Zeal is manifested in various ways in every church. You have the individual who is excited about evangelism. Another one is the expert on church policies and regulations. The prophecy guru is zealous over historical dates, while the children’s ministry gang competes with the Vacation Bible School special forces team. Theological auditors sit in the back pew with their bifocals while the conspiracy theorists have their own unique enthusiasm. From audio-visual techies to prayer warriors, the church is a home to all types, shapes, and sizes of zeal.

Then there is the Auntie (or sometimes Uncle). She is zealous about getting every single person in the church married off. Whether she works off a database or her memory, she is a human android that can come up with creative combinations and statistical compatibility rates. We may snicker, but the zeal of this ministry is important. Perhaps you have benefited from their ministry.

What may lie behind this zeal, however, is the idea that singles are incomplete and that communities must do everything they can to eliminate them. The first chapters of Genesis are often quoted supporting the notion that it is bad for individuals to be alone. While it is true that married individuals have benefits and advantages, the rewards and pluses of singlehood must not go unmentioned. After all, the Son of God Himself was a single. Though this quarter addresses the topic of sexuality, this week will look at various passages throughout Scripture that touch on the gift of singleness and its juxtaposition to the other gift that God has given.
Write out Isaiah 56:3–8 from the Bible translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
FOR HEAVEN’S SAKE

Unlike the goal of Auntie, the goal of conversion is not to make every singleton into a couple. While it may be in the best interest for evolutionary biology for each human to procreate and further the complexity of the gene pool, it is not the sole goal of the gospel of Christ for people to experience matrimony. Yes, the church is a great utility and facilitator for this purpose. But this is not its main purpose.

Christ’s goal is the redemption of humanity to its original purpose (see the inVerse study on Education) and to bring forth the righteousness of God as through justification (Rom. 4:3–5; 6:6, 7), sanctification (Rom. 8:4; Eph. 5:9), and glorification (Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 15:53). Marriage or singleness is not a prerequisite to this righteousness.

When Jesus responded to the Pharisee’s question on marriage and divorce, the disciples responded by saying, “If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry” (Matt. 19:10). Jesus replies with Matthew 19:12. Note before reading it, however, that this is a very difficult passage. It is sandwiched with verse 11 as, “All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given” and the end of verse 12 as, “He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.” We must be careful to understand this verse contextually.

Jesus didn’t say, “No, no, no, one must always get married!” This is very much the cultural custom in many places in the world. Many cultures consider it a religious duty to be married. The single individual is seen as incomplete and given some temporary status until they marry. As the first week established, we must forgo cultural conventions and be willing to accept the scripts of Scripture as the basis for our Christ-focused lives. What did Jesus say about singles?

Yes, God did say, “It is not good that man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). But it’s interesting that He said it was “not good” and not “bad” (did you follow that?). Meaning, He didn’t condemn singleness; rather it was just not ideal. Good and evil clearly exist in the Scriptures, but “not good” exists as well—which should be avoided if possible because God has something better in mind. But at the same time, it’s not bad. We have clear examples of this in the life of Jesus Himself, as well as that of the apostle Paul.

Jesus gives three categories of singleness in Matthew 19:12. Though He uses the word eunuchs, the definition transcends our contemporary and limited understanding as one who is castrated. The first category are those individuals who were born from their mother’s womb as naturally single. These individuals were biologically (perhaps even the word genetically could be used) single to describe their sexuality. They were born to be single and not married. Jesus acknowledges people who have a physical, biological status that results in their singlehood.

The second group consists of those who were made eunuchs by others. This correlates to our most common usage of eunuch. These individuals were those who were made single by external forces. Some references suggest that Daniel and his friends were made eunuchs to work in the royal courts of Babylon (Dan. 1:3, 7–9). A category of individuals not born this way exists, whose external life experiences have made them single.

The third group have made themselves such for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. These have taken up singleness for the higher calling of the kingdom of God. As the apostle Paul lays out in 1 Corinthians 7, the goal of the gospel is primary in these individuals, and they take on singleness for this evangelistic purpose.

