

Praise for *Thrive*

Lina is kind of like the feminine version of the apostle Paul—she’s a straight-shooting, no-holds-barred, truth-slashing gospel warrior! I admire her passion for God, her knowledge of His Word, and her heart for His people, and all three of those characteristics are present from cover to cover of *Thrive*. This is one of the most practical, hopeful, Jesus-focused books I’ve ever read on the subject of singleness!

—**LISA HARPER**

*Author, Bible teacher, and
Women of Faith speaker*

Thrive is rivetingly raw and gloriously victorious . . . a goldmine for singles and marrieds alike!

—**LYNNE TELLSCHOW**

*Director of Women’s Ministry,
Harvest Bible Chapel, Elgin, Illinois*

In a world full of families, singleness can be a major challenge. There have been lots of books and seminars aimed at helping singles cope and conquer, but often not backed up with the power and principles of God’s Word. Thankfully, Lina has done just that in a book that is bound to live up to its title for those called to a life of singleness.

—**DR. JOSEPH M. STOWELL**

*President, Cornerstone University,
Grand Rapids, Michigan*

Thrive is, in a word, BOLD. Her fresh perspectives on single-ness as a gift, temptations that most don't mention, the real tensions living in a world where matching means another person, set this book apart as not only a must read for singles, but a must study, dialogue, and debate book. Attitudes and obstacles are examined in the bright light of Scripture with the precision and focus of this emergency room doctor perspective that is uniquely Lina. Read and prepare for bold, biblical impact.

—**MIRIAM NEFF**

President of Widow Connection

Thrive:

The Single Life as God Intended

Lina AbuJamra

MOODY PUBLISHERS

CHICAGO

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LINA ABUJAMRA

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*To Milo and Fawzi—
they taught me how to thrive,
and I'm forever grateful.*

Contents

Foreword	9
Introduction: You Were Made for More	11
Part 1: The Gift of Singleness	
1. No Exchanges, No Returns: The Gift of Singleness	27
Part 2: Five Attitudes to Embrace	
2. I Can't Find No Satisfaction: Learning Contentment	53
3. Oops, I Did It Again: Choosing Self-Control	71
4. Holy Rollers and the Church Ladies: Embracing Holiness as a Lifestyle	93
5. Free as a Bird: Understanding True Freedom	111
6. Single-Minded Focus: Pursuing Undivided Devotion	127
Part 3: Four Obstacles to Overcome	
7. Me, Myself, and I: Defeating Self-Pity	145
8. Soul Killer: Uprooting Bitterness	165
9. Joy Stealer: Destroying Idolatry	183
10. Never Alone: Rejecting the Lie of Loneliness	201
Part 4: Making It Happen	
11. All You Need Is Love: Finding True Love in Christ	219
12. Hit the Road Jack: Executing the Life That Thrives	237
Conclusion: Not Just Pie in the Sky: Real-Life Examples of Thriving	249
Notes	269
Acknowledgments	273

Foreword

There is little real debate anymore about what the Bible means. Camps have formed, sides have been taken, and little if anything is freshly debated. Though we know what the Bible means, we desperately need flesh-and-blood examples of it lived. How can we take the authoritative message of God's Word and make it work in real life, dark culture, Western world reality? While the example of living the biblical mandates is needed in every societal strata and segment, it is needed most acutely where the challenges we face are greatest.

Given the sexually charged culture and the constant media pressure to "be in love," to "satisfy ourselves," to "do what feels best," I am constantly on the lookout for single adults who love Christ and are living His message in an exemplary way. Dr. Lina Abujamra is the example so many are searching for. An accomplished pediatrician, Lina has taken her medical experience to some of the toughest mission fields in the world and expressed the love of Christ to "the least of these." Today, Lina continues to practice pediatric emergency medicine even as she has assumed the role of director of women's ministry on the largest campus of Harvest Bible Chapel. Lina is an engaging and effective communicator of God's Word and has refused the traps so many unmarried Christians fall into. She has not put her life on

Thrive

hold nor has allowed impurity to become inevitable. She has courageously turned away from marriage opportunities that were not God's will for her life. She has insisted upon actually living the message of biblical and eternal priorities, and in the process has become one of the most dynamic and contagious Christians you will ever meet.

But she is not naive or content with easy answers either. Lina pulls no punches in *Thrive*. While Lina understands that "singleness" is not a disease for which marriage is the only cure, she refuses to placate or provide easy answers. She opens her Bible and with great candor brings God's Word to bear upon the Christian single adult experience in our culture. If you long to live victoriously regardless of your marital status, and if you want to get out of "limbo" and embrace with joy what God has for you right now, regardless of the future, you will be greatly helped by this book. If you are already in a relationship or married, this book will speak to you as it has to me. It will give you greater capacity to see and savor others regardless of their marital status and understand better how to minister to the "whole church."

If you're touchy and easily offended, put this book down now. But if you are ready for a real person, who is truly living a Christ-honoring life of singleness, and you can handle real candor about real struggles, a wonderful blessing is headed your way. Apply carefully the lessons of *Thrive* and your life in Christ will reach a new level of joy and victory.

DR. JAMES MACDONALD

Senior Pastor, Harvest Bible Chapel (Greater Chicago area) and author of *Vertical Church*, *Lord Change Me*, and *Authentic*

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Introduction: You Were Made for More

If you're single, you're familiar with this scene.

It's a beautiful Sunday morning. The air is crisp, the sun bright. You're on time for a change. You smell good. You look good. Even your hair turned out great. You walk into the Sunday school room resplendent in fluorescent lighting, and do a 360, your version of Christian recon. You're new to the church, new to the singles group. You're ready for anything to happen. You're ready to meet "the one." But then you see it—the familiar box of Krispy Kremes, and you smell it, the aroma of badly singed coffee. In your peripheral vision, over in the far corner of the room, you spot the infamous huddle. You size each one of them up, while every head swivels your way, and several pairs of eyes zero in on you. Each of the young men silently scans you up and down, assessing you, carefully mulling you over. You see the internal debate as they study your face. Are you the one? Are you the answer to years of waiting and unspoken prayer requests?

