

Living Whole
without a
Better Half

SECOND EDITION

Biblical Truth for the Single Life

Living Whole
without a
Better Half

S E C O N D E D I T I O N

Wendy Widder

 Kregel
Publications

Living Whole Without a Better Half: Biblical Truth for the Single Life

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*For Tammy.
I couldn't have run this stretch without you.*

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preface to the second edition

Writing this book changed my life. I suppose some people who have been changed by writing a book write their next book from a new beachfront property—purchased with the royalties of their breakout best seller. That didn't happen to me—although, gratefully, *Living Whole* has sold copy after copy over the long haul, which is why my publisher and I think it merits another round of life. Others have written books that put them in contact with people who changed their lives. When *Living Whole* came out in 2000, at least one well-meaning acquaintance said that was going to happen to me: “Now that you've written a book on singleness, you'll get married.” While I secretly hoped he was right, he wasn't.

When I started writing *Living Whole*, I was a late twenty-something single with a broken heart. At the prompting of a wise friend, I used Bible study and writing to work my way through the pain and confusion of a dismantled future. Over the months of writing, I actually began to notice that the sun still came up every day. And then it slowly dawned on me how much delight I took in studying the Bible and writing about it in an engaging way.

Not long after this, I had a terrifying realization. If my book found its way past piles of rejected manuscripts to publication, and real

people read what I had pecked out in the solitude of my apartment, they would believe me. At least, most of them. I have read my share of books by “experts”—pastors, teachers, and others with certain experiences—and I usually assume the authors know what they are talking about, too, unless they give me good reason to think otherwise. If I didn’t think so, I wouldn’t buy the book. And yet here I was—an elementary school teacher—telling Big People what the Bible means and why it matters. The awesomeness of this responsibility humbled me.

About the same time, I had a trio of male college friends who were all headed to seminary. One summer day as I walked my regular route through a nearby neighborhood, I was praying for my friends and the decisions they were making about the future. Before I finished, I had another epiphany: *I want to go to seminary!*

And so began an educational journey that I planned to last two or three years. After a year of correspondence courses (on cassette tapes, if you can even remember those), I packed up my little life in a fifteen-passenger cargo van and moved around the lake (Michigan) to be a full-time residential student. Thankfully, I didn’t know then that I had effectively launched a “career” that would last more than twelve years. Seminary turned out to be much more than I had bargained for. I couldn’t stop. For the next decade of tax seasons, the employment status on my 1040 read “student.” I completed a Master of Divinity at seminary, and then moved back around the lake to do a Master of Arts and a PhD closer to the home I had left four years earlier.

All because I wrote this book.

An uncharitable reviewer of the first edition said, “The author apparently considers herself an expert on being single due to a recent break-up with a fiancé in her midtwenties. Unfortunately, her experience is not particularly relevant to people who have been single for many years or are single in their thirties or forties, which is significantly different from being a single twenty-something.” You already know what I think about the “expert” business, and a careful reading

of the book reveals no fiancé. But I have chewed on the second part of the review at times over the years. Now that I *am* single in my forties (and was in my thirties, too), I can better assess the reviewer's perspective. I do agree that singleness at these stages is a lot different from twenty-something singleness. And I am fully aware that I could not write this same book today—in part because of the education I've received formally in school and informally in life. My approach and style have changed.

However, as I read through the book again to make revisions and to create discussion questions, I found many of the chapters to be helpful reminders to me of lessons once learned and then relearned and then learned again and, amazingly, still needing to be learned in the present. Perhaps I'm just a really slow learner.

If you are “young” (really, it's all relative . . .) and single, I hope these examples of faith can help you set the right course for as long as you are unmarried. If you know the course well, maybe you've already learned these lessons—or maybe not. For you, I hope the men and women of Hebrews 11 can offer fresh encouragement to you to run well.

Always needing to remember whose I am,

Wendy Widder
July 2013

Acknowledgments

My name may appear on the cover, but don't be fooled. Writing a book is a team effort. Without the advice, experiences, and encouragement of so many, the following pages would be blank. I could never create an exhaustive list of all who have had an impact on my writing, but I can thank the key players on the team:

Julie Ford—You were right. I should've written this book.

