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SINGLE LIFE IS NOT AN OXYMORON

BY SARAH GALE



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How do you respond when someone asks you to write an article on singleness? "My life's goal! Of course I will! This is my purpose!" Is receiving such a request acknowledgement and affirmation? I'm not sure what it is, but here I am. Single. Sitting in the kitchen with my laptop, dinner dishes pushed aside, while wearing an ex-boyfriend's sweatshirt. Apparently I'm an "expert" in being single. I've been single for 31 years. So, yeah, I guess I have some experience in this arena.

But you're only 21. Or 22. Or 23. If you've made it this far, standing on the edge of graduation, about to take that big leap into the realm of adulthood (salary, car payment, rent/mortgage), then you look at my life and maybe dread becoming me: 31 and single. Perhaps your secret prayer is something along the lines of "O Lord, anything but that!"

ATTITUDE AND PERSPECTIVE AND PERSPECTIVE

A lot of this journey is in your attitude. I mean, if you think living as a nonmarried person is torture, then it will be. But the apostle Paul talks about singleness as a "gift," (1 Corinthians 7:7) and I think we downplay and disrespect that gift by wishing it away. Is it a temporary gift? I hope so, since I test positively for it on some spiritual gifts tests. But I see a purpose for my singleness right now. I'm single today. God has a plan for my single life today.

Granted, I haven't always seen this life as a gift, and honestly, I would like to be married one day. But I can't control that. Bonnie Raitt sings,

I can't make you love me if you don't...
I can't make your heart feel something it won't....

So while my heart waits to feel something for someone whose heart feels the same for me, there's a lot of life to explore and experience. I don't want to waste this life by pining away for something different.

But you could get stuck with a whole lot worse than singleness. Really. You could be married and wishing you were single! That's not as rare as you might like to think. And—who knows?—maybe within a year or five you will be married. But for now you're as singular as I.

It hasn't been as hard or scary as you might think. In fact, I have a great life—lots of fun, lots of travel, lots of learning, lots of friends, lots of life. And isn't that what Jesus came to give us—abundant life? I think so. And so I try to live like that. Here are my thoughts on singleness and living out your life with meaning for as long as you find yourself happily single.

In *The Secret of Loving*, author Josh McDowell talks about that very thing. (Spoiler alert: The secret of loving is *you*.) He says that we should think about what kind of person we want to be with and then take time to incrementally grow into the kind of person whom he or she would want. Makes sense. While I can't control how others react to me, I can live life to become the kind of person whom the kind of man I want would want.

****CAUTION:** Beware of trying to become someone else. God created you for a purpose, with a plan. Don't try to become less than you are for someone else. Grow to become all that God has purposed for your life and character. Dream of partnering with someone who is a good match with who you are.

MAKING A LIST, CHECKING IT TWICE

Make a list of your dreams and goals. Go ahead! Put marriage and family on your list if they are important to you. But you'll notice that those aren't your only goals, right? Maybe you want to go somewhere to see breathtaking sights. Or pick up a new hobby. Earn another degree. Learn a language, an instrument. Visit all the pro baseball fields. See as many U2 concerts as you can. There are lots of adventures waiting for you.

I think we are too quick to look at the one thing we don't have and accuse God of not caring about us or not loving us. My pouting heart will say, "God, if You really loved me, You'd give me a husband!" But what does that do to my theology? The test of God's love for me then becomes getting a husband. But really, the ultimate test of God's love for me is the cross.

God gave His only Son; He gave me Jesus! Of course God loves me. But just as Eve fixed her eyes on the one thing God said no to, so I, too, often fix my eyes on what God has said no to, or at least "not yet." And that thing then becomes an idol. I long for it, love it, and throw tantrums when things don't work out the way I want. *Hmm...* Jesus died for my sins and rose victorious over death so I could have a hissy fit about sleeping alone in my bed each night? I don't think so. I think God has a higher purpose for Christ's resurrected life—and for His life lived in me!

Your attitude is the key. Do you trust God? Do you trust that He's good, that His intentions toward you are kind, that He has a plan to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you a future with a hope? (A spouse named Hope?) If you do trust Him, then relax. Take a deep breath. And live life. God is big, and He's in control. He can make miracles happen. He turned water into wine, and He gave me three dates in one week. (Yes, three dates in a row!) So even if you're living in Small Town, USA, you are not without hope! Miracles happen every day.

I see life as an adventure, so I've viewed my singleness as an adventure. I've traveled the world, crashed a party of gourmet food and wine makers at Epcot Center, learned a few languages, earned my scuba certification and motorcycle license, taken guitar lessons, rented a convertible and driven with the top down on a gorgeous day, taken a few painting classes. ... Life is an adventure, and when your tax filing status is single, you don't have to check with anyone before signing up for a course in something that interests you.

