Genesis - Commentaries by Nicolas Simon

That It May Be Well With Thee: Dating And Marriage, Seeking a Spouse

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Perhaps you're thinking: Adam had it easy! He didn't even have to look for a wife. God gave Adam the most amazing, stunningly beautiful girl that one could ever imagine — at least, I don't believe that it's unreasonable to assume so. Furthermore, Eve didn't have to wait for a husband; there he was! Before we get too carried away with how simple it all was for Adam and Eve, let us remember what happened next. Within a short period of time, days perhaps, Eve was anything but a help to Adam, and worse still, Adam had failed in his headship. How quickly sin came in and marred this beautiful relationship established by God.

Despite the weaknesses of our forebears — which weaknesses we inherit — God's promise to the man remains: "Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord" (Prov. 18:22). Find implies a search. Though we walk by faith and not by sight, still, we walk. Faith is not inactive. Pursuing our own wills is not faith; but taking a step in dependence on the Lord is faith. Peter may have sunk, but at least he got out of the boat. He had little faith — and a good deal of self-confidence — nevertheless, he stepped out onto those stormy waves.

I have no doubt that God knows all, including the one we will marry, but this does not mean to say that the individual will be delivered to our doorstep in brown paper packaging tied with red ribbons, or white tissue paper and pink bows. No, with life there are deep exercises, missteps and perhaps even tears, but in due course, if we are leaning upon the Lord, joy and happiness in the morning. I encourage you to read the Song of Solomon1 to see how true this is, both of our spiritual lives and also of natural things. And so, young men, if you desire a wife, then prepare to step out onto some waves — it won't all be smooth sailing!

What about the girl? Proverbs — from where we just quoted — is, in many respects, directed toward the young man (Prov. 1:4). The first nine chapters is especially the guidance of a father and mother for their son. But does Scripture say nothing of the girl desiring a husband? Certainly it does, and we shall consider some examples later. For now, I offer this verse: "She is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). From this we can conclude that the woman is going to make a choice — whom she will. From a scriptural standpoint, her role may be more passive, but it is not entirely inactive either. Her behavior will be key as to whom she attracts. The steps she takes will be just as important, and she will require just as much faith as the young man if she is going to meet a husband of God's approval.

How to Begin

The search must begin in prayer. Perhaps that sounds rather cliché, but it isn't. I can hear some say: But I've prayed for a suitable marriage partner for years, and nothing ever happens! There are many reasons why the Lord does not answer prayer just the way we would like. Perhaps it is a lack of dependence. Are our prayers mingled with faith? Are we looking for the right reasons? Maybe we are not ready for marriage. Is there a needs-be in our lives that must be taken care of first? It could even be that God has other plans for us. I would suggest to anyone that finds themselves in this position to pray earnestly, in all sincerity, and to ask: Why hasn't my prayer been answered? "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5). Prayer is either for real or it isn't. Too often prayer is made and no answer is expected. We can also pray with the attitude that we already have the answer. In this case we are not really praying at all, but just seeking some indication to confirm our belief. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Luke 11:9).

Young men, "House and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the Lord" (Prov. 19:14). If you want a prudent wife, then it must be from the Lord. By the way, prudent doesn't mean prudish; it means wise, intelligent and skillful. Maybe there's the attitude that a spiritual, intelligent, responsible girl from the Lord will be no fun. And so there might even be a reluctance to ask the Lord for guidance. If you are entertaining such thoughts, then it makes me wonder about the readiness of your heart. Stop and think for a moment: could God ever give us the wrong answer? Besides, what sort of spouse are you seeking; is it someone to love and to cherish, to respect and honor? Or is it someone upon whom you can fulfill your lusts. "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3). At the risk of being repetitive, allow me to say again: God knows our needs, and He knows how best to satisfy those needs. But God wants us to satisfy them within a loving marriage relationship, not a self-willed union. Incidentally, the girl who is all over you physically before marriage often does not know how to behave within marriage. Everything she knows about sexuality relates to getting a man, and there is no comprehension of the beauty of godly intimacy.

Though much of the preceding paragraph has been directed towards the young man, there are common principles that are also applicable to the girl. Be equally skeptical of the guy who is physical; is he really interested in you, or is it just your body? There must be a stronger connection than the physical for a marriage to work. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1).

God is rather blunt when it comes to our own choices: "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered" (Prov. 28:26). Many a person has been delivered from misery by yielding to God at the last, though having begun in self-willed independence. It is better, of course, to both begin and end the search in dependence upon God.

In the Lord

A Christian should never enter into a marriage with one who is unsaved. "She is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39). "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). A Christian who does not date an unbeliever will not marry an unbeliever. Don't underestimate your susceptibility. "Keep thy heart more than anything that is guarded; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). Let's be clear; God will never lead us into such a union. It is easy, especially when we are deeply attached to someone, to think that the Lord could be

using us for their salvation or to lead them to the assembly. It is, however, dangerous to mix emotions of this nature with a desire to evangelize. As genuine as our desire may be, our sight is easily clouded. Furthermore, we need to recognize that a marriage in the Lord goes far beyond merely finding a Christian spouse. It means that the couple desires to fully acknowledge the Lord's authority over their relationship.

Where we look will eventually determine the one we marry. If we look at the gym, or work, or college, we open ourselves up to trouble. I do not say that it is impossible to marry someone we meet at one of these locations, but should we do so, we immediately create a difficulty before the marriage has even begun. Starting with the assumption that they are a Christian, where do they worship? What do they believe? How were they raised? All these things must come together in a marriage.

In the book of Exodus we see God's principle for finding a wife. "There went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi" (Ex. 2:1). And for the women looking for a husband: "Let them marry whom they please; only they shall marry one of the tribe of their father, that no inheritance of the children of Israel pass from tribe to tribe" (Num. 36:6-7 JND). In the second case, this ordinance specifically referred to a family with daughters and no sons. Since the father's inheritance passed to the daughters, they were not to marry outside their tribe. In this way the land was preserved within the tribe and not lost through inheritance. Perhaps there is an objection: we are not under law. That is true, but an important spiritual principle remains. When one marries someone outside of the assembly, all too often that couple will leave the assembly. Sadly, as these cases frequently turn out, the spiritual heritage of that individual is lost to the children.

How do we know if someone is a Christian? If they cannot give a clear confession of their faith, then this is most certainly a poor beginning. Furthermore, what type of Christian are they? Just because they are in the assembly, or even if they are at the Lord's Table, sadly, it may not mean much. Do they pray? Do they read their Bibles? Do they understand what they read, and if they don't, what do they do about it? If an individual is struggling spiritually, this will not end after the wedding; instead, their partner will be drawn into that struggle. Ever since our childhood we have sung:

Is this something real? Are we growing? If we don't read our Bibles and pray every day — and I don't mean for hours at a time, quality is more important than quantity — then why should we imagine that we will attract someone with these traits? Naturally, I am assuming that one is looking for someone with these attributes. Keep in mind, we usually find what we are looking for.

God expects the man to be ... well, a man! "Stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13). It's all very well to marry a man who has pecs like a body builder, but physical strength fades; what about his spiritual strength? Is he a heavy lifter, or is he content to be a lightweight?

What Are You Looking for?

