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The Normality of Marriage?



Introduction

In Chapter 1 we saw the differences between Tom and Sally's generation, and that of their parents, and I gave a bit of the history of how we got to where we are now. We attributed careerism, delayed adolescence (in some cases promoted by the commercial entertainment industry), and the rising youth culture to the apparent resistance to marriage and family evidenced today.

Now we will look at eight descriptions of how many of today's singles approach their singleness. Since all singles, like all married folk, are sinners, no





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one lives out singleness perfectly (except Christ), and many of these points will describe errors. And as we have discussed, our culture is presenting us with some particularly challenging circumstances. Even though none of these approaches might describe you perfectly or completely, prayerfully read this with a heart to discern what approach(es) might characterize you.

1. Are you approaching singleness too individualistically?

Do you find that you largely pursue romantic interests outside of a church or other structured community? Or is your community made up solely of peers, who are afraid or reluctant to ask hard questions of accountability? Are many of your romantic interactions without any clear cultural expectations either for the gender roles or for the process of romance?

2. Do you feel that you are entitled to happiness?

Many singles today have a stronger sense of this entitlement than those of prior generations did. This approach can lead to two conflicting approaches to singleness: given the influence of mainstream media, and especially the high divorce rate, you may be more likely to associate marriage with misery and strife. So you steer clear of it, avoiding it indefinitely. On the other hand, you may strongly desire marriage, yet reject every close relationship with potential, because you have a sense that the other person doesn't quite

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meet all your needs, the relationship doesn't feel "just right", or you have unrealistic standards that the other person cannot meet.

3. Are you passive in your pursuit of a marriage partner?

This tendency can result from both the first two points. This is particularly the case for men, but is increasingly observed in women as well. Whereas prior generations anticipated making sacrifices to achieve the personal fulfillment of marriage and family, many of you may experience relational commitment in a more reactionary manner. It is something that happens to you, perhaps surprisingly, and then you must adjust. This is often accompanied by an inability to "pull the trigger" and settle on a lifemate because a subjective set of feelings is lacking, you don't think you're old enough, or haven't had enough fun to settle down yet.

4. Are you afraid to lose the security of singleness?

This may surprise you, but I am especially referring to women who strongly desire to get married, who may have been single for a long time, or who may have been deeply wounded in a past relationship. The longer we are single, the more settled we become. We know how to live single, and the thought of embarking on an intimate, committed relationship can really rock the boat, even if it is one of our deepest desires. Are you (even if unintentionally) sabotaging potential romances in order to hold on to the life you know?





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5. Do you not feel ready yet for marriage?

This is a highly appropriate attitude if you are 15. But perhaps you are 35 and pursuing your second graduate degree. We'll talk further in this chapter about the wisdom of considering marriage and family to be a key ingredient of adulthood. While it is becoming more normal to delay marriage until the education, career, travel plans, and retirement portfolio are all tied up in a neat little bow, delays of this type can be related more to immaturity and laziness than wise foresight. And if you are waiting to become the perfect spouse or become perfectly holy before you marry, it is best to drop that ambition. With this goal, you would never get married. And even if you were successful in your endeavors, you would certainly never find a perfect spouse for your perfect self!

6. Are you failing to pursue marriage in the right ways?

You may be ready for marriage, eager to get married, even heavily involved in a church singles' group and wondering where ARE all the eligible bachelors and bachelorettes? But there may be several ways in which you are jeopardizing yourself. Are you at a weaker church where there are few godly singles of the caliber you'd like to marry? Are you so involved in teaching 1st grade Sunday school that you are missing opportunities to interact with other adults? Are you looking for Christian singles in all the wrong places (like bars)? Are you spending 10–12 hours a day at work, plus putting in extra time on







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the weekends? Or have you racked up burdensome financial debt, which now greatly curbs your freedom (Prov. 22:7), or leaves you tied to Mom and Dad? Perhaps you believe that finding a spouse, unlike finding a job or obtaining groceries to fill your fridge, depends entirely on God and you have no role at all: "I shouldn't do anything because God will bring a spouse to me." If you are dating weaker or non-Christians just for companionship "in the meantime", you're also making yourself unavailable for marriage.

