

1 Tale or Truth?



Once Upon a Time

“Oh, heavens!” she cried. “Where am I?”

The prince answered joyfully, “You are with me,” and he told her what had happened, saying, “I love you more dearly than anything else in the world. Come with me to my father’s castle, and be my wife.”¹

This fairy tale of Snow White is emblazoned on our hearts from the time of childhood. Many little girls dream of being rescued and swept off their feet by a handsome prince to live happily ever after. We may not have our prince’s exact face defined, but we certainly have many of his attributes in mind: dashing, strong, humorous, reliable, and steadfast. Although the idea that a fairy tale could have a profound impact may seem silly and sentimental, I have often pondered the actual effect on little impressionable minds and hearts. Could it be that we really do carry these dreams with us into adulthood (and maybe into marriage for those of us who will be married) much more than we realize?

1. *Classic Fairy Tales* (Seymour, CT: Greenwich Workshop Press, 2003), 60.

Personally, I assumed that I would finish high school, attend college, marry, and have two children—all by age 27! Now that I am beyond that age, I have realized that the Lord's thoughts are not my thoughts, neither are his ways my ways—biblical truth from our Father's mouth in Isaiah 55:8. How often has a scriptural truth such as this cut right to the heart? If we were honest, I'm sure that each of us could admit times of bitterness at hearing these words. Maybe you have been stung with the unanswered reality of singleness—possibly for years. You may ask, "How can marriage *not* be in God's plan for me now?" We can become overwhelmed with disappointment, frustration, and a myriad of other emotions that can eat away at the fibers of our being.

Why can it be so difficult at times to accept and even enjoy life as a single woman?

"Sex, Lies, and Videotape"²

We often believe in lies. Deceptions and distorted images discreetly enter our minds, ears, eyes, and hearts and can cause us to struggle in various ways. I truly believe that many of our frustrations stem from a skewed view of reality. Scripture says that the father of lies, Satan, "masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). He makes so much that is counterfeit look bright and beautiful. In C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it seems to be no coincidence that the evil power is depicted as a beautiful white witch, not a decrepit old hag. If we were to see the current world, events, and people through spiritual lenses, it would be curious to observe how much is actually deformed.

2. Title borrowed from *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (Miramax Films and Showtime Networks, 1989).

The following pages highlight several consistent themes as well as responses to attacks that strike at us as single women.

Un-Reality TV

Reality TV is the rage these days, with countless programs from which to choose. But the whole concept of “reality” TV continues to baffle my mind; it is so absolutely *unrealistic*! On the relationship/dating shows, the people are thrown together, often in the most far-fetched circumstances. The situations are handpicked, and many of the details are filtered and perfected. In addition, we track the participants’ lives for only a brief time; the future is not seen. How many of these people will end up with happy, healthy relationships once the reward money runs out? And yet, many of us are drawn into these programs. Our minds *will* be affected in some way or another. This is the reality of TV.

Also from the entertainment industry, we are bombarded with images of people who find the “love of their life” in the most uncanny situations. Television and movies paint fascinating and alluring portraits of relationships. Most of them end happily ever after—just as in the fairy tales. Boy meets girl; they face insurmountable obstacles, which they overcome victoriously; and they end rapturously in love—idyllic but often missing the full commitment into marriage. Furthermore, in real life, we know that in their offscreen lives, quite a few actors are in highly unstable relationships, unable to re-create their movie romance in their daily existence. And yet, we scour the magazines for news on the latest Hollywood couple or check the Web sites for the most recent love interest of our favorite movie star. Do we somehow think we can live vicariously through these tabloid romances? Even though the temptation

to jump into the craze is great, when I step back from all the fanfare, I truly can see no lasting benefit.

The Island of Misfits³

Most of us have experienced that awkward moment in church when someone wants to set us up with the boy next door—or, boy in the next pew. Or perhaps you have endured the woes of a lame singles' event. These uncomfortable realities might tempt you to quit going to church altogether.

