

“We live in a sex-obsessed culture, so the notion of single women living fulfilled, joyful and celibate lives is totally counter-cultural, and hugely challenging. Andrea encourages us to take God’s word seriously and meet that challenge head on. Her honesty, humour and wisdom will challenge the way you think, warm your heart, and nourish your soul—which is exactly what happened when I read this book. This is not just for single women; everyone should read it to understand the pressures on single women, the mistakes others can make, and how church families can be truly encouraging. Worth the asking price for chapter seven alone.”

Rev Carrie Sandom, associate minister for women, St John’s Tunbridge Wells, Kent, UK; author of “Different By Design”

“This is not just another book on singleness. It will help you to know wholehearted contentment, and see singleness as a true gift. A brilliant book.”

Dr Helen Roseveare, missionary, conference speaker and author

“The most helpful and biblical book I have read on singleness. Most others made me mad or sad, but this made me rejoice. Andrea helps us lift our eyes from our situation and gaze upon Jesus, who loves us and delights in us.”

Rev Caroline West, curate, St Mary’s Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK; lecturer at Cornhill Training Course, London

“Most women regard the idea of singleness with horror, not a gift to be wanted, and certainly never good. Andrea Trevenna confronts this reality head on, with an honest look at what this says about our hearts. Full of biblical wisdom, this book truly shows how to be single and satisfied.”

Dr Kirsten Birkett, tutor in ethics and philosophy at Oak Hill Theological College, London; author of “The Essence of Feminism”

“Among a shelf of books on singleness, this one stands out because it deals with our hearts. Andrea encourages us with the great news that if we get our hearts right, then we really can have the satisfaction we all yearn for. I’ll be encouraging others to read this book and praying that their lives will be changed as they allow God to change their hearts.”

Rosie Dunn, London Women’s Convention Committee

“I really appreciate this book, and I will keep coming back to it. Andrea is very honest about what being a single woman is like, and she points us to the real change that Christ brings to our everyday lives. I really enjoyed the down-to-earth examples and the chatty and engaging style, as well as the food for thought throughout the book. I highly recommend it.”

Annabel Heywood, Parish and Women’s Worker, St Ebbe’s Oxford, UK.

The heart of singleness

How to be single and satisfied

Andrea Trevenna

*To my parents, John and Eileen,
with heartfelt thanks for your constant love,
encouragement, prayers and friendship*

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1. The *gift* of singleness?!

What is the worst thing that could possibly happen to you in life?

My answer: staying single.

Or at least, that's how I'd have answered when I was 18, and for a good few years after that. I couldn't think of anything worse than being a "Miss" for ever. Never having any rings on that one crucial finger on my left hand, never introducing people to my "significant other"—that was as bad as it could get.

I'm 42 now; and I'm still single. There have been many times, since I was 18, when that has been really painful, when being single has made me cry, when I have thought that God has surely made a mistake. I still have days when being single is a struggle, especially when I go somewhere new on my own and someone asks me who my husband is, or how many children I have.

You may not go so far as to think that being single is the worst thing that could possibly happen to you, as 18-year-old me did. But if you are a single woman reading this, it's probably not something that you've chosen to be. It's not what you dreamed of when you were young. You'll know that feeling inside that whispers: *It wasn't meant to be like this.*

You complete me

And that feeling is reinforced by our culture. Love is (to steal a song title) all around us: we are bombarded daily with all sorts of wisdom on how to find, get and keep the man* of our dreams.

Just turning on the radio reminds us of this. While making a cup of tea just now, “Don’t you want me baby?” by The Human League and “All you need is love” by The Beatles were playing on the radio (I was clearly not listening to the current top 20!). The vast majority of today’s hits seem to be about relationships, love or the heart. They’re about longing for a love you don’t have, or about finding a love you long for, or being rejected by the one you love, or losing the love you once had.

All you need is love—all you need is a lover. That’s why, over the last few years, there has been a massive surge in the number of online dating agencies available to help you find him. There are literally millions of them on offer. When I googled “dating agencies”, over 44 million hits came up. “Christian dating agencies” gave me 2 million options.