7. Do you focus too much on finding someone rather than becoming someone?



It's easy to spend all your energy worrying about what you want in a spouse or if you'll ever find one. In Chapters 3 and 4 we'll explore at length a topic that may be of much greater importance to you... what kind of person (and possibly spouse) God is calling you to become.



8. Are you gifted with celibacy?

Do you feel called by God to live celibately for your entire life? Are you content, and don't struggle much (or at all) with the desire for sex? You are blessed, and rare. This book will not have much that is directly relevant for you, but I pray that you will find help in the book as you counsel and encourage those in your life who are eager to marry (or are sinfully avoiding marriage).

Regardless of our inclinations on the subject of singleness and marriage, we may be tempted to



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go back to the structured processes and cultural expectations of past generations, but we must resist. Such sentiments are often, to borrow from another, a masked appeal for reactionary conservatism combined with intellectual laziness.¹ We do need to rid ourselves of much of what is wrong in our approach to marriage, but a focus on external methods (like mandating that a young man ask a woman's biological father for permission to pursue her) or circumstances (requiring that all women live with their parents until marriage) is ultimately not helpful. It can lead to judging others on the basis of man-made rules that go beyond the Bible's teaching. Others may become inclined to inaccurately associate their adherence to such rules as a sign of spirituality. Lastly, a misplaced focus on externals might hide rebellion only until the young people leave home.

Christians will always struggle to know where to draw the line between biblical principles and optional (cultural or situational) methods. In a society with almost no agreed-upon framework for premarital relationships, the temptation to force-fit a simple one-size-fits-all structure is present now more than ever. Likewise, there are also those who are content to swim along with the culture and trust that all will work out in the

¹ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Zondervan, 2005.





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end. Thoughtful Christians should seek to avoid either extreme.

Youthful tendencies need to be focused in a purposeful direction. Let's think about this in terms of age, gender, and life station. Not everything that makes sense for a 25-year-old will make sense for a 15-year-old. Likewise, not all actions and responsibilities that apply to a man will make sense for a woman, since a man has a unique responsibility to initiate. We'll return to this theme later.

One trend we need to deal with is that youth seem to be maturing faster, but with a concept of adulthood that includes recreation and fun, but not responsibility. While it is true that the onset of puberty is occurring at a lower age today than in previous generations, what I'm referring to has manifestations beyond the transition to physical adulthood. I am talking about the fact that 12–13-year-olds find it “cool” to listen to the music of older teenagers, to hang out with older crowds, to drink and do drugs, or to spend the money and have the sort of freedoms that older teens enjoy. In a culture that values attractiveness, even prepubescent girls want to wear just the right bikini at the beach, particularly if they've noticed that older girls (if not boys) pay attention to such things.






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And so there is also a race to enter the world of dating. You've probably seen this (or experienced it) – two 14-year-olds walking down the street hand-in-hand. What's wrong, you may say? Mere puppy love, is it not? The difficulty is that if you are already stoking the flames of hormonal passions at the age of 14, it is going to be very difficult to remain self-controlled until an age when marriage is possible. Further, physical intimacy clouds judgment, causing an intense emotional bond before two people really know each other. Then there is heartache at the breakup that could have been avoided.

Christian maturity recognizes that strong sexual passion leads inevitably either to marriage or to sin. So the possibility (and even probability) of marriage must be the backdrop that hangs over any romantic interaction. As Christians, we must be the people who unambiguously declare that marriage is the context for all sexual expression, the only possible condition for its fulfillment. This means that there needs to be the cultivation of, and respect for, mature expressions of masculinity and femininity that are in and of themselves winsome before God, and in marriage, valuable for companionship, mutual enjoyment, and working together as fellow heirs of the grace of life.