A spouse! Yes, I get that; but let's try this simple mental exercise: imagine the guy or girl of your dreams. If you're not the visual type (and by the way, even if you are) think of the qualities that are high on your list — after all, qualities should be more important than looks! Now, ask yourself honestly: Where has my focus been? Has it been on my needs — those things that will fulfill me; that which will make me happy? Before we get any further, let's be clear: your spouse will not fulfill you and you will not fulfill your spouse. Based on the scriptural principles laid out in the first section of this booklet, God created men and women to form a complementary relationship; we need to look for someone who is going to complement, not fulfill. Now, instead of asking what's in it for me, how about asking: What's in it for my prospective spouse? Or more importantly: What's in it for the Lord? "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). "That God in all things may be glorified" (1 Pet. 4:11). Is marriage not included in these verses?

Marriage is not about me. Until we get out of this selfish mode of thinking, a great partnership is just a romantic dream. At the wedding day, I have no doubt that both bride and groom are subconsciously thinking about what's in it for them. Oh, I'm sure they wouldn't put it that way — but the underlying thought is there. Quite frankly, unless they've been through it before, they really have little idea as to what the other's needs really are. Despite the fact that we — men and women — live on the same planet, for as well as we understand each other, it sometimes seems that we come from different worlds. Of course, this is not true — we have one Creator who knew very well what He was doing. Nevertheless, the fewer assumptions we make about the opposite sex and the more we are willing to learn from one another, the happier we will be. Don't assume that if I am satisfying my needs, then clearly I must be satisfying hers (or his) — wrong!

Does the Bible have any pointers as to what we should be looking for in a spouse? Absolutely! Let's begin with the girl. What qualities should she look for in a man? Since the husband is to be the head, then surely one should look for qualities suited to this role. Bossy men make for poor husbands — headship is not dictatorship. Look for someone who will provide spiritual and practical guidance in the home, who will be able to lead and direct, and, when called upon, make the hard decisions. Interestingly, many of the qualities required by an overseer and deacon represent desirable traits in the husband. In fact, one who is a poor husband and father is not spiritually qualified to take a role of oversight, or even of servitude, in the assembly. "The husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity" (1 Tim. 3:2-3). Think about the man described by these verses — and the one who isn't.

Scripturally, the husband is to provide for his wife and children. That does not mean to say that the wife cannot help — indeed, she may well do so, particularly before children come along. Nevertheless, the Apostle speaks strongly concerning the man's responsibility: "If any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8). In Proverbs we read: "Prepare thy work without, and make it fit for thyself in the field; and afterwards build thine house" (Prov. 24:27). I would question the motives of a young man who is pursuing a girl when he has no means of supporting her. Who is this about? Him, or her? The words that Naomi spoke to her daughter in-law come to mind: "My daughter, shall I not seek rest for thee, that it may be well with thee?" (Ruth 3:1). Naomi was not looking for a rich husband for Ruth, so she could laze about with servants waiting on her hand and foot; that's not the rest she sought. The bride in the Song of Solomon describes that rest this way: "Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir" (Song of Sol. 1:16-17). He was handsome and kind to be sure, but in addition to that, he provided rest, security, and shelter. For some women this may translate into stature and strength. I trust, however, that you are wiser than this; physique is a poor assessment of a man (or woman for that matter).

And what about the man; are there similar verses which describe what to look for in a prospective wife? Most assuredly there are. Proverbs 31 immediately springs to mind. “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life” (Prov. 31:10-12). Now, that’s a help meet! If chapter 31 of Proverbs describes the woman to look for, then the 5th chapter describes the one to avoid. “The lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: but her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a twoedged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell” (Prov. 5:3-5). The word strange in this context does not mean weird. Without question, this woman has plenty of natural charm. She is strange because she has nothing in common with the godly young man.

We find similar warnings and exhortation in the New Testament. “Withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not. I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully” (1 Tim 5:13-14). Though it may not be the primary role of the wife to provide for the family, what is she doing while she remains single? Is she a meddlesome gossip? “Occupy till I come” should be true of all God’s servants — male or female (Luke 19:13). The virtuous woman, of Proverbs 31, is industrious, supplementing her husband’s income as she is able; her hands (or palms) are mentioned seven times. In this modern economy, such activity may be mental more than menial — there is nothing unscriptural about this.

There are many, many other verses that we could turn to in regards to both the prospective husband and wife. If you are seeking a godly spouse, Scripture provides a detailed portrait.

Falling in Love

So far, I’ve not said a word about romance or falling in love. Perhaps some are asking: Shouldn’t we follow our hearts? Despite the fact that this line has been used countless times in popular media, the short answer is no! “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9). Having said this, however, it doesn’t necessarily follow that there will be no romance, nor that one won’t fall in love. It would be a sad relationship if everything was conducted as if it were a business transaction — there’s a list of requirements, certainly qualities that must be met, and the deal is sealed. In fact, if there is no affection, if the heart is not engaged — if there isn’t any chemistry, as people say — then surely something is missing.

In the Song of Solomon, the Shulamite is so overwrought by her feelings that she says: “I am sick of love” (Song of Sol. 2:5) — or as we would say: I am lovesick. It is a state that she does not wish to disturb: “stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please” (vs. 7). The three times where we find this latter expression in the Song of Solomon, it marks the close of a scene. In each instance, however, a time of renewed activity follows, and we see further development in the bride’s affections and understanding of the bridegroom. As much as we may desire it, one cannot go about in a state of euphoria, without appetite, and unable to sleep. Ultimately, reality must return and rational thoughts must guide us.

Unfortunately, lovesickness often accompanies infatuation, especially when the feelings of one are not reciprocated. One believes that they cannot live without the other; that the individual is the only one who will ever make them happy. Without them, one is incomplete — they make me a whole person. Such feelings are not only misplaced, but they are unhealthy. God alone can make us complete; He alone is all-sufficient to meet our needs. The world portrays such love as a lofty ideal. It is the Romeo and Juliet type of love, love worth dying for.2 Such feelings, nevertheless, are not representative of true love. This type of love is shallow and selfish, like a cloudburst amidst the flashes of lightening. A girl or young man in such a condition is not at all rational; indeed, they bear the characteristics of one whose mind is clouded by alcohol. As a result, actions are misinterpreted, strengths and weaknesses are misjudged, and the infatuation thrives upon its own delusion. True love runs deep like a river overflowing its banks.

Most are aware that the Greek words for love, agape and philia, occur frequently in the New Testament. There are in fact two other Greek words that also mean love. The first rarely appears in ancient Greek and would be unfamiliar to most, whereas the second will no doubt be recognized by all. Eros is passionate love with sensual desire and longing; it is also that love-at-first-sight, the infatuation that we have been considering. The English word erotic derives from eros. It is informative to note that eros never once appears in the New Testament. This does not mean to say that husbands and wives should not feel passion or desire towards one another. Nevertheless, when such feelings are conveyed in the scriptures, alternative forms of expression are used in place of eros.

