

BRIDGET GEE

SINGLE.
JUST
BECAUSE

A PILGRIMAGE INTO
HOLY ALONENESS



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Single, Just Because* by Bridget Gee.

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

SINGLENES IS NOT THE PROBLEM

“So, Morgan, what was your response tonight?”

We were sitting outside the student union on a late-September evening after our weekly gathering. Morgan was a new freshman whose parents had met in our InterVarsity Christian Fellowship chapter in the 1990s. She was eighteen. Truly fresh. I had just given a talk and invited the students to respond by writing down a burden they needed to lay at the foot of the cross. We set up a foam cross for students to tack them to.

“Well, I was thinking about my singleness,” Morgan said.

“Really? Why’s that?” I asked, curious because I hadn’t mentioned relationships in my talk that night.

“I’m just so afraid that I won’t meet my husband. What if I don’t? And I know, I’m young, everyone says that, but it’s just a worry that I have to keep giving to Jesus.”

I smiled. “That’s fair, Morgan. I’m glad you felt like you could do that tonight. But I do want to reassure you. You have your whole life ahead of you. You’re eighteen and so beautiful. You will absolutely find love. I’m sure of it.”

“I know, I know, but it’s just . . . what if I don’t?”

“What *if* you don’t? I’m twenty-seven and I haven’t found love—”

“Exactly! And my heart breaks for you!” She interrupted my point.

I threw my head back in laughter. “Don’t waste your heart-break on me, babe! I’m twenty-seven and single and I’m happy with how my life is—I don’t look at all these years as less beautiful or valid since romance hasn’t been center stage. Life is so much more than finding love in one person. You were right to lay down that worry, tonight. I have to lay it down all the time. But rest assured, I am not heartbroken. Not right now anyway.”

Morgan will never know twenty-seven-year-old singleness. She did in fact meet her husband in our chapter, just like her parents. Her now-husband, Carson, was another one of my students; he was not overly concerned about his own singleness, but ended up being a huge blessing to Morgan and her family. They got together only a year after the family lost Morgan’s dad. I see God’s handiwork in their relationship. God was kind to connect her with a partner even before her freshman year ended. Her story is different from mine. She endured only a few months of adult singleness, whereas mine has lasted a decade and change.

People show undue concern all the time for my now thirty-something singleness.

“How are you still single, Bridget?”

“How is it that you have not been snatched up yet?”

“It’s an injustice that you’re not married.”

“Your husband is going to be so lucky.”

Usually, I’m having a wonderful conversation about life and God when I hear these sentiments from the mouths of my friends. I don’t always know how to respond. Sometimes I feel

uncomfortable, sometimes I feel flattered. After years of hearing such things, a narrative has risen to the surface:

It is somehow wrong for me to be single.

I know that the truth of the matter is that my friends and family are experiencing a moment of delight in me when they say things like this; they actually mean to tell me they feel loved by me and find me incredibly lovable. And I write that without a hint of irony—I mean it. This is the most common response I get when people in my life are amazed by me and feel big feelings of love for me. They wish that I was regularly loved and appreciated by a spouse.

But I'm not.

In fact, I've been single for over a decade—and not for lack of trying, believe me. This fact often shocks people during bonding moments we share. They wonder how could I have gone so long without being chosen by a man?

And so, in that moment, rather than affirming and encouraging me for who I am, they feel confused that I'm still single, and they want me to answer for it. The confusion seems to suggest that my personhood is going to waste by not being in a romantic relationship.

To be honest, I've felt this way too at times when singleness makes me ache.

I'm not held enough.

I'm not told I'm beautiful nearly enough, in my humble opinion.

I rarely have anyone offer to make me a meal.

Days can pass without anyone checking in on my well-being or encouraging me to keep going.

I get to structure my life around me and me alone, which can be a bit unmooring.

And I agree that it is wild that I have yet to meet a man who wants to spend the rest of his life with me.

While all those things are true, it's a lie to believe that my personhood is wasted just because I'm not being loved by a partner. In American culture, marriage is often discussed as a checkpoint in life, a sure thing. That sense of entitlement to marriage turns singleness into a problem, a curse, or a burden. But this mindset only makes sense when you're looking through a lens that centers romantic relationships.

When we talk about singleness, dating, and marriage this way, it can be dehumanizing. We are wholly valuable regardless of our relationships, our accomplishments, or our lovability for that matter.