Most of those sites will tell you that the fairy tales we grew up with, and the romantic comedies we watch, are true. They’ll assure you that in life, the boy and the girl always end up together... and always live happily ever after. Even if (in fact especially if) the two main characters start off absolutely hating each other, you can guarantee it will end in true love.

* It may be that, for you, you find yourself attracted to finding “her”, rather than “him”. If this is you, then you might like to read Emily’s story, in the “Real Faith” section on page 97. This book isn’t the place for going into what the Bible says about homosexuality. But that doesn’t mean it won’t be helpful for you to read, because all single women, no matter who we feel attracted to, find our deepest desires are met only by one person—Jesus. If you want to think about what the Bible says about same-sex attraction, a good place to start is *Is God Anti-Gay?* by Sam Allberry (www.thegoodbook.co.uk/ssa or ...com/ssa).

Happy endings mean a couple ending up in love. And we just love those happy endings because, I guess, that's what we're all hoping for. So if that's not the ending in my life, or your life, surely something's gone wrong.

If you've seen the Tom Cruise film *Jerry Maguire* (between this and my music tastes, I'm beginning to show my age), you'll probably remember the line at the end of the film when Tom says to Dorothy Boyd, played by Renee Zellweger: "You complete me". If we're single, the chances are that deep down we long to hear someone (and it doesn't need to be Tom Cruise) say that to us.

Our culture says we need "the one", and that we're right to feel incomplete until we find him.

Made for each other

And, in many ways, the Bible says that our feelings and our culture are right.

We were made to live in loving relationships. Love and marriage were invented by a loving God as part of his perfect world. Seeing them as things to be highly valued is a right instinct (though our culture, and even our feelings, can twist and spoil love and relationships until they're not good for us at all).

After all, Tom Cruise wasn't the first man to feel incomplete until he found his girl. Right at the beginning of the Bible, having made the first man, God says:

It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper
suitable for him. (Genesis 2 v 18)

So God makes the first woman out of the man's rib. She's made from him, and in a sense is made for him. This couple really could say: "We were made for each other".

The man is overjoyed! And Genesis continues:

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. (v 24)

They are perfect for each other, and are given to each other in marriage. It is not good for humans to be alone. It is very good for them to be in love, married, and each other.

And Genesis 2 sets the tone for the rest of the Bible. So when I feel that being single is awful, that something has gone wrong, that finding a man is what I most need... God agrees, doesn't he? Marriage is good: singleness is bad, right?

Better?

Not quite. Yes, God made marriage to be great—and if you long to be married, that feeling is not wrong. Yet here's a verse that as a single woman I need to hear, but which actually I'd often rather not hear:

To the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. (1 Corinthians 7 v 8)

The writer is Paul, an apostle chosen by Jesus Christ to teach his church and write his word. His words are God's words. And he says it is good to be single. Not just OK, tolerable, bearable. Good.

How do you feel about that?

It's not that Paul's made a slip of the pen here. In 1 Corinthians 7, he looks at a number of different singleness scenarios: at those who have never been married, those who have been widowed, and those who are engaged. And over and over again he seems to say: Marriage good: singleness *better*. See what you make of what he says...

It is good for a man not to marry but since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. (v 1-2, NIV 84)

I wish that all of you were as I am [ie: single]. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. (v 7)

Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife [or husband].
(v 27, NIV84).

Those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. (v 28)

A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is. (v 39-40)

Being single is a gift (v 7)—a present from God. Paul says it leaves us “happier” (v 40). It’s marriage, not singleness, that brings “many troubles” (v 28). So if we’re not married right now, then we’re currently enjoying this “gift” from God—experiencing the “happiness” of singleness.

As you read God’s words in 1 Corinthians 7, how do you react? “Singleness means less trouble than marriage? I’ll take the trouble!” “Singleness is happier? I don’t want that sort of happiness!”

“Singleness is good? Not for me. That’s simply wrong.”

