

life + love

navigating singleness, dating, engagement, and marriage

ben stuart



LifeWay Press®
Nashville, Tennessee

EDITORIAL TEAM

Ben Reed
Writer

Joel Polk
Editorial Team Leader

Reid Patton
Content Editor

Brian Daniel
Manager, Short-Term Discipleship

David Haney
Production Editor

Michael Kelley
Director, Discipleship & Groups Ministry

Jon Rodda
Art Director

Published by LifeWay Press® • © 2019 Ben Stuart

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted in writing by the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed in writing to LifeWay Press®, One LifeWay Plaza; Nashville, TN 37234.

ISBN 978-1-5359-6555-2 • Item 005816898

Dewey decimal classification: 306.73

Subject headings: DATING (SOCIAL CUSTOMS) / COURTSHIP / SINGLE PEOPLE

Scripture quotations are taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers. Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™ Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, IL 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. www.lockman.org.

To order additional copies of this resource, write to LifeWay Resources Customer Service; One LifeWay Plaza; Nashville, TN 37234; fax 615-251-5933; phone toll free 800-458-2772; order online at LifeWay.com; email orderentry@lifeway.com; or visit the LifeWay Christian Store serving you.

Printed in the United States of America

Groups Ministry Publishing • LifeWay Resources • One LifeWay Plaza • Nashville, TN 37234

contents

introduction	4
about the author	5
how to use this study	6
session one	
singleness	8
session two	
who to date	28
session three	
how to date	48
session four	
pursuing purity	68
session five	
engagement	88
session six	
marriage	108
leader guide	128

introduction

People can endure almost any *what* if they have a compelling *why*.

If you think about some of the most heroic, inspirational actions of human beings in history, they usually took place because a compelling reason prompted a momentous action. A soldier leaped on a grenade, sacrificing his own life, because of his love for his friends. A mother singlehandedly lifted a car because her great love for her child trapped underneath the vehicle recruited an other-worldly level of adrenaline from her body. It's incredible what has happened because of inspirational *whys*.

Why mention this?

As we talk about our relational seasons—singleness, dating, engagement, and marriage—I want you to embrace the realization that God has given us a specific, compelling reason for each of these stages. When we understand this reason, we're equipped to engage every moment of our day in that season with a tremendous sense of purpose. Eternal significance can touch down on every mundane moment. And I want you to live a life like that.

I don't want you just to survive singleness. I want you to fulfill every God-given purpose for your single stage so that if it ends, you'll know you didn't waste a second of it. Even the most mundane tasks were shot through with meaning because you knew the compelling, God-ordained *why* behind the *what* of being single.

The same goes for dating. I want you to be amazing at it. I want you to journey through dating with a clear view of that unique season's purpose. And I want you to link hands with someone special and run through the stages of engagement and marriage together with a singular, compelling vision for your joined lives.

I don't want you to settle for just existing in whatever season of life you're in. Whether you're single, dating, engaged, or married I don't want you to lock your gaze on the minimum you have to do in life just to skate by and pass the time. I want you to live every season of your life to the hilt. I want you to crush it. I want you to be as successful as humanly possible while experiencing the unique opportunities and challenges that accompany each relational stage.

The good news: you don't have to try to create the meaning of each stage. God has done that for you. You can wake up every day, regardless of what stage you're in, and embrace the moments before you with a deeply motivated sense of meaning.

In the pages ahead and with the videos we'll watch together, we'll take a look at the purposes God has established for each relational stage you'll journey through. And the purposes of the stages relate to and inform one another. So whatever stage you're in, clarity is present for you in each category. I'm excited to run this race with you, and I'm cheering you on every step of the way!

Ben Stuart

about the author

Ben Stuart is the pastor of Passion City Church in Washington, D.C. Previously, Ben served for eleven years as the Executive Director of Breakaway Ministries, a weekly Bible study attended by thousands of college students on the campus of Texas A&M. Ben earned a master's degree in historical theology from Dallas Theological Seminary. Ben and his wife, Donna, live to inspire and equip people to walk with God for a lifetime. They live in the District with their three kids, Hannah, Sparrow, and Owen.