Glenn G.—Thanks for equipping me with the hardware, software, and expertise (computer and life) to make this project happen. I appreciate you.

Brent Gibbs—Thanks for finding me and agreeing that we had something to say. You made this happen.

Kerry M.—Thanks for letting me watch you learn how to run. I'm so glad to be on your team.

David—my coworker, pastor, boss, fan, editor, visionary, big brother, and forever friend. Thanks for believing in me.

Jeff and Julie—my friends for life. Thanks for honest words when I need them most, deep love that isn't dimmed by distance, and exemplary lives that challenge me to love Him more.

Mom and Dad—Thanks for being teachable as I've walked you through the truths about singleness. Thanks for learning what *not* to

say! Thanks for years and years and years of silent, unshakable support. Thanks for laying a foundation in my life that invites God to build in His magnificent way. Thanks for, thanks for, thanks for . . .

Suzy—my sister, my friend. Thanks for reading and rereading with your English-teacher eyes and red pen. Thanks for reading with a deep knowledge of and undying love for the author. *Your* words have been stickers of praise on my heart. I love you forever.

Jason—You have been the defining person of my adult life. God’s indescribable plan included you, and, while I’ve sometimes wondered why, this book helps answer the question. You have been an example to me of running the race with eyes fixed straight ahead. May your feet never swerve from the only course that counts.

Spring Creek family—You’ve been there from the cradle to college to careers one, two, three, and counting! Thank you for creating an environment where I could grow, and thank you for being a family I’ll always love. I’m proud to call you “home.”

Spring Creek staff—You are the best team in the world. You stood around me when the hardest parts of being single overtook my life. You held my hands up when darkness threatened to swallow the victory God wanted to accomplish. You listened to each completed chapter and urged me on with your loving words. Our Monday mornings around a crowded staff table provided enough love, learning, and laughter to fill every day of every week. I’ve loved running with you!

CrossRoad—Truth be told, I really wanted to graduate from our class a *long* time ago! Being a “pillar” in the Spring Creek singles ministry was not something I planned. But God did, and I’m glad. Thanks for letting me stick around! And thanks for letting me practice what I preach in front of a live audience.

Tammy—What a ride! Thanks for *living* this book with me! I know you really don’t need to read the following pages—you’ve heard them so often, you can practically recite them with me. God knew what He was doing when He put us together.

introduction

Master of mystery Alfred Hitchcock once said, “The only way to get rid of my fears is to make films about them.” That’s the way I’ve felt about writing this book. Singleness is not something I dreamed about as a little girl. It was something I dreaded like an incurable disease, dooming me to a life of loneliness and despondency. It was something I prayed only happened to other people.

As my twenties edged closer to thirty and I found myself as single as it gets, my friend Julie Ford suggested I write a book about singleness. I laughed and thought that the last thing I wanted to do was become an “expert” on something I was wishing away like adolescent acne (with equivalent success). However, when a series of unwanted circumstances sent me deep into the dark valley of my fears, I discovered that God had an answer for every one of those fears. I found Him more than big enough to deal with what terrified me. Writing this book became a spiritual journey as God walked with me through the tough issues and emotions of singleness.

If you’re single, I don’t have to explain what those issues and emotions are. You live them. And you probably know what’s on the bookshelves for us. I can’t read another book about how to fix my “problem” of singleness. I don’t want another person to tell me what I need to do

while I'm "waiting" for a spouse to stumble into my life. I want to live the abundant life God promised with no marital strings attached. I want to make my one and only life matter for eternity, whether or not I ever walk down the aisle in white.

If you're *not* single, you know what those issues and emotions are, too. You also live them. "How can that be?" you ask. It's true, because the issues of singleness are not unique to spouseless people. They are really issues of fallen humanity. Loneliness. Unfulfilled desires. Unanswered questions. Pain. Rejection. Stubbornness. Commitment. Fear. Ill-placed priorities. While I write about these struggles from my own perspective as a single adult, the principles are the same for the circumstances that surround you.

Thanks for letting my world collide with yours for just a short time. It is my earnest prayer that God uses His truths and my words to help you love Him more tomorrow than you do today.

