

# how to be single

Jennie Pollock explores purpose and practicalities





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## **WAIT! Don't turn the page just yet.**

You might be thinking this sounds a really weird topic. Being single is something you just are or aren't, and are mostly hoping not to be. Why would you need any advice on how to do it?

I want to suggest that as Christians we can see seasons of singleness – however long or short they last – as something more than simply null states. What if being single wasn't just the state of not-being-something-else, but an actual positive state, a state with purpose? How might that change our approach to it?

### asking the wrong question

I'm single, and have been since my last relationship ended in my twenties. I always wanted to marry and have kids, and assumed it would happen as naturally as passing my A-levels and getting a job. Come to think of it, maybe failing half my A-levels should have given me a heads-up that life might not turn out the way I expected.

The A-levels didn't bother me, but for a long time I did feel as though I was failing at life by not being married. *'What's wrong with me?'* I wondered, *'What am I doing wrong?'* Maybe you wouldn't put it quite like that, but I think many of the ways we talk about singleness and disappointments in love suggest that we think that the goal of life is marriage. *'Don't worry, you've still got plenty of time,'* we say. *'There are plenty more fish in the sea.'* *'You just haven't found the right one yet.'* Even in church we often hear that singleness gives us the chance to grow in godliness (in preparation for marriage).

This is the wrong way of looking at it.

I can say that unequivocally for one very good reason: **Jesus was single.**

Jesus never failed at anything. He never fell short. He did not need to be refined. He was single because he chose to be. It was the best state for him to live in to achieve his life's purpose.

If nothing else, that ought to dignify singleness

and help us to see that it does not equal failure to attain to the proper relational state for adults.

### a purposeful state

Of course, unlike many of us, Jesus chose singleness; he didn't have it thrust upon him.

But if we believe he is in control of our lives, we have to recognise that for this season – however long it might be – he has chosen it for us. He hasn't forgotten to bring us our 'other half.' Nor is he punishing us for not being holy enough or healthy enough or hot enough. He has given us this path for his glory and our good.

### what if being single was... a state with purpose

Biblically, we believe that God created marriage for a purpose – to fill the earth and to point to the relationship between Christ and the Church – so I think it is reasonable to assume that he created adult singleness for a purpose too. What might he want to show the world through faithful Christian singleness?

#### – it is possible to flourish without sex

We live in an age in which many people think it is literally harmful to not have sex. In a world where self-expression and self-fulfilment are the highest moral values, to choose not to follow your heart (or the urges of other organs) seems as implausible as deciding not to breathe.

For people from the LGBT+ community looking in at Christianity, one of the biggest obstacles can be the realisation that choosing him will likely mean turning their back on any hope of romantic or sexual relationships.

If they see a community of believers doing singleness well (as well as doing marriage,

family, dating, adoption, widowhood, and all the rest well), it can give them hope that this is a plausible way of doing life.

So doing singleness well in part means demonstrating the plausibility of living a flourishing celibate life. It is a powerful Christian witness.

## if you're completely self-sufficient and not in need of any help, you're doing singleness wrong

Related to this, singleness shows that:

### – sex isn't the only source of intimacy

We were designed as relational beings. God is Trinity. His essence is community, unity in difference. Being created in his image means being created to thrive in community, to need a wider network of people than just one other, to need brothers and sisters.

The language of siblings is helpful because it gives us a framework for thinking of close male-female relationships that are 'chaste by default' as Rachel Gilson puts it.<sup>1</sup> We can know and be known without having to get into bed.

This also provides a context for close intergenerational relationships. We are not just looking to have our needs met in one other person of roughly our age, but recognise that all people, of every age and stage, have great worth and can enrich our lives as we enrich theirs.

### – singleness offers the opportunity for others to be needed and to be generous

Jesus was reliant on others to provide for his most basic needs. If no one offered him a bed for the night, he would have to sleep out under the stars. If no one offered him a meal, he and his disciples would spend another day fasting.