Dealing with my own singleness has been challenging enough without the consistent questioning from others. For most of my adulthood, I've treated myself with contempt because of my singleness. It's only in the last couple years that I've been able to stop treating it like a curse and start peeling back the layers to understand who I am and how I got here. I'm single not because there's something wrong with me or anyone else. I'm single just because. That's how it's worked out so far. I won't blame anything or anyone but God and his mercy, because even though I cringe at calling it a "gift," I know that God is not uncomfortable with my singleness. He knows what's going on, even when I don't.

A few years ago, when I became restless with having such a negative view of my relationship status, I decided to work on actively embracing it. I wanted to learn to trust God more with my life, and I thought it was time to unpack the intricacies of my singleness—what parts I have control over, what spiritual aspects are at play, and what value systems

perpetuate my struggles. I was met with both encouragement and discomfort while seeking out answers and healthier conversations around singleness. Some of my friends felt this change in me was a breath of fresh air; others said I was defining myself too much by my relationship status. But that's exactly what I had been doing before this move in a healthier direction. I was convinced that society's judgment was right, that my partnerless, sexless life was less than valuable.

Society loves to center romantic pairing, love stories, and getting married—it's a literary and historic reality. Traditionally, comedies are meant to end in weddings with the main characters living happily ever after. These days, most movies and TV shows include a romantic plot line in order to draw an audience. In many cultures, marriage is the final step into adulthood—a real coming of age, a solidifying of purpose and value.

From a young age we are overtly and subliminally encouraged to attain opposite-sex relationships, in which our identities make sense to everyone else and our lives seem stable behind the white picket fence of the American Dream (or something like it). We are sold one version of what life can be—packaged, boxed up, and limited. We are told that all the good stuff happens within that box, that it's where all the fun and value is found.

As I become more comfortable with my own singleness, I rage against that box. I am bored by the story that I'm offered as a single person. Instead of being married by twenty-seven, like I imagined I might be, I became the Singleness Gal™ (just kidding, I haven't trademarked it . . . yet). I hold the tension of wanting to be married with the knowledge that marriage isn't all there is to life.

I've always been drawn to living a different kind of life, imagined for me by the stories of the kingdom of God.

Scripture doesn't center human love stories. They are in the Bible no doubt, but that's not what the Bible is about. It's not even about human marriage. It's not about human reproduction. The story of Scripture is about a covenant relationship between humankind and its Creator. It's about reproducing eternal life. It's about being invited into the family of God as an heir to the kingdom. If you follow The Way, then you do not believe in a book of romantic fairy tales. You believe in the real deal of what life is all about. That's why I am baffled when the church sounds more like the world than the Word.

THE REAL PROBLEM

One afternoon early in my ministry career, I sat in a coffee shop booth with my coworker and good friend Chris. Before we got down to business, he made a surprising admission.

"Bridget, your singleness has seriously opened my eyes." Although he was only six months my senior, he had been married since his sophomore year in college.

"Oh yeah?" I asked curiously and cautiously, bracing myself for what he might say next.

"Yeah. I was at my dad's church last weekend for a men's retreat, and I couldn't help but notice that all the content was geared toward husbands and fathers. Like, they just expected that we were all married with children."

"Were there any single guys there?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, definitely, but it was the first time I realized that the content wasn't for everyone in the room."

"It's as if the expectation is that those single men will one day be husbands and fathers, so it will eventually apply to them, right?"

“Yes! Exactly!”

“And how did that make you feel as a married man in the room?” I asked.

“Well, I felt a little ruined! I wouldn’t have noticed it had I not been exposed to your perspective as a single person. And it just sucks because getting married and having kids is no guarantee.”

How sweet that moment was for me, a hopeless romantic who was hopelessly single and whose friends were marrying left and right. Finally, one of them recognized what I see all the time in churches and in the content put out by Christian leadership.

And that’s that it often lacks imagination.

It often lacks a dreamer’s perspective and vision for what our lives can look like. These conferences, sermons, and devotionals encourage lifestyles that look more like the Western cultural ideal than the wild, upside-down, and unconventional kingdom of God.