When the nature of true love is so misrepresented, then the desire to fulfill that love will be misguided. Lovesickness of this nature can lead to very poor choices. Amnon the son of David believed that he loved his half-sister Tamar; her beauty captivated him (read 1 Samuel 13). He was so tormented by her, that he fell sick. He desired Tamar for himself but could see no way to obtain her. Unfortunately, Amnon had a friend, Jonadab, who knew exactly how to prey upon Tamar’s feelings. Appealing to her feminine compassion, Tamar is enticed into Amnon’s bedroom where he lay pretending to be ill. Alone with Tamar, he forces himself upon her. Having obtained his object, Amnon’s hatred for Tamar exceeds his earlier passion.

There are numerous lessons to be learned from this story. This type of love is not to be trusted. It is selfish, whereas true love is about the other person. Who would ever knowingly hurt someone they loved? Amnon’s hatred in the end is not atypical; having satisfied his lust upon Tamar, he has no need for her. Guys — never for one moment believe the lie that girls secretly desire to be manhandled. Tamar’s, No! should have been enough — and surely it would have been for any man that truly loved her. David should have protected Tamar; instead he sent her to Amnon. On her part, Tamar should have left the room with everyone else, as Joseph had done (Gen. 39:12), rather than be left alone with Amnon.

In this story God reveals the ugliness that lurks in the recesses of man’s heart. Some may feel that this is an extreme example, and that infatuation doesn’t typically end in rape — and I would agree. Nevertheless, let’s not ignore the many principles to be drawn from this account. God in His wisdom records it for our learning. Even when such ardent passion doesn’t end so terribly, it is misguided and will lead one down a dead end; do not confuse it with true love.

Some Biblical Examples

Not only can we find plenty of verses that give us the qualities that should characterize the husband or wife, but we also have Scriptural examples of individuals seeking a spouse — thankfully, some happier than the story we just considered. Unfortunately, space does not permit a thorough examination of these accounts, but a cursory overview to confirm the principles that we have established is in order.

We begin with Abraham's search for a wife for his son Isaac (Gen. 24). The modern take on this story is that, although it was appropriate for the culture of the time, it does not translate into this present day. Contrariwise, I believe that the principles contained within the account are every bit as applicable as when they were written. In this instance, the father sends his servant to seek a wife for his son. Now, I'm not about to suggest that we, as parents, arrange marriages for our children. That being said, it is most appropriate to pray for our children, both to seek their welfare and that they might be guided to a suitable wife or husband. The servant's quest begins with godly counsel and prayer (Gen. 24:3-14). It was very important to Abraham that the girl be from the same family — in our instance, that would mean one from the family of God. Upon his arrival at the city of Nahor, the servant takes time to observe the girls at the well. Rebekah is noted to be industrious, kind and generous. Furthermore, if we interpret the water in its typical application, then it could speak of the Word of God — this was her occupation. Rebekah's statement as to her family is clear and concise: "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, which she bare unto Nahor" (Gen. 24:24). When an individual cannot give a clear confession of faith, this is a clear warning. And, as if all this weren't enough, Rebekah was beautiful and pure. Rebekah was some girl! No wonder the servant was left completely astonished (Gen. 24:15-21).

When we come to Isaac and his son Jacob, we don't see the same level of concern with either the father or the son, and the outcome reflects it. "Isaac called Jacob, and blessed him, and charged him, and said unto him, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan. Arise, go to Padanaram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee a wife from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother" (Gen. 28:1-2). The initial instruction bears similarities to that given by Abraham; however, when Jacob meets Rachel, the only quality that we read of him observing is: "Rachel was of beautiful form and beautiful countenance" (Gen. 29:17 JND). Jacob was smitten by Rachel's figure and good looks. I don't believe we ever read of Jacob seeking God's direction; in fact, in the previous chapter he is fearful in the presence of Jehovah and thinks he can strike a deal with Him.

Infatuation is not a good indicator of a successful marriage. In the very next chapter, Genesis 30, we find Rachel making unreasonable demands of her husband, and an angry Jacob responding without empathy or concern for his wife. Rachel was idolatrous, dishonest, deceitful and envious (Gen. 30:1; Gen. 31:30-35) — not exactly desirable traits to discover in your wife. Nevertheless, Jacob, a man of the flesh, found what he was looking for. I don't mean to imply that this match wasn't in God's will for Jacob, nor that Jacob didn't really love Rachel. Jacob had much to learn about himself; he was blind as to his own faults, and his infatuation with the attractive Rachel blinded him to hers as well.

We get quite a different perspective when we come to the story of Ruth. Before we go on, however, there is a point to be noted. The primary intent of these scriptural portions is not to instruct us in finding a mate. Ruth forms an important link in the lineage of David and hence the Messiah. The book is also prophetic; Ruth typifies the restoration of Israel. Nevertheless, the incidental details in each of these accounts present us with Godly principles that we can follow in connection with our subject.

From the outset we learn much about the character of Ruth. The story begins with her faithfulness to Naomi and her God — "thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Though a Moabitess, she had entered the fold of Israel through faith in Jehovah God (Ruth 2:12), and as such, grace made her an eligible partner. Likewise, one saved out of an ungodly condition, and who is to be found in the assembly, is likewise eligible. Nevertheless, whenever there are significant differences in background, these must be worked through. As with Rebekah and Rachel, Ruth does not sit idle in the home; she goes out into the field to glean. Although the practical side of things is important, if we again recognize the typical teaching — of one gleaning spiritual things, especially in the assembly — the lesson for us is even more significant. For his part, Boaz is not ignorant of Ruth; her good reputation has preceded her (Ruth 2:11). Boaz is kind and thoughtful; he gives Ruth food and water, and extends his protection to her. In so doing, he comforts this stranger, for he speaks to her heart (Ruth 2:8-14). Truly these are the rare qualities to look for in a suitor. Ruth responds to Boaz's encouragement and she sticks fast by his maidens throughout the harvest (Ruth 2:23). It is interesting to note that Boaz had said, "abide fast by my maidens," but Ruth quotes him as saying "keep fast by my young men" (Ruth 2:8,21). Perhaps she was hopeful of meeting a suitable young man and considered Boaz out of her reach. Don't sell yourselves short; you could make an unwise match! Naomi wisely responds: "It is good, my daughter, that thou go out with his maidens" (Ruth 2:22). For the sake of brevity, I'll leave it to my readers to familiarize themselves with the full story. However, one might wonder why Naomi, who had been so careful about Ruth's character, would instruct her to go down to the threshing floor. She was to go there after the men had eaten and drunk at the close of the day. When Boaz had lain down to sleep, Ruth was instructed to uncover his feet and lay by him. In this instance, I believe, it is now Boaz that needed some encouragement. Keep in mind, he was much older than Ruth, and quite conceivably he feared that this pretty young girl would not have him. Ruth not only gave him the prompting he needed, but she also reminded him of his obligation to her under the law (Ruth 3:10-13).

On the negative side of things, we also find examples of men and women in the Bible who followed their hearts. "And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines. And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife. Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well" (Judges 14:1-3). Young men, if you go searching for a woman of this world that pleases you well, you will find one! Samson rejected the counsel of his parents and he got his wife. It's not long, however, before she's given to another man. Samson then takes up with a harlot before he finally settles on Delilah — yet another Philistine (Judges 16). The story of Delilah is infamous, and I don't think that there are many places in this world where her character is not known. If we are going to be driven by the lust of our eyes and the lust of the flesh, why should we expect a better outcome than Samson's? We only read of Samson praying twice — and both times he was in an extremity (Judges 15:18; 16:28). What a difference it would have made, if he had prayed earlier and if he had listened to the advice of his parents.

