

# OpenTheo

## All By Myself - Part 2

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### **The Bible for Today with John Stott - Premier**

John Stott shows us that if marriage is seen as a blessing, singleness should not be seen as a curse. He warns against believing that singleness makes us more spiritual and explains why it should not result in us being alone.

### **Transcript**

[Music] Singleness need not mean aloneness. It is in healthy relationships with many friends of both sexes and all ages, not in unhealthy isolation. That loneliness will become terrible and sexual temptation will become beatable.

[Music] Welcome to the Bible for today with John Stott. There's perhaps been no one who has raised the standard of biblical teaching in the 20th century as John Stott. An extremely humble man, known affectionately to many as Uncle John, he was a pastor to pastors and a servant of the global church.

From his home church of all souls, Langham Place in central London, he preached over 600 sermons. And during this his centenary, we're bringing you some of his very best teaching from nearly 60 years of ministry.

[Music] We know that there are a wide variety of issues facing Christians today.

Last week John Stott looked at Singleness and showed us that it should be seen as a gift from God. Indeed we saw that both marriage and singleness are a gift and neither of them is a curse. There are numerous reasons why someone may be single and this week John continues this message by outlining some of those reasons.

A, there are those who are born that way. In other words they have a congenital condition that makes it either undesirable or maybe even impossible for them to marry. Secondly, there are those who are made that way by men.

In their case what inhibits marriage is not an internal condition, whether physical or psychological, but an external situation of some kind that imposes singleness upon

them. Again it might be a physical or psychological handicap caused in their case not by birth, but by an accident or in some cases by inhumane, cruel treatment, maybe torture for example. Indeed it might be a person who hasn't met the right partner who has never been proposed to or never proposed himself or herself.

I know it tends to be a bit reciprocal these days. Or it might be a person who is fiercée, died or broke the engagement and who after that has never felt free to marry anybody else. You see there are a number of external situations that seem to impose singleness on some people.

Then see there are those who have made themselves single who have renounced marriage deliberately for the sake of the kingdom of God. That is in the service of the kingdom of God. Because they have been called to some demanding work in which marriage would be in expedient and singleness would be more expedient.

It might be somebody called to be a Christian worker where the churches are pressed or persecuted and then a spouse and family would be in hardship and even in danger. It might be somebody called to an itinerant ministry in which spies and children would need to be left behind and therefore conceivably neglected. It might be somebody called to serve in a situation in which there are simply no funds available to support a spouse and family in addition to him or her.

It might be somebody called to a demanding service that requires total commitment and would be incompatible with alternative or rival commitments, for example, to a spouse and family. So you see here are people who deliberately make themselves single and renounce marriage for the sake of the kingdom of God. And Jesus concludes the one who can accept this should accept it.

In other words, if the cap fits wear it. If you belong to one of these three categories, embrace singleness as God's good gift and calling. So we move from the teaching of the Bible as a whole to the teaching of Jesus on singleness.

Now we need to look at the teaching of Paul on singleness, therefore we conclude. We turn back to 1 Corinthians 7. We've already seen that the chapter does present special problems to the interpreter because Paul says he is answering questions that the Corinthians have addressed to him and we don't know, at least in any detail, what those questions were. But I want to ask you tonight straight away that Paul makes several statements which color his teaching about marriage and singleness.

Please follow in your text. 1st, 1st, 26. He refers to what he calls the present distress.

Greek word "precen" could mean impending or present. It probably means both. It's about to come and has already begun and distress could be translated crisis as in the new international version, but it's some particular situation to which he is referring.

Verse 29, he says, "I mean brethren that the time has been shortened," literally. Then verse 31 at the end, the form of this world is passing away. Notice those three statements.

They're very important. He refers to the present distress, the shortened time, and the transient nature of the world passing away. How do we interpret that? Well, liberal commentators of course jumped to the conclusion that Paul was referring to the second coming of Jesus, of which we're thinking on Advent Sunday, which they say he believed to be imminent.

But they go on. He was mistaken. Christ didn't come.

He still hasn't come. So they conclude we're free to disregard his teaching because it was based on a mistaken premise. That is typical of liberal commentators.

And I very much hope that you don't naively and uncritically follow the critics. Sometimes the critics are the least critical of their own criticism. I hope instead if we are conservative in our attitude to the Bible, believing it to be the word of God, that we will reject that reconstruction because there is no need whatever to suppose that Paul was referring to the second coming of Jesus and declaring that it was imminent.