Ben is the author of *Single, Dating, Engaged, Married: Navigating Life and Love in the Modern Age* and the Bible study *This Changes Everything*.

how to use this study

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to think biblically about human relationships. Six sessions of study examine four different stages of relationships: singleness, dating, engagement, and marriage.

group study

Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each session of content begins with the group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members and with God's Word.

start

The group session will begin with a few questions designed to help you introduce the session's topic of study and encourage everyone to engage with the study.

this session's topic

This section provides context for understanding how the session's topic is viewed in our broader culture. From here you will transition to the video teaching from Pastor Ben Stuart.

watch

Key statements and Scripture verses from the video session are provided so that group members can follow along as they watch the video teaching.

discuss

This section is the main component of the group session. The questions provided are designed to facilitate the group study of the session's topic. The goal is to better understand biblical teaching on one of the four relationship stages.

personal study

Three days of personal study are provided after each group session to help individuals think biblically about the session's topic. With biblical teaching and introspective questions, these lessons challenge individuals to grow in their understanding of God's Word and to respond in faith and obedience.

biblical case study

The first section of personal study considers the session's topic from the perspective of a biblical character. The Bible is filled with stories of real people who grappled with many of the same issues we deal with today. We have much to glean from their examples.

personal application

The next section of personal study takes what members have learned in the case study and seeks to apply the teaching at the heart level. These questions and activities are more introspective and personal than those provided in the previous section. Members should give time and consideration to their answers.

journal

The personal-study section ends with a journaling activity designed to help members tie together all they've studied during the week.

leader guide

A tear-out leader guide for each session is provided on pages 128–42, which highlights key points from each session and offers helpful considerations for leading a group discussion.

session one

singleness

group study

start

Welcome to session one.

Begin this study by introducing yourself to the group. As we start our journey together through this Bible study, we find ourselves at different stages. Some of us are single and want to be. Others are dating and wish we weren't. Others hope to be engaged soon. Some are married. Take a moment and share with the group the life stage you're in.

What's your current relationship status, and how long have you been in this season of life?

What about this season brings you joy? What frustrates you?

Each season provides unique challenges, frustrations, and joys. Let's begin by asking ourselves two introspective questions:

1. Am I moving toward becoming content where I am?

I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself.

PHILIPPIANS 4:11

2. Am I honoring God in every area of my life in the unique season in which I find myself?

I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me.

PHILIPPIANS 4:13

With these two questions in mind, let's get started.

this session's topic

Use this section to provide necessary context for the session's topic.

Though seasons of singleness vary in length, God has purposed that every human being on the planet experience this stage of life. So it's fair to ask the question: Why? If we say the purpose of singleness is simply to find someone to marry, then we're saying Jesus and the apostle Paul failed at singleness. I don't know anyone who wants to say that. So let's ask the fair question: What does God want our single season to be about?

Pray together; then begin video session one.

watch

Use these statements to follow along as you watch video session one.

You are most free when you fulfill God's created intent for your life.

The purpose of singleness is to pursue an undistracted devotion to the Lord.

You're not just made by God; you're made for God.

We're meant to get really good at being near God, to hear His heartbeat, to know what He cares about, to be attentive to His Word and His work.

Flourishing under God

1. You need to know Him.
2. Be attentive to His work.

People like to be around life-giving people.

discuss

Use these questions to discuss the video teaching.

We're at our best when we function as we were designed. Freedom isn't the absence of boundaries. It's the ability to fulfill our created intent. Fish are most free when they swim, and birds when they fly. The same is true of human beings. We're most alive when we fulfill our Creator's intent for our lives.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:32,35. Why did Paul say God has ordained a season of singleness for every person?

If singleness existed just to lead us to marriage, Jesus was a failure.

Singleness offers freedom that married life doesn't. How does devotion to the Lord look different during a season of singleness?

In what ways would marriage detract from your freedom?

Because of the freedom single people experience, they have more time to focus. However, most people use this season to focus on one of two interests:

- 1. CAREER.** They're working to get ahead or climb the ladder.
- 2. THEMSELVES.** They say things like "I'm taking this time to focus on me."

Neither of these pursuits is wrong, and yet neither focus will ultimately satisfy our hearts.

What pursuit, other than Jesus, are you tempted to focus on because of the freedom found in the phase of singleness?

Ben told the story of Jesus talking with the woman at the well in John 4:1-26. Jesus encountered a woman who had been married five times and was now living with a man. He told the woman her problem was that she was thirsty for something only the Lord could satisfy. We have to get our relationship with God right before we can ever hope to get a relationship with a guy or a girl right.