We find a similar sad tale with Dinah: "And Dinah the daughter of Leah, which she bare unto Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the country, saw her, he took her, and lay with her, and defiled her" (Gen. 34:1). As with the man, if a girl looks for a guy in this world, she will find what she's looking for. Men of this world find Christian girls attractive — and why shouldn't they? They would be fools if they didn't. A Christian girl should have all the qualities that naturally attract a man — they are pure, kind, caring, committed, honest, industrious, and the list goes on. I pray that you won't sacrifice your life to an unequal yoke; things may be pleasant at first, but in the end there will be grief. When we walk in disobedience to the Word of God, the outcome cannot be avoided.

Young Men, Take the Lead!

In the Biblical examples that we have considered, it is the man who takes the initiative to seek a wife. Not only do I believe that this is right and proper from a scriptural perspective, but when men and women accept their God-given responsibilities, they grow and prosper. Young men, if you want to see a girl respond, then woo her! The bride expresses it well in the Song of Solomon: “Draw me, we will run after thee” (Song of Sol. 1:4). Conversely, a young man that refuses to take the lead — to act the suitor — demonstrates a lack of maturity. The verse: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and cleave to his wife” (Gen. 2:24), is found four times in Scripture. The young man must be ready — spiritually, emotionally and practically — to step away from his former ties, to take his place as a husband and the head of a new household. Isaac was quite old before Abraham, his father, sought a wife for him. By this time he was ready, both emotionally and also practically, to support a wife. Some men, when they are young, get themselves involved in girlfriend relationships that can clearly go nowhere — except, perhaps, trouble! The hormones are far ahead of their maturity — there is still a lot of growing up and development that needs to take place before they are in a position to have a wife.

Clearly not every young man is the forward, go get ‘em, type-A personality. Some are shy and reticent. I understand this. It can take a good deal of courage to approach a girl. Regardless, at some point, the guy must show some initiative. Don’t assume that leadership must always be characterized by the aggressive drive associated with the type-A temperament. In fact, that can be a real turn-off. There are other styles of leadership. A servant-leader puts others first, helping them to grow and shine according to their unique abilities. What girl wouldn’t respond to that?

I have already said it, and I will say it again: Guys, begin on your knees! Secondly, observe. Take note how a girl behaves in her family, in the assembly, at Bible conferences and at other activities. If a girl is disrespectful or dismissive of her father, or even her brothers, it is a strong indicator as to how she will treat men in general. Group settings are a relaxed way to interact with other young people without giving the wrong impression. Don’t be afraid to strike up a conversation. If the first interest that you ever show a girl is expressed by the question: Will you go out with me? She’ll probably look at you with a puzzled expression and ask Why?

Talk doesn’t come easy to some guys — at least not chit-chat. For a shy person, conversation may even be a deal breaker. When words fail, the tendency is to fill in the gaps with talk about one’s self. There may be no intent to sound self-absorbed, but it can easily come across this way. Take an interest in the other person, ask about them — but don’t interrogate. Take their lead in the conversation and ask questions that show a genuine interest in what they are saying. If you can’t show an interest in another, how do you expect to spend your life with them? Clearly, two shy people together is a painful sight to behold! Sometimes the focus on having to come up with something to say is just too much. Try doing an activity together, it can serve to break that awkwardness. In all your conversations be open and honest. Do not lead a girl on or misrepresent your intentions.

Certainly not all guys are reticent. No, there are plenty who go to the other extreme. They will seek to chat up any pretty young girl that comes their way. The search for a wife is not a sport! Hearts are involved; maybe not yours, but quite possibly the girl whom you are trying to sweet talk. To lead a girl on is neither loving nor kind. A wise girl will guard her heart and not fall for the tongue of the flatterer: “a flattering mouth worketh ruin” (Prov. 26:28). I do not mean to suggest that one cannot talk to a girl unless she is the right one, but it should be done in a way that clearly states your intentions. If it is just to be friendly, keep it that way; don’t flirt!

On a more general note: be a gentleman! This is not especially fashionable these days. Acts of kindness, once considered right and proper, have not only been given up by men, but in many cases, they are rejected by the woman. Nonetheless, regardless of modern etiquette (or the lack of it) women respond to thoughtfulness. Holding a door open for a girl, or offering to carry a heavy load, these indicate that you care. “Be kindly affectioned one to another” (Rom. 12:10). I would suggest to the girl, that such things work best when they are not demanded; on the other hand, show your gratification when a gesture is appreciated. Teasing can be fun, but only if both parties are enjoying it. For all of us, there are things that are off limits; learn to read the other person and don’t joke about things that are hurtful or unkind. Guys, pulling pigtails (literally or figuratively) went out in grade school; such behavior is immature and, while it may get a girl’s attention, it will not endear her to you. “Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted” (Eph. 4:32).

Girls, You Can Help!

The girl certainly has a say as to her future husband — after all, she is the one who gets to say, yes or no! “Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go” (Gen. 24:58). Nevertheless, it is out of character for a girl to be the pursuer. Her role is attractive whereas his role should be active. So how does one go about attracting a suitable companion?

“Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee” (Ruth 3:3). Appearance and deportment are important. That may sound shallow, but quite frankly, a book is first judged by its cover. Guys are visual; they respond to what they see. Girls clue into this at a young age, but although they get it, they seem to have little comprehension as to what’s really going on inside the male brain. We live in a day where girls are exposing more and more of their bodies. Unquestionably, this will provoke a visceral response in a guy, but is this really what you want? While it may seem paradoxical, seductive styles that tease are just as provocative — more so even — than styles that expose. Incidentally, the latter is a turn-off for any man going on for the Lord. Seek to be beautiful, not sensual — there is time and place for that within the sanctity of marriage. Scripture is clear as to a woman’s dress: “In like manner also that the women in decent deportment and dress, adorn themselves with modesty and discretion, not with plaited hair and gold, or pearls, or costly clothing” (1 Tim. 2:9 JND). In case you think that Paul3 had a dim view of women, then listen to Peter — a married man: “While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear. Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel” (1 Pet. 3:2-3). This may seem so outdated and unfashionable — but I don’t think it needs to be interpreted that way. Scripture doesn’t tell you what to wear, but it does describe the character of what you should wear. Remarkably consistent with these verses, surveys tell us that men are not fond of heavy makeup or excessive jewelry — though I realize that tastes vary considerably. Should you desire further scriptural guidance as to style, then long hair is definitely in! “If a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her” (1 Cor. 11:15). As far as the guys go, it never went out of fashion! Of course, for a godly woman, dress and hair length go far beyond fashion or being attractive — it is a question of obedience to the Word of God and doing that which is pleasing to the Lord.

Though the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 was anything but dowdy, she concludes: “Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised” (Prov. 31:30). A book will be opened, and ultimately it will be judged by its contents. A beautiful

woman with a contemptible spirit is a miserable companion. You may be able to dress up, but you can never hide inner spiritual turmoil. Conversely, a godly woman who is at peace, and is walking confidentially with the Lord, will glow with a beauty that cannot be replicated through dress. Ruth didn't just dress herself, she also washed. There was a condition of things that went along with her appearance.

