those who are happy, as if they were not. Those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep. Those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world, in its present form, is passing away.

[ 4 : 00 ] So what does he mean by a crisis? Some people think there must have been something going on at that moment in Corinth. Maybe there was the threat of war, or a famine going on, or a plague.

But that doesn't really make sense of the rest of the letter of 1 Corinthians, and the things that Paul is addressing, the spiritual pride in the church. In fact, even you get to 2 Corinthians, and Paul is asking the Corinthian church to give money to help another church with a crisis of a famine.

So that doesn't seem to fit. But the Greek word that we have translated crisis here, crisis doesn't quite fit. It could be translated that it's pressure or constraint of some kind caused by the nature of things.

So if you put that together with what he says at the end of verse 31 about the world passing away, Paul is most likely just describing this era that they live in, and that we live in, between Jesus' resurrection and his return.

It puts pressure on how we live. That's what the Bible calls the last days, in that the next big thing that's going to happen in our world is that Jesus is going to come in glory to judge and put the world right.

[ 5 : 16 ] and then he'll reign forever and ever in a new creation where we won't be married to each other anymore. We'll all be married to Jesus. Marriage today is just a picture of that.

We saw that last week. And that imminent return of Jesus should put pressure on us today. We live differently because we understand the times.

So that when Paul says in verse 29, those who have wives should live as if not, of course it doesn't mean that you should kind of ignore your wife because Jesus is coming back. He's got a whole chapter here about how husbands should treat their wives and wives their husbands.

But what he means is don't treat your marriage as the ultimate thing. Live under God's great as if not. Live in light of the fact that the next big thing that's going to happen is Jesus will come in glory. The same with his commands about when you're happy or when you're mourning or when you're buying something or when you have something. Live under God's as if not. In other words, don't get too preoccupied with things of this world because it's passing away.

[ 6 : 29 ] The British and Irish lions are on tour in New Zealand at the moment. First test on Saturday. And I'm going to milk that for all the illustrations I can get because the English and the Scots are on the same side for once.

Now when the lions go on a tour like this, they always produce these brilliant kind of documentaries afterwards. It's called Living with Lions and it really gets your pulse racing as you watch this rugby squad getting ready for the big tests.

Now the lions are professional rugby players. They've just played a very long, very demanding season for their clubs and for their home nations as well. And their bodies need a break.

They're creaking. Their minds need a break from the long season. Some of the guys are married. Some of them have got children. But they know that in a week's time the All Blacks are coming. Best rugby team on the planet. And that shapes how they're living today every hour. Their daily training sessions, their workouts in the gym, what they eat, how late they stay up at night.

[ 7 : 34 ] the players won't see their wives and girlfriends and kids. They're on the other side of the world. They didn't take them with them. No distractions because the All Blacks are coming. It's pressure.

And Paul says there's pressure on us that should shape the way we live. We live under God's as if not. I wonder if you think back to last week and how you spent your money and how you spent your time might things have been different if you were more conscious of Jesus' return.

How would we live differently this week? Because Jesus is coming in glory and it puts pressure on our decisions. Or we might think how does God's as if not affect the big choices we're going to make over the next five years of our lives?

Perhaps about homes, where we'll live, about jobs, about family. We have to understand the times and live in light of them. So that's our first point, adapt to the present crisis.

And that kind of shines a light on everything else Paul says here. Secondly, because of that, understand the gift of marriage under God's as if not. So Paul gives some vital principles.

[ 8 : 54 ] The first is that marriage is for sex. If you have a look at verse 3 of chapter 7, the husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband.

Then he explains in verse 4 that you give your body to your spouse. Now of course he's certainly not saying that sex could ever be forced or demanded in a marriage. Certainly not.

And there are periods of time in lots of marriages where because of health issues sex isn't practical. And nobody should feel guilty about that. But in the course of normal, healthy, married life there should be sexual intimacy.

It's part of the relational glue that God has given us to bring people together and keep people together. If you're in a marriage and you're not having sex you should talk to someone about that.