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Since marriages are often occurring later in life today, and children are growing up faster, the time during which young people have active sex hormones and no biblically sanctioned outlet has been significantly extended. Add to this the fact that the habits of young people are often no different than those of the world (attending pubs and nightclubs, etc.), and so it's not surprising that the frequency of fornication is often no different among Christian young people than it is of non-Christian youth.² Where there is not fornication there is often intense sexual frustration (including struggles with pornography) that could be readily avoided by marriage.³

There need not be this extended period of time where youth must live as single, biological adults. People often protest, "Yes, but if they got married sooner, such marriages would more likely lead to divorce." It may be true that, today, those who marry when they are quite young (19–22) are more likely to divorce.⁴ However, the fact that *immature* youth choose to marry early, and are

2. See, for example, the studies cited by Lauren Winner in "3 Fibs and a Truth about Sex", *Christianity Today*, Leadership Journal, Spring 2005, available at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/002/15.50.html>.

3. This is not to say that marriage intrinsically solves all problems stemming from a lack of sexual self-control. It is to say that, biblically, God anticipated such problems and created a safe environment for healthy sexual expression. To not accept marriage can thus be a failure to receive one of God's good gifts provided for your sanctification and protection.

4. Albert Y. Hsu, *Singles at the Crossroads*, InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 19.



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unsuccessful, does not prove that all who marry at a young age must experience the same fate. The problem is immaturity, not “early” marriages. Rather, if maturity is formed in youth during the teen years, marriages for young adults (when people begin to live apart from parents and assume financial responsibility for their own life) can be readily sustained.⁵ And an important part of forming this sort of maturity in youth is the teaching of the normalcy of marriage for adults. Since it is so crucial that Christians conduct their romantic activities in the light of a potential marriage, we’ll devote the rest of Chapter 2 to defending the normalcy of marriage for the adult. Later in this book we’ll return to the theme of how young people can direct their passions toward marriage in a God-honoring fashion.

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Lev Grossman noted that thirty years ago the category “single adult” was almost unnecessary.⁶ Twenty and thirtysomethings, living on their own, hopping to different jobs and moving from town to town, were a nonexistent category, statistically

5. Such couples upon marriage do not need to unlearn habits that are developed in the single years during which their responsibilities towards their roommates or friends were not nearly on par with their new responsibilities to their spouse.

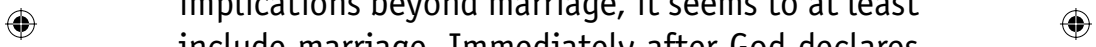
6. Lev Grossman, “Grow Up? Not So Fast”, *Time*, January 24, 2005, 42–54. This very helpful study shows the statistics for the average age of first marriage for men and women in numerous Western countries.





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speaking. Singles now constitute roughly 50 per cent of Western nations. It is likely that within a generation most people will spend the majority of their earthly life as singles (including divorces and the death of a spouse). Consequently, our youth are growing up in a milieu that suggests marriage is at best just one option among many for emotional fulfillment. That is why I feel it is appropriate to spend some time discussing the normality of marriage.



In Genesis 2:18, God has created man and now He famously declares, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” Though this statement has implications beyond marriage, it seems to at least include marriage. Immediately after God declares that it is not good for man to be alone we’re told, somewhat oddly, “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.” The man then proceeds to name the animals. Why do we have this discussion occurring immediately after God’s acknowledgment that the man should not be alone? It seems, at least on the surface, to be out of place. Others have argued, and I think persuasively, that at least part of God’s intention was to reveal to Adam



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that which is noted in verse 20: “But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him.”⁷ So Adam was made to recognize the truth that God had previously declared – he needs a helper, and has not found one yet. Then God creates Eve and Adam recognizes that this need is now met.