So how does one put these things into practice? A plant will look faded and spent if it never gets much water; one must begin with prayer and reading. In both instances, the quotes I gave above are incomplete. Paul goes on to say "but, what becomes women making profession of the fear of God, by good works" (1 Tim. 2:10). Peter adds: "But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1 Pet. 3:4). I imagine that some girls (and guys) are picturing a mousy woman who's afraid to show her face — but is that consistent with the scriptural examples we find? Consider: Sarah, Deborah, Ruth, Rahab, Mary, Priscilla, Phebe — and the women who "received their dead raised to life again" (Heb. 11:35). If you intend to be a help meet, you will need to show a little fortitude. If we contrast Peter's words with Proverbs 7 — "she is loud and stubborn" (Prov. 7:11) — then, I believe, we begin to see something of what he is speaking. Would you rather be, "loud and stubborn," or, to be known by your "meek and quiet spirit?"

Don't seek to impress the guys. Mind you, this also goes for guys seeking to impress the girls. Whenever we set out to impress, it invariably flops. Acting like a guy won't make you liked by the guys — after all, they are looking for a girl! Naturally a man has the need to be useful. If you have no need for a husband, then why would a man look your way? The stories of a damsel in distress, rescued by the handsome prince on his steed, don't come out of thin air; in some way they reflect our God-given psyche. One positive observation that we can make about Jacob is that he lifted the stone off the well and watered Rachel's flock (Gen. 29:8-10). Gallantry was alive and well in those days. If you wish to encourage a young man, perhaps ask him for some help! It may be spiritual — and wouldn't that be wonderful, especially if it were genuine! But it could also be practical. On the other hand, don't make every phone call, and every text message, an occasion to express your problems. You want him to be excited when you call, don't you? Don't throw yourself at a man. On the other hand, if you don't offer any encouragement, it will send the message — you're not the one for me.

A woman desiring a husband won't closet herself away. She will be at the assembly meetings and at Bible conferences. She will be busy seeking to serve the Lord in whatever capacity she is able. There is a story at the close of the book of Judges that offers guidance for both young men and women (Judg. 21:16-23). The men of Benjamin sought wives. They were encouraged to go to Shiloh at the time of the feast of Jehovah. It was there that God had placed His name in Israel — the tabernacle could be found at Shiloh. Surely this would be a good place and occasion to find a wife. The men of Benjamin were told: "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards; and see ... Behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in dances, then come ye out of the vineyards, and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh." This may sound funny and quaint but it sums up, I trust, what has been said. Guys look where you'll find godly girls; then observe them. Again, where are you hanging out? Is it in the vineyards where fruit can be borne for God? Girls, if your life for the Lord shows out in a joy for all to see, you will attract the right kind of man. Finally, young men, show some initiative and go after that girl!

That It May Be Well With Thee: Dating And Marriage, Biblical Basis for Marriage, The

I will begin by quoting from the traditional marriage service, some parts of which may sound familiar. For centuries English speaking Christians have paid lip service to its contents. It has been, despite man's inconstancy, broadly accepted as the Christian view of marriage. For all its uncertain history and associations it contains a good deal of truth.

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with His presence, and first miracle that He wrought, in Cana of Galilee; and is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men: and therefore, is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.

First, It was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of His holy Name.

Secondly, It was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

Thirdly, It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity. Into which holy estate these two persons present come now to be joined. Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace.

The foregoing is from the Solemnization of Matrimony from the Church of England Book of Common Prayer. This book has represented the official liturgy of the Anglican Communion since 1662. Though attempts have been made to revise it, the changes have never been ratified; for that, the approval of the parliament of the United Kingdom is required. This is not to say that there aren't alternatives; the 1980 Alternative Service Book and the 2000 Books of Common Worship provide updated ceremonies. Not surprisingly, the modern versions weaken the original. For example, all references to fornication have been removed; such is the nature of modern theological relativism.

It is not my intent to endorse the Book of Common Prayer, 1662 or otherwise. Surely the very notion of formalized rituals is contrary to the Word of God, not to mention a priestly caste to administer them. Nevertheless, I find it remarkable that such teaching exists within the folds of this denomination, especially given the hostility with which it would be received by many of today's members. Rituals cannot and do not preserve; books of liturgy will not uphold the truth. We must rest wholly on the Word of God.

It may not seem very interesting or particularly exciting to review the biblical basis for marriage in a book on finding a spouse. Nonetheless, it is essential if we wish to gain the correct perspective on the subject. It is the foundation upon which all else rests.

God's Plan in Creation

“The LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him ... Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:18,24). It is immediately clear that God’s order in creation was for a man to have a wife. Their relationship would be a special one, going beyond mere companionship; they would be one flesh. It was to be monogamous, else we would read of wives. What we find in Genesis predates the law by more than 3000 years. When the Lord Jesus came, some 1500 years after the law of Moses, we find Him quoting the same scriptures to His disciples: “Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:4-6). And again, in this present dispensation of grace, the Apostle Paul quotes from Genesis: “What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith He, shall be one flesh” (1 Cor. 6:16). “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh” (Eph. 5:31).

It is clear from the verse in Corinthians that, in part, the expression one flesh implies a sexual union. God chose to create men and women to be sexual creatures with sexual desires. He has also made it clear that such desires are only to be satisfied in the marriage relationship. “Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). God’s plans are not arbitrary and man is not wiser than God. Clearly this is one area where men and women flaunt their so-called liberty today. We do not need to look for proof in society to see the destruction that this causes, though I believe the evidence is clear. No, we must rest upon God’s word and His wisdom. Surely the engineer knows the inner workings of the machine he designed; no less the Creator His creature.

God’s order, as established in creation, still stands; nothing about it has changed. These aren’t legal ordinances established by the Mosaic Law, for they clearly predate it. When the brethren met at Jerusalem to discuss the position of Gentile Christians with respect to the law, they offered this sentence: “We write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20). This isn’t a summary of Christian conduct, but rather, they were necessary directives to the Gentile peoples of that day among whom these things were accepted behavior (Acts 15:28).

God created Eve to be Adam’s help and counterpart. The expression help meet in the Hebrew, as in English, is two words: the first means help; the second could be translated, as his opposite. Eve was Adam’s perfect counterpart — not that she was to become this, but God created her to be this. God created the female to be the perfect compliment for the male. It is not a question of superiority or inferiority; the wife is not a second-class citizen. However, God did anticipate different roles, different needs, and different temperaments. Despite these differences, the male and female, by God’s design, answers exactly to the needs of the opposite sex. This complementary function extends to multiple facets of married life.

Since we are discussing God’s plan for marriage in creation, it is necessary to touch briefly on the subject of headship — more will be covered later. This is important, for it says a good deal about the sort of men that we should be. It also says much about the traits a woman should look for in a husband. For those men reading this booklet, it should be made clear from the outset: headship is about responsibility and not privilege. “The head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God. ... Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. ... Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:3,9,11). These verses, from Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, spell out the basis for the man’s headship. It also beautifully brings in the complementary relationship of which I have been speaking between the husband and the wife.