Over on your right, you sense the regulars even before you see them—a group of single ladies also in their Sunday best—hoping the new face in the crowd, yours, hasn't dimmed their chances of catching "the one." They want to like you, they really do, but the jury is still out. You're still an

Thrive

unknown threat, and you did put on a killer pair of shoes.

You've got to make a decision, and you've got to make it fast. Do you walk over the cliff and into what is better known as the church singles scene, or do you turn and run? You hesitate for a split second, but suddenly the answer is as clear as the bright blue sky. This is not your scene. You do not belong here. Deep in your heart, you know you were made for more. Deep in your soul, you know that your life was meant to be about more than just hoping, looking, and waiting for "the one."

You were made to thrive.

Before you've had time to process this new revelation, you turn and run. And as you run, you catch your reflection in the window, and you notice something else: you're smiling.

It's been over ten years since I found myself at that very crossroad in that very same singles Sunday school class, and today I'm still smiling, though I'm no longer running.

By my midtwenties, I'd already read Joshua Harris's *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and found it irrelevant to me as I hadn't even met my dating life yet. I'd also read *How to Know If Someone Is Worth Pursuing in Two Dates or Less* and knew I could one-up the author with my version of the book that I'd call *How to Know If Someone Is Worth Pursuing in Two Minutes or Less*. I knew enough by my midtwenties to know that if God's purpose for my life was simply to wait for Mr. Right to show up, then I was in for a long and boring life.

As a Christian woman, I'd been taught that Jesus had died for my sin and promised me abundant life. Surely Christ didn't sacrifice His life on the cross simply to land me in a

room full of sticky donuts and stale coffee, waiting for the right man to find me? Surely God hadn't meant for my entire adult life to remain on hold until a guy sitting in a huddle somewhere mustered up the guts to finally make a move? Had God really saved me just to place me on some high-reaching shelf, waiting for the right man so my life could finally begin?

If you're reading this book, chances are you fall into one of three categories: (1) you're married and know the perfect single person to gift it to; (2) you're my mother (Mom, this is where I'm supposed to remind myself to make you promise to skip over chapter 3—it's the sex chapter); or (3) you're single and are sick and tired of yet another singles book on waiting. Perhaps you're hoping for a book on living. Perhaps you're looking for a book on thriving.

I'm glad you found this book.

This book is not a critique of church singles groups. For years, well-meaning churches have tried to minister to the growing segment of single evangelicals, hiring nice, young, good-looking married men with beautiful wives to lead the growing number of Christian singles in the United States. They preach sermons on how to get married, stay married, and have great marital sex, so long as purity is maintained during the interminable singles years. They make sure to throw in "I'm married to a beautiful woman and we have great sex together," every few minutes, as if to remind all the single ladies that the typical singles pastor is untouchable and already spoken for.

Meanwhile, the church remains full of single men and women who walk in and out of the doors of their potential

Thrive

mating soil. They pray that the windows of heaven would finally open, that God in His great mercy would finally take note of them and deliver them from the suffering of the single Christian life. They live in a society made for marriage, in churches geared for couples, in a world where twos rule. Week after week, they leave brokenhearted and confused, with a growing list of questions about God and His ways: Has God forgotten or overlooked the single Christian? Where is God in the single Christian life? Is it possible to thrive without a soul mate?

And the most sobering question of them all: Is this all there is? Is this the abundant life that I've been promised? Is this fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore or am I missing something?

If God's promises are true, then you were made to thrive no matter what your marital status is. If God's Word is true, then the waiting ended the moment you embraced Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. If God's Word is true, then you have everything you need for life and for godliness. You are not half of a whole; you were made whole in Christ. You are not part of an incomplete equation; the equation has already been resolved in Christ. You are not a mystery to be solved; Christ is the answer to every question you have ever asked and every puzzle you have ever agonized over.

You were made for more.

If God's primary will for men and women is to get married and have kids, then He's dropped the ball on 45 percent of the American people.¹ If God's primary will for mankind is for men and women to live in perfect wedded bliss, then He must have forgotten to give the memo to Jesus Christ. And

Introduction: You Were Made for More

if God's will for mankind is to find the big love and spend eternity with the wife of your youth, then the most confused person in the world is the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7.

But God didn't create you to just get married and bear kids. God hasn't saved you and put you on hold until your right partner comes around. God isn't holding His breath, wondering when you will get over your commitment phobia and get on with His will.

You were created to know God's love and be radically changed by it. You were made to love God with every ounce of your being. Christ died to turn your life upside down for His glory and the renown of His name.

You were made to thrive.

And it starts right now. No more waiting for Mr. Right. No more wondering if your train has passed you by. No more pondering what went wrong.

It's time for you to live the life that Christ rescued you for. It's time for you to thrive.

In the following pages, I'm going to show you from God's Word what it means to thrive, and how to live the life that thrives. We will discuss five attitudes that every single Christian must embrace in order to thrive. I'll also point out four obstacles that single Christians must overcome. Finally, we'll talk about how to actually make it happen.

This book is for every single Christian. It's a book about understanding what the life that thrives looks like and how to get there. If you're ready to move beyond the waiting and finally break free into the life that God has created you for, then this book is for you.

Thrive

MY SAD SINGLE STORY

I was born at five thirty in the morning on a glorious Saturday in April—which makes me thoughtful but not nice. A nice person would have waited until at least eight o'clock to come out, but a less thoughtful person would have made it through the tunnel at three o'clock in the morning instead.