And They Lived Happily Ever After

*It's a snap to find the one single person in the world
who fills your heart with joy.*

—Joe Fox, *You've Got Mail*

“Are you and Mrs. Kepler *friends*?”

The incredulous voice told me this was a revolutionary thought. My fifth grade student, like most of her classmates, thought she had a handle on what it meant to be a teacher. She knew, for example, that teachers get sadistic thrills from coloring papers red with ink. Teachers have insatiable appetites for bringing offending students to swift judgment. Teachers spend most, if not all, of their allotted hours surrounded by the smell of dry erase markers.

Teachers don't understand Saturday morning cartoons. They don't go to the grocery store or the dry cleaners. They don't have any sympathy for what it's like to be ten years old, since it's unlikely they ever were. And for certain, teachers don't have friends.

My student learned a lesson I hadn't planned to teach her that day. Indeed, Mrs. Kepler and I were friends. For three years, Alison Kepler

and I taught our fifth grade classes across the hall from each other, and we found ourselves captured in a rare relationship, a diamond of a friendship. We were “kindred spirits,” as Anne of Green Gables would say. No detail was too trivial to share, no thought was too shocking to voice, no joke was too small to keep from the other.

During the last year we taught together, we exchanged notes and shared giggles as if we were a couple of schoolgirls ourselves. Alison was pregnant that year, and I was dating a man I thought I recognized from my dreams. We both were living at the pinnacle of excitement, one for new life and one for new love, and we had fun.

Somewhere between laughs and lessons, we talked about life, mostly mine. Alison was on a mission to get me married, and she was convinced I was halfway down the aisle already. I supported this belief in whatever ways I could, sharing the pertinent, as well as the absolutely irrelevant, details of my developing relationship.

Several months into the academic year, the fog in my dream lifted, and I realized I didn’t know the man I was dating after all. We broke up, and Alison began her “bigger and better” campaign. “If we thought Tom was so wonderful, just imagine what *he* will be like.” One particular day, Alison was carrying on in her familiar way. On this occasion, though, she added the oft-used Scripture verse about God giving you the desires of your heart as confirmation that I would definitely get married. Unsuspectingly, she had pulled a trigger and made herself the target of my speech about singleness.

“Where,” I asked, “does the Bible promise that I’ll get married? It doesn’t. I know lots of singles, older than I, who have the desire in their hearts to be married, and they are not.” I was just getting started, and as I lectured on, Alison felt like she’d unleashed a rabid dog!

I managed to reprogram Alison’s thinking (or I scared her into silence), and she was careful after that to encourage without offering empty promises. But Alison was just a little droplet in a sea of people holding faulty assumptions about singleness.

Lie #1—God Is a Genie

One assumption is that God will give us what we want, just because we follow Him. Furthermore, He will do it in the way that we expect. It doesn't take a seminary degree to figure out that this is not true.

Like you, I have a lifelong list of “heart desires” that I never received. As a child, with all my heart I wanted a pet monkey. Mom wouldn't even entertain the idea. As an adolescent, I begged God for a clear complexion. Instead I got sick to my stomach taking tetracycline. As a teen, I wished not to have to ride the school bus with the elementary kids; by graduation, I was still riding the big yellow bus to school. As a collegian, I longed to meet “Mr. Right.” Now college is a distant memory, and I'm still single. As a teacher, I longed for changed lives in wayward students, only to see them sink deeper in depravity.

god doesn't give us everything
we deeply desire. . . . The more
significant truth is that He goes
beyond our desires.

God doesn't give us everything we deeply desire. The truth is, He hears the cries of our hearts, and He does answer. But as God, He holds the right to answer His way. The more significant truth is that He goes *beyond* our desires.

In his gospel, the apostle John tells the story of a man with an expressed desire that God chose to bypass. The fifth chapter opens at the Pool of Bethesda, a first-century nursing home for Jerusalem's down-and-outs. Admittedly, it may have been a home, but not much nursing took place around this pool. Medical treatment was only received by the first patient to get in the water when it periodically stirred. One very frustrated resident had been an invalid for thirty-eight years and had never won the race to the water. His real

handicap, he said, was that he had no one to help him in the pool. If a roving reporter from the *Jerusalem Herald* had interviewed him, he would have issued a plea for someone to help him: “Just get me in the water.”