Throughout history, except in times of war or natural disaster, marriage has been the typical lot of an adult, regardless of race, culture, or religion.⁸ In this sense, we can safely say that marriage (rather than singleness) was the norm. To balance this, however, we need to deal fairly with 1 Corinthians 7, where the Apostle Paul seems to prefer singleness. It should be noted that Paul’s statement in verse 1 is probably a quote that the Corinthians made in a letter to him. Namely, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” Paul affirms this, but qualifies it with verse 2: because of the (assumedly widespread) temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. This qualification sounds like the one Jesus made in response to His disciples’ statement that it was better not to marry. Not dismissing their remark, Jesus replied, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those

7. See Douglas Wilson, for example, *Reforming Marriage*, Canon Press, 1995.

8. See also, for example, the chapter by Albert Mohler in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor, Crossway, 2005.





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to whom it is given” (Matt. 19:10-11). Certainly, later in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul does reveal his own preference that singles remain single, because it offers peculiar opportunities for kingdom ministry. Yet the implication of the passage as a whole suggests that such individuals possess, to quote Calvin, “a gift by a *special* grace of God” (Calvin’s Geneva study Bible, emphasis mine).

The upshot of this is that if you are single, you should be giving yourself with particular earnestness to ministry that extends the kingdom of God. You have the freedom to go and come as you please, but you should use it not for yourself, but for others to the glory of God. You are a gift to God’s church. Use it well, as one who will have to give an account. Pastors and church leaders, likewise, should receive such Christians with open arms as gifts to the church.

That said, if you are an adult single, do consider if you may be uniquely gifted for singleness. If you are, it will be evidenced in part by a lack of desire for sexual companionship, which would allow you, without undue discomfort, to forgo marital bliss for a lifetime. And my guess is that if you’re in that group, you are probably not reading this book (at least for yourself)! But for most, you probably find sexual purity to be significantly challenging and either an occasion





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for sinfulness or frustration. And for you, marriage should be the focus of your premarital romantic activity. In fact, to a large degree, marriage will mark your transition to adulthood in the fullest sense – because it is in the joys and sufferings of marriage that God will sanctify you into the person you could not possibly become apart from marriage. This book is primarily written for you, your pastors, and your parents.

I know there are numerous objections to what I have said, so I want to deal with them one by one to make sure I am not misunderstood.

Objection #1: If what you are saying is true, how would I know if I possess this “gift by a special grace of God” or if in fact I should seek marriage? From Scripture, the primary indicator would be a level of contentment with celibacy. If instead there is an urgent longing for sexual satisfaction or emotional intimacy, marriage should be considered. You may legitimately wait until an educational or vocational program is completed so that you can be financially independent from your parents, or you may delay marriage to become better acquainted with the sort of person you should marry. These good considerations notwithstanding, unless you are gifted with celibacy you should prepare for the future with marriage in mind.

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Objection #2: What if I am the sort of person described above who should plan for marriage, but God just hasn't brought that special person into my life?

This objection can seem remarkably legitimate, but it's wise to do some soul searching first before settling for this explanation.

The first response I'd make is: What are you doing to become the sort of person who would be winsome and attractive to the kind of person you want to marry? In other words, say you want to marry someone godly, charming, outgoing, and others-oriented. Well, are you developing godliness, charisma, and a servant's heart? If not, don't be surprised if godly members of the opposite sex are not showing interest in you.

Next, what type of standards do you have for someone of the opposite sex? One common experience of older singles is that as each successive year of singleness accrues, the standards of a "suitable mate" actually increase. This may seem counterintuitive; and some singles may claim otherwise. "I'll take anyone at this point", they may say. However, the more people they date, or see, or know, the more they can compare a particular person to someone "out there" who they think is better. For example, Joe has dated five girls and each was missing



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something in particular. He starts dating a sixth girl, who seems great, but now she's missing that wonderfully salient quality that girl #2 had (who had been rejected because she lacked the good looks of girl #1). So he tells himself, "Girl number seven will be perfect!" And he continues on his search. Given the mobility of modern life, who knows? In a few months, he might find someone in another town and she might be "the one". The reality is, however, that the number of single Christian women he's meeting is bound to decrease every year if for no other reason than that they are marrying off and that it becomes more impractical (and therefore unlikely) to meet many of them in one place, such as college ministry or some other shared experience.