Little could I have predicted that the story of my birth would be a foreshadowing of my future dating life. I ended two engagements over a ten-year period of the best years of my life, proving once again that I'm thoughtful but not nice. I'm thoughtful because in both cases I saved my fiancés from a life of slow and painful torture, but definitely not nice, because a nice girl would have simply said no to a proposal of marriage in the first place.

Regardless, I've found myself back in the bull pen or the waiting room of life that every single Christian knows and dreads.

I suppose working as an ER doctor for the last fifteen years has made me a bit of an expert when it comes to waiting rooms. I can tell you that all kinds of crazy things happen in the waiting room. People bleed out in the waiting room. They talk, they fight, they eat, and they stare into space in the waiting room. Sometimes they even die in the waiting room.

But worst of all, people get forgotten in the waiting room.

It happened to me once. I was waiting for my turn to see the doctor when I had to step away to the ladies' room for a second. I debated the wisdom of going, but it was a matter of life and death, and the bladder has a way of trumping everything else. I made the agonizing decision to go.

I was gone three minutes, tops, but it was long enough—

long enough to blink, long enough to get passed by. Next thing you know, it's too late. Your name has been called out, and you're officially put in the leftover bin. You're lucky if your name ever gets called out again. So you go on waiting until God knows when. And I suppose I'm still waiting.

That's my sad single story.

I never planned on being single at forty. No one plans on that. I'm pretty sure I've never met anyone who grew up dreaming of living happily ever after—alone. I don't remember ever seeing a movie or reading a book where the star thought to herself, *When I grow up, I can't wait to go on vacation alone*; or *Oh boy, someday, when I finally can, I'll get all dressed up and head out to dinner at a fancy restaurant—on my own*.

Yet here I am—forty and single, thoughtful but not nice, and still waiting.

Or am I?

A few years ago, I went into a restaurant and gave my name to the hostess. After writing it down, the lady gave me a funny-looking square to hold on to.

“Keep this with you,” she said. “It will buzz when your name is called out.”

And in that instant, in the blink of an eye, my life was radically changed. Armed with the magic square in my hand, I was given the freedom to enjoy the beauty of life in the waiting room. There were places I could go, vending machines I could explore. There were cafeterias to be visited and people to get to know.

The waiting room had metamorphosed into a place of thriving, a place where dreams could be born and life could be lived. The waiting room had suddenly become a gift.

Thrive

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

If you stop and think about the singles in the Bible, you won't find that many of them. Ruth was single until she met Boaz. Esther was single until someone discovered her hidden potential and turned her into a beauty queen (I guess you can thank God for every Disney movie ever made since Esther). Abigail became single for about a day after Naboth died until David heard about it and asked for her hand in marriage. Then there was my favorite single virgin in the Bible, the daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11 who was banished to a life of permanent virginity because of her father's rash vow.

The New Testament list is even shorter. Perhaps it's because after Christ's death and resurrection, the context of relationship changed. No longer is your blood family your primary family. When you became born again and began walking in Jesus Christ, the context for your relationships shifted from the family you were born into to your church family, the bride of Christ.

The apostle Paul, arguably the greatest Christian of all time, understood relationships even better than Dr. Phil does. Paul himself remained single and spent much of his time writing about relationships and how to grow, despite the difficult ones. In this book, we'll be spending some time in 1 Corinthians 7. If you're familiar with the Bible, then you know that 1 Corinthians 7 is the singles, sex, and marriage chapter.

Interestingly, in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul doesn't refer to singleness as the resigned lot of those who aren't wily enough to find a partner. He doesn't describe singleness as a curse or a punishment or even a temporary state of waiting until the right man comes along. Quite the contrary. Paul is convinced

throughout 1 Corinthians 7 of the blessing of the single life. Throughout the chapter, he uses three key ideas to describe the blessings of singleness, proving that singleness is indeed a place you can thrive in. Let me show you what Paul thought.

IT'S A GOOD LIFE

The single life is a good life. When God created the world in Genesis 1, He looked at each day He created and said that it was good. It was well done. It was perfect. The word *good* is a good word. I'm not much of a cook, but I appreciate good food. When I taste something good, not only am I pleased with it in the moment, but I look forward to tasting it again—the sooner the better! When I see a good movie, chances are I'll want to rent it or buy it for myself.

Good is good.

So when Paul describes the single life in 1 Corinthians 7:8, it's fitting that he uses the word *good*. Here's what he says: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that *it is good for them to remain single* as I am."

The single life is a good life. No more wondering if God has given you second best. No more asking why everyone has been more blessed by God while you keep on waiting. No more misinterpreting God's Word and His ways.

You have been given a good life. Is it permanent? Is it irrevocable? Are you doomed to a life of eternal virginity and aloneness? As you flip the pages of this book, I hope to answer every one of your questions. For now, settle it in your mind that God is big enough and wise enough to give you the best life possible—the life that thrives.

So stop wasting it. Stop wishing it away. Stop complaining

Thrive

about it and praying that it would change soon, and start believing the truth of God's Word.

You have been given a good life, and it's yours by design. Do you believe it?

IT'S A PURPOSE-DRIVEN LIFE

Not only is the single life a good life, but according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, it is a life of purpose. Do you ever wonder what God wants you to do with your single life? Do you ever wonder what your purpose is as a single Christian without a husband to care for or kids to nurture?

Stop wondering and listen to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:32: "I want you to be free from anxieties. *The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.*"

I hope you pick up on what Paul is saying. Your purpose in life is to please the Lord. Your life will thrive when you become obsessed with pleasing the Lord. Later on in the book, we'll further explore the meaning of this freedom that Paul alludes to and how every single Christian can take full advantage of it. We'll also talk about undivided devotion to God and how to get it.

But for now, suffice it to say that your purpose as a single Christian is to please the Lord. You cannot please the Lord when you're nursing a grudge about your singleness. You cannot please the Lord when you're questioning His judgment and criticizing His will. You cannot please the Lord when you place your desires higher than His purposes for your life.

Your purpose in life has not been botched by your singleness. You are not a mutant in God's design for marriage.