Our churches are not always nurturing places for single women. Instead of being accepted as viable participants in the visible church, we are sometimes unwittingly excluded from its vibrant dynamics. Some of our churches see singles as having a “missing part” without a husband or as being capable of operating at only half-steam. This mistaken idea takes me back to my childhood days with Rudolph (yes, the Reindeer) and his forgotten friends. Because of their missing limbs or parts that didn't operate quite as expected, they were sent to the land of misfit toys. After a little love and attention from Santa, however, they ended up having a vital role to play. It seems that they were *misjudged*, not misfit. We must pray that the church body would see us as God does: equipped at this time in our lives just as God wishes us to be.

I'm afraid that singles themselves don't often help to change the perception. By our negative attitudes, lethargy, and reluctance to become involved in the church or the community, we build walls around ourselves. Instead, why not shift your attitude and get involved positively? We will explore in a later chapter ways to give of your talents to the church. Many of us have more time available to serve than our married friends do. Our schedules are freer. Seize this unique circumstance to be

3. Title borrowed from *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

used by God, to make a commitment to his church. Do not present the church with an opportunity to form a misjudged opinion of the single!

Sex and the City

Sex is everywhere: on TV, in movies, on billboards, in books, in conversation, and practically everywhere else. In your personal life, you may have already had several sexual encounters; or maybe the temptation to try it is looming large; or maybe you are a virgin and simply long to one day experience IT. When any of us feels starved from a lack of attention and then a man gently touches us and tenderly speaks, we are drawn in emotionally. Face it—it feels good. All the layers of pleasing and meeting expectations crowd in; maybe you are ridiculed if you are still a virgin. According to *Sex and the City*, everybody's doing it—all the time and with many partners. Sex is the topic of nearly every conversation or the point or conclusion of most scenes. Is this even realistic, much less healthy?

It has become widely acceptable to have sex outside of marriage, and you may have never seriously thought otherwise. There is rarely an audible call to adults specifically to remain chaste. In the secular arena, that would sound ludicrous; few would consider it. From the pulpit, there is little acknowledgment that remaining pure is even a struggle, much less the admission that premarital sex is sin. I occasionally hear the admonition to marrieds to stay pure within their bond, but I rarely hear this call to singles.

I recently learned of two women, formerly staff members of a Christian organization, who are so discouraged by their singleness that they have laid aside their virginity for the physical affection of men. The desire to be desired, the ridicule about their virginity, and the hope for love have caused these

women to turn from long-held beliefs and convictions. Is there any problem with this? After all, such things happen every day, times have changed, and we are encouraged to follow suit.

We seem to forget that there will be some kind of impact on the heart and mind of a person who engages in sex. The question then stands: what is the impact outside of marriage? Compound one encounter with numerous partners and comparison or insecurity will undoubtedly take root, in addition to the increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy. We seem to ignore these realities all too often.

Have you ever weighed the advantages versus the disadvantages of premarital sex? Some people think just having that sexual experience is an advantage. There are, of course, beautiful aspects of sex—but in its proper context. Certainly many equate the act, the physicality, and the intimacy with love. But reflect on the emotions left to deal with when that man is gone. Mysteriously, when two people have sex, they are joined more intimately than by any other relationship or act. This is how it was meant to be. By stating that in marriage two become one flesh, God demonstrated the extremely high value he places on oneness. This bond in marriage and the symbolic metaphor it holds for the body of Christ is the highest approximation on this earth to the relationship within the Trinity. The Lord does not at all take this lightly; oneness is given tremendous priority in Scripture. Outside of marriage, sex cannot offer the same security and proper intimacy.

Bottom line: none of us can have sexual encounters and be whole, happy, and satisfied. We can deceive ourselves for a time, but cheapening sex cheapens us. The human heart left to its own lusts has an insatiable appetite for personal satisfaction or complete acceptance. Also, when we open ourselves vulnerably (and literally) to a man in that way and then he leaves, it rips out a part of our heart. It may not be visible at

first, but over time, more is gone. I will never forget a skit I once saw at summer camp, highlighting scenes from preschool through high school in the life of a girl. She began as a precocious child, playing happily with a little orange (signifying her heart) that she had wrapped up in a blanket, pretending it was her baby; but then a neighbor grabbed the orange, bruising it. A few years later, she was teased about her outfit by some schoolmates as they dug into the orange. The skit finally culminated with a boyfriend who coaxed her into giving him her prized possession by fondly stroking it, until he got what he wanted, leaving her with the shreds of pulp and rind, barely reminiscent of the formerly beautiful and untouched orange.