There is a great amount of freedom in life when you are both unmarried and kidless. If you doubt me, try making spontaneous plans with a married friend. There's checking in with the spouse, coordinating schedules, perhaps arranging child care—lots of details.

The grass isn't greener on the other side; it's just a different blend of seed. And it seems like every yard has some weeds mixed in with the Kentucky bluegrass.

We live in a fallen world. Sin started destroying the world, so now everyone has to learn to deal with disappointment and disillusionment,

regardless of life stage. The good news of the gospel is that we are no longer slaves to sin and doomed to hopeless destruction, isolation, and death. Rather, we can experience life now—the life of the resurrected Christ lived out within us. And we get to be a redemptive presence in the world.

Singleness and marriage were tainted by the Fall. But what does it look like to redeem singleness—to live a single life with the hope of Christ? It means I don't have to go to bars and get drunk to meet people. It means I can use my life-stage freedoms to help others, volunteer, be a blessing, enjoy God. I can focus on others rather than being self-absorbed like so many in our culture. It means I don't have to give in to sexual temptation and lust, defrauding myself and others. I can walk in self-control (a fruit of the Spirit).

And what does it look like to grieve a broken relationship? We don't "grieve like [non-Christians], who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13, NIV). While I have yet to find a verse that promises I will be married, I do have a gracious God who is merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in disaster (Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13). Is the disaster a bad relationship? Maybe. But God is still faithful.

We don't have to wear a happy-go-lucky mask when our hearts are sad within. We can walk through sadness and disappointment in an honest way. Like the psalmists, we can be frank with God about our broken dreams and hopes.

So look at your list of goals or dreams. (Remember, you wrote them down earlier.) What can you do now? Do you want to learn an instrument? Look online to find someone who gives lessons. Jen wanted to meet people, so she went to craigslist.com and found a book club to join. Susan took French classes from an adult continuing education program that her local school district offered. Bill joined a volleyball league he found on Yahoo! Groups. Be resourceful. Don't waste this time you have. You can become whomever you want, but you have to *do* something. You won't grow if you sit at home and watch TV every night.

****CAUTION:** Beware of eating your dinner in front of the TV and staying on the sofa all night, every night. What a rut! Get a few people from work to go out together. Invite yourself over to eat with a coworker's family. Meet some people at church and spend an evening with a retired couple. People enrich our lives, and connecting with people who are at different life stages will help you connect with others. And you'll feel more normal.

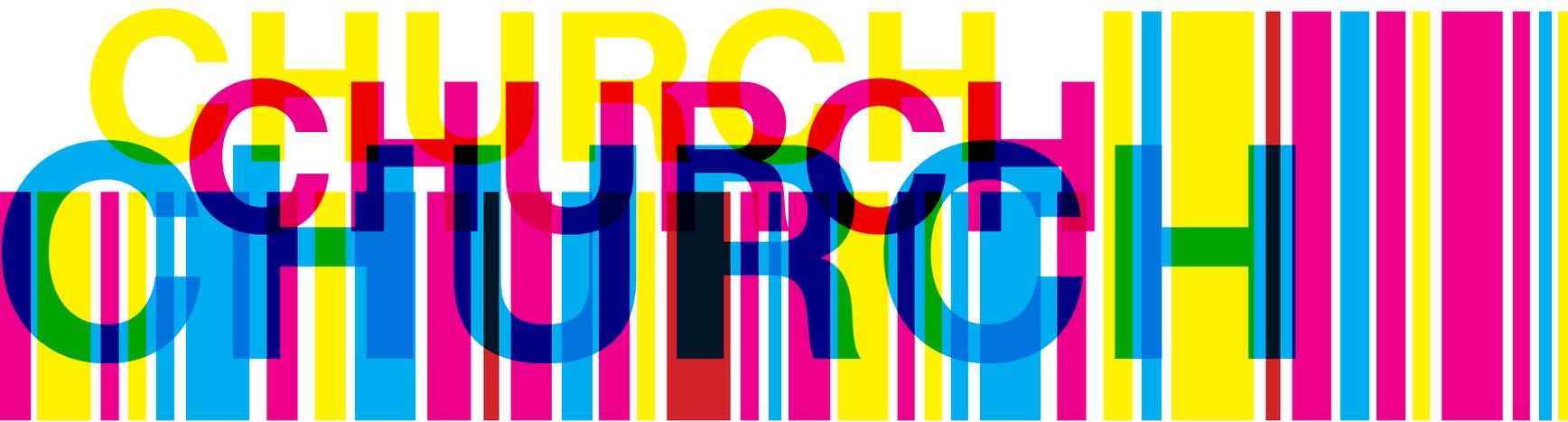
COMMUNITY COMMUNITY

Leaving the safety net of college and arriving in the “real world” can be a shock to your system. Your friends from Campus Crusade are strewn all across the U.S. and you find yourself in unfamiliar territory—a new town or at least a new stage of life. Staying connected to your friends will be a great comfort, but there is also something to be said for creating new connections and friendships. Community is a great thing.