It can lead to real problems in your marriage. So marriage is for sex. Also marriages for keeps. Verse 10 Paul says, To the married I give this command not I but the Lord.

[10:03] In other words he's saying Jesus said this a wife must not separate from her husband but if she does she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband and a husband must not divorce his wife.

Now Christians disagree on this. I think the Bible does give rare examples where divorce is warranted where there's been an affair and possibly where there's been desertion but basically marriage is for keeps.

When marriage is very difficult the husband and wife have to remember that they promise to each other publicly before God to love their spouse for better for worse in sickness and in health for richer for poorer until death us do part.

And marriage is often very difficult. On the outside as a single person marriage can look like paradise. For lots of people there are long periods in married life where marriage is really difficult where it's miserable being married and you honour God by sticking with it as best you can.

Marriage is for sex. Marriage is for keeps. And we also need to remember that the overriding purpose of marriage is serving the Lord.

[11:29] That like everything in life we're living under God as if not. So your overriding concern if you're married is pleasing Jesus. Not your spouse in terms of your overriding concern.

I don't know if you saw this week but Tim Farron publicly resigned from being leader of the Liberal Democrats. He did it because he felt he was being forced to make a choice between really living out his faith faithfully to Jesus or being at the forefront of politics.

I don't know if you saw how he ended his speech when he resigned. He said this imagine how proud I am to lead this party and then imagine what would lead me to voluntarily relinquish that honour.

In the words of Isaac Watts it would have to be something so amazing so divine it demands my heart my life my all. Of course that raises lots of questions for us about the role for Christians in public life today and there are obviously differences because devotion to Jesus would never cause you to leave your marriage.

Jesus wants you to if you're married to commit to your marriage but those words from Tim Farron are a great example of what comes first as a Christian. Some Christian married couples it's the temptation for Christian married couples to kind of live as though being in a nice flat in the West End or a nice house with your spouse in Jordan Hill or Bears Den that is the promised land and it's not the promised land Jesus is coming in glory to take us to the promised land we're in the wilderness on the journey and God's love for us in Christ demands our souls our lives our all so that our marriages are ultimately for him.

[13:23] Never allow your devotion to your spouse to get in the way of your devotion to Jesus. Now what we should be thinking by this point in 1 Corinthians 7 is when you put it like that marriage doesn't sound as appealing as I thought.

The writer Sam Albrecht whose book is on the bookstall there says this we say today in churches celibacy is too hard for so many marriage is the answer but Jesus says in Matthew 19 marriage is too hard for so many celibacy is the answer so that's what we're going to look at next adapt to the present crisis understand the gift of marriage thirdly this morning appreciate the gift of singleness Paul's teaching here it's radical in our city and our world's culture but it's also radical in our church culture look at what he says in verse 7 I wish that all of you were as I am he's single but each of you has your own gift from God one has this gift another has that now the language of gifts is very telling gifts from God are given to us by him to serve him with and singleness is a gift how do you know if you've got the gift of singleness well perhaps sounds too blunt

I recognize that but if you look at your hand and you're not wearing a wedding ring you have the gift of singleness and just as a married person is called to use that gift of marriage for devoted service to Jesus so a single person is called to do the same with their singleness and Paul sees real opportunities for us from singleness you see that again in verse 38 if you just have a look at that towards the end of the chapter verse 38 so then he who marries the virgin does right but he who does not marry her does better isn't that extraordinary so in a church that obeys God's word here we look at the single person who stays single their whole life and think what a position of great honor and if you are single these verses mean you should think long and hard about the opportunities you have from being single before you think about seeking marriage why well that's

what verses 25 to 35 are all about once again the overarching reason is this present crisis that Jesus is coming in glory and in that context Paul wants us to be free from other concerns so if you look at verse 32 he shows such a great understanding here of married life verse 32 I would like you to be free from concern an unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs how he can please the Lord but a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world how he can please his wife and his interests are divided and then the same is true the other way an unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit but a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world how she can please her husband I am saying this for your own good not to restrict you but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord so challenging isn't it now it's not saying that the desires or interests of your spouse if you're married are necessarily anti-Christian that looking after your husband or wife isn't honorable if you're married loving your spouse sacrificially is a key thing Jesus wants you to do with your life but that duty takes a lot of time time when you could be doing other things and so Paul wants us to value the gift of singleness a married guy at St.