God created you for the sole purpose of knowing Him and making Him known. Your singleness is God's perfect place for you to thrive. You don't have to wait for your knight in shining armor to start living. You can know the Lord fully and serve Him wholly right here, right now.

What you've forgotten is that you do have a knight, but He didn't come on a horse. He was born in a stable. He developed calluses on His hands, and died on a cross to call you His own. You were created to know Him and make Him known.

Are you living out God's purpose for your life?

IT'S A HAPPIER LIFE

Good is good, and having purpose is good, but sometimes good is just not good enough. I'm not a fan of average. I like chocolate, but I much prefer a chocolate explosion dessert. And I like strawberries, but give me a chocolate-covered strawberry anytime.

I may settle for good, but I'm looking for great.

To call the single Christian life a good life is a place to start, but this book isn't about settling for good. It's about looking for great. It's a book about thriving. When I think about thriving, I can't help but picture a lush green tree with plenty of fruit for picking. Or I picture a wound that's healing well with plenty of granulation tissue and healthy pink, blood-tinged skin forming around the edges. Okay, that was unnecessary, but you get the point.

Paul, of all people, understood the tension that single Christians face. And if you know anything about Paul, he was not a man who settled for average. The guy was pas-

Thrive

sionate, full-throttle, all the way. So Paul finishes his thesis on singleness in 1 Corinthians 7:40 with just one more little nugget—one more blessing not to be overlooked.

Yes, singleness is good. And yes, the single life has purpose. But now Paul makes one more astounding statement. Here's what he says: "Yet in my judgment *she [the unmarried] is happier if she remains as she is*. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God."

Did you catch it? I can hardly believe it. Every time I read this verse, my jaw hits the floor. I know that theologians argue about whether verse 40 was divinely inspired or simply Paul's words, but I'll take Paul's words over my own opinion on any given day. I also believe that God has allowed this verse to remain in His Word specifically to encourage every single Christian who is convinced that true joy is beyond grasp. It's not! Paul, in this unbelievably bold verse, settles every question about singleness you may ever have.

Life is happier as a single follower of Jesus Christ.

I can already see you putting words in my mouth. I'm not attacking marriage. I believe that God loves marriage and uses it as the primary example of the union between Christ and His bride, the church. But I cannot read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:40 and not come to the simple conclusion that the single Christian life is a happier life.

The most obvious question that comes to my mind then is this: *If the single Christian life is happier, why don't more single Christians feel happy?*

Many reasons come to mind. It could be because single Christians have embraced the lies of our culture and society about love and sex. It could be because of a lack of know-

Introduction: You Were Made for More

ing and believing God's Word. Or maybe your story is much more painful than I can ever imagine.

Here's what I do know: God's Word is alive and active, and God uses it to help you discern the truth about your heart. So as you turn the pages of this book, I pray that God will reveal Himself to you in your point of pain. I pray that the Spirit of God will convict you where you need to change, and I pray that God will help you overcome in the areas where you need victory.

My prayer for you is not only to understand what it means to thrive, but to know how to live the life that thrives, and then, by the grace and strength of God, to do it.

If you're ready for it, go ahead. Turn the page.

PART 1

The Gift of Singleness

I

No Exchanges, No Returns: The Gift of Singleness

It's Christmas morning. Everyone in the family can't wait to open their presents. There's cheering and there's laughing until my turn comes. I can feel every eye on me. I need a moment of privacy. It happens every Christmas, and I know it's going to happen again. I'm going to get another gift I absolutely can't stand. This time, I refuse to let my expression be captured on video. I refuse to make my gift-loathing known for generations to come. I will win the battle of the undesirable gift and learn to receive it with grace.

Ask anyone in my family. I'm the worst person in the world to buy gifts for. I never know what I want, and no matter what I get, I typically hate it.

If you're single, you know exactly what I mean when I start talking about unwanted and undesirable gifts. Every single Christian has had to sit through a conversation that sounds a little bit like this:

"So, tell me, are you dating anyone?"

"Nope. I'm not," you answer quickly, hoping to get the conversation over with.

Thrive

“Really. How old are you now? Shouldn’t you be settling down by now?” the questioner persists, oblivious to the hideous nature of the question.

“I don’t know,” you mumble. “I mean, I know I’m getting older, but I seem to be doing okay.”

“Oh. I see. You have the gift of singleness. That’s it, isn’t it?”

While I’m sure that most people really mean well when they grant you the gift of singleness in a sentence, I can assure you that nothing bothers the single Christian more than the assumption that God has given you this “special” gift of singleness. Singleness, a gift? Where in the world would anyone come up with such a grotesque idea? And if singleness is a gift, can someone please point me to the return counter?

IF SINGLENES is a gift, can someone please point me to the return counter?

Further inquiry into the idea of singleness as a gift reveals that it was not an idea made up by your great-aunt Midge, but by none other than the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church. I’ve already alluded to the passage in the introduction, but over the course of this book, we’re going to spend a big portion of our time in 1 Corinthians 7, so you may as well go ahead and get familiar with its content right now. It’s Paul’s treatise on singleness and marriage.

But let me start by giving you a little background on the church in Corinth.

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

In Paul's day, Corinth was the most important city in all of Greece. It was wealthy. It was luxurious. And it was chock-full of immorality. The people of Corinth spent their days attending tournaments and speeches. In other words, they loved sports and politics. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? They liked to have fun much like most Americans do in our modern-day world.

Enter Paul.

In Acts 18, we're given the account of how the gospel reached the people of Corinth. It was during Paul's second missionary journey that it happened. He was about fifty years old at the time and single, a tentmaker by trade. As soon as he got to Corinth he met a nice couple, Priscilla and Aquila, also tentmakers, and the three of them set up shop. Paul spent a year and a half in Corinth, making tents by day and preaching the gospel by night. By the time Paul was ready to move on, a church had been birthed.