It is noteworthy that women more frequently make this objection – that the right man has not yet pursued them. Women do have a unique responsibility to respond to, nurture, and affirm male initiation in this area, and the last thing I'd want to do is make a woman feel guilty for being committed to doing so. That said, women can also (perhaps unwittingly) make the mistake of setting unrealistic expectations. Many women, for example, believe that there must be one "perfect match" for them out there, and it's their job to wait for him. This may seem romantic, but

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it is horribly debilitating. As soon as she's lost that first rush of emotion and is getting to know him as a flawed human (and not the paragon of perfection her ignorance initially allowed him to be) she feels obligated to end the relationship. This happens with some frequency where women have been duped by the media into thinking that marriage must be a state of perpetual bliss and that, if it is not, something must be wrong with their partner. Such a mentality, if learned during the single years, can be devastating in marriage. Such discontent singles make discontent husbands and wives. A theological sidebar: though God does providentially orchestrate our lives, a mystical theology that suggests we can discover God's secret will is bound to frustrate. Who we marry falls into the realm of God's secret (unrevealed) will (Deut. 29:29). There is a "specific person" out there, but we only find out who it is by obeying the principles God has revealed in His Word, making our vows, and walking down the aisle.⁹

Lastly, some folk who make this objection (men and women) are doing very little to put themselves in the path of godly members of the opposite sex who are probably marriage-minded and could make a suitable match. They may work too many hours or spend unreasonable amounts of

9. See Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*.



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time on hobbies that don't promote fellowship. If you are giving all your energy and time to worldly activities, worldly people are whom you are likely to attract. Single Christians who are taking advantage of their season in life for undistracted devotion to the Lord (as Paul urges them to) will be giving their time and energy to ministries that bless others, and the sort of man or woman they hope to marry will be doing the same. If you are running hard after God, He may open your eyes to the worthiness of someone running right alongside you.

But you say, "I've carefully considered all you say, and I am not falling into any of these errors, and I'm still single. Why?" The balance is that God does not promise us we will be married, and we are called to be content in whatever circumstances we are in (Phil. 4:11). I pray that you will be engaged in service to your local church, using your singleness for His glory, and continuing to grow and develop the personality, godliness, and skills that will make you an excellent spouse, and that He will give you deep and abiding contentment in this season which may last a few months or a lifetime. God may have a plan for glorifying Himself through your singleness that goes far beyond anything you can imagine. Trust Him to work out all things for your good and His glory in the end.

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Objection #3: Doesn't this way of thinking cause me to look down on my single friends, particularly the older ones?

Since we're not God, we cannot know all the reasons for their singleness. Hence, as we interact with them, we may discover areas of their life that we may challenge (these sorts of conversations should be going on all the time in healthy churches), we may come alongside them and comfort them as they rely on God for contentment, or (alternatively) we may be in a position to encourage them to consider whether singleness may in fact be God's special gifting for them.

Objection #4: Does this mean that if I'm still single, I am less than who God is calling me to be and I cannot be sanctified?

Absolutely not; Christ was not less than perfect, and the great apostle, Paul, was most likely single. Cherish the season God has you in and trust that He will use you and perfect you (Rom. 8:28) regardless of your marital status. But be diligent in discerning if you do have any areas of growth or error that might be keeping you unnecessarily from marriage.



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***Objection #5:** What steps can a single woman take to find a husband, if she's convinced from the Bible and her conscience that it's a man's responsibility to take initiative?*

This is an excellent question, and probably one that many of you were thinking about. To a large extent, the prolonged single years of women are the result of the sins of passive men. Namely, men who won't grow up, take initiative and responsibility, find the woman God would have them marry, and raise children to the glory of God. That is why most of my exhortation has been to the men.