[17:37] Silas I was looking at this passage with fairly recently and he said to me I guess Paul's just saying isn't he realistically if you're not married you can kind of get more done that's what he's saying now as I say that please don't think that I'm being naive about the pain and difficulties for many people about being single I know that it can be really difficult to be single we've got people in our church family who are widowed and that is very very painful and we want to support them in that we've got people in our church family whose spouses have left them and that is a really sad thing for them and for us as a church as we support them in that for anybody who's single there is a kind of grief about being single because there is a grief about what might have been if they were married and perhaps what was longed for there are costs to being single you don't get to have children and lots of married people do get to have children I know that's very painful you don't get to have sex that's not as costly as our culture makes out because our culture sex is one of the biggest idols in our culture but it's still costly not to have sex because sex is a gift from God there are other costs to being single single people often feel lonely they get anxious for the future they sometimes feel as though their friends lives in some way are moving on in the way that our world understands that because they get married they have children and a single person can think has my life moved on in that way

I know there's lots that's difficult we know that and yet at the same time we have to get better at understanding God's vision for singleness as a positive one it's not just about what you lack being single it's about what you have and we know that you can have life to the full as a single person don't we because Jesus managed it Paul wants us to understand our lives as devoted to Jesus in light of his imminent return and because of that singleness is a gift from God nine days ago it was Thursday that's what I'm thinking about two Thursdays ago and I had a plan for the day it was a big day I had to make progress writing a sermon in the morning at lunchtime I was hosting at St Silas a UCCF church leaders lunch where the UCCF team were coming here to share with church leaders what was going on we were hosting that I was hosting that and then I was getting on a train to Edinburgh to be part of a press conference that was organized by a small group of us very small group of faithful

Anglicans in response to what the General Synod was deciding and the press were coming to that that was the plan for my day our daughter Rachel started being sick at five in the morning and she kept being sick all morning my wife Kathy was at work so I couldn't leave Rachel with a child minder so I worked from home with a sick little girl which is always a write off I finally made it to St Silas for the last 20 minutes of the lunch I was meant to be hosting for UCCF then I got on a train then I realized on the train I'd picked up the bug from Rachel so I got to the press conference and then was sick on the way home and was sick all night that night when you're single you can get more done okay that's what I thought to myself on Thursday night just compare that with Peter Adam who we had preaching here two Sundays ago and he was with us on Wednesday night I invited Peter Adam he was over from Melbourne

I invited him here two Sundays ago to preach for us while he was in Scotland so he said he would do that for us and he said can I come up a couple of days early and stay with you for the weekend I'd like to do some sight seeing okay great nothing wrong with that that's brilliant if Peter had been married I would imagine that he would have spent a lovely weekend with his wife seeing the sights of Glasgow and Scotland nothing wrong with that that would have been a good thing to do but Peter

is not married so by the time I saw him on Sunday he'd spent without me organizing any of this or asking him to do any of this he'd arranged to spend Friday evening with a couple from St Silas to encourage them spiritually and he spent the whole of Saturday with another couple from St Silas who I didn't even know he knew and then on the Sunday he had lunch with another bunch of people from St Silas it's just an example the single life I am absolutely certain that the work of advancing the gospel here at

St Silas and the work of advancing the gospel for the church in the UK today would be massively held back if it wasn't for the single people here at St Silas and in other churches who give their energy and their time and themselves to serve Jesus in ways that wouldn't be possible if they were married that's the reality and we must thank God for that so let me just mention three implications of all of this for us as a church family friendship and children first of all in our view of family we think it must be hard being single because you don't have a family we need to remember Jesus redefined family when people went to Jesus and said your mother and brothers are outside he looked in at those who were with him the people who were trusting him and said here are my mother and sisters and brothers so those of us who are married with kids we need to really think and reflect on the question how do we make our nuclear families feel less nuclear are there single friends who could be invited in more given a spare set of keys to our home invited to eat with us and be part of our children's lives and our lives in the plausibility problem that Ed