Have you seen this thirst in people who were looking to satisfy themselves with something only the Lord can satisfy? What does an unhealthy thirst look like in the context of a relationship?

By contrast, what does it look like to thirst for the purposes and priorities of the Lord?

In Greek the word *devotion* is made up of two words: *good* and *beside*, meaning we need to become good at being beside God, attentive to His Word and involved in His work. Ben gave some practical ways we can do this, from reading and writing out the Gospels to making extra money to sponsor a child.

What changes can you make in the way you structure your time in order to prioritize devotion to God? What do you need to uproot from your schedule and plant in your life so that you can focus on devotion to God?

What can you do this week to take advantage of your freedom as a single person that you won't have as a married person?

If you're not single, how might this discussion be helpful to single people you know?

prayer

Close the session with prayer.

Ask God to help the group treasure Him during the stage of singleness. Pray for patience when you're tempted to rush through this stage and for help to center your lives in Him alone so that you can grow spiritually before joining your lives with someone else. Ask Him to help you find rest in Jesus.

personal study

paul // biblical case study

mission

Sometimes the best way to figure out how to do something is to watch someone else do it. There's a reason the Internet is filled with how-to videos. Often it's easier to show than to tell. This same principle applies to navigating singleness. What we really need is a good example. We need someone we can look to who lived the single life well.

The Bible doesn't let us down. The apostle Paul was an extraordinary example for us. He even said, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). The final portion of his letter to his young protégé Timothy, written from prison, shows us what a single life lived well looks like. Paul gives us a vision of what our single years, when lived to the glory of God, can be and accomplish.

Read 2 Timothy 4:9-12.

This passage may sound strange, and we may be tempted to skip over these hard-to-pronounce names because we don't know who they were. But Paul is showing us that even from a prison cell, close to his death, he was directing ministry. Make the decision now that nothing in life will keep you from fulfilling the purposes God has assigned to you. Your mission isn't complete until God calls you home.

In this passage Paul, at the end of his life, was talking about the people he had invested in who would carry the torch of the gospel after he was gone. Notice that Paul's ministry strategy involved mentoring young people who, in turn, would use their lives to help others. Second Timothy 2, just a few chapters earlier, shows that investing in the next generation was a pattern for Paul and a highlight of his life.

Read 2 Timothy 2:2. What characteristics do you notice about the way Paul invested in people?

How might your season of singleness change if you invested in people as Paul did?

friends

Not only was Paul surrounded by protégés, but he also had good friends. In addition to the people we're investing our lives in, we need others who can share our burdens and struggles—brothers and sisters to lock arms with. During singleness we should cultivate deep friendships. Even at the end of his life, Paul had Luke by his side. Many of us have acquaintances and coworkers we see and interact with. But here we're talking about deeper relationships that go beyond a surface level. We're talking about friends who push us forward in God's call on our lives. There's a great possibility that because Luke was a doctor, he worked to literally keep Paul's battered body alive!¹

Read King Solomon's words in Ecclesiastes 4:10. What's pitiable about someone who has no friendships?

How can you cultivate the kinds of friendships that preserve your life spiritually and physically?

a lifelong learner

Read 2 Timothy 4:13.

This is another verse that's easy to pass over, one that at first glance has nothing to do with the season of singleness. Yet Paul teaches us something valuable here.

Even from his prison cell, even after all he had preached, all of the ministry he had done, and all he had accomplished, he wasn't finished learning.

Singleness gives you a freedom from distraction like no other time in your life. You have the time to learn and grow in a way you may not later.

Take a moment to look at your calendar. What free time do you have this month that could be directed toward learning?

What are a few ways you can build your faith during this time?

If learning doesn't come naturally to you, consider marking this priority on your calendar, blocking time each day or week to pursue learning so that like the apostle Paul, you'll continually grow in Christ.

forgiveness

Read 2 Timothy 4:14-15. Based on these verses, how would you describe Alexander?

What did Alexander oppose about Paul?

This wasn't a personality conflict. It was opposition to Paul's teaching. Any follower of Jesus should face the same challenge. Jesus warned us in Luke 6:26 that we should be wary when everyone speaks well of us. The goal isn't to proactively make enemies. But when we're taking a stand for the truth, we'll face resistance.

