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Hopeful or Hopeless?

Guest: Marshall Segal
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Bob: The average age at which young people are marrying today—it's 29 for young men / 27 ½ for young women. Why are these young people waiting so long to marry? Marshall Segal says it's because many of them are disillusioned about marriage.

Marshall: And I think divorce is the biggest factor here; that more and more young people are coming from homes where the only picture of marriage that they've known up close is really hard / really painful. Probably the most painful thing in their history. So they're looking at that and they're saying "Wait; why would I want all of that? Why would I want to walk into that kind of pain? Why would I sign up for that?"

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson. I'm Bob Lepine. What can young singles do to deal with the ambivalence they feel about marriage? We're going to explore that today. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. We're talking about singleness this week although Marshall Segal who's joining us doesn't talk about it as singleness. You pick the phrase, the title of your book, *Not Yet Married* because you think singles need to be thinking in those terms, right?

Marshall: Yes; so that's a great question. I've gotten a lot of push back on the phrase as you might imagine.

Bob: Yes; right.

Marshall: I understand it and I probably would have pushed back on it.

Bob: As a single person.

Marshall: As a single person; or at least, earlier in my single years. Because it seems, on the surface, to identify or define you by what you're not.

Bob: Yes.

Dave: Yes.

Marshall: And I think that's the weakness in the phrase. That's something I had to wrestle with—for five years, I wrestled with “Is this a helpful way of talking?” So I have four reasons if you don't mind me giving—

Ann: Oh.

Bob: I'll let you give your four reasons but let me first introduce to our listeners: Marshall is a writer and managing editor at *Desiring God*—lives in Minneapolis. He is *now* married and the father of one and has written this book called *Not Yet Married: The Pursuit of Joy in Singleness and Dating*. So what were your four reasons?

Marshall: Yes; so I'll give the four. The first one is I believe that there are *many* single people in the church who really, really, really want to be married. And just culturally, in America at least, people are getting married later and later. And so I think there are a *lot* of young people in the church who are getting married later than they thought and now starting to wonder at 28/29/30/35 “Am I ever going to get married?”

Secondly, I still believe that *most* single people in the church especially are going to get married one day—and that's for biblical reasons and then, just from experience / just watching—eventually, wanting to experience marriage, have children, things like that.

So if the majority are going to get married, I think it's a fine way of talking about singleness to say “Even if you're not thinking about this right now and you don't even really want to think about this right now, you probably should be preparing yourself in a way, in Christ, that if God calls you to this, that you'd be ready for it.” That you're not stuck at that moment, at 27/28/29, on your heels trying to think about “How will I fulfil this calling God's put on my life?”

Third, I think there's an increasing number of young people—and this is just anecdotally from my experience working with young people—that are disillusioned with marriage. And I think divorce is the biggest factor here; that more and more young people are coming from homes where the only picture of marriage that they've known up close is really hard / really painful. Probably the most painful thing in their history. So they're looking at that and they're saying “Wait; why would I want all of that? Why would I want to walk into that kind of pain and regret? Why would I sign up for that after everything that I've seen?”

And then the fourth reason may be the most important for me and that's Revelation 19:7 which says, “Let us rejoice and exalt and give him the glory, for the marriage of the lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready;” And so we are all not yet married. If you are in Christ, you will be married one day. And it will blow away—That day will blow away whatever your wildest wedding day dream is. Whatever your wildest ideas of what marriage could be. Even if you're married, your happiest, fullest, richest marriages, that marriage will blow us away. So I want whether your desires are for marriage or not,

whether you feel called to marriage or not, I want your life to be shaped by that day / by that wedding day.

Bob: We've already talked this week about the pitfalls of the dating experience / your pitfalls / the issues couples go through before they get married. I'm thinking of the group—and I meet these people all the time—who long to be married and there's just nothing happening. It's guys who will say "I ask girls out and they say 'no.'" It's women who say "I'm trying to do all the right things and be in all the right places and by the way, what I'm observing is that guys are more attracted to the less godly women than they are to me." So it's this lonely single longing to be married and hopeless. That's a pretty desperate place for people to be.

Ann: How would you encourage them? What would you say?