Women, nevertheless, need to continue to cultivate contentment in their single years. They can pray. They can continue developing their femininity in whatever providences they experience as single women (work, hobbies, church activities, etc.). Such femininity will be attractive to a masculine, godly man. They can develop a nurturing disposition through volunteer baby-sitting (for example) and other involvements with younger women or children. They can learn to be content with their wages and resist the lure of the corporate ladder.

Secondly, it is possible to look for a husband without hunting for one. For example, it may be wise for a woman to move to a place where

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there is a strong, larger church with elders who can know her and care for her, and where she may meet more available Christian, godly men. At this point, I should also note that it is possible for a woman to have an inordinate desire to marry at a young age to escape the responsibilities of life or to perhaps become free from parents with whom she may be quarreling. This sometimes happens in the case of a young woman from a troubled home. However, to the contrary, her problems will not be alleviated with marriage. Such a woman probably has trouble with authority in her life, and will likely bring her husband much grief.

This principle can be generalized to more than just young women from troubled homes. For both men and women, an inordinate desire for marriage may be indicative of general discontentment. *We need to be able to distinguish between a healthy and an unhealthy discontentment.* Since God intends that most singles marry, some degree of discontentment with the state of singleness is inevitable for these (most) singles. It is what propels them to marry. However, where there is unhealthy discontentment, people are making an idol out of marriage. As we noted earlier, some think of marriage as an institution of perpetual bliss. Conversely, a healthy discontentment with



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singleness maintains a biblical, realistic view of marriage. Such a man or woman wishes to embrace the challenges of marriage for the glory of God and for their sanctification. Indeed, they ought to look to marriage as an opportunity to have God reveal to them degrees of their own selfishness and pride that were otherwise unknown. Marriage becomes the necessary crucible for sanctification for these people. I said to my wife on my wedding day, "I cannot become the man God means for me to become apart from you." I still believe that was a true statement.

OK, shifting gears a bit, what should our response be, if we've accepted the idea that marriage is the norm for Christian adults? Well, naturally, we will want to find someone we want to marry, and this gives purpose and direction to our romantic interests. However, as I alluded to earlier in response to objection #2, we must focus on the one person for whom God will hold us responsible: **ourselves**. The scriptural emphasis is on working out **our** salvation with fear and trembling (by God's grace!), becoming the sort of person God intends for us to become. Consequently, to emphasize how to find someone would be putting the cart before the horse. In one sense, we continue to "become" even after we've "found", so I'm not suggesting one has to

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wait until he is “perfectly mature as a single” in order to get married. (This would discourage all of us, and we’d never marry!) Rather, as we give emphasis to growing in the grace of God (becoming), we trust God for our active finding of a spouse in His timing. And this “trust” will look different in a man than in a woman. We’ll look at that in a later chapter.

Discussion questions:

1. Did any of the eight struggles of singleness resonate with you? Which do you see in your life?
2. What do you think about the “gift of celibacy”? Do you have it? Can you think of anyone you know who does? Do you agree with how the chapter defines it? Go to 1 Corinthians 7 to investigate further.
3. Were you surprised to learn that the frequency of fornication is just as high among Christian youth? What are some reasons for this? How can you combat this in your life, and in the lives of other Christians?
4. Discuss the “normality of marriage”, given the fact that neither Jesus nor Paul was married. What implications does this have for those who are young and eager to marry? Those who prefer not to marry? Those who have longed to marry and now are in their forties or fifties?



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5. What role do you think a woman can/should play in pursuing marriage? Has this chapter challenged or supported your thinking? What are some other ways a woman can make herself available to godly men without hunting them?
6. How can you both trust God for a spouse, and be looking for one at the same time? Are these mutually exclusive?