In campus ministry, our aim is not to create an army of future husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers out of the young singles we work with, but instead to develop disciples of Jesus. To develop world changers here and now! They may eventually become husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, but we do not prepare them for something not guaranteed. We prepare them for the sure thing: Jesus’ eternal reign and our partnership with him as coheirs in the kingdom of God.

There needs to be a new wave of discipleship in singleness in our current cultural climate.

During my adulthood, things have been changing in the United States. The average age of first marriage has risen by years instead of months. It seems the longer I’m single, the

closer that number gets to my age. Single people now make up a little over half of the adult population.

And yet, in the evangelical movement one can graduate high school with a deep theological grasp of traditional Christian marriage yet hardly have a robust understanding of what it means to be a part of the global church or even a grasp of engaging with God in their personal life. We've spent too much time on marriage discipleship for single people.

When the church and popular culture say the same thing about singleness, we have a major problem.

I get it. Marriage books, conferences, and materials exist to help marriages *last*, not to convince people to get married. But being hyper-focused on marriage leads many singles to believe they are missing something vital to abundant life.

LOCKED AWAY IN A TOWER

Disney's *Tangled* is a telling of the fairy tale of Rapunzel, the princess with long flowing hair, locked away in a tower. It's one of my favorites of all the Disney movies. I first saw it in theaters with my little brother Luke when I was twenty and he was just thirteen. It made me very emotional, but I tried so hard to hide my sappiness from him that only one tear escaped my left tear duct while he sat on my right. I don't know why I was so eager to hide my emotions because as we drove home, I confessed them to him, and we had a good laugh. Now I openly weep when the movie makes me emotional.

The movie's opening number shows a grown-up Rapunzel singing about her daily schedule—all the things she does locked away in the tower all day. After listing off her chores and hobbies, she sings, "Stuck in the same place I've always been, I'll keep wonderin', and wonderin' . . . When will my life begin?"

All Rapunzel wants is to leave her tower on her birthday to see up close the annual display of stars she's always admired from a distance. But her captor (pretending to be her mother) makes the excuse that the world out there is too dangerous for her, and so she traps her year after year.

There have been so many days I've felt like Rapunzel—trapped in my singleness, wondering and wondering and wondering and wondering when will *my* life begin? As if my life would begin when I was finally chosen by a man and I was finally in a marriage. The world of love, purpose, fun, and freedom wasn't for me if I wasn't married. That's what I had heard from the world and the church.

But deep down, I didn't buy it. Couldn't I be enough just being me? Couldn't I have a full and beautiful life as a single person? Couldn't we stop believing and acting like being in a relationship or a marriage unlocks some kind of magical portal to a better life?

Too often, the answers we give each other for our deep hurts and longings are romance, dating, love, and marriage. None of these things are inherently bad, but they are not lasting answers to the problems in our souls. We need to find better ones—there's a whole creation out there that God gave us to interact with and delight in.

Rapunzel's desire to venture beyond her tower is so right on; she was right to imagine more for her life. It isn't until she meets the film's other main character, Flynn Rider, that she finds out the stars are actually lanterns in a festival that the king and queen put on for their lost princess on her birthday each year.

When Rapunzel and Flynn finally get to the festival and sing *Tangled's* key musical number, I completely lose it. As

they float on a boat outside the palace, lanterns start to ascend into the night sky all around them and they sing, “I See the Light.”

“Standing here it’s all so clear / I’m where I’m meant to be /
And at last, I see the light.”

Rapunzel is finally getting what she wants: to see the lanterns up close. She doesn’t yet know they’ve been for her all along! Her parents never gave up on her return.

That first time I let the song and scene sink into my soul, I turned into mush at the thought of my Father. The King who waits and waits and sends out endless signs and light in the hope that his children will return to him. God wants us to have that same moment that Rapunzel has in the boat—the fog lifted, our worlds shifted, finally seeing him.

Tangled is not primarily a love story. It’s a pilgrimage. Rapunzel leaves behind the comfort of life as she knows it for a new experience. Along the way, she finds out that life has more to offer her than she could imagine. *Tangled* is a story of returning to who you are, finding out what life is really about, dreaming dreams, taking risks, and opening your eyes to the invitations left for you.

Rapunzel’s story is my story. It’s our story. We aren’t locked away in towers of single loneliness, but we may be missing out on real life with Jesus because of the false stories we’ve been told. We can venture out into all that life has to offer. We can open our eyes to the ways God beckons us into his kingdom, into his family, and into our positions as his royal ones.