Paul handled Alexander's hatred with incredible maturity. Notice his reaction in verse 14. Paul didn't try to even the score or call down curses on Alexander. Just a few sentences later Paul would even forgive his friends (see v. 16). During Paul's court hearing in Rome over his imprisonment, it would have been common for supporters to come forward to vouch for Paul; defend his character; or, at the very least, plead for mercy on his behalf. Paul asked that everyone reading this letter refuse to hold a grudge against the people who had deserted him.

Based on Paul's example, what should we say and do to truly forgive someone who has wronged us?

Is forgiveness a regular practice in your life? How can you grow in the ability to forgive?

rest

It may have appeared that Paul stood alone while he was on trial, and verse 16 would lead us to believe that. Yet he wasn't alone.

Read 2 Timothy 4:17.

God's presence filled Paul with courage to proclaim the gospel, even while on trial for proclaiming that same gospel. Paul leveraged his time in prison and his life of singleness to advance the gospel. He didn't seek to be put into prison, but he used his imprisonment as a platform for evangelism.

God can use your current circumstances as a single person as well. It's no accident that you're where you are, have the time you have, and are surrounded by the people who are a part of your life.

What about Paul's courage inspires you most?

Read Paul's closing affirmation in 2 Timothy 4:18.

Whereas most people would have ended the letter by asking for help in getting out of prison, Paul found a way to rest in God. He had a broader view of the work of God, trusting Him with his ultimate redemption and rescue. Therefore, nothing could touch him. It's impossible to control everything in life, but it's possible to be both known and loved by the Creator of life itself. This truth gave Paul peace, and it can give us peace as well.

When have you seen someone act calm in a stressful situation?

How can you apply Paul's affirmation in verse 18 to your current season in life?

When you rest in God, you recognize that your life is about your relationship with Him. The way you relate to God is far more important than the way you relate to other human beings. Identity isn't found in your friends, your dating relationships, or even your spouse. Identity is found in your relationship with Christ. He's the only person who's able to define you. When we're you in Christ, you're adopted into the family of God as a son or a daughter of the King. Ultimately, flourishing in singleness (and in every other stage) depends upon having an identity that isn't found in your relationships (or lack thereof) but in Christ.

What happens when we seek our identity in relationship with other people instead of with Christ?

When have you fallen into this trap? What were the results?

1. This idea is adapted from Tommy Nelson, the pastor of Denton Bible Church.

personal application

We've explored some of the ways Paul maximized his singleness. Now let's evaluate our own lives and determine how we can implement some of his practices. It's one thing to know what obedience looks like, but it's another thing to walk in the steps the Lord has directed for us.

your devotion

Read Matthew 28:19-20.

The point of life, no matter what season you're in, is to know Jesus and make Him known. Even if you feel that you're early in your journey of knowing God, you can still find ways to help others along the way. As we saw in the first portion of this session's personal study, Paul devoted his life to proclaiming the gospel and to training others to proclaim the gospel.

Based on your past experiences and current passions and reality, how can you join God on mission in this season of singleness?

Who are some people in your city, community, or church you believe you could help?

How could you help those people on their journeys of knowing Jesus more and making Him known?

An old African proverb says, “If you do not initiate the boys, they will burn the village down.” Paul charged Timothy to entrust the truths of God to reliable people who can teach others (see 2 Tim. 2:2). This is often called the four-generation verse:

PAUL ► TIMOTHY ► RELIABLE PEOPLE ► OTHERS

**Are there people in your life who follow this process well?
What are some of the things they do?**

**Do you have a mentor in your life who’s helping you know
Jesus better? If not, how could you position yourself to get one?**

**What would it look like for you to invest your time and energy
in helping others know Jesus?**

your friends

Even in his final hours Paul had a close friend beside him. In our season of singleness, we need deep friendships—the kind who can stand the test of time and endure difficulties, people who know us, love us, and hold us accountable for stewarding the ministry and relationships God has entrusted to us. These friendships aren’t easy to come by, but they’re worth the effort to find and nurture.

**Whom have you given permission to speak truth into your life?
What are their names?**

Do you truly trust these people in the deepest recesses of your heart? When was the last time you actively demonstrated that you trust them at that level? How did they respond?