Sadly, the church in Corinth had no sooner taken off than it started sputtering along without the strong leadership of Paul. Unable to break from the carnality of the culture, the worldliness of the city soon infected the fellowship of believers. Cliques were formed. Lawsuits started flying around between believers. Women abandoned modesty. Arguments broke out over marriage, spiritual gifts, and life as a follower of Jesus Christ.

The church, unsure of what to do, wrote to the apostle Paul and asked for advice. Paul was on his third missionary journey by now, and while in Ephesus, he sat down and wrote the two letters to the church in Corinth known to us

Thrive

today as First and Second Corinthians.

The first letter to the Corinthian church began with Paul's usual greeting, but Paul then quickly narrowed in on the heart of the matter. He was quick to warn the church that its greatest danger came not from the outside, but from within, in the form of divisions and cliques in the church (1 Corinthians 1:11). He reminded the church that its only leader and center ought to be Christ. Apart from His leadership, there would be no church. Paul reminded the Corinthian church of the meaning of salvation and reviewed the basics of the gospel on which everything else in the Christian life hinges.

By the time Paul reached chapter 5, he was ready to discuss in greater detail the specific point of immorality that was going on in the Corinthian church: a man was having an incestuous affair with his stepmother. That's bad no matter how you look at it. Paul admonished the church to clean things up and refused to condone this man's sinful behavior. Paul wrote one of the strongest passages on immorality in the Bible in 1 Corinthians 6:9–20. Paul then drove home the point that in Christ, our bodies are not our own. God owns us. He paid for us with a price—the precious blood of Jesus Christ, God's own Son. Because we've been purchased by Christ's death, we can no longer live as we choose. We must now live as God desires, no matter the context of our closest relationships, single or married.

To further expound on how the Christian life ought to look, Paul moved into 1 Corinthians 7 and broke down the who/what/when/where/why of marriage and singleness.

By now you have a clearer picture of the culture in which

1 Corinthians was written. It was a culture of moral decay and corruption. It was a culture that was affecting the church in Corinth. It was a culture very much like our own.

Have you ever wondered whether God understands the stress and temptation that single Christians face today? Have you ever wondered if you as a single Christian immersed in a culture of great sensuality can live a holy life that thrives? The answer is a resounding yes. Just ask Paul as we embark on his teachings on singleness and sex to a church caught in the midst of a morally corrupt world and culture.

But I digress. We'll talk about sex and singleness later on in the book. Right now I'd like to introduce you to the concept of singleness as the gift that God has lovingly and purposefully given you in order to thrive.

SINGLENES AS A GIFT

I once wanted a blender for Christmas really, really badly. Every time I came across a recipe, even though I don't cook, I seemed to think that it absolutely needed this particular stainless steel and glass blender. Every time I felt thirsty, I dreamed of the wonderful drinks I could make with that specific blender. So I did what every smart woman would do: I made sure I told the right people what I wanted, and when Christmas morning finally came around, I acted delighted and appropriately surprised when I unwrapped the package and saw the beautiful blender that was everything I thought it would be and more. My dream had come true.

Two years have gone by since I received that perfect gift, and I'd like you to take a moment and try to guess how many times I've used my blender so far. Go ahead. Write it down.

Thrive

Are you ready for the answer? If you guessed twice, you are correct.

Now allow me to tell you about another Christmas gift on a different Christmas. It was finally my turn to open my present. I held the package and wondered what could be so big and so fluffy. I hadn't asked for anything that year, and certainly for nothing so big and quite so fluffy. I tentatively opened the package, carefully watching my facial expressions. By the time I processed that what I held in my hands was a big and fluffy red blanket, it was too late to hide my dismay. A blanket for Christmas? Who would give such a—how can I say this politely—*useful* gift to anyone? I took my blanket home with no plans to use it and started making up a list of folks I could regift it to.

Little did I know that the red blanket would become a family and personal favorite, and the saving grace to my very cold basement for years to come. I can't keep track of the friends who have snuggled beneath its warmth and wondered as to its softness. The blanket that I would have never chosen turned out to be this girl's best friend and the best Christmas gift I have ever received.

It's a funny thing about gifts. The gift you think you can't live without ends up sitting unused on a shelf somewhere in your home, while the gift you initially can't stand turns out to be the one item you can't live without.

The truth is that, most of the time, you and I have very little concept as to what we truly need in our lives. Our desires are affected by what we see on television, what advertisers tell us we need, or by what our friends have. Our wants are often molded by our backgrounds, upbringing, and cul-

ture. They are influenced by the last movie we watched or the latest book we read. Most of us give only a passing regard to what God deeply desires for our lives.

It shouldn't surprise us then that we apply the same rules when it comes to our singleness.

Singleness, a gift? The very idea is appalling. Who would ever give anyone such a—how can I say it politely—*useless* gift? Weren't we made for marriage and sex and kids and car seats?

If you're single, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Singleness is the gift that you never wanted, never planned on, and wish you'd never opened. Surely there's been a mistake. Surely this is not your gift to keep forever and happily ever after?

But a careful look at God's Word reveals that your gift is no mistake. We've been talking about 1 Corinthians 7, and if you'll read verse 7 you'll see that it was Paul who brought up the concept of singleness as a gift. Here is what he says in 1 Corinthians 7:7: "I wish that all were as I myself am. *But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*"

**YOU AND I have very little
concept as to what we
truly need in our lives.**

Wait—say that again? Singleness—a gift? Why in the world would anyone consider singleness a gift? It sounds

Thrive

more like a curse to most people. And if it is a gift, who is “lucky” enough to have it? Or if I may make it even more personal: Do you have the gift of singleness?

I believe the best way to answer this question is to consider some basic characteristics of this so-called gift.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GIFT

When discussing the gift of singleness, there are three characteristics of the gift that you must observe from 1 Corinthians 7:7.