He wasn't afraid to be in need like that. He didn't think it was shameful to ask for help.

Weakness and need are not ungodly. They are part of the design – we are created as one body with many parts. No one part is meant to be able to function without the others. Seeking help is what is supposed to happen, and singleness makes that clear.

So, part of the purpose of singleness is to learn weakness and to give others the opportunity to serve. If you're completely self-sufficient and not in need of any help, you're doing singleness wrong.

## contentment in singleness

Seeing singleness as a purposeful state that God has designed and chosen for us can go a long way towards helping us find contentment in our singleness. Yet many of us may have to go through a grieving process as we choose to give up one set of dreams and expectations and place ourselves into his hands.

We can find ourselves wrestling with questions like:

- **is God good?** – can I really trust him if he's not giving me what I want in this area?
- **is God enough?** – if he never grants me this request, will he be able to fill the hole?
- **is God worth it?** – if I give up my dreams and desires to him and really let him do whatever he wants in me, are the rewards, in this life as well as the next, going to be worth it?

We need to deal with those questions because they form the roots of our discontentment. For me, the assurance of God's goodness and that he was enough for me – more than enough – led me to a place of quiet trust.

Then I discovered that those things I knew I had been created for but thought I needed a husband to be able to fulfil, God was fulfilling anyway.

In Philippians we see similar developments in Paul's life. He might have thought that in order to spread the gospel he needed to be out in the streets and the meeting places. But actually, he says that while he was in prison, other people

had stepped up to preach in his place, and the whole palace guard were learning of his faith.<sup>2</sup> His circumstances weren't hindering his ministry but actually facilitating it.

His imprisonment might have felt like a negative, something he just had to survive with fortitude, but it had a purpose. God deliberately planned it for a reason, and by embracing that reason, Paul was able to have an abundantly joyful life and a far greater impact.

Here are some things we can learn from Paul, and from other Bible characters and heroes of the faith, that can help us grow in contentment:

1. **worship God** – he is always worthy of worship however we are feeling and whatever our circumstances.
2. **read the Bible** – it's easy to start to doubt God when we don't get what we want, and then we pull away and stop reading his word. Keep reading, studying, and searching the Scriptures weighing what your heart is telling you against what his Word says.
3. **pray** – for yourself and for your friends. Pray scriptural things for each other – look at what the Bible calls us to be like and pray that you and they would grow in those qualities.
4. **practise gratitude** – finding things to be thankful for helps shift our focus away from the negative things in our lives and onto the many gifts God has given us.
5. **learn to lament** – we need to learn how to take our sadness and disappointments to God and have honest conversations with him. Use the Psalms to help you structure those prayers faithfully and in a way that honours God.
6. **press into community** – it's too easy to pull away and try to get ourselves sorted out first before we try to do community. That's not how

## RESOURCES



### ■ *If Only*

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Good Book Co, £6.00, 2020

9781784984489



Life doesn't always go the way we hope it will. Whether it's singleness, childlessness or some other big disappointment, it's hard to be content when life lets us down.

Drawing on encouragements from the Bible and the stories of others, Jennie helps readers to trust in God's plan for their lives and enjoy true contentment through a genuine conviction that Jesus is better than even our most keenly-felt hopes and longings for this life.

it is supposed to work. As with a physical body, the way to heal a bruised limb is not to cut it off and leave it in a darkened room to heal! Only by staying connected can the hurt heal and the whole limb be healthy. Learn from older believers. Serve in church. Show up whenever you can, and stay in contact when shift patterns keep you away.

7. **look to God more than the thing you long for** – ultimately, the thing we need above all, the only thing that will bring us true contentment, is Jesus. Press into him, then. Whether he gives you what you were asking for or changes the desires of your heart, you'll end up with him, which is better by far. ■

## REFERENCES

1. Gilson R, *Born Again This Way*, The Good Book Company, 2020. p76. 2020:76
2. Philippians 1:13