What then was Paul's time frame? Well, the time frame of Paul, as we know from all his letters, is that Jesus Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of God or the New Age when he came and would with the first coming of Jesus the last days began. And that no further event is scheduled in the divine calendar before the perusea, the second coming of Jesus, except tribulation, which has already begun. And between the first and the second coming of Jesus, there will be a time of tribulation for the people of God who are opposed and persecuted by the word.

And meantime, during the tribulation, until the second coming, we ought to be awake and alert because we don't know when Jesus is going to come and we ought to behave as if he could come at any moment. And if we have that perspective, it affects our attitudes to everything, including our attitude to property and possessions and including our attitude to marriage. For in this situation of tribulation and waiting for the coming of Christ, married people will have extra tribulation in the present distress.

Now, I think he was referring to a particular situation in Corinth at that time. Though that may be a little controversial, but certainly it's true, isn't it? The depression and torture are bad enough for single people. But the tragedy of torture and depression is multiplied many times over.

"If the person is married and has children who are involved as well, I want to spare you that," says Paul. "So there may be situations of particular tribulation when it would be more expedient to say single." And the same goes for the second point that not only will

there be extra tribulation for married people but divided loyalties as well. Single people, he says, are concerned with the affairs of the Lord, how to please him.

While married people are concerned with the affairs of the world, how to please their spouse. "And I want your undivided devotion to the Lord," he says. Now, of course, it's perfectly true that married people can serve the Lord through serving their spouse and their children.

But there are some things, as Jesus said in the passage we've already studied, some things that singles are more free to do than married people. And in their situations, their undivided devotion to the Lord can be given in a way that it's difficult for married people to do. So we have Paul's teaching that in the light of the tribulation that had already begun in Corinth and in the light of the transitory nature of the world and our expectation of the kingdom, Paul wants us to be spared both additional tribulations and the divided loyalties, which at least in some situations marriage brings.

The teaching of Paul. Now my multiple conclusion. I have a few words for several categories of people who are present here I know in church tonight.

First are those of us who are single people. Well, whether or not you hope to marry later, your present situation of singleness is good, is beautiful, noble, pleasing to God, nothing wrong with it in its own mind. It's wrong with it in itself, it isn't an evil and it is a good gift of God's grace.

I want to beg you in the name of Christ not to rebel against that. I hope that single people hear however much pain and loneliness they may be experiencing. I want to urge you to say to yourself and to God repeatedly, "Singleness is good and it is a gracious gift of God." That's what the scripture teaches.

We need to accept it and not rebel against it. Now to be sure it's perfectly legitimate to pray because you believe and hope that God doesn't want you to be single all your life, you can of course pray that God will lead you to a life of God. But it's counterproductive to become obsessed with that as if finding a life partner is the be-all and end-all of humanness and it's counterproductive to be agitated about it.

Relax. Do you or do you not believe in the sovereignty of God? And if you do, as I do, then relax, put it into the hand of God and say to him, "Lord, I'm willing for either state to be mine, to be single is good, to be married is good, whichever you choose for me is fine." Could you come to that? I hope so. Meanwhile, take steps to develop your relationships.

I'm still talking to single people, both to the Lord and to your friends, first with the Lord. Develop your relationship with Jesus. Remember, you got more time and freedom to do it than married people have.

For says that, you single people have the opportunity to give your undivided devotion to the Lord. Then I want to give you another appeal, exploit that opportunity. Give more time to Bible meditation, more time to prayer than your married friends are able to give.

Seek to become a whole person in relation to Jesus Christ. Jesus was whole, although he was single, and Paul writes to the Colossians, you have become complete in Christ. Colossians 2, 10.

It is possible to be complete in Christ as a full human being in relation to him. So let's cultivate our relation to Jesus. But also our relations with our friends of both sexes and all ages.

Friends, don't pretend to be super spiritual. Don't claim that the friendship of Jesus is entirely enough without any other human friendships, because it isn't. Paul didn't claim that.

Do you remember there was one occasion he describes it in 2 Corinthians, when he was just over burdened with distress of various kinds, then he said that God comforted me. And you super spiritual people said, "You are told you so, God comforted him. That's all he needed, with divine comfort." Yes, but you don't know your Bible, you see.

What Paul actually wrote is, "God comforted me by the coming of Titus." The comfort of God was mediated to him through a human friendship. And it was the same in his last imprisonment in 2 Timothy 4. Paul was all alone in the underground Mamatine prison, probably. And he wrote to Timothy, "Timothy, do your best to come to me soon.