First, it is a personal gift. The word *each* insinuates the idea that this gift is personal. God gives each person a gift. It is the perfect gift because it’s given personally to each individual with great thought and care.

Second, it is a unique gift. To further emphasize his point, Paul reminds us that this isn’t a grab bag, white elephant gift exchange. The Word of God says that each person has his own gift. This gift has been uniquely given to each person by the Lord. It is a unique gift.

Third, it is a gift from God. The most amazing thing about this gift of singleness isn’t just that it was designed specifically with you in mind, but that the giver of the gift is God Himself. He fashioned the gift. He made it perfectly and uniquely and personally for you. God gave you the best gift possible, knowing everything there is to know about you and your life. That’s pretty amazing.

Your gift is not an accident. It’s not a mistake. It’s not a joke. It is for real. It doesn’t get much better than that!

You may be thinking to yourself, *But that doesn’t seem fair. Why in the world would God give me the gift of single-*

ness? Doesn't He know me at all? Or you may be thinking, What if I don't want this gift? Can I return it? Is it too late to exchange it?

These are great questions, and by the time you finish this book, I hope you will have the answers you're looking for. For now, let's consider the gift of singleness from God's perspective. Is the gift of singleness yours permanently, or only for a season? And do you have any choice in the matter of your giftedness?

SINGLE BY GIFTING

So far in my life, I've met two people who believe they actually have the spiritual gift of singleness. In other words, they genuinely believe that God has called them to be single for the rest of their lives and have no desire to ever be married. I cynically glaze over when they start talking, because deep down, I believe that they are likely to change their minds if the right six-foot tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed, washboard ab'ed guy showed up at their doorstep.

Maybe you're not as cynical as I am, but the truth is that only a small number of people reading this book believe that the gift of singleness is the most natural and desirable gift ever given to them by God.

The "single-by-gifting" Christian makes me think of Matthew 19:12. In this passage, Jesus is having a very interesting conversation with the people about divorce. The disciples, puzzled over Jesus' statement about divorce, make the conclusion that people would be better off remaining single. To that, Jesus acknowledges that indeed some people have been given the gift of singleness and as such, are very happy

Thrive

to remain single, and thus avoid divorce. Look at Jesus' words in Matthew 19:12: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it."

You probably haven't used the word *eunuch* in a conversation today, so I looked it up for you. According to Wikipedia, a eunuch is a person who may have been castrated and who often worked as a harem guard or palace official. Wikipedia goes on to say that according to ancient texts, a eunuch may also refer to a man who is not castrated but who is impotent, celibate, or otherwise not inclined to marry and reproduce.² Regardless of Wikipedia's definition, Christ used the term, not in a derogatory fashion, but in quite a positive way.

What Jesus was saying is that a single-by-gifting person is like the eunuch whose sexual urges do not control him and who is happy to remain single.

If you're reading this and realize that you fit the description of single by gifting—good for you. You're probably the exception to the rule in our sexually charged culture, and you can consider yourself blessed. You're happily single by gifting, and nothing would push you over to the other side.

Before you close this book and figure you're good to go, let me warn you that just because you're single by gifting doesn't mean that your life is necessarily thriving for the Lord. If you have the gift of singleness, the challenge for you is to think carefully about why God has given you this gift and how you will use it for His kingdom-building purposes.

So resist the urge to stop reading and make sure you finish the book.

SINGLE BY YOUR CHOOSING

The second category of the gift of singleness is the “single by your choosing” group. You fall in this group if you’re one of those “who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). I remember reading the story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot. They had dated for a while and felt that they had found their soul mate in each other. However, Jim Elliot had other plans. He felt called to be a missionary to the Auca Indians. Elisabeth did not. So Jim became a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of God. He ended his relationship with Elisabeth with no hopes of ever marrying the love of his life. He was determined not to let anything stand in the way of God’s call for his life. Eventually God did change both Jim and Elisabeth’s plans and they did get married, but not until both of them had fully surrendered their dreams of love and marriage to the Lord.

I’ve always been inspired by this love story because it clearly places love for God above love for another human being. We live in a culture that idolizes the “big love” so much so that it’s hard for most of us to understand how anyone can choose anything over true love. Yet over the course of history, countless Christians have put their hands to the plow of serving the Lord and have never looked back, considering the reproach of Christ of far greater worth than the fleeting pleasures of what this life has to offer for a season. It sounds radical. It is. These Christians serve as an example for us today, and understood that the life that thrives is the life

Thrive

that dies to self and is fully surrendered to the Lord.

Of course the best example of a man who had the gift of singleness by his choosing is the apostle Paul. Paul understood that to serve God alone without the burden of a wife would benefit the kingdom of God far more than a life of temporary wedded bliss. Having been greatly influenced by this apostle's example, it's hard for me to disagree with his choice.

**WE LIVE IN a culture that
idolizes the "big love" so much
so that it's hard for most of us
to understand how anyone can
choose anything over true love.**

While you may not be single by gifting, if you've chosen a life of singleness to further build the kingdom of God, you will be greatly blessed and rewarded for it in due time. Paul commends this life of sacrifice and reminds us that the Lord is pleased with it.

As you read this book, I hope you will find it a blessing and an encouragement to you. You will likely face certain obstacles along the way of the single Christian life, and I hope this book will help you to overcome them as you grow closer to Jesus Christ.

SINGLE BY GOD'S CHOOSING

I'd venture to guess that most single Christians in today's culture fall into this category of singleness. Growing up, the last thing you had on your agenda was a life of barren singleness. You are not single by gifting. You are not single by your choosing as evidenced by the hundreds of dollars you've already spent on Internet dating subscriptions. No. You are single by God's choosing.

Drum roll please.

God has decided that, for better or for worse, the best gift for you right now is the gift of singleness.

I'm not sure how long you'll be stuck with this gift. I'm not sure why you've been given this gift. But until the Lord says so, you would do well to graciously accept His gift for you.