Marshall: Yes, there's a lot to say. First thing I would say to a sister in Christ who says all the Christian men don't seem to be attracted to godliness but seem to be attracted to physical beauty and less godly women, I would say I'm so thankful that God spared you that man. If you're going to marry and be committed to someone for decades to love them day in and day out, you want them to *love godliness*. You want them to love you, first and foremost, because you love the Lord your God with all heart and soul and mind and strength. Don't ever compromise that. You *wait* on the Lord for someone who will love the Lord more than they love you and who will encourage you to do the same.

Bob: Here's what you're saying in that. You're saying that marriage to a guy who doesn't love godliness will be harder than singleness feels to you today. You don't realize that because you think that's going to fill in some of the gaps for me, but the loneliest people I know are people who are lonely in marriage not people who are lonely outside of marriage.

Marshall: That's so important.

Dave: I can remember a few years ago I was preaching on the guy you want to marry—these qualities—listed them in a sermon about marriage. It was to singles. I remember saying "If you're single and you're a woman and you're dating a guy and he doesn't have these qualities, I have one word for you." Guess what it was? *Run!* [Laughter] I yelled it. *Run!* I can see a few of them looking at me like "Yea, Yea, but I'm going... He's going..." I'm like "That's what you think—you're going to change him after you get married." Of course, they do in some ways, but the percentage is no, they really don't. You get what you got. So don't settle.

Ann: Oh, I can't tell you the many, many, many women that I've talked to that have settled—that were so desperate / so lonely—wanted to be married thinking "I can change him. I can get him to become more godly and he *will* walk with Jesus when he's married to me," and they have been miserable at times. Now, can God work and do a

miracle? Absolutely! But it feels even more lonely when you're sleeping beside someone where you are disconnected, and it can be miserable.

Marshall: And that's why I think it's important—one thing that's important to say to single people is spend some time with married people. And it's countercultural—at least in my experience, you just don't find a lot of young 20-something people prioritizing time with families in their church for instance. So just a word to families: if you are married, look for ways to invite single people into your home because if they can see the dynamics in your marriage, some of the things that they've heard in principle will begin to make sense in ways that they never have before. But they need to see it.

And in the opposite way, if you spend a lot of time with married people, you'll see the disfunction. If you spend hours with Faye and I, you're going to see the disfunction. Because all of us are sinful / all of us are dysfunctional. And seeing the disfunction will help you understand and appreciate how important these principles for dating are—to value the right things / to look for the right things.

Dave: I remember in college—just became a follower of Christ, and there was a young man, actually married, on the campus that was pouring into me. You know you think it's got to be a missionary / a pastor. No, this was a student who was a couple of years older, married, lived in married housing and he invited me over—brand-new Christian—to have dinner with their family. It's exactly what you said. I could take you to that apartment. Because I remember being marked—thinking as I got in my car to drive back to my dorm, "I think I've just witnessed the first Christian marriage I've ever seen in my life." It gave me a vision of that's the kind of woman I want. I'm not going to settle for anything different and I want a marriage like I just saw. They were about bring these students in here. Show them what Christ can do / what Christ does.

Ann: Well I remember when you were telling me—Dave and I started dating, and he talked about this couple on campus. He said "I want what they have and what they have is Jesus is in the middle of their relationship. I've never experienced that before and I want us to have that."

Marshall: Right, and that's because we treat Jesus like a box to check in our dating process. So, he says he's a Christian, great! Now, we're working on chemistry. Am I physically attracted? Is he funny? Is he going to make a lot of money? There're so many other boxes that all the world—like anyone in the world checks—and we try to check Jesus. Boom. Okay, that's good. He's going to heaven. So we're going to be good on that front. I just want to say I want Jesus to be the ink for all the boxes. Like I want Him to be the main thing. That will be the main ingredient in a healthy, happy marriage for decades.

Bob: So, we got listeners who are going "Yea, yea, yea, I've heard that. I'm still lonely. I'm still—"

Dave: —hopeless.

Bob: Yes. “I know all of this stuff and I believe it. But what do I do about the pain of today where I just am lonely and want somebody to know me and to love me and it’s just not happening?—and by the way, I’d like to have babies and I don’t have much time left there.”