Timothy, do your best to come to me before winter." You see, he missed his friends. So we need friends. We don't only need the friendship of Jesus.

And Calvin is one of a number of commentators in his commentary on Genesis 2.18, who saw that the phrase, "It is not good for the man to be alone" has a wider application than to marriage. I quote Calvin's commentary, "It is a general principle that man was formed as social animal, and solitude is not good." Singleness is good, but solitude is not good. So you see, singleness need not mean aloneness.

It is in healthy relationships with many friends of both sexes and all ages. It's in healthy relationships, not in unhealthy isolation. That loneliness will become bearable, and sexual temptation will become beatable.

That is my word to single people. Then I have a word, secondly, to married people. Don't forget the struggles you used to have when you were single.

And don't forget the singles who are struggling still. In the Old Testament, single people were embraced within the extended family. Not only their parents, brothers and sisters, granny and grandpa, aunts and uncles and cousins.

In this great extended family, you know, there's a wonderful context in which some people could remain single. In the West, in which we live, and in which the nuclear family is traditional, I think it is important for us to create extended family situations. Married people can do that.

They can invite single people into their homes. I wish they did it more often. Keep an open home.

Be hospitable if you're married to those who aren't. That's a word to married people. Now, thirdly, a word to the local church.

The church is God's family, in which he is the father and church members, the brothers and sisters. And every church would seek to be a church family. That lovely phrase that I believe Michael Bourne himself invented, the church family, in which there should be a program for singles.

Of course, there is the 2020 group here, fellowship groups and so on. Some churches, particularly in America, appoint a minister to singles. Because there are so many single people who need support and encouragement.

The local church needs to take them seriously. Now, fourthly and lastly, for a final minute, a word to all of us, whatever our state may be. Some of us need to repent, that is change our mind and attitude, and give up dismissing singles as if they were all auditors.

I know some of us are, of course. But I want to say that you never forget that Jesus was single. And because Jesus was single, we need to have a greater respect for single people.

Now, the world may despise them in many cases, but the church would honor them. Singleness is good, just as marriage is also good. And we must remember that.

So, although we have to be alert to single people who need support and who need counseling and help, let's try to concentrate in our thinking rather on the blessings of singleness, as well as the blessings of marriage, and especially on that freedom to please the Lord, and that freedom to serve His kingdom, which both Jesus and His Apostle Paul referred to. I hope you'll take advantage of the next few moments in which silently to speak to God, about your own condition, your own need, your single. You may want to bring to Him the pain of your loneliness, your desire perhaps to be married.

You may want to come to a position of fresh surrender to His sovereignty, so that you're willing to remain single if that's His calling. You may want to praise a single person to take greater advantage of the freedom and the opportunities to serve that are given to you. You're married, may want to pray for grace to be more hospitable, too, and supportive of single people.

So, whatever your need is or your particular situation, we'll all pray now in silence. We would like to thank you Heavenly Father for the balanced teaching of Your Word, that both the married state and the single state are good, beautiful pleasing to you, and those can be good gifts of your grace if we have discerned your gift and calling a right. We pray that we may be willing and glad to welcome your gift and your calling and not rebel against it.

We pray that we may find in your obedient service, as we pray at the beginning that perfect freedom, wholeness, completeness that we can find. Here as we humbly pray for the glory of your name. Both marriage and singleness are good gifts from God.

You've been listening to the conclusion of a message by John Stott on Singleness. It's just part of a series of sermons John gave on sexuality, marriage and divorce that you can hear by going to the All Souls website. John Stott often preached on tough subjects, many of these messages formed the basis of a very popular book he wrote called Issues Facing Christians Today.

It's the recommended book this week on our website, where you'll find new materials regularly added for this John Stott's Centenary Year. Just visit [premierchristenradio.com/JohnStott](http://premierchristenradio.com/JohnStott) The legacy of John Stott lives on and is growing, touching every level of society across the world. Today Christian leaders throughout the majority world are being equipped to provide pastor training and resources in their own countries thanks to the vision of John Stott, who donated all his book royalties to support this ministry through Langham Partnership.

To find out about this and other ministries John Stott founded, go to [premier.org.uk/JohnStott](http://premier.org.uk/JohnStott) Join us at the same time next week for more from The Bible for Today with John Stott.

[Music]

(buzzing)