Family

As we have observed, the marriage union is a sexual one. The fruit of such a relationship are children. God intended children to be raised within the confines of a marriage. This is the order that God has established. “I will therefore that the younger women marry ... ” and then they “ ... bear children” (1 Tim. 5:14). Any other notion is entirely foreign to Scripture. Children are to be a blessing and a heritage, not the unplanned product of desire. “Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is His reward” (Psa. 127:3).

Children are to be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). On their part, they are to “hear the instruction of [their] father, and forsake not the law of [their] mother” (Prov. 1:8). The family setting should be warm, caring and nurturing for the child, one where the love between the parents is evident. If we put our own selfish needs before the commitment of marriage, the home environment will be a fragile one.

Families hold a unique place in God’s sight. Throughout Scripture we see God blessing families. It is important that we seek to follow God’s plan for marriage for the sake of our children and the family unit as a whole. It should be our desire to bestow upon our children a godly heritage.

Love and Mutual Comfort

Eve was created as a help meet for Adam. Though I have indicated that this goes beyond companionship, it most certainly includes it. “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him” (Gen. 2:18). As a man, this world would have been a lonely place for Adam without Eve. “Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves’ eyes” (Song of Sol. 1:15). The Hebrew word used for love in this verse is actually female companion; it is the feminine form of friend. This is an important point to observe; the one we marry should be our friend — this, I believe, is God’s plan.

We read concerning Isaac and Rebekah: “Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen. 24:67). Rebekah was a comfort to her husband. On the other hand, when we come to the story of Elkanah and Hannah, we see Elkanah being a comfort to his childless wife: “Unto Hannah he gave a worthy portion; for he loved Hannah: but the Lord had shut up her womb” (1 Sam. 1:5).1 “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:9-12).

Scripture is perfectly clear that marriages are not to be loveless affairs. We read, “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). Even the wife is exhorted to love her husband — or more specifically, to be a husband-lover.

“Teach the young women to be sober, to love2 their husbands, to love their children” (Titus 2:4). Many have pointed out that love is an action, not a feeling, and that is certainly true. However, I don’t for one moment believe that God intended for it to be an emotionless action. That would be an extraordinary thing. If we truly love someone, then their interests will be our interests, there will be empathy towards that person, the things that please them will also please us, and it will be our desire to honor them.

Christ and the Church

So far the Biblical authority and purposes for marriage that we have looked at — God’s order in creation, the establishment of families, and for mutual comfort and companionship — spring, by and large, from our temporal needs. There is, however, something that is of a far greater character than anything that we have considered so far. “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:29-32).

Marriage should reflect something of the character of the spiritual union between Christ and the church. In these verses, the expression one flesh brings before us a different thought; it speaks now of the physical body and the care that is shown toward it. Nobody ever neglects their own body — we feed it, wash it, treat it, clothe it — some more so than others! Such also is the care of Christ for His body, the church, and such should be the care of the husband for his wife (Eph. 5:28-29).

We also read, in connection with Christ and His church, that He is “head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22) — notice that it says to the church rather than over the church. To understand the distinction, think again of the natural body. The head coordinates all activity; the brain receives stimuli, for example pain, from other members of the body and guides and directs the whole to respond accordingly. When the spinal cord is severed, the body does not die — the heart, liver, and so forth, keep functioning, albeit imperfectly for the body is paralyzed; it can no longer receive direction from the head. Neither the church nor a marriage will flourish when in such a state of paralysis.

A functioning marriage is a living organism; two acting together as one, with the husband providing the headship. They act, not for their own selfish needs, but as a reflection of the love and grace that Christ has poured out upon His church. They are “heirs together of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7). Of course, I speak of a Christian marriage — a marriage in the Lord. Though I mention two acting together, in such a relationship there will in fact be three; the Lord Himself will be an integral part of the marriage. One has likened this to a triangle with the Lord at the apex; the closer the husband and wife are to Him, the closer they will be drawn together. “A threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:12).

This aspect of marriage should make us stop and think. There is a bigger picture here. Marriage is not about my needs; furthermore, it is not simply about his needs and her needs; there is something more that God wishes to accomplish in a marriage. Though I have taken up that which is natural first, as we reflect on the spiritual side of things, we begin to realize that this should be the driving force behind the relationship. We do not pretend to neglect the natural, but it will take on a different, and, I would suggest, a correct perspective, when we live for the spiritual.

A final point needs to be made: Scripture closely links marriage and the church. Time and time again we find church truth, and behavior within the assembly, connected with marriage and the family. The two are inseparable. Again, I would reiterate the importance of being clear as to the assembly before entering the marriage relationship.

That It May Be Well With Thee: Dating And Marriage, What Do We Do When We Mess up?

It is important to recognize the seriousness of sin in the sight of a holy God. Grace does not lessen God’s standard — far from it. In fact, it is those who seek to gain acceptance before God through works, or by keeping the law, who must make excuses or limit the law’s reach1. It is in the gospel of the grace of God that we alone have the full revelation of divine righteousness. There is no acquittal from sin; we must judge sin as God views it. Once sin is recognized in this light, we begin to see something of the horror of it. True repentance is taking God’s side against oneself. If I truly recognize that Christ has suffered for me on the cross, it will not make me indifferent to sin — though I see my deliverance there. Rather, it will give me a greater tenderness of spirit and feeling.

Failure isn’t addressed through penance, renewed promises or by berating ourselves. There must be confession and a forsaking of those things that led to the failure (Prov. 28:13). “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). True repentance will manifest itself in a broken and contrite heart (Psa. 51:17); broken for having dishonored the Lord, and contrite because of the failure. It is not God’s desire to lead us into despair where all is hopelessness — that is Satan’s doing. Rather, it is the Lord’s advocacy that brings us, firstly, to repentance through the application of His Word, and then, secondly, into a place of true restoration (Luke 22:61-62; John 21:15-19). Bear in mind, this is a process and not a point in time. “Grief according to God works repentance to salvation, never to be regretted; but the grief of the world works death” (2 Cor. 7:10 JND).

Sin is invariably accompanied by consequences, and in moral things they may be significant (Gal. 6:7). Nevertheless, this does not preclude restoration. It may certainly mean changed circumstances, but if we judge the sin and wholly turn to the Lord, we will be blessed. David sinned in a most egregious way. He committed adultery with Bathsheba; he caused the death of Uriah the Hittite; and through it all, a child was born. In Psalm 51 we read David’s prayer of confession and humiliation. In the end, there was blessing: Bathsheba’s son, Solomon, ultimately sat on David’s throne. Nevertheless, the price that David paid was high. He lost the child conceived through his adultery; his son Amnon was murdered; Absalom died as a result of insurrection; and finally, Adonijah died for his pretension to the throne.

One who has been restored in the Lord should be received as such (2 Cor. 2:6-8). The deep lessons that such an individual will have learned will leave their mark indelibly on their soul. Such a one may well be of greater service to the Lord after the fall than before, for the weakness that led to the failure has been recognized and judged. Peter was fully restored to the Lord and to his brethren.