Marshall: Yes, that’s great. Thanks for bringing it back to that question. The Lord brought me to a place in my mid 20’s of extraordinary brokenness and I would say loneliness. It’s different from the kind of person that you’re describing so I don’t want to—I’m not going to pretend to relate to somebody who’s saying, “I just want a relationship.” But I do believe the Lord brought me a different route to a similar feeling of loneliness and despair. In some ways, I felt instead of going back to stage one at the end of each relationship, I felt further back than stage one. Like I didn’t feel like I was starting over. I felt like I was another mile past the starting point each time. Because it felt like “I don’t want to go through this again.”

So, that’s not to belittle the pain of someone who’s not been in a relationship but just to say I felt some of that. I do think part of the turning point for me was texts like Philippians 3. Paul says “I count everything as loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.”

I just read in my devotion Psalm 27:4 “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all my days, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple.” And then that took me to Martha and Mary which I thought this was interesting for today. Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, looking up at him, loving him, listening to him; Martha’s frantic. So she goes to Jesus and says “Jesus, can you just tell Mary to help me. Can’t you see that I’m working so hard and she’s just sitting there.” And he says “Martha, Martha”—He says her name twice.

So the kind of person that’s asking this question / that’s *feeling* this inner turmoil, restlessness, despair, loneliness—I just want to say “*Bob, Bob*”—He said her name twice like I want you to hear this. He said “You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will never be taken away from her.” That last phrase was the new phrase for me this morning as I thought about our time together and about this kind of person that’s asking this question and hurting deeply. I just want to say “What you have in Christ, the one thing is necessary—one thing you’ve asked of the Lord and sought after. That that you have in Christ by the gift of the spirit, that will never be taken away from you. And it *will* prove, after these short 50/60/70 years are over, it will prove to be so much more precious than you realize now—even in its sweetest moments—the fellowship that you have with Christ.

So I think those who have tasted it—and for me, I had to go low through a number of break ups and failures to get there—but those who finally taste it what it means to say one thing I’ve asked for. He didn’t say “I’ve asked to dwell in the house all the days of my life and get married / and have a child / and have the job I wanted / and live in the city that I wanted to / and have the ministry I wanted to look a certain way and be a certain number.” It says, “one thing.” And Jesus said to Martha who was *so busy* trying to serve Jesus—She was serving Jesus!—“one thing is necessary Martha.”

So, I’ve gotten a lot of help personally in my darker days from the story of Joseph. I wrote an article about this called *Love the Life You Never Wanted*. But if you go back and read the Joseph story and think about how much of his story went the way he didn’t want it to go. I mean 13 years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit. Think about that. But it says, “*Twice* the Lord was with him.” The good news of this story is not that Joseph becomes you know, right hand to the king of Egypt / to Pharaoh. The good news of the story is that the Lord was with him. So I think that if you can start to preach that to yourself early, and often, and get around other people who can preach that to you, knowing that He loves you and He’s with you.

Ann: I remember being at a conference; a very wise and godly woman was speaking—Elizabeth Elliott—and there was a woman there that at the end of her segment—there was a question and answer time and this woman raised her hand. She was in her 30’s and she said “Elizabeth, I’m single and I really know that God has called me to be married and I’m not sure what to do in the waiting.” And Elizabeth, without a second thought, she said to this young woman “Are you married right now?” And the woman said “No, I just said I’m single.” She said, “God has called you to be single then. Today you’re single and so He’s equipped you and called you to be single. Live today what God has called you to be in. He has so much in store for you today. Stop looking at tomorrow because He has something today while you’re single.” That was like—we were all like “Oh my gosh! That’s pretty harsh.”

Marshall: Unless you only think that applies to singles—we’ve talked about already—but in a few years, if you get married and you’re around a lot of other people that are married, you’re going to start to see people—husbands or wives or both—who would rather be single.

Ann: Exactly.

Marshall: They may not say it but everything in the life says, “I’m in this because I promised and there’s nothing else that I’m going to do.” And at that point, you say “You know what ‘Are you married?’ You say ‘Yes.’ God has called you to be married.”

Bob: Well and I remember—it was another sitting—but Elizabeth Elliott said, “People will always ask me ‘How do I know if I have the gift of singleness?’ And she’ll say ‘Well, are you single?’ And they’ll say, ‘Yes, but I want to know if I have it like for a lifetime,’

and she says ‘Well, nobody knows if you have it for a lifetime. All we know is you have it today. So you have the gift of singleness today—’”

Ann: So be faithful in it.

