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Singleness and the Bible: What Does the Bible Say to Singles? Isaiah 54:1–10

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When we glance at the Bible, we can see it talks a lot about marriage. The Bible begins with a marriage (Gen 2:18–24). It ends with a marriage (Rev 21:2). Song of Songs is an entire book devoted to a romantic relationship between a man and a woman. We can also find numerous other places in the Bible where marriage is upheld and celebrated. The Bible makes a big deal about marriage. So, conversely, we might assume the Bible doesn't have much to say about being single. We might feel that unless we marry, then God's purpose for our life won't be fulfilled. That to be single is to be second rate in God's kingdom.

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This is a problem because there are a number of reasons for someone to be single. A person may be single because of their personality, divorce, death, or disability. The marriage rate for people with disabilities is much lower than the general population. It's also worth mentioning that the marriage rate in Australia is declining. There's a large number of people in our society who are single for a variety of reasons, and it seems to be becoming the norm for people to remain unmarried. So, what does the Bible have to say to these people? What I want to do is provide a biblical framework of marriage, and then within that framework understand singleness and how it relates to us as people who follow Jesus.

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So, we come to this obscure passage in Isaiah 54 that talks about barren women breaking out in song. Why of all passages did I choose this one? Because this passage marks a pivotal moment in God's plan of salvation that changes the way we think about marriage and singleness. While being single is not the same as being barren, there are lessons that can be learned from the Bible's discussion around barrenness. To understand why this is the case, we need to know something about what it means to be barren in the context of God's covenants with Abraham and his Old Testament people, Israel.

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In Genesis 12, God meets with Abraham, and makes a covenant and promises that God would bless the whole world through his kids (Gen 12:1–3). Now, some of us who are parents are thinking, "Wait. Have you even met my kids??" Nonetheless, kids are part of, and a means to God's blessing, and in the Old Testament, having kids had a special significance as this was how God would bless the whole world. Park that thought to one side. We'll come back to it.

This idea of having kids as a sign of God's blessing is solidified in God's covenant with Israel. And it's not just kids, but all kinds of fertility. In Deuteronomy 28 God says to Israel, "If you fully obey the Lord your God ... The fruit of your womb will be blessed, and the crops of your land and the young of your livestock—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks." (Deut 28:1, 4). So, the promise of fertility extends to crops and livestock if Israel remains faithful to the covenant.

Conversely, God says to Israel, “However, if you do not obey the Lord your God ... the fruit of your womb will be cursed, and the crops of your land, and the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.” (Deut 28:15, 18).

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So, in the context of the old covenant, to be fertile was to be within the covenant blessing. To be infertile was to be outside the covenant blessing. This is reflected elsewhere in the Old Testament where Sarah and Hannah have a hard time because of their infertility or barrenness (Gen 16:4–5; 22:9; 1 Sam 1:6–7, 13) . While God worked powerfully through these women, being barren was not good. We see this in the book of Ruth. While Naomi wasn't barren, she faced the same fate as a barren woman because all her sons had died. Therefore, she faced the prospect of having no support in her old age. Naomi understood her circumstances as God being against her (Ruth 1:20). That was until Naomi's daughter, Ruth, married Boaz and redeemed their situation. But typically, to be barren and single was really bad because it meant that you couldn't enjoy the covenant blessing. Yet, through the prophet Isaiah, God tells barren women to burst out in song.

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Before I get to the reason for this, I want to talk about the men for a moment. Just as there were infertile women there were also infertile men. These men were known as eunuchs. In fact, some men were made into eunuchs - to put things politely. Eunuchs were particularly useful for serving the king because they were dependent on the king's administration for their welfare. Because the man was infertile, he couldn't have sons to provide for him in his old age. So, if you were a eunuch and wanted a comfortable retirement, then you had better do all you could to ensure the success of the king and not do anything to jeopardise the king's reign. Get the picture? So just as barren women were outside the covenant blessing, so were eunuchs.

Yet, Isaiah foresees a time coming when eunuchs will share in the covenant blessing which will be better than sons and daughters (Isa 56:4–5).

Why? What has happened to allow barren women and eunuchs to enjoy the covenant blessing?

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When Isaiah spoke these words, no one was enjoying the covenant blessing, and it was about to be completely removed. God had set Israel aside to be his servant and enjoy being in covenant relationship with him. Instead, they have been going their own way and serving themselves rather than God. They have sinned against God and can no longer enjoy the covenant blessing. So, the question that Isaiah is grappling with is how can Israel be God's servant and enjoy the blessing that comes from that when their sin against God is so great?