If you don't have that kind of friendship, what steps could you take in this season to begin developing one?

a lifelong learner

In 2 Timothy 4:13 we looked at Paul's example of being a lifelong learner. Even in His last days Paul was committed to knowing God better. Singleness provides a unique opportunity to invest deeply in our relationship with God.

What's your plan to learn and grow in this season?

Try this activity this week. Spend thirty minutes a day reading, in addition to the time you spend reading the Scriptures. Select a book or a Bible study that will help you grow spiritually. If you're not sure where to start, consult a pastor or a godly friend. Then commit to read for thirty minutes. If you do this every day, in addition to growing spiritually, the University of Michigan's annual health-and-retirement study says you'll live an average of two additional years.¹

Record your progress.

DAY 1: I read ____ minutes. I read ____ pages.

DAY 2: I read ____ minutes. I read ____ pages.

DAY 3: I read ____ minutes. I read ____ pages.

DAY 4: I read ____ minutes. I read ____ pages.

DAY 5: I read ____ minutes. I read ____ pages.

DAY 6: I read ____ minutes. I read ____ pages.

DAY 7: I read ____ minutes. I read ____ pages.

What was difficult about this activity?

What was rewarding?

How can you ensure that learning is an ongoing part of your life?

forgiving people from your past

This may be one of your most important pursuits as a single person. Like everyone else, you've been hurt, and hurt people eventually hurt other people. Forgiveness isn't minimizing the wrongs or the pain. Instead, it's choosing to maximize your view of God even in the midst of pain and confusion and allowing God to enforce justice as only He can. In Romans 12:19 Paul reminds us that vengeance and repayment for wrongs belong to the Lord Himself.

Make a list of the people who've hurt you in the past.

Read 1 Peter 2:20-23.

We must learn to forgive as Jesus did. He took the wrongs committed against Him and “entrusted himself to the one who judges justly” (v. 23).

Describe what forgiveness would look like if you granted it to the people who’ve hurt you the most.

Beginning to verbalize your forgiveness can prepare you for the day when you’ll have the opportunity to offer those people the same kind of forgiveness Jesus offered you. If you have difficulty forgiving, consult a counselor. At the very least, call a trusted friend and walk through this process with him or her.

People on mission need to be forgiving people. As we’ve seen, opposition can accompany living on mission. Paul was a man on a mission, and he encountered opposition. This wasn’t just a generic “Life was tough for Paul.” This resistance had a name: Alexander (see 2 Tim. 4:14-15). Note that their contention wasn’t a personality conflict. It was Alexander’s opposition to Paul’s message. Paul was so closely associated with Jesus that if someone hated Jesus, they hated Paul. We’re meant to be this way. We don’t need to be needlessly offensive, but throughout the Scriptures we’re told that those who live a godly life will be persecuted.

When we stand for the truth, our lives themselves become offensive, as Paul’s was. Have you ever faced opposition because of your association with Jesus? What happened?

Paul was willing to go to jail for his association with Jesus. Has your faith ever cost you anything? If not, why not?

Paul was thrown into prison for his faith. It's hard to think when Paul started his journey with Jesus, he would proclaim the truth while bound in chains. The reality is that living in a fallen world means not everybody will receive our faith with open arms.

rest

Writing from prison, Paul was in the most stressful place imaginable, where his life was on the line and he could die any day. Yet he was at rest.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-17.

Paul reminds us that the pain, setbacks, and frustrations of life are only momentary in the grand scope of eternity. And even though we're wasting away on the outside, daily spiritual renewal occurs internally.

What stresses you out most?

What does it look like for you to trust in God and His plans even in the middle of your stress?

How are you being internally renewed every day?

1. "Health and Retirement Study," accessed January 23, 2019, <http://hrsonline.isr.umich.edu/>.

journal

If seeking God through prayer and Scripture reading is difficult for you because you can't seem to find the time, try blocking off fifteen minutes each day over the next week to meet with God.

Create calendar events each day of the next week for activities like the following.

- **Stop what you're doing and pray.**
- **Read three chapters in the Bible.**
- **Read three verses of Scripture over and over again.**
- **Memorize one Bible verse.**

Use the chart on the next page to outline Scriptures you'll read and where and when you'll read them. Afterward list one prayer and one truth you learned.

At the end of the week, evaluate whether fifteen minutes were enough. Would you like to block off more time next week?

scripture

time & place

prayer

truth

sunday

monday

tuesday

wednesday

thursday

friday

saturday