But I have another angle for you to consider.

Could it be that God has given you this gift of singleness to deepen your walk with Him? Could it be that God wants to use your unfulfilled longings to draw you closer to Himself? In other words, could there be a purpose to this gift that God has given you?

I know what you're thinking. *Why me? Why do I have to learn this way while everyone else I know can learn the same lessons within the confines of a biblical marriage? Is it something I've done? Is it the way that I look? Was it something I said? Why would God choose me to carry this burden?*

I believe that you will find answers to these questions as you turn the pages of this book. I never planned on being single at forty. I thought I'd lived right and prayed right, and by God's grace, things would turn out right for me.

Little did I know that what our culture says is right is

Thrive

often far different than what God considers right for His children. Little did I know that the road toward God is filled with valleys so deep and mountains so high that only His grace could sustain us through them.

GROWING UP, the last thing you had on your agenda was a life of barren singleness.

Here's a little known secret: you can embrace God's will for your life and thrive in it, even when it's not what you would have chosen for yourself in the first place, because God's gifts are the ones you never knew you needed but end up not being able to live without.

So how do you move from accepting a gift you may not have wanted to actually loving and enjoying it? How do you thrive when you feel like you've been given plan B? It starts by understanding who you are and what you've been given.

WHO AM I?

It happened shortly after I ended my engagement. I went home for the holidays and was getting a mani/pedi with my mother. Halfway through the job, the nice lady doing my nails and listening to my sad tale of disrupted love looked up, stared me in the eye, and with her broken English said this: "You lesbian?"

Despite all of our modern technology and advance-

ments, we're still living in a culture that misunderstands the why of singleness. If you're over thirty and you're still single, the gay community will push you to admit who you really are. Feminists will commend you for standing up for who you are. Traditionalists will wonder where your parents went wrong. Society will tell you that you can still do something about it and change it. And the church simply doesn't know what to do with you.

In a culture where everything promotes marriage and family, the idea that anyone would be single by choice or giftedness seems preposterous. If you're single, there must be a reason. There must be something wrong with you. There must be a good explanation. Every other explanation for your singleness is too outrageous to validate.

The single Christian simply won't fit into a clean category. It used to be that if you passed age thirty and remained single, then you liked cats and still lived with your mother. Today's single Christian is a far cry from a cat-owning old maid—not that I have anything against cats.

Ironically, despite the freedoms and opportunities that most single Christians have in today's society, deep down you still wonder if there may be something wrong with you. You feel insignificant. You aren't sure where you fit in. You wonder who you really are.

Though the search for significance is not restricted to the single Christian, it certainly has a way of isolating the single Christian, leaving you with the impression that you're not sexy enough, you're not woman enough, or you're not good enough. Otherwise you'd be married by now.

Your sense of insignificance and confused identity is

Thrive

propagated by the many social media outlets that remind you that everyone else in the world has figured it out, leaving you alone, isolated, needy, and unable to enjoy the gift that God has so graciously given you for this season of your life.

The worst part about it is that you know better. You know you shouldn't care what other people think. You know that you're not a lesbian, and that you're not a feminist. You know that you're smarter than that. But in the quiet of your soul, you find yourself wondering where your plus-one is.

**IT USED TO be that if you
passed age thirty and
remained single, then you
liked cats and still lived
with your mother.**

If you long for a life that thrives, you must accept the gift that's been given to you by God and embrace your true identity in Christ. Stop listening to the voice of the culture. Stop listening to your feelings. Stop dreaming of the life you think you ought to be living.

It's time to let go of the lies and embrace the truth of who you are in Christ.

YOU ARE NOT A SLOPPY LEFTOVER

I'm not a fan of leftovers. I'm too cheap not to take a doggie bag home from most restaurants, but anyone who

knows me will tell you exactly what's going to happen to my bag of leftovers two days later. Yes—that bag of leftovers is going in the trash.

Whether you're a "never married but want to," or a "once married and hope to again," chances are you're familiar with sloppy leftovers. You know the gig. The good ones are married. The available ones are single for a reason. It's easy to feel like God's forgotten you and that you're nothing but a bag of leftovers. The idea of singleness as a God-given gift is preposterous. You tell yourself in your darker moments that if you wait long enough and pray desperately enough, someone's significant other will die and you will finally get your happy ending.

Allow me to introduce you to Hagar. Twice in Genesis she found herself in the wilderness, alone, afraid, and wondering what went wrong in her life. It wasn't Hagar's fault that she ended up pregnant. She was powerless to change the outcome dictated by her master Abraham. She only did what Sarah told her to do and ended up pregnant. Without much more than a second glance, Hagar is thrown out to the desert, treated like nothing more than a bag of trash.

It's a painful story, and I've always felt sorry for Hagar. She didn't deserve what happened to her. If anyone was a victim, it was Hagar. But she was anything but forgotten. With steadfast love and everlasting faithfulness, God saw value in Hagar and her unborn son. In Genesis 16, God reached down to Hagar in love and Hagar got the message. She called the Lord "the God who sees" in sure indication of her faith in a loving God.

If you're single and feel like you've been overlooked by

Thrive

God, think again. God sees you and knows you. His gift to you is personal and intentional.

YOU ARE NOT PLAN B

I was never one of those girls who grew up dreaming about whether my bridesmaids would wear teal or organza, but I suppose just like everybody else, I assumed I'd get married, if not by my thirtieth birthday, then certainly by my thirty-fifth.

When what is expected, predicted, and seemingly God's will for all people doesn't happen to you, it's easy to wonder where things went wrong and what you could have done to change the outcome.