But community takes effort. No longer are you surrounded by thousands of people in your same age bracket, experiencing the same pressures you were with classes and commitments. To experience community, you’ll have to expend effort and initiate conversations. As a summer

intern, I started a weekly “happy hour” to hang out with coworkers in the evenings. At my first assignment, I invited two women from church to take kickboxing lessons with me at a karate dojo so we could work out and develop a friendship. Eight years (and four job relocations) later, the three of us have annual reunions.

Now my friends have potluck dinners and dance parties. We go swing dancing, take day trips to the beach, and attend intelligent design lectures. I’m in a Bible study with the women in my friendship circle. I go to concerts and shows, and we’re planning camping trips. But someone has to initiate all these gatherings. And if people aren’t responding as I’d hope, I don’t give up!



I’ll admit it. Some of my loneliest times have been at church. I go alone. I find a spot in the pew alone. And throughout the sermon I watch families sitting together and couples with their arms wrapped around each other (sometimes touching each other a bit too much, if you ask me). It can be distracting and disheartening. I know.

In one place I lived, I discovered a few older couples who liked me. So I’d invite myself into their pew, crawling over other people to sit near these sweet couples. But in another place I lived, I had to set goals for myself to engage at church: *Okay, Sarah, you have to say hi to two people before you can go home.* And sometimes I didn’t even hit that goal!

If you go to church, just sit in the pew, and then split after the service, I promise you won’t enjoy that church for long. Or any church. You’ll be bored and lonely and you’ll blame the church. I did.

So, how do you get plugged in? Join something. Call the church office and let them know you want to plug in. Go to a Sunday school class and *talk* to the people there. Volunteer in the nursery—that’s a great place to meet people. Teach a class. I help teach the junior high girls’ Sunday school class, and I’m surprised at how much I enjoy them. And now I’m starting to meet their families too. Of course, you can volunteer with the youth group—a classic single thing to do. Join a Bible study and sign up for a mentor. Meet with the pastor or the head of women’s ministries and let this person know you want to plug in. But don’t wait for others to come to you; you go after them.

It’s tempting to find the other singles in church and then create a post-college Cru (Campus Crusade) environment. But by doing so, you miss out on the holistic life of the church—all that the body of Christ has to offer.

How will you learn about healthy marriages if you don’t spend time with marrieds? Or how to raise kids in the church if you aren’t around families? And what about dealing with the pressures of your career in a Christian manner? I’m sure there is someone else with a similar job in your church. Try to connect with older people, too. The small group I joined at church has a healthy mix of people, including a retired couple in their 80s. They have walked with God for decades, nearly three times as long as I’ve been alive. I have so much to learn from the different people in my small group.

Yes, a good single life requires some initiative and effort. You don’t have someone else to lean on or to introduce you. And sometimes people just don’t know how to interact with singles. They can make awkward comments, and sometimes I don’t know what to say in response. “What’s a nice gal like you doing single?” “Just don’t want to settle down, do you?”

These people are really just trying to figure out how to connect with me. So I can offer common ground by asking about their life (what they do, what they like about the church, how long they’ve lived in the area), and that can get the focus off me.

THE DATING GAME AND M&Ms

Last year was my best dating year ever, hands down. The best out of all my dating years combined even. A few dates were from eHarmony.

I know. Online dating. Well, I did it. And I had a good time. I viewed it as discipleship. See, a disciple is a learner, and I want to learn how to have healthy interactions with men, learn how to cultivate a relationship, learn what I want in a mate, and learn how to communicate (what questions to ask and so forth). And in the process, I had a great time.

My sister gave me her rules for meeting an online date for the first time:

1. Don't give out your address, meet at your house, or go back to your home with your date. Let your home remain anonymous.
2. Don't kiss on the first date. As Julia Roberts said in *Pretty Woman*, "Kissing is too personal."
3. Don't buy any new clothes for the date. Your blind date hasn't seen your wardrobe yet, so don't waste time and money on anything new.
4. Bonus: Ask one of your friends to meet the date too—at the movie theater, at the bookstore—so that your date knows you have backup and so that your friends can check out your date. It's a safety thing. I'm a safety girl!

But eHarmony isn't the only one I get to thank. I asked my friends and work associates to pray for "M&Ms" for me: money and men. I needed financial support (I'm on staff with Campus Crusade) and I wanted dates. So people all over the country were praying for me, asking how it was going, and setting me up on dates. And I ended that year with a boyfriend. Not bad, eh?