The unwanted gift

I guess we could call singleness, in most cases, the unwanted gift. I once saw a book titled: *If singleness is a gift, what’s the return policy?*, which pretty much sums up how many of us feel about

our singleness. If you're reading this and you're not a Christian, the idea that being single is a gift probably sounds crazy. And if you're reading this and you are a Christian, then it probably sounds, well, crazy.

It's not easy to be grateful for a gift that you don't want, to enjoy a present that is totally not what you asked for. One Christmas, when my sister and I were 6 and 8, our parents gave us a train set for Christmas. It was a very nice train set, a state-of-the-art Hornby train set... but it was a train set! This was not what I wanted at all. I wanted a Tiny Tears doll. (Looking back on that Christmas, I asked my mum recently if she thought my dad had wanted a son. She replied: "No, but he did want a train set!")

My father is wonderful. But that Christmas, he didn't give me what I wanted, what was good. His idea of a good gift didn't match up with mine.

Is God like that? How can singleness possibly be a good gift? Surely Paul (and God) must have got this wrong, we think. We may not think it in our heads—if we're Christians, we know that God's word is God's word, that it's all true and right and good—but we feel it in our hearts. And, normally, it's what happens in my heart that directs what happens in my life.

How on earth can anyone really, really believe in their heart that being a single Christian (that is, not "being single" so I can sleep around, but rather, not sleeping around because I'm single) is better?

The heart of singleness

So this is a book about our hearts. It's about what's going on in our hearts as we think about singleness. It's not a book full of doctrine; it isn't meant to be the last word on the whole issue;

and I certainly don't have all the answers. My aim is to help us to look at our hearts, to look at our dreams and loves and hopes and fears about singleness in the light of God's word.

You may be reading this book as a Christian, or as someone who hasn't worked out what they think about Jesus Christ. You may be single having never been married; you may have been married but now be single again, through divorce or bereavement. You may have been unmarried and sexually active in the past, either as a Christian or before you became a Christian, and find it hard to be single, celibate and satisfied now.

You may be young and single, and deep down assuming this won't last for much longer; you may be a little older, and deep down realising that this might continue through your whole life. You may have been heartbroken in a previous relationship, or abused as a child or an adult (in which case, let me say at the start that the contents of this short book won't be all you need. I hope it'll be really helpful for you—but do speak to a trusted Christian friend, or pastor, about your particular circumstances). Or you may be married, but wanting to help and support single friends.

Our circumstances will be very different; your past and your present may not be like mine, and not all the experiences I talk about in this book will be ones you've been through. And at the back of the book, you can read about some other women's lives, and about their joys and struggles as they deal with singleness in very different circumstances.

But in the end, whatever our situation, fundamentally our hearts are pretty much all the same. So if we're single, we'll all at times struggle with the same feelings, and all at times be attracted to the same apparent solutions. And ultimately, as we'll see, our heart's longings are all actually met at the same place.

It can be quite uncomfortable looking at our own hearts. But it will (I hope) be liberating and exciting, too. So as we begin, take some time to think through these questions:

- How is your heart? What are you feeling about singleness?
- Are you struggling with being single? Are you feeling angry and bitter and resentful towards God? Do you feel he has let you down, forgotten you, given you second-best? Have you turned your back on him altogether?
- Are you gritting your teeth and getting on with it? Or determined to change it? Or generally fine with it, but experiencing the odd moment of doubt?
- Are you assuming if you live with it now, then God will give you what you really need later on?
- What did you feel in your heart when you read those verses about your singleness being a good gift from God, one that you can welcome?

I think that instinctively our hearts tell us God is wrong, even if our heads know that he is always right. But here's the thing: wouldn't it be great if, somehow, God were right? If there were a way for singleness not to be at best a quiet regret, at worst a personal tragedy?

There is. Our hearts can change. It's possible to view singleness as a blessing, a gift, even if we haven't chosen it. It's possible to enjoy a contentment that isn't based on our relationship status, and isn't affected by it.

It's possible to be single, and satisfied. That's what this short book is about. My prayer is that as you read it, you will come to truly believe and experience that too—not only in your head, but in your heart as well.