His desire was close to coming true when Jesus visited the Bethesda Nursing Home. Jesus asked the question, “Do you want to get well?” Ignoring the obvious “*Yes!*” the poolside patient uttered his deepest desire: “I just need someone to get me in the water.”

Jesus recognized the real need
and answered in His way,
satisfying the deepest longing
of the man's heart.

Jesus didn't grant his desire. He did better. Instead of helping him in the water at the magical moment, Jesus recognized the real need and answered in His way, satisfying the deepest longing of the man's heart. He healed his body and offered healing for his soul. Jesus went beyond what the man thought to ask.

Jesus is not a bottle-bound genie summoned to grant every desire. He is, rather, an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present Keeper of divine promises. And His list of promises is more than impressive. It's overwhelming.

[He] satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

—Psalm 103:5

No good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

—Psalm 84:11

And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:19

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

—2 Corinthians 12:9

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

—Romans 8:28

Perhaps *my* definition of these fulfilled promises is a spouse, but God and I often have different ideas about the way my life should be. My 20/20 hindsight leaves no doubt that His ideas are always better than mine.

Lie #2—Singleness Is Second-Rate

A second false assumption says that not to be married is to miss out on the best in life. Being single means being short-changed.

When I was in college, I did a fair job of attending classes regularly. At times, however, I weighed my options and class attendance lost. This occurred frequently during the winter quarter of my sophomore year. By then, as a declared education major, I was taking some classes that applied directly to education. One such class was scheduled for two o'clock every afternoon for ten weeks. The focus of the class was something like "effective assessment of student learning."

It took me two weeks to figure out that if I attended class on Monday, I'd get the bulk of the week's notes. Tuesday through Friday were spent in laborious explanation and application of Monday's concepts. By the third week, I'd established my routine: attend class every

Monday, pop in on Wednesday or Thursday to catch up, and carefully follow the test schedule.

One of the skills we spent too many days working on was test writing, being able to accurately assess student learning. Dr. Andrews taught us how to write multiple choice tests that didn't scream obvious answers; he taught us how to glean the most information from essay questions; and he taught us about matching tests—you know, the kind with twenty questions or words that must be correctly matched with the twenty choices.

Dr. Andrews was insistent that a good test always has *more* options than needed. This helps prevent students from getting answers right simply because there are no other choices. There should be a handful of answers left over, unmatched.

Sometimes it seems that God has written a cosmic matching test, pairing men and women with each other. And, true to effective test writing, He's included some extra answers, options that don't really fit on the test. Without the other half, they are incomplete. They are missing something.

An Age-Old Lie

In these two faulty assumptions, Satan has rephrased the lie of Eden: "If you are single, you are missing something wonderful. God can't be good if He withholds something so desirable." Like Eve, we ponder the lie, and given space, it settles in. It begins its insidious mission, robbing us of God's richest gifts. We entertain the thought that God is unfair, withholding marriage for no good reason. Singleness becomes a curse instead of a gift from His gracious hand. Being alone is a cross we must bear instead of a powerful position He can use. And while we'd never admit it, we doubt Him. Like Eve, we then set about the task of making

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God's plan fit into our plan. We focus energy on solving the problem of our singleness, going in search of God's "better gift," marriage.

Running the Right Race

My home church, like many across the country, runs a week of vacation Bible school for kids every summer. One year, the program centered on a kids' musical entitled "G. T. and the Halo Express: Winning the Great Race of Faith." The story followed a group of children competing in a bike race. A flat tire, a huge hill, a tired teammate, and a big bad bully named Billy Baxter nearly eliminated the group from the contest. Midway through the race, the map they were following seemed wrong, and they narrowly escaped getting off course. Crisis after crisis bombarded the team, but they managed to press on to the finish line and win.

Much of their encouragement during the race came from a host of singing angels, the Halo Express. Bible verses set to music provided just the right words at just the right times. The theme verse, Hebrews 12:1, set the tone for the entire race. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. *And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*"

The last part of this verse, especially, offered three encouragements to the weary bikers. First of all, the race was marked out; simply follow the map. Secondly, persevere; things will definitely be tough, but you can do it. And finally, run; keep moving forward and give it all the energy you have. It was a recipe for success in the bike race, but it's also a pretty clear formula for success in life, especially as a single adult. It's the truth that combats Satan's lie.