If you are holding on to guilt about a sexual past, come to the Lord. Confess to him your sin and ask for his restoration in your heart and life. King David, whom the Lord declared a man after his own heart, found the forgiveness of the Lord after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba: “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow” (Ps. 51:7).

The pressure is very great, coming from all angles: our personal passions that rage within us, the world that clamors right outside our door, men who would gladly spend a night of physical intoxication with us, and even the church that wonders why we are still single. But let us stand firm! In the name of Christ, “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

Expectations Dashed

We face expectations—almost daily, it seems—from family and married friends, who all mean well and desire our happiness. Their first solution for our struggles and lives is often marriage. (*Has this become our own “solution,” too?*) Our world has convinced us that relationships will solve our

problems—or at least lighten the load. The piece of news that seems to bring the most excitement to our family and friends is an announcement about a date or a boyfriend. But should this be the crux of life? In fact, relationships bring with them many *new* concerns. How many times, I wonder, does the married woman remember somewhat nostalgically the freedom and flexibility of the single life? As I observe my married sister with *four* children, I realize how tied down and consumed she is. Although the blessings of motherhood abound and it is good to be a mother, she will have the weighty responsibility of children at home for at least twenty-five years. She has virtually no time to call her own; free time is a memory of the past. (They always seem to leave this part out of the fairy tales and teen romances.) Be careful not to see marriage *only* as a blissful existence or an escape from loneliness.

The Comparison Game

I had never thought or cared much about dog shows until watching *Best in Show*.⁴ Unscripted, it details, albeit humorously and possibly unrealistically, the lengths to which people will bend to come out ahead. In so many areas we compare our “dogs” with others, whether it be our lives, looks, or, yes, even our men. With past boyfriends, I (much to my chagrin) have stacked their qualities up against those of my friends’ boyfriends. Also, I tend to pine away if several friends are dating and I am not. The question “What is wrong with me?” can too quickly creep into one’s thoughts. Unfortunately, this is a battle that we must constantly wage in all areas. But be encouraged to stay in the battle. Don’t give up! The Lord does

4. *Best in Show*, directed by Christopher Guest (Castle Rock Entertainment, 2000).

not compare us to others, and we are not expected to make comparisons, either.

The best combat I have found against the trap of the comparison game is to recognize that I am made in the image of God. We are all fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14) for this time, place, and path. The load of pressure is lifted from our lives when we finally accept this fact.

I was recently in a women's Bible study that focused on Romans 12:2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Quickly the discussion moved to the constant struggle faced by many in that room concerning image: how we look, how we cannot age gracefully in our society, and how we must be a certain size in order to live up to the world's standard. The entertainment industry has inundated the Western world with an ideology of beauty that is wreaking havoc on relationships, health, mental stability, and clear thinking. This may sound extreme, but think about the effects on relational expectations because of gorgeous bodies visually represented on TV, billboards, and movies. The beautiful people of the entertainment industry come to us in the form of manipulated and touched-up visual materials, the end product of which is often far different from the actual. It is no wonder many men and women aren't satisfied to date most people; no one can measure up.

While thinking on these realities, I read Psalm 27:2: "Evil men advance against me to devour my flesh." Do you see a correlation? Our flesh is, in a sense, being devoured. Individually we spend hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars annually on our appearance: buying cosmetics to stop the wrinkles, hair color to hide the gray, and gorgeous clothes to make us look like the latest greatest model. Yet no matter how hard we resist, our bodies are aging and returning to dust. Regardless

of how hard we try, we will never feel as though we measure up, and as a result, we are devoured in our inner being. I am reminded of Matthew 6:21: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Our treasure chests are filled with outward adornments that will rot and fade away instead of lasting for eternity.

Pursuing the world’s standards of beauty keeps our eyes on the world and off the Lord. We are held captive by these images and driven to somehow keep up. Much of our time is consumed with making a good impression through our looks and outward presentation—perchance to catch a man. We have been imprisoned in darkness by the one who “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). Our striving for beauty has truly entrapped us and sent us on an unending quest for an unattainable ideal. We have forgotten the inner individual and the work of redemption that the Lord desires in our lives. He came “to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, . . . [and] to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, . . . and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (Isa. 61:1, 3). The Lord does not intend for us to be trapped by the world’s requirements for appearance. Our Father longs to crown us with his beauty—which is based on his work alone and frees us from ceaseless striving. His crown of beauty will never fade and is defined by his everlasting standards, not those of this world that will turn to dust.