[ 23 : 54 ] Shaw's written one of the best books I've ever read we've got copies on the bookstall he talks about families who've done that for him as a single guy people who've brought him into their family and there are regular times in the week he's always with them and he's got to know them what about our view of friendship in the bible when king david mourns the death of his friend jonathan he says this i grieve for you jonathan my brother you were very dear to me your love for me was wonderful more wonderful than that of women i don't know what you think of that i think david and jonathan understood friendship more deeply than our culture does even our christian culture some people even look at what david says there about jonathan and say well he must have been gay they must have been in a gay relationship no what that shows is that we are impoverished in our understanding of friendship again a book on the bookstall i was encouraged a few of these sold last week but true friendship helping us think about how we're better at friendships so that singleness is upheld and honored in the way we honor marriage we need to encourage and nurture levels of deep friendship and non-sexual intimacy among each other among ourselves thirdly let me just say something about how we think about parenting for those of us with children our kids are growing up watching things like lava okay and often they know under the surface that if they grow up and stay single their christian parents will be gutted and i just wonder if you're a parent could we meditate on 1 corinthians 7 and turn it into a prayer for our children so that we declare to ourselves and can pass on to our kids singleness is a good thing god might call you to that and if he does we would be content with that as your parents we would praise him because it's a gift now for lots of what i've said this morning lots of you will be thinking well you would say that martin because you're married so just before we pray i've asked somebody single from our church to come up and talk a bit about that so i've asked yvonne if she'll come up thanks yvonne not everybody will know you thank you for being with us why not perhaps just say where you normally are so that we i'm normally in northern region of ghana great in a muslim community where i don't wear trousers okay thanks yvonne and um just to help us think about this you're a single lady yes i'm single the bible here is telling us to understand singleness as a gift we'll talk about the hard things in a moment but what are some of the ways you have seen singleness as a gift being able to see that as a gift well um we did talk about this a little bit yesterday and i've thought a bit more about it so you might not know exactly what i'm going to say um that's scary but carry on yeah um i haven't really appreciated singleness as a gift but also when people give you gifts sometimes you don't like the gifts anyway but you know you can't give a gift back to god you have to take it um the gift of righteousness the gift of grace gift of forgiveness all those they're pretty big and pretty great gift of singleness you get it and if no guy asks to marry you or not the right guy asks you because i have had proposals but not the right ones um then you end up with the gift of singleness long term so but um you mentioned um about eternity when we leave this planet and i've been talking with esther brown who's also a long-term single and thinks things very very deeply she didn't talk as much as me so she thinks quite