On the other hand, when one repeatedly falls into sin — especially when it's the same sin — then it is questionable whether the thing has ever been really judged. Repentance must be accompanied by action; it's not simply words. "Ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16) is a solemn but true warning. When it comes to marriage, it would be unwise, and possibly unscriptural, to enter into a relationship with a person who, time and time again, falls into a sin, especially when it is of a moral or addictive character.

Epilogue

Marriage is an institution established by a Holy God for the blessing of mankind. Never one to be satisfied with what God has provided, man has redefined the matrimonial relationship to suit his own sinful nature. Irrespective of what human reasoning may decide, if we walk in obedience to the Word of God, its blessings are ours to enjoy. However, we should not view marriage simply as something for our own good and blessing; it is honoring to God and brings glory to His name. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). This should be true of all that we do, and for that matter, of all relationships that we enter into — not the least of which is that between husband and wife. Furthermore, within the marriage relationship there should be an expression of that love and respect that exists between Christ and His bride, the church.

Sadly, many Christian marriages are based on selfish desires. They have not been entered with much consideration, either for the needs of the other person, or for the glory of God. Christendom must bear much of the blame for the breakdown of the marriage relationship. Nevertheless, even in the most awkward of marriages, blessing and happiness is still possible when the Lord truly becomes the focus of both husband and wife — even when there seems little else in common.

This booklet has been written for those seeking a spouse. Although it may seem negative, with many warnings and much advice, this is an important step with serious consequences. It need not be complicated or frustrating, but the outcome will depend on the maturity and attitude of those involved. If we put God first in our lives, and the one we profess to love second, a happy ending is very much in view. "Isaac brought [Rebekah] into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her" (Gen. 24:67).

That It May Be Well With Thee: Dating And Marriage, So You've Found Someone

Who Are They?

It is almost certain that the person you marry will be a comparative stranger, as odd as that may seem. Their father, mother, brother, sister and grandparents will all know them better than you. You will probably not recognize them first thing in the morning, or know how they will behave before that first cup of coffee. How about when they've been deprived, night after night, of sleep because of a colicky baby? More practically, do they have a temper? Most of us get angry on occasion; but how does it look? "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (Prov. 16:32). We don't like it when a person starts acting like a child, throwing a tantrum, or when they become violent or verbally abusive. On the other hand, anger and frustration can be handled in a mature way — even if it means taking a quiet walk in the woods. If you are the type that withers before an angry outburst (and there's nothing wrong with that) then don't marry a person prone to such outbursts. You might be able to handle it once or twice, perhaps even 50 times; but 50 years of it may prove to be more than you can humanly bear. How would you feel if your spouse talks to the children in this way?

You are marrying a person, not their looks, not their money, not their position. "Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant" (Song of Sol. 1:16). Many in this world are beautiful, but they don't turn out to be so pleasant. You need to get to know the one you are marrying. You can only do this through communication — and I don't just mean lovey-dovey notes, but talking together on real subjects. When things get serious between a couple, it is essential that they move beyond that stage where each is guessing what the other is thinking; where neither is willing to say too much as they are unsure of their own commitment. Books make much of this situation because it creates a tension and crisis in the story. While it may work well for a novel, it isn't such fun in real life. If you can't talk through key issues before marriage, what makes you think you will be able to do so afterwards?

The ability to communicate takes effort and much depends on how we go about it. Don't begin a conversation with, We need to talk. That's what parents say to children. Try expressing your feelings and where you are at — this comes across as less threatening. If it is the girl doing the talking, don't be surprised if the guy says nothing in response! He will probably want to think about it. On the other hand, young man, don't think you need to fix the girl! She's probably not asking for a solution. She's not a car that needs repair! Offer some words of encouragement — something that indicates that you've understood what you have just heard. By the way, in this scenario we could reverse the roles and the advice still stands, though the way I've stated it is the common pattern.

People come with connections, and, like it or not, you will be caught up in their world when you marry them. If you can't abide their family, this is going to be difficult. You could choose to live far away, but what makes you think that the person you are marrying is completely devoid of the family traits that you find so objectionable? Oh, I know: He or she is different, nothing like the rest of the family. Of course! But, seriously? It won't be quite as true as you hope; just be sure that you're not blinded by your love. Laban was a dishonest and shrewd man and his daughter bore some of those same family characteristics. On a more positive note, Rachel was the mother of Joseph. Perhaps some of those attributes we admire in Joseph were learned from his mother, for he didn't bear much resemblance to his father, Jacob.

Compatibility

One of the most common reasons given for divorce (where one must be provided) is irreconcilable differences. To put it simply, two people who are incompatible. Compatibility should be considered at many levels: faith, spiritually, intellectually, temperamentally, financially, recreationally, and so on. There will be items that are nonnegotiable, for example, faith, and there will be things that are less critical. It is important to decide what's vital and what's not. If you can't live without it, then it's probably vital!

To quote a literary reference:

“Let me advise you to think better of it. I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life’’ (Pride & Prejudice, Jane Austen).

Once again it strikes me just how far society has shifted from once accepted Christian standards. When Jane Austen wrote this piece of popular literature, it wasn’t to express radical views — her writings lean towards the satirical observation of her fellow human beings and not the overthrow of societal norms. These sentiments are now widely viewed as being entirely outdated and most certainly demeaning towards women. Nevertheless, Mr. Bennett’s advice to his daughter, Elizabeth, is generally sound. It would have been nice if Austen had focused on spiritual rather than intellectual qualities — after all, she was the daughter of an Anglican minister. It is critical that the woman choose a man whom she can truly esteem as her head; that she can happily look up to, honor and respect. Intellectual compatibility should not be ignored, but look beyond college degrees. Couples from widely divergent walks of life have made for happy marriage partners because they shared a common intellectual bond and curiosity despite great differences in education.

If we turn now to the man, I trust that he has been looking for a help meet. Is the one that he has chosen going to be a spiritual help or a dead weight? Or worse still, will his wife be a spiritual discouragement? Don’t marry your ministry; if your mission field is the lost sheep of this world, marry a shepherdess! “Michal Saul’s daughter loved David” (1 Sam. 18:20) and yet she was no spiritual help to him at all. In fact, Saul gave her to David, so “that she may be a snare to him” (1 Sam. 18:21). They were not at all spiritually compatible.

You will never discern these things unless you are willing to discuss spiritual matters together. If there is someone that you are presently seeing, have you ever prayed with them? Ever read the Bible together? Maybe it all seems so awkward, but really, why should there be awkwardness with someone we profess to love and who returns our affections? More than likely, our thoughts are far away; we are too busy planning what thing we are going to do next. It is important to have fun — a marriage is not going to hold together if we don’t enjoy each other’s company — but there are more fundamental things. There needs to be that bedrock upon which the marriage rests. When children come along things get messy very quickly, unless the question of compatibility in matters of faith is settled long before marriage.

Financial issues are the primary source of conflict in about 40% of marriages; for another 50%, it’s a secondary cause of difficulty. It is important for a couple to understand the type of money managers they are. Money is used in Scripture as an example of faithfulness in material things (Matt. 25:14-30). We are to be good stewards of the resources that God has given us, no matter how little or how much. Money isn’t simply about meeting one’s needs. To expect one’s needs always to be met is neither practical nor scriptural; to raise a child this way is disastrous. On the other hand, if we view our financial resources as belonging to the Lord, then it changes both the way we manage our money and how we spend it.