Decide now to step out of the rat race of measuring up. Our existence or worth cannot be justified by any of the world’s means or accomplishments.

If Only . . .

“If only I were married!” Unfortunately, this mind-set is the engine that operates a vicious cyclical machine that will

quickly entrap us. It begins early on—whenever we become discontent with our present situation.

Many of us have believed that *if only* we were married, we would no longer be lonely or battle depression or feel unloved or Every stage of life can become ensnared by *if only*. Once one is married, the cry is, “*If only* I had a child!” Then, when the child is born or adopted, the parent dreams, “*If only* we had a larger house.” In the new house, after more diapers and temper tantrums than imaginable, the outburst of desperation may be, “*If only* my baby were of school age!” And the cycle continues. If we were to link all our *if only* statements in life, we would probably have a chain long enough to choke out all hope of satisfaction. We must stop this cycle *now*, before we continue to spiral downward into a life of discontentment.

We must also remember that beyond the *if only*, when that goal is attained, the reality is often much different from the dream. William Makepeace Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* captures the awakening to reality for Amelia, the supporting female character, merely nine days after her wedding to the man of her dreams:

What a gulf lay between her and that past life. She could look back to it from her present standing-place, and contemplate, almost as another being, the young unmarried girl absorbed in her love, having no eyes but for one special object . . .—her whole heart and thoughts bent on the accomplishment of one desire . . . : as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but to link each other’s arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition.⁵

5. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York: Random House, 2001), 268-69.

Loneliness arises even in marriage. Many married women struggle with bouts of depression and often feel unloved. The grass is *not* always greener on the other side; it is only a different kind of grass.

I Just Can't Believe!

At the other end of the spectrum from *if only* is *it never will be*. In a quest to avoid being consumed with thoughts of marriage, we can err on the side of hope forgotten. I have found myself at times so anxious to *not* be disappointed that I have tended to block out all desires for matrimony. Instead, we still can genuinely hope that God will bring a mate—believing even if we cannot see the way. I love Paul's description of Abraham in Romans 4:18: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." We would do well to follow this bold determination to believe God's faithfulness against the odds—regardless of whether or not we will marry. Remember, however, the necessary balance between hoping in God's provision along with contentment in our present situation.

The dream of attraction can be frustrating when you find no one to whom to be attracted or, on the other end of the spectrum, you feel that no one will ever be attracted to you. Do you struggle to believe that God will ever bring along your husband—one you will love and desire as a partner?

As Abraham looked at the reality of his life juxtaposed with God's promise to him to be made "into a great nation" (Gen. 12:2), he asked, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless . . . ?" (15:2). The key for us is Abraham's address of God: he recognizes God as Adonai Jehovah—the One who is over all, the Lord who set the stars in the heavens and arranged each molecule in the universe, he who ordains all that comes to pass. When Abraham believed God's word regardless of the circumstances visible before him,

God “credited it to him as righteousness” (15:6). He is later included in the book of Hebrews’ “Hall of Faith” “because he considered him faithful who had made the promise” (Heb. 11:11).

Even though we don’t receive specific promises from God for every instance—for example, that we will marry—we know that he will provide for our needs, that he will always protect us, and that he offers complete freedom in Christ. Also, if he desires for us to marry, it *will* happen because God is sovereign. Have you ceased to believe these truths? God might be saying in this instance, “You of little faith” (Matt. 16:8). As the disciples did, we, too, forget the many past ways in which the Lord has provided loaves of bread and fish to feed thousands. His blessings to us have been abundant. Why do we doubt that he can move heaven and earth to bring our husbands to us? He created the universe out of nothing (Heb. 11:3). God’s plan cannot be thwarted. Remember, though, that it will be in his timing if it will be at all. And whatever his plan, it is best.