Jesus says in John 10:10 (ESV), “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

He offers all of us abundant life. That doesn't mean a married life. That doesn't even mean an easy and happy life. But it does mean a life that is full and free, with unwavering peace from God and constant access to joy unspeakable. Unconditionally, God's promises are available to us. We don't have to be married for that to be true.

But we do have to be willing to leave behind the lies we've been told and to seek out real life in Jesus. What are the stories you've been told that hold you captive to a limited life? What are the realities at play that keep you thinking that your singleness is less than God's best for you?

MOVING FROM STARVATION OR GLUTTONY TO HEALTH

Sometimes you go through seasons of loving life, hardly thinking about your singleness. And then other times, it's all you can think about. The truth is that singleness does define us in some seasons. We live in the tension of hating being alone—alone in our households, alone in our hurts and sadness and struggles—but loving the freedom and joy that singleness affords us at the same time.

We long for companionship. There is nothing wrong with this.

We long to be touched. Biological realities are at work in us, making this absolutely normal.

We long to be championed in our goals and dreams.

We long to be seen and understood because we want to validate our existence.

In a lot of ways, a romantic relationship *can* provide all these things. But that's a tower we get trapped in: we wrap up the solution for all our longings in this one place.

What if, as in my case, it just keeps not working out? As much as I've tried, I haven't been able to land a long-term romantic relationship.

Does that mean I go without my longings being met?

Some of us deprive ourselves of what we want and need when it doesn't come in the package we expect. Others go out and get it by any means necessary. Both approaches are commonplace, but both only cause more strife. The first requires us to see ourselves as robots with a specific set of instructions for meeting our needs. The second requires us to see others as the means of getting our needs met. Where did this come from? I think the church encourages starvation and the world encourages gluttony. What an inhumane tension to live in! There must be a better way.

Throughout this book, we will explore a healthier approach to the longings and needs that arise in singleness.

We are made for companionship, connection, romance, love, and commitment. Relationships are supposed to be beautiful and fulfilling, to bring us joy, life, and wholeness. However, there's a lot of brokenness, abuse, and unhealth in our relationships. A lot of us are living without the love and connection we are made for—romantic or otherwise.

So how do I go about getting that when time and time again, romantic relationships are not working out for me? How do I treat my longings with grace and kindness, and a bit of wisdom?

What we do with our longings is a great measure of our character and maturity.

I applaud people who go after what they want unapologetically, full force. I love seeing people ditch societal expectations to fully embrace who they are and what they've been

made to do. It's inspiring. I think we all love those stories to some extent, but the status quo of the church and the world pulls us back in over and over.

One of the biggest reasons I am grateful to be part of the kingdom of God is that it beats every human system. Every human-made construct eventually crumbles. And praise God for that! That's his mercy. All the things we think we want and need become incredibly dull next to Jesus and the life he offers. Jesus has living water for us—overflowing, bubbling up. His life for us doesn't ever end (John 4)!

The cost of following Jesus is high, however (Luke 9:23). And sometimes that means giving up a version of yourself meant to please others. Or giving up a version of your life you've come up with yourself. Either way, following Jesus means real freedom. Life with Jesus means you always have access to your Creator and that you reflect him with every inhale and exhale.

My aim in this book is to help you envision an abundant life, one that you are called to by Jesus, no matter your relationship status. Throughout my story, I share how Jesus has crushed the lies of the world and flipped anti-kingdom structures on their heads in my life. In my pilgrimage, God has helped me see how different and better his invitations are for me than those found elsewhere.

Let's be like Rapunzel and leave our towers behind to discover true Life.

Pilgrimage Moment: Take the First Step

Are you ready for our first pilgrimage moment together?

Actually, that's my main question for you: Are you ready to move in a new direction with your singleness? Maybe it's your attitude that needs some change. Maybe you need an overhaul of your view and beliefs around your singleness as a follower of Jesus. Maybe you need to wrestle with God for a while over some things. No matter how you're coming in, this likely will be a healing journey for you.

Take a moment before moving on, and consider where you've been and what brought you here. How's the journey been so far? Is there something you need from God in order to take the first step on your pilgrimage into holy aloneness?

Ask him for it!

The pilgrimage began when you picked up this book. I'm excited for you.

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