My race has been marked out. I must follow God's map. Right now the course has me running solo. Maybe a teammate will join me around the next bend, but maybe not. I just don't know the terrain of God's established route.

Persevere—things will definitely be tough. There will be loneliness, rejection, and uncertainty. There will be difficulties unique to singleness. Press on anyway.

And perhaps most importantly—run. This race demands the best energies I can give. I can't afford to meander along the course, looking around for a better route. I have to quit waiting for life to happen to me. This course requires proactive living—setting my sights and running.

Hearing the Right Crowd

I'm not the first one to run a tough race and neither are you. In fact, welcome to the *human* race! I take comfort in the expression, "There's nothing new under the sun," knowing that billions of people have run before me. (If that doesn't put life in perspective, nothing will.) They've "been there, done that." They serve as witnesses that life's circumstances aren't intended to ruin the race; they *are* the race. Their stories are swigs of cold water to sweaty athletes; their examples are splashes of refreshment to weary runners.

I'm not much of an athlete, but during my twenties, I developed a passion for the game of football (strictly as a spectator). During a season when I dated a footballaholic, I joined the Wisconsin masses and became an official Cheesehead, a Green Bay Packer fan. Growing up in America's Dairyland during the Packers' less-than-glory years, I had always been indifferent toward a team that changed head coaches and quarterbacks faster than I lost my baby teeth. But in 1994, the Packers were on the rise. Quarterback Brett Favre put the entire state of Wisconsin on the edges of their couches from week to week, wondering if he would throw more interceptions or touchdowns. Fans fell in love with a big teddy bear of a player on a mission to wear a Super Bowl ring, "The Minister of Defense," Reggie White.

Every Packer fan knows that a pilgrimage to Lambeau Field to watch the green and gold in action is like winning the lottery. With

a season ticket waiting list longer than Santa's, getting to a game is a wild dream fans never expect to come true. Unbelievably, I managed to win the lottery one Monday night, and with three friends, I made the semi-sacred journey to Green Bay for a game against the Philadelphia Eagles. Driving into Title Town, it was obvious that the entire town had the game on its schedule. Entrepreneurs lined the sidewalks in their lawn chairs, selling space in their front yards for parking. Local businesses boasted their team's prowess on exterior signs. Swarms of sweatshirted ticket holders paraded toward the Midwestern Mecca. Cars filled with hooting Packer-maniacs crawled into the stadium lot. Approaching the stadium, we walked through the haze of grill smoke and declined several offers of bratwurst, the official food of Packer fans. Once inside Lambeau, we were surrounded by fans intoxicated with their team's success (and a lot of something else, too). From overhead, the Goodyear blimp filmed a party sixty thousand strong.

When the players finally broke into the field's light, the crowd erupted. With banners waving and arms flailing, the fans cheered their beloved Packers. Reflecting the crowd's enthusiasm, the team charged through their warm-up, as if to say, "We dare anyone to beat us here." And for years, most teams didn't. The electrified fans created an environment antagonistic to opponents.

But there's more to historic Lambeau Field than a crazed crowd. The stadium itself is a modern-day shrine. Names like Bart Starr, Vince Lombardi, Curly Lambeau, Don Hutson, and Ray Nitscke surround the stadium. They are mounted as reminders to say, "This is the home of winners. We are unmatched in NFL history. Read our names and remember. Remember what we did. You can do it, too." It's an ever present beckoning to be better, an invitation to excel. Some perfervid fans even allege that the "spirit of Vince" roams the stadium, driving the present players as he did their forerunners.

Except for the part about Vince, this is the sort of picture I get

when I read about the “great cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12:1. The author issues a challenge to any who will take it. Referring back to chapter eleven, he says, “See the names all around you? They did it and so can you.” Names of men and women who have gone on before and overcome. Names of men and women who faced life head-on and prevailed.