You might have believed the lie that since many marriages will end in divorce anyway, why even hope? This fatalistic attitude can surely rob us of our energy and any zest for life. It also dangles us precariously somewhere between an embittered single woman and a hard-nosed, independent feminist. Bottom line: God has instituted marriage and it is good, so it is a valid life stage about which we can pray and hope—without being consumed by these thoughts. Hope most fervently *in the Lord!*

The Truth

These are some of the messages Satan has used to deceive us so that our perception of reality is distorted. But there is a

SINGLENES REDEFINED

true Story beyond every earthly tale; there is a greater Story behind our individual stories. It began before time, and all of history is marching toward its grand climax. This Story was birthed in the heart of God and declared through his Word, which is

most of all a Story. It's an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It's a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne—everything—to rescue the one he loves. It's like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life!

You see, the best thing about this Story is—it's true.⁶

Even if we truly want to place our trust in the Lord as our heavenly Prince and Rescuer, we still live in this world! How do we combat the strong messages that constantly bombard our thoughts and lives?

Following the example of the psalmist who declared, “I will set before my eyes no vile thing” (Ps. 101:3), we can monitor the images and ideas that we allow to enter our minds and hearts. Many times we move through our days without any precaution regarding the information that bombards us daily.

Instead, there is a better way and a single focus that we can pursue: “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).

Dwelling in the house of the Lord will not, of course, be a physical reality until we reach heaven. But figuratively, we can dwell, rest, and exist in the Lord's presence. This may

6. Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2007), 17.

seem rather ethereal to some of you, but pray for his constant presence with you and truly seek him. We cannot just hope that this will happen and wish that we would no longer be caught up in the worldly races toward beauty and acceptance. We must seek the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. When you walk outside, recognize and thank him as Creator of the natural surroundings. Look at yourself in light of how *he* sees you: as a beloved, beautiful daughter.

“Gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.” Rest in the peace of that concept for a moment. Try to grasp what this means. The Lord is beautiful—everything that is lovely, good, and perfect.

For as God is infinitely the greatest being, so he is . . . infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation, is but the reflection of diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory.⁷

We can cease striving and delight in the Lord’s attractiveness. Remember also that we have been created in his image, so he has imputed his beauty to us in some way.

I love the determination of the psalmist in this verse: “My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, LORD, I will seek” (Ps. 27:8). A definite decision and continual action must take place. I think of a child who grabs her daddy’s face, both hands exuberantly cupping his two cheeks, puts herself within a few inches, and looks intently into his two eyes. Stop gazing in the mirror and gaze instead into the face of the Father.

We must always seek the Lord, for Satan attacks from every angle. In the wake of David’s encroaching enemy, he declared:

7. Jonathan Edwards, *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 252.

“Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident” (Ps. 27:3). We, too, can have this confidence, especially as we seek the Lord and gaze upon his beauty, reminding our hearts of the truths of his Word and our standing in his eyes. He looks at us with eyes of love and full acceptance because of Christ.

One of the most prevalent roadblocks to contentment is that we do not believe in God’s goodness. If we truly believe that God is good in the midst of *every* circumstance, then we can trust that we are in the situation that is the best. Romans 8:28 says that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Nothing in this passage qualifies “all things” as being only spiritual, familial, or related to any other one circumstance. So it must describe *all* things. This means that God is working for our good through our jobs, in the families he has given us, where we are living, and, yes, even through our lives as singles. This is not to say that all circumstances are good; they are what they are. But God works in all of them for our good.

The conclusion of Psalm 27 is: “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD” (Ps. 27:13–14). Do you grasp the fullness of these verses? The outcome is not clear, but the confidence in the Lord is solid. The Lord’s goodness will come.

Meditation Moments

1. Do you have difficulty accepting singleness? Do you feel discontent and joyless? Explore the reasons why.
2. Do you long for contentment? How do you seek it? Consider whether the Lord is challenging you to change your perspective on contentment.

3. How have you been longing for a fairy tale?
4. Look back over the struggles listed in this chapter. Do any of them resonate with your own struggles? If so, how do they play out in your life?
5. Contemplate other areas of struggle for you regarding singleness. Process through them; ask questions; pray through them.
6. How have you bought into the lies that are infiltrating our society? What does the Lord say about you? (Read: Ps. 23:5-6; Isa. 43:1-3; 1 John 3:1)