a lot and um after we die you mentioned it a little bit after we die god somehow puts together singleness and marriage because we are not married to human beings when we die you know marriage husband and wives finish at the point of death we are all single for eternity so it has to have absolutely amazing big value we're born single unless you're a twin or extra you die single unless you sadly die in an accident and we're all single for eternity so it's really really big and important but the singleness after death is a singleness inside god's church that is his bride and christ is married to the church so somehow after death god puts together in an incredible way singleness and marriage but somehow in life on this planet for us as his church he has to show it separately i'm going to say something else sorry um you're going to answer my question in a moment but i will answer your question in a minute this is great okay now you can pretend i use the word pretend you probably won't but you can pretend that it's normal to be single it's it's weird it's weird to be single it's also i think weird to be married and not have children the norm of the majority of the world any tribe nation whatever is marriage with children and if you go other places you don't have them they think you're really really weird it is the norm but i think in god's church on this planet it is important to have minorities who are single and minorities who are married without children you think about how you make fabulous bread you have a lot of flour a tiny bit of yeast a tiny bit of salt and all together you get brilliant bread it the the minorities are essential and i think that's really important and the testimony of god's church on earth is everybody in together all of the married people with children the married people without children and the singles and that's not the value of the world so again it's god's values and we need to be in it all together okay so what are some of the advantages of being single for you what what could you look at and think if i was married if i'd been married i wouldn't be able to do that or things would have been freedom of course i don't have to ask a husband if i can do something i can just go off and make my own decisions yes there's lots and lots of freedom i i don't know much about how to compromise you married people are great at compromising i don't have to bother with that very much and also i'm flying around the world it's much cheaper as one person than as two or three four five or six you know i don't have to have caravan holidays and who are the sunset from the steps of the caravan sorry if it's true yeah okay and in terms of that freedom i guess you well we've already talked a bit about where you are i mean other ways you could point to big things you've been able to do in your life that two incidents for being single that have really paid off for god sorry god but for you kind of thing when i was in ethiopia and we were working with prostitutes at night there was one girl who we needed to rescue her and get her home really really quickly because she was getting beaten up this gang was after her the married people on our team couldn't take her because she was a thief and you didn't want her kind of influence on your little kids the single ethiopians on the team couldn't take her because in ethiopia if you're single you live with your parents till you marry so it wasn't their decision they couldn't take her home but being a foreign single person i could pick her up and i could take her home and i could rescue her so that's one point when god used it and then now in ghana as you say i'm weird because well you didn't say that but i say i'm weird because i'm not married i don't have children and i'm living in a muslim community god is using it amazingly because the men in the community it's very very segregated community women over here men over here because the men want to practice their english and they have more education than the women they want to talk with me so as a single person i get to talk with the men in the local community and the women if i was married it would be very difficult for me to talk with the men so i know what they're both thinking yeah that's helpful and you're there i mean you could you could if you were married be with a husband who was sick and you couldn't go to these places well maybe but it's really important that families are overseas because the family is the normal testimony and you know if it's just singles who go out as missionaries that doesn't relate to the people like the ones where i'm living or the ones in jordan god needs christian families overseas much more than he needs us okay um so second question was about what's been hard about being single and where's if you have them that you've overcome what's been hard or try to overcome and deal with what's been okay that's quite easy the two hardest things are living without sex and loneliness now i didn't become serious about god until i was in my late 30s i have not enjoyed sex as a loving thing inside a married relationship but i've had the sex that the world has i know what i've lived without for years and years and years and after you've had the menopause you still have these monthly cycles you still have to eat chocolate about five days a week one week a month so um yeah i mean it is really hard being single and not having sex especially if you've played around with it before it really is better to do it god's way not play around with it before so

that's really really hard years and years hard hard hard um and then the other thing is loneliness it is really really lonely as a single i but i would prefer to be lonely and single than lonely inside a marriage that's not working i think that must be absolutely hell and yeah so i'd rather be single and lonely than single and lonely in a marriage you have to be intentional about finding people to talk things through with look for wisdom help with decision making and things like that and there isn't anybody there at the end of the day to chat about the day with i can talk to god and of course i do talk to god an awful lot because there isn't the other person so i talk to god a lot so i guess that's a big value great okay and last question was just how ideas you might have for how we as a church can be better at caring for single people honoring singleness and seeing it as a gift and um yeah okay i really do think is the bigger picture of being god's family here on earth and it is an important testimony and we need to embrace people who are different from ourselves and yet you know everybody kind of likes to be with their own kind and push aside people are a bit marginal a bit different that's not god's way you know god is embracing of absolutely everybody you know we're supposed to take in strangers everything i think that's what we have to do be some people can do it naturally some people have to be intentional and keep gathering in the people on the edges and even though it might be uncomfortable we need to relate with people who are different from ourselves great that's great thanks yvonne and it's not very easy is it saying very personal stuff so let's just thank yvonne for sharing with us i'm going to pray let's pray together heavenly father we thank you that jesus came so that all of us might have life and have it to the full we thank you for those of us at saint silas who are single we pray for them through the opportunities they have but also the challenges and for all of us help us to honor the gift of singleness with our friendships with the ways we do family together with the ambitions we have for our children and for younger christians and as we do that we pray that the gospel will advance through us so that more people are ready for jesus return in his name we pray amen