What is wonderful and just as profound is that after this discourse on singleness, Jesus blesses little children, saying, “For of such is the kingdom of heaven.” These three sections (on marriage, on singleness, and on children) are distinct, but the underlying common theme is that whatever course of life you are in, you should do it for the glory of heaven. A difficult saying indeed.
The main passage for this week spotlights the purpose of singlehood in Scripture. Though the historical context addresses those who were normally excluded from being a part of God’s people, Isaiah 56 foresees a time when strangers, foreigners, and eunuchs are welcomed wholeheartedly. Verse 3 addresses foreigners who no longer have families. Verse 5 addresses those who no longer have children. Though an Old Testament historical fulfillment has occurred in Israel’s neighbors who were converted, the eschatological (or end-time) fulfillment has yet to occur, seeing as verse 7 speaks of a holy mountain and a house of prayer where all nations would convene.

What Isaiah alludes to is a promise that transcends the blessings of marriage and the blessings of descendants. Whereas ancient cultures found security in spouses (namely husbands) and in the number of offspring, God promises that those who remain single-minded for Him will receive a larger blessing: Himself. In other words, more than the pleasures of marriage, the joys of children, the security of status, and the reassurance of family, God gives Himself, His house (vv. 6–7), His mountain (v. 7), and His joy. Isaiah 56 is a call for singles to display their devotion to Him through piety, obedience, justice, and truth (vv. 1–3). This display would glorify God more than would marriage and/or childrearing. What is more amazing is that God grants them a name “better than that of sons or daughters,” namely His name (pun intended)!

The ultimate purpose of singles is found in verse 7’s “for all nations” and verse 8’s “yet I will gather to him others besides those who are gathered to him.” In other words, God will use singles for discipleship and ministry to bring others to God. This means that the kingdom of God grows not biologically but through discipleship and relationships; through regeneration, not sexual procreation. Seeing as relationships in Christ transcend time and space, these connections transcend the boundaries of normal marital and familial relationships.

This promise is a paradigm shift, since the Jews built their nation through biological propagation. Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful and multiply. Abraham was focused on the biological son Isaac. Parents throughout the Old Testament had to continue their “line” and the genealogies to continue the legacy of Israel.

Deeper than just having children, Jesus had discipleship and conversions in mind when He quoted Isaiah 56 in Matthew 21:13. Instead of being a headquarters for discipleship, prayer, spirituality, and connecting the Gentiles to God, they made God’s “house of prayer” into a “den of thieves,” or, in other words, a for-profit organization for themselves! Jesus sees the fulfillment of this chapter in the last-day church of Philadelphia in Revelation: “I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God. And I will write on him My new name” (3:12).

Sexuality, marriage, and family are not the end game, but only the means by which the kingdom of God is established. How often are these mixed up!
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Matthew 19:11, 12
1 Corinthians 7:1–16
1 Corinthians 7:25–40
Genesis 2:18
Matthew 21:12–17
Mark 3:31–35

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with being single?

Review your memorized verse from Isaiah 56:3–8.
THE LOCUS OF FOCUS

If sexuality and/or marriage were a necessity for righteousness, surely Jesus would have participated in them. Despite what some shows and myths allude to, Jesus was a celibate man whose twelve male disciples and many other followers became His family. He understood that those who desired to follow the will of God were His household (Mark 3:31–35). He redefined relationships beyond the biological connection.

At the same time, through all of Jesus’ teaching He did not compel His followers to be celibate or remain single. If we look at the reasoning of Paul’s singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, we find the practical logic of singleness for the sake of the gospel, not because sexuality was inherently sinful in its pleasure of the physical.

First Corinthians 7:34 presents this practicality where spouses care about their families but singles can be single-focused on God and His “things.” Because of no “distractions” (v. 35), full attention can be devoted to God and His Kingdom. Anyone with a family, children, or other dependents to take care of knows the difficulty and weight that these beloved individuals bring. It is a different ministry entirely.

Second, verse 32 speaks of pleasing God as the main focus. Hebrews 11:5, 6 informs us that it takes faith to please God. Although both the single and the married can focus on faith to please God, singles can experience a different spirituality and intimacy with God alone, which is often complemented with aloneness and isolation. Whether it is permanent or temporary before marriage, this is a wonderful locus that should be taken advantage of.

Last, Paul presents some theological threads in which eschatology is presented in 1 Corinthians 7:29 (“the time is short”) and verse 31 (“this world is passing away”). In the context of the kingdom of God and the work of Jesus in the last days, Paul presents his entire life to be an offering in imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ and in service in these times.