WALKING WITH GOD

G O D

The single life doesn't have to be some humdrum holding pattern. No, it's an adventure, full of possibilities and potential. Life doesn't start when you're married; this *is* life. Right now. Part of enjoying and experiencing life is to enjoy and experience God, the author of life. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the *life*" (John 14:6).

Our life with God is vital. How are you doing with that? Do you know God? Know what's on His heart? Are you reading the Bible? When you do, are you reading it to get through your "duty," or do you read it with an eye toward how your life needs to change in light of truth and how God is portrayed in each book of the Bible?

Who are you hanging out with? Is there anyone who encourages you to walk with God, or are all the influences in your life pointing you away from God? You may not be able to do much about that, but you can monitor how much time you spend with people and what kinds of activities you engage in. Garbage in, garbage out. This is the time to make wise choices, because every choice matters. Unfortunately, many Christians stumble in their walk after college, giving in to temptation, busyness, laziness, and distraction.

Seriously, plug into a church and commit to the basics of prayer and Bible study as you walk through this transitional stage. Perhaps there's a lot of uncertainty in your life now. But God isn't an uncertainty. Go online or to a local Christian bookstore and buy a Bible study to do on your own. Or ask friends how they connect with God. Get some spiritual accountability. Try taking the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement class (www.godsperspective.org) and learn about missions. Take your walk with God seriously; don't neglect it.

At this time, being single, we have incredible freedom to travel and serve God anywhere, anytime. Remember the tsunami that hit Southeast Asia at the end of 2004? Within the next few months, I not only gave money to aid the relief work, but I also went over to Thailand twice to help rebuild homes and lives. I didn't have to check in with anyone, ask for permission, or arrange meals or child care. I knew there was a huge need, and I knew I could help. So I went. After Hurricane Katrina, I knew I wanted to go and help, so some people from work got together and we made plans to go down to the destruction area. We can pick up at a moment's notice and go. We are unencumbered in the pursuit to help fulfill the Great Commission.

You can connect with ministries like Here's Life Inner City, Priority Associates, or even Campus Ministry to volunteer your time and serve others. You could start a campus ministry at the college near you, or lead a Bible study there, or disciple a college student. What about helping with high school ministries like Student Venture? What ministries is your church involved in? How can you serve the church? What about short-term missions projects?

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul talks about the freedom we singles have right now. He says married people are anxious about worldly things, such as how to please their spouse, but single people are anxious for the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. This is so true! What a gift we've been given through singleness. It's not a holding pattern, with us waiting for clearance to land at the altar and start life. No! This is the journey.

BE REFERRALS FERRALS

Now, I know that everyone tells you to "read this book" or "read that book," and, like, who has the time? It's like a verse citation at the end of an e-mail: if I don't happen to know it, I'm not looking it up. Well, I'm sorry, but whether you read them or not, I simply must suggest a few books: *Every Man's Battle* by Stephen Arterburn; *Sex and the Soul of a Woman* by Paula Reinhart; *Twenty Someone: Finding Yourself in a Decade of Transition* by Craig Dunham and Doug Serven; *Twenty-Something: Surviving and Thriving in the Real World* by Margaret Feinberg; *Boundaries in Dating* by Henry Cloud; and *Changes That Heal* by Henry Cloud and John Townsend. If you read even one, I'll be happy.

And God, in His wisdom *and kindness*, has chosen to use singleness in your life (and in mine) to conform you to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28-29). Will you let God transform and conform you, or will you fight Him every step of the journey?

Truly, truly, I say unto you, though you may want to be married, don't waste this time in your life. Don't miss out on all that God has for you. Don't wish it away or accuse Him of not loving you. Take advantage of all the opportunities and privileges you can. Enjoy God, becoming captivated by His character. Enjoy life, love, and service to others. And as Donald Miller, in *Blue Like Jazz*, suggests, "Enjoy people the way you enjoy a good novel," soaking in the details and reveling in the discoveries of each new chapter.



REFLECTION

1. Write out some personal goals you have for the next few years.
2. If you were to be married five years from now, what would you wish you had accomplished or done during the next five years?
3. Make a list of some of the blessings and opportunities of being single? How is it a "gift"?
4. Who do you know who is single and modeling a godly life? What is it about this person's life that's attractive?
5. In what areas do you need to grow in order to become the kind of person that the kind of man or woman you want would want?
6. In what areas do you need to repent of wrong attitudes or beliefs as they relate to God and being single?
7. In what ways can you initiate more in life, church, friendships, and relationships?

Sarah Gale has been on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ for ten years and currently serves as mid-Atlantic regional director. Sarah drinks lots of coffee with old and new friends as she listens to their stories, and she likes traveling to exotic places, such as the Middle East and New Jersey. Currently living in Delaware, the small Wonder State, Sarah is happy to be in Wilmington, whose city slogan is "The Place to Be Somebody."