There was a guy who asked me out during medical school. To say that I hadn't dated much is an understatement. This was my first date ever. The guy was good-looking and polite. He was educated and had great table manners. His only fault was that he left me a bag of cookies on my doorstep after our second date. Many of you are swooning right now, but for me, nothing could have been worse. Maybe it was my own cultural traditions, or my fear of commitment, but all I could do was run in the other direction. Though I'm smart enough to understand that the odds of me marrying that guy back then were nil to nothing, there is hardly a year that goes by when I'm not tempted to wonder whether I'm living out God's plan B for my life because of my disdain for a dozen chocolate chip cookies.

It sounds ridiculous, but unfortunately many single Christians have believed similar lies when it comes to their singleness. Maybe you're one of them. Instead of trusting

God's wisdom in giving you the gift of singleness, you spend hours mulling over bad decisions you've made that have landed you in plan B of your Christian life.

**NOTHING THAT happens
in your life is outside
of the will of God.**

Read the next phrase and read carefully. Underline it if you must.

God makes no mistakes. You are not living plan B. Nothing that happens in your life is outside of the will of God. Your dating life is not God's big "oops." Your single life is not plan B. It's God's best for you. I believe with all of my heart that God, in His sovereignty, has allowed you to be single today for a reason, and that it is His plan not only to intentionally give you the gift of singleness but to also teach you how to thrive in it. Until you start believing God's truth in your life, you will not thrive.

This seems like a great place to remind you of who you are in Christ.

THIS IS WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST

Whenever I'm trying to buy a gift for someone, one of the first things I do is think about that person. Who am I buying the gift for? What are they like? What do they like? The best gifts I've given are the ones where I really know the person I'm buying a gift for. I bet you've had the same experience.

Thrive

Now think about God giving you the gift of singleness. No one knows you better than God does. In choosing your gift, He knows exactly what you like, who you are, and what will make you utterly, undeniably happy. I believe a review of who you are in Christ will help you to better accept the gift of singleness that God has given you.

YOU ARE CREATED

Do you ever look at yourself in the mirror and isolate the one thing about yourself that you can't stand? It may be your weight, or your nose, or your skin, but whatever it is, you convince yourself that your singleness is due to this one horrific feature of yours. One of the greatest battles that you will face as a single Christian is the idea that you are single because you haven't made the cut physically. If the marriage ship has passed you by, it's easy to stare at yourself in the mirror and blame your love handles, or your uneven skin, or your stubby fingers for your singleness. The truth is much harder to buy. You were created in God's image. He made you just the way you are. Your face is not an accident. Psalm 139:14 says, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well."

God's Word is amazing. Though the loudest voice in your head seems to be telling you that you're not pretty enough or perfect enough, there is another voice, a softer voice that tells you who you really are. It's a voice that reminds you that you're more than your face, your skin, your weight. It's a voice that whispers, "You were intricately woven by God in the depths of the earth." In other words, you are wonderful. You are beautiful. You were created in God's image. You are

exactly who He created you to be.

The more you listen to that voice, the louder it will get. You were created by God to thrive.

YOU ARE CHOSEN

Not only are you created, but you are also chosen by God. It says in Psalm 139:16 that “your eyes saw my unformed substance . . . when as yet there was none of them.” God saw you even before you were born. He knew what your face would look like and what kind of personality you’d have. He chose you, beloved.

In Ephesians 1:4–6 we’re told that “even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

Remember when you were in grade school and had to pick dodgeball teams? My heart rate always went up. My palms started to sweat. Would anyone choose me? The waiting seemed to last forever.

If you’re a single Christian whose time seems to have passed, whose marriage age seems to have come and gone, you may feel like the guy on the team who was never picked by anyone. It’s easy to wonder what went wrong with you. You’re believing a lie. No more lies. No more nonsense. It’s time to live in the truth of God’s Word. You were chosen by God before the foundation of the world.

You were chosen by Him to thrive.

Thrive

YOU ARE GOD'S CHILD

My favorite story growing up was a book called *Are You My Mother?* It was the story of a bird whose mother went to find some worms. While she was gone, the bird panicked and got lost. The entire book is the story of the poor little bird walking around (because he hadn't learned how to fly yet) trying to find his lost mother. He runs into a cat and a truck and all kinds of things that don't look a thing like him. The poor little bird is on the verge of giving up hope of ever finding his mother, when she finally comes back. With one look at her, the little bird knows exactly who his mother is because he looks just like her.

I remember, even as a child, sensing the peace of belonging at the end of that little story. If you're a single Christian living in today's world, it's easy to feel like you don't belong. Even at church, with its good intentions, you may be tempted to feel like you don't belong.

**WITH ONE LOOK at her,
the little bird knows exactly
who his mother is because
he looks just like her.**

The reason you feel like you don't belong is that you're not looking at your Father. Just like the little bird, you may be desperately looking for home, but you won't find it until you look at the face of Jesus Christ. You were not simply created to belong to a church scene or a social circle. You were made

to belong in God's family as His child through His Son, Jesus Christ. You will only find true peace when you finally look at the face of your Father and see the obvious resemblance.

THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

The greatest gift you'll ever be given is the gift of Jesus Christ, God's Son. In Ephesians 2:8–9 here's how God says it: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

You cannot receive the gift of singleness until you find your likeness in God the Father by accepting the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ.

You may be even more familiar with John 3:16 that says this: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

When you're given a gift, it's not yours until you receive it. Whether we're talking about the gift of God's Son or your gift of singleness, there comes a point in time where you must take a step of faith and receive the gift you've been given.

It is when you receive the gift that you begin to thrive. And as great as the gift of singleness may be, it pales in comparison to the gift of God's Son.

I guess the ball is in your court now. Have you received the gift? Are you God's child? Do you know whose you are?

And if you do know God as your Father, I trust that by now you're ready to accept the gift of singleness that He has so graciously given you.

In the next section of the book, I'm going to give you five

Thrive

attitudes that every single Christian needs in order to thrive. I'll follow that with four obstacles that you're going to have to overcome in order to thrive. You'll then be ready to take the next step in making it happen.

Are you ready to keep going?