In chapter 53, Isaiah foresees another servant who will take the sin of God's people unto himself and suffer the punishment of death for their sins (Isa 53:3–4). The sin that separated God from his people would be done away with so that God's people could enjoy the covenant blessing once more. Remember at the start, I mentioned that God promised Abraham that he would bless the whole world through his kids? Isaiah anticipates a richer fulfilment of this promise by a suffering servant. A blessing that will see not the prosperity of a nation. Instead, a blessing that will see God and his people reconciled, and God's people reconciled to one another. This is how the barren woman and the eunuch will be able to enjoy the covenant blessing. The blessing that was anticipated through marriage and having kids will now be fulfilled on a much grander scale through a suffering servant. The blessing will be so abundant, even those who have been

outside the covenant blessing will come to enjoy it, and they will burst out in song and worship God.

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Of course, this servant figure that Isaiah was anticipating has been fulfilled by Jesus. That it was through the death and resurrection of Jesus that he took the sins of the whole world unto himself. It would be Jesus who would endure the punishment of death for our sins so we could be reconciled to God. There's a very real sense that the purpose of marriage has been fulfilled by Jesus – to be God's blessing for the whole world. It is because of Jesus that we can enjoy the covenant blessing of being reconciled to God and to each other.

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This has a bearing on how we think about marriage and singleness. Because of the suffering servant, Isaiah says that the barren women will have more children than married women (Isa 54:1). At which point we might think, "Barren, single women having babies. How does that work??" Obviously, it's pointing to something that isn't biological. This is something that is reflected in the New Testament.

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When Jesus' biological family comes looking for him, Jesus indicates that his family are actually the ones who do what God wants (Matt 12:47–48). Now, Jesus is not saying that biological families are irrelevant. But the covenant blessing of being reconciled to God and his people is comparable to biological families, and even surpasses biological families. There's a sense that the body of believers is a greater fulfilment of what God had intended for biological families.

We can also see this in the use of familial language. According to my Bible search, the word "brother" is used 135 times in the New Testament to refer to a fellow-believer, inclusive of women. To be clear, this isn't a title. This is a statement of the relationship we have with each other as believers. Paul can even refer to Timothy as his "son" (1 Cor 4:17; Phil 2:22; 1 Tim 1:2, 18; 2 Tim 1:2), and describe himself as a father of believers (1 Cor 4:15). Such was the familial relationship Paul had with the believers at Corinth.

This is the blessing that we enjoy as part of the new covenant we have in Jesus - that we regard each other as family. That means, I have to put up with your quirks, and you have to put up with mine - it's awesome! This is why it's important to do church in person whenever possible so that we can enjoy the covenant blessing we have been given. That's also why we have church picnics so we can enjoy the covenant blessing on an informal level. It's also why we have growth groups so we can enjoy the covenant blessing on a more personal level.

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OK. So, where does this leave marriage and singleness? As big and wonderful and exciting as marriage is, and we should thank God for all those who are married and for their kids, it's not the be all and end all. Marriage actually points to something greater. It was through marriage and having kids that God would bless the whole world. But now, that blessing to the whole world has arrived in Jesus. So, marriage is still a really big deal. It's part of the original creation. But it doesn't carry the significance for our relationship with God as it once did in the Old Testament. Therefore, being married or single does not define who we are in terms of our relationship with God. Our relationship with God is defined by Jesus. If we should remain single or lose our marriage, this does not change our standing with God. We are no less blessed in Jesus. Every blessing that you receive from God is found in Jesus.

So, what does this mean for those of us who are married? It means Jesus must define your marriage. That is, it is Jesus who informs how you spend your time as a couple: where you invest and use your resources, how you raise kids, maintain the home, support the family, deal with conflict and so on. There is a greater purpose at stake than just your marriage.

What does it mean for those of us who are single? It means Jesus must define your singleness. That is, it is Jesus who informs how you spend your time and resources. I think it's fair to say that singles have more time and resources than married people. There are exceptions, of course. But on the whole, singles enjoy greater flexibility. So, there is a great responsibility to ensure that what we do with our resources is honouring to God. Especially when we are alone with no one to hold us to account. Ask yourself, is how I'm spending my time honouring Jesus and the blessing I have in him. Remember, the time and resources you have to yourself also belong to God.

Married or single, we are to be defined by Jesus. Just as Isaiah told barren women not to be ashamed (Isa 54:4–5), neither should we feel ashamed if we happen to be single. Neither should we feel like a second-rate Christian. While singles today may not experience infertility, we now have the blessing that barren women and eunuchs looked forward to, and we can rejoice in that. Married or single God has called all of us to something greater than marriage, and it's to be found in being reconciled to him and each other through Jesus. So, let's do what Isaiah said that barren women and eunuchs would do - burst out in song and enjoy our covenant blessing with praise and worship of God for what he has done!