Telling story upon story of their faith, the author makes his methodical way through early Old Testament history. He paints pictures of the obvious celebrities like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then sketches in some obscure characters like Enoch, Amram, and Jochebed. Etched under each portrait is a tribute to great faith. It’s not a nebulous, warm-fuzzy faith; it’s a “no-holds-barred” aggressive faith. It’s an unexplained certainty in the unseen, and it spurs the faith-holder to action. This kind of faith received God’s commendation and inscribed their names in the annals of biblical history. Their lives serve as inspiration to us. They are swigs of cold water and splashes of refreshment.

As nice and noble as that may sound, the truth of the matter is that seeing their names and knowing their stories are not enough. Playing football in the legendary Lambeau Field during the 1970s and 1980s certainly didn’t earn the pathetic Packers any titles. It takes more than history to change the present and the future.

Traveling the Light Way

When I was in junior high, my favorite teacher was a fresh-out-of-college novice who brought more to class than a lesson plan and a list of assignments. Mr. Moore liked to have fun, and with his seventh graders that included spending our free time in jacks tournaments, table tennis matches, and a runners’ club. I learned how to play jacks, and I thrived on table tennis, but I am not a runner. However, when my favorite teacher challenged me to run fifty miles in five weeks, I groaned and signed up.

Every night I tied my tattered laces and started down the block

toward Center Street, the halfway point where I would turn around and pant for home. I hated every block of the six hundred I ran in those five weeks. I tried singing in my head, breathing rhythmically, varying my pace, all to no avail. Nothing made it any more enjoyable. Nothing made it any easier.

i've read enough biographies to know that some of my fellow sojourners reach the end and say, "i fought a good fight, i finished the course, i won the prize." Then there are those who reach the end and admit, "i missed the fight, i fought the course, i never saw the prize."

I do know what would have made it harder, though. Carrying my backpack with all the homework I hauled home from seventh grade would have killed me. Running with that weight, I never would have made those nightly twelve blocks. If I had run with my double-knotted shoelaces untied, I never would have made it either; I would have fallen before I finished. Running with such a hindering weight or entanglement would have left me confined to the curb or sprawled on the sidewalk.

Hebrews 12:1 doesn't claim that being surrounded by such a great host of examples is enough. In fact, it's really just the beginning. The Hebrews 11 cast of characters proved it can be done, and now I've got to do it. For starters, I've got to throw off everything that hinders and get rid of the sin that so easily entangles. Only then can I run.

There are a lot of Christians confined to the curb or sprawled on the sidewalk. Entangled by sin or just hindered by baggage, they are stuck.

They've stopped running. They are sitting on the side, and I think a lot of them are single. Some are defeated by weights of loneliness and rejection, or stuck in sins of self-sufficiency and stubbornness. For others, the death of their dreams has halted their race. And still others are sidelined by laziness or lethargy.

Whatever the weight, whatever the sin, it's time to quit looking at the pebbles around our feet. Look up. See the names. Remember their faith. You can do it, too. Get up. Get back in the race. Running a race *is* hard work. Pressing on when you want to quit *is* excruciating. Believing that the race is sovereignly designed *is* difficult to swallow sometimes.

I've read enough biographies to know that some of my fellow sojourners reach the end and say, "I fought a good fight, I finished the course, I won the prize." Then there are those who reach the end and admit, "I missed the fight, I fought the course, I never saw the prize."

Lambeau Field is a hall of football fame, enshrining the greats of the game. I will never achieve Packer celebrity status. I don't have the skill, experience, or qualifications. Hebrews 11 is a memorial to men and women just like me. They faced the same weights and sins that I do. They fought the fight and ran the assigned course, and they made it. They won the prize.

So can I, and so can you, single friend. It's time to quit looking for something "better." It's time to throw off entanglements and sins. The pages of life keep turning, and some of us are stuck on the table of contents wondering where the marriage chapter is. We're missing the story.

Study and Discussion Questions

1. How have the lies about singleness affected your life?
2. What promises in the Bible have been most meaningful to you as a single person?

3. Has God ever given you what you needed instead of what you wanted and you realized His gifts were better?
4. What are the things that keep you from running the race with your full strength?
5. Read Hebrews 11. Which characters are the most meaningful to you and why?
6. Can you think of singles in your life who have modeled what it means to run the race? Have you ever talked to them about this?