What is amazing is that Paul’s singleness pointed to the ministry of Jesus. One powerful aspect of Christ’s ministry can be seen in Isaiah 53. Verses 2 and 3 describe the Suffering Servant, a passage so famous that it is highlighted in the Ethiopian’s conversion story in Acts 8. This Servant takes our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, and our iniquities; He is even “stricken, smitten by God” (Isa. 53:4, 5). Our response is to reject Him, crucify Him, and to bury Him in a rich man’s tomb. This is one of the clearest Messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures!

Verse 10 states, “When you make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.” Though He was single, His single-mindedness to the glory, work, and mission of God caused Him to have seed, offspring, or children! In other words, this would not be propagation by procreation but by discipleship and spiritual conversion through His sacrificial ministry.

Even more amazing, Isaiah 54:1 continues in exclamation, “Sing, O barren, you who have not borne! Break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you who have not labored with child! For more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married women,” says the Lord.” The chapter then continues to describe how nonbiological children will inherit the kingdom of God on earth (cf. 1 Cor. 4:15). How much more poetical could a description of the gospel going forth be!
THE OPTION OF SINGleness

“Jesus did not enforce celibacy upon any class of men. He came not to destroy the sacred relationship of marriage, but to exalt it and restore it to its original sanctity. He looks with pleasure upon the family relationship where sacred and unselfish love bears sway.” (Ellen G. White, The Adventist Home, 121.)

“As in the days of Noah, one of the signs of these times is a passion for injudicious and hasty marriages. Satan is in this. If Paul could remain single, and recommend the same to others, that he and they might be wholly the Lord’s, why not those who would be wholly His, and wish to make a sure thing of avoiding the cares, trials, and bitter anguish so frequent in the experiences of those who choose the married life, remain as he was? And more, if he chose to remain so, and could recommend it to others, eighteen centuries since, would not to remain as he was be a commendable course for those who are waiting for the coming of the Son of man, unless evidences were unquestionable that they were bettering their condition, and making heaven more sure by so doing? When so much is at stake, why not be on the sure side every time?” (James and Ellen White, “Dealing With Those Overtaken in the Sin of Adultery,” Review and Herald, March 24, 1868.)

“What ought every Christian to do when brought into the trying position which tests the soundness of religious principle? With a firmness worthy of imitation he should say frankly: ‘I am a conscientious Christian. I believe the seventh day of the week to be the Sabbath of the Bible. Our faith and principles are such that they lead in opposite directions. We cannot be happy together, for if I follow on to gain a more perfect knowledge of the will of God, I shall become more and more unlike the world and assimilated to the likeness of Christ. If you continue to see no loveliness in Christ, no attractions in the truth, you will love the world, which I cannot love, while I shall love the things of God, which you cannot love. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Without spiritual discernment you will be unable to see the claims of God upon me, or to realize my obligations to the Master whom I serve; therefore you will feel that I neglect you for religious duties. You will not be happy; you will be jealous on account of the affections which I give to God, and I shall be alone in my religious belief. When your views shall change, when your heart shall respond to the claims of God, and you shall learn to love my Saviour, then our relationship may be renewed.’

“The believer thus makes a sacrifice for Christ which his conscience approves, and which shows that he values eternal life too highly to run the risk of losing it. He feels that it would be better to remain unmarried than to link his interest for life with one who chooses the world rather than Jesus, and who would lead away from the cross of Christ.” (Ellen G. White, The Adventist Home, 67, 68.)

“The high, noble, lofty design of God in the institution of marriage is not discerned; therefore the purest affections of the heart, the noblest traits of character, are not developed.

“Not one word should be spoken, not one action performed, that you would not be willing the holy angels should look upon, and register in the books above. You should have an eye single to the glory of God. The heart should have only pure, sanctified affection, worthy of the followers of Jesus Christ, exalted in its nature, and more heavenly than earthly. Anything different from this is debasing, degrading in courtship; and marriage cannot be holy and honorable in the sight of a pure and holy God, unless it is after the exalted scriptural principle.” (Ellen G. White, The Adventist Home, 55.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why do people opt to be single?

What are some selfish reasons for remaining single?

How can singles be sexually pure?

How are singles complete in ways that married couples are not?

What are some examples of “eunuchs” in the categories that Christ listed?

How can you be a blessing to the single people in your community, church, and/or local area?

If a single, how have you experienced God “without distraction” and pleased Him in the “things” of God?

How can sexual temptations be sublimated into avenues for ministry?

How can singles “bear” non-biological children in the faith?