

## Introduction

### The Big Question

Fall has settled on Nashville, where I've dropped in for a weekend stay at the home of married friends who have two little girls. On Saturday afternoon we head for a puppet show at the downtown library. Maggie is six months pregnant with number three, so we tell her to take the front seat of the car. Thomas is driving, and I'm sandwiched between the two girls in their car seats in the back of the Ford Explorer.

One side effect of the pregnancy is that the girls' chatter often revolves around babies. As we drive across a wide intersection, four-year-old Mary Pierson asks me, "Do you have a baby?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not married," I explain.

"Why aren't you married?"

*Hmm.* Children have a knack for posing theological stumbers. As if we single women wouldn't like to have God answer that question ourselves.

## From Baby Dolls to Marriage

The next morning the girls ask me to read them some stories. I can tell they're in the mood for a fairy tale. They've got Snow White figurines in hand and offer me the choice of two books that both end with variations on the theme of girl marrying boy and living happily ever after.

Later that day, their daddy turns the questions on his daughter: "Mary Pierson, do you want to get married?"

"Yes."

"Why do you want to get married?"

"Because I want to be a mommy!"

Little girls learn early to love marriage and family.

Yet the trend of the last generation is that more young women are spending more years single—and many would say that's not by choice. The average age of first marriage has climbed more than four years since our parents' generation.

Not surprisingly, the circumstances of singleness can sometimes be perplexing. Few of us received specific guidance about this particular phase of life as we were growing up. Frankly, no one seems to have expected it. Nor, with few exceptions, has there been much investigation of the disconnect between our expectations and reality—either how this gap came to be or how we as individual women should deal with the divide now that we're in the midst of it.

## A Life Full of Callings

Thomas and Maggie are right to raise their daughters to desire marriage and children, just as it's appropriate for us as adult single women to maintain our own hope for those things.

The challenge for us singles, then, is to keep that desire in perspective. The most important questions are not, *Why am I not married? When will I get married?* or, *Whom will I marry?* Rather, they are, *How am I supposed to be content today while hoping for something more? What's my purpose here and now?* and, *Do I trust God in this unexpected in-between?* Answering these questions is the key to making sense of singleness.

The challenge is to live in the present purposefully and to lead a contented life even while particular desires remain unfulfilled. That kind of contentment depends on a sense of purpose outside our own feelings. It rests in the conviction that there is a grand design to our lives, and that the design has an Author. Our knowledge of that design may be incomplete, but its Author has made Himself known to us, and that helps us perceive how He works in our lives and in the world around us.

When God calls us to Himself, it transforms the purposes for which we live. To respond to that call is to view relationships, responsibilities, gifts, and opportunities as His purposes in our lives. These purposes are our *callings*—the things we are equipped by God to do in our individual situations throughout all the seasons of our lives. This perspective on life as a set of callings from God helps a woman

get her bearings when singleness gets confusing—anchoring her identity, giving her a sense of belonging, setting a direction for her life's activities, and shaping her overall sense of purpose.

Because there are many ways in which each of us lives out our first call to God throughout the changing circumstances of a lifetime, this book uses the term *callings* to refer to those individual means through which we are to follow Him in our own situations.

The plural *callings* is meant to distinguish these from the singular purpose of that first call to Him. It is also intended to help us avoid the trap of elevating any one purpose here on earth—other than the pursuit of God—to the place where we confuse it for our whole life purpose. God's multiple callings in each of our lives may include marriage, but that is not the full story of His grand design for any of us. Being too focused on marriage (or its absence) may lead to neglect of our other callings at hand or cause us to miss the fulfillment He intends for us in each of those callings. Glorifying God should be the organizing principle of life. Marriage is only a means to that end, not to be confused for the end itself. Singleness is a part of God's design for life now, one aspect of a full—and complete—life.

Attaining contentment doesn't require us to suppress the desire for marriage, but it does mean we have to keep it in proper perspective. When desire grows into preoccupation, it edges out contentment and causes us to doubt God's faithfulness and goodness. When desire becomes a sense of entitlement—that God owes us what we want—it deprives us of gratitude for what He is doing outside our expectations.

Life is about more than marital status, and singleness is more than a holding pattern. This book is about redeeming the time between the now and the not yet for which we hope.