Bob: “—and live out the gift of singleness. But if you want to know if you have it for a lifetime, we’ll know at the end of your lifetime.” [Laughter] Don’t try to forecast that for today. Yes, we’d like to know.

Our mutual friend, Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth, thought she had the gift of singleness for a lifetime until she met Robert Wolgemuth and she realized “Oh, I don’t.” And she had to, in her late 50’s, be open to God’s changing the direction and changing the course. I don’t know if you know this Marshall, but she wrote a letter when Robert began to pursue her—she wrote a letter to John Piper and she said “So I’m battling with this. I think I can be content as a single. Does that mean that I should not pursue this if I think I can be content?” He wrote her back a very dear letter that helped her in the journey and helped lead her to the point where she said, “I do” and now she has the gift of marriage, right? [Laughter]

Marshall: Amen. It’s a beautiful story.

Bob: It really is. Well, I know what we’ve talked about here says easy and does hard and listeners will hear this and they’ll go “I’ve heard this before. It’s living with it with joy that is the hard part of it.” So when the joy’s not there in your singleness, any suggestions on what you do?

Marshall: Yes, I would say that one of the keys is that no one is calling you to be joyful *about* singleness. The joy is going to only be found in Jesus. And the same recipe for your joy *now*, no matter how long the Lord has you single, is going to be the recipe for joy in marriage. So this is preparation for whatever God calls you to tomorrow. If he calls you to 25/30/50 years of singleness, the way that you pursue joy—one thing that I’ve asked of the Lord—the way that you pursue joy now as you go to your prayer closet to be with the Lord, to linger in His presence, and then give your life / your gifts / everything He’s given you, give it freely to others in the name of Jesus. The way that you pursue joy now is going to prepare you to have joy in the next season whether it’s singleness or marriage.

Bob: So here’s what you’re saying, and I think this is key. If today you say “Okay, I’m single, I’m going to find my joy in Jesus.” If you’re thinking “but when I’m married, then I’m going to find my joy in my spouse.”

Dave: And the truth is everyone—we represent three marriages / six people—and I know this about us, and I know it just from what you two have been saying, you’re not finding your joy in your spouse although she’s incredible, and I would say she’s amazing.

Ann: Thanks honey.

Dave: I didn't find joy in her as a single man and I'm not finding joy in her as a married man even though I'm sure singles would say "Well, it's easy for you to say because you are married." It is not easy. It's harder. There are days where I wish I wasn't married because I could find joy easier without the conflict and the you know—and I'm sure Ann feels the same way—but it's real. If you don't find it as a single man, you're not going to find it as a married man. The only place you'll find it is a ruthless pursuit of Jesus.

Bob: You know one of the things that Marshall talked about today is how—whether you're single or married / wherever you are / whatever relationship—if you're trying to draw life from one another as opposed to drawing life from Jesus, you're going to find yourself depleting one another. David Robbins, who's the president of FamilyLife, is here with us and you've seen that happen with couples, right?

David: Yes, and in my own life and in my own marriage. I love how today's conversation points us to Jesus being our source or it all starts going sideways. Meg and I often use the illustration when working with couples—because we love it applying it to our own lives—of what we call the A and the M. If you picture capital letters, you can often build your relationship like an A, and a lot of Christians do this where a Christian couple builds their relationship like a capital letter A. If you were to take the angled lines, they represent a husband and a wife and there is that horizontal bar in the middle and that represents God. We're happy that God's in the relationship and it's a great thing but ultimately, we are still leaning on each other and we will end up suffocating each other. We are not designed to be the source. We are not designed to be able to fully satisfy. And even on Meg's best day, she will not be able to fully satisfy and be the source that I need. God is only intended to do that.

And so what we invite people to do is to build their relationships like the capital letter M—where the angle lines still represent a man and a woman in a marriage or in a relationship. But we're each leaning separately on God himself and all of a sudden, the connection is a very deep connection and there's greater intimacy in those places. And so, certainly, this applies to dating and it's helpful there, but I think it even applies even more into marriage as we continue to add complexity to life Jesus has to be our source.

Bob: Yes, you cannot make your girlfriend / your boyfriend / your spouse an idol. You can't put them in the place of preeminence. Only God belongs there and both of you have to be looking to Him rather than looking to one another to fulfill those needs. That's a great observation. Thank you, David.

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