When Abraham spoke to his servant, he gave this instruction: “if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath” (Gen. 24:8). Though this is in connection with Isaac not returning to Mesopotamia, I believe that it has a wider application. If the wife is unwilling to follow her husband, then will she acknowledge his headship? Furthermore, if the man intends to provide for his wife — as he should — his employment may not permit him to move.

It is interesting to note that when Abraham’s servant introduced himself to Laban, he made it clear that Isaac was a man of means; one who could support a wife (Gen. 24:35-36). Now, a girl should not expect her husband to provide a situation as comfortable as that to which she has been accustomed. Nevertheless, if there is to be a significant change in circumstances, it should be openly discussed. I’m not suggesting that money be the touchstone for marriage, but since a couple is in this together, they should try doing a little budgeting together. Building a home is a joint responsibility. Many young couples have begun married life without ever having considered the cost of running a household. All this may seem embarrassingly prosaic, and terribly unromantic, and yet these are some of the chief reasons that people give for conflict in marriage. You can’t live on love alone!

There are many other areas of life where differences will appear: Are you a night owl or a morning person? Timely or a free spirit? Neat freak or messy? Spontaneous or a meticulous planner? Don’t just ignore these differences; you are going to have to decide whether you can live with them or not. Little things can quickly grow into festering sores unless one has the capacity and grace to overlook the other’s foibles. A person that is always punctual may view timeliness as a question of integrity — to give that up touches them very personally. One who is free-spirited may view agreed upon times as a goal but not a promise. Can you reconcile the difference? Is one willing to show a little forbearance when the other is running late? Is the other ready to give him or herself more time so they’re not habitually behind?

What about the things we enjoy doing in our free time? Perhaps one likes to be away from the crowds enjoying nature in the mountains, whereas the other would rather be at the mall with the hustle and bustle of people. Clearly these are things where a suitable give-and-take can create a workable relationship. Not every activity needs to be done together — even in marriage. Time alone is important. Nevertheless, if there are no commonalities, I would ask: What draws you together? A husband and wife should provide mutual comfort and support for one another. If there are no shared interests, it can lead to a very lonely marriage.

The Father or Mother of Your Children

Children and the family are one of the Biblical reasons for marriage. Since this is the case, surely we need to spend some time thinking about the makeup of the family unit. This begins with our choice of spouse. The one we choose to marry is going to be the father or mother of our children. I suppose that is rather obvious, but let’s take a minute to think about it.

Do you see your boyfriend acting as a father? He may be a fun guy now, nothing but a boy at heart really, but will he step up to the plate? Is he going to be the spiritual head that you desire? Or is he going to run off with his buddies when things get unpleasant, leaving you changing the dirty diapers? Suddenly his boyishness isn’t so captivating — you have a boy; you need a man. “As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place” (Prov. 27:8).

Perhaps I have unfairly directed my comments towards the prospective father. Although the maternal instinct may be strong for many women (Isa. 49:15), there are girls who marry without ever having considered the responsibilities of guiding the home (1 Tim. 5:14). After all, girls want to have fun too.

Raising children is not a part time occupation. Both parents have an important job to do. Initially the mother has a strong biological role about which she has little choice, but motherhood goes far beyond biology. The father, in addition to caring for and providing for mother and child, has a critical part to play in raising the life he has helped to conceive. Can you see the person you wish to marry as the father or mother of your children?

Though I have already addressed the matter of an unequal yoke, if there is still one contemplating such a union, think again! Not only is it self-willed disobedience, but the children, without exception, will suffer the most. How are you going to handle it when your spouse undermines everything you say concerning Christianity — and they will. I don't suggest that this will be in a mean-spirited way; it might be, but more likely it will all be very rational. But that's not going to make it any easier. Reason is not faith, and reason will never lead to faith. In the beginning of this booklet I addressed three fundamental questions. The first two related to faith and the assembly. These are key questions that we must settle in our individual lives; they must also be settled in the life of a couple well before they are married. Even if both are saved, are they agreed that the children need to be raised in the assembly? When this question has not been answered, there is a danger that the family will leave the assembly.

Have you ever considered the genetic makeup of your prospective children? Certainly, there are medical conditions that one may need to consider, but these are relatively uncommon. Our children are the product of our combined genes. This affects eye and skin color, height, hair type and all our other physical characteristics. It may also affect less tangible qualities as well. Experiences mold us, and, unquestionably, God's work within us is transforming. However, we are vessels of clay, and we reflect the weaknesses of sinful humanity. Look for complementing strengths, and think twice about compounding negative traits. Both Jacob and Rachel were deceivers and, whether by nurture or nature, this tendency was clearly expressed in their children.

I'll Change Them!

Two statements are frequently heard: I can change, and I can change them. Really? I'm not just talking about a brand of toothpaste. Actually, we can't and you can't. I am convinced that change is hard. Yes, we do change, but we don't change ourselves. God alone brings about change — not our wife, not our husband. When we realize that the cost of not changing far exceeds the cost of change, it is only then that we are ready to let go. Often the pain involved in such circumstances is not something we would wish upon anyone. We have a loving God who does not inflict pain willingly, but He does and will allow pain to work out His plan in our lives (Lam. 3:32-33).

Have you ever stopped to think that pain is necessary? Lepers have no feeling; as a consequence they hurt themselves without noticing. The end result is a slow destruction of the body — they lose fingers and toes; they get burnt and wounds form, all because they don't sense pain. We can thank God for pain; it is one way whereby we sense bad choices. Let's pray that we never become insensible, like the leper, to God's prodding. However, no one with any sense willingly inflicts pain upon him- or herself.

We all make choices. We can make things easy or hard. We can either seek to walk according to God's will or our own. It seems that some have to go down the hard path. You can enter a hasty marriage, infatuated with the person who you believe will make you happy, and then endure the years of trial that go with it. Yes, if you repent and turn to God, you will learn from it; you will be a changed person, and wonderful blessing may yet result. But let's not forget, there will be a cost; you are creating a circumstance that you cannot escape. Is this really the path that you want to take?

The Advice of Others

We live in a culture where the choice of one's spouse is individual; no one else is going to make that selection for you. And yet, to ignore the advice of others would be foolish. We read of Rebekah: "the damsel ran, and told them of her mother's house these things" (Gen. 24:28). There must have been a happy relationship between mother and daughter — she runs! Ruth clearly consulted and confided in Naomi, and, I might add, it was well worth it. It is normal Christian behavior for a child to talk with their parents and to seek their advice. "My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother" (Prov. 6:20). When parents have concerns, they should be weighed carefully before the Lord and not angrily dismissed as irrelevant. If this is how one behaves, then it bodes poorly for the marriage relationship. How much better when the parental response is: "The thing proceedeth from the Lord" (Gen. 24:50). Consider the advice of both sets of parents. It is easy to pick and choose who we want to hear. When there is a consensus, either one way or the other, then surely it is a strong indicator. The pain of a breakup is nothing compared to a lifetime of regrets and sorrow. It is too late when you "mourn at the last, when thy flesh and thy body are consumed, and say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; and have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me!" (Prov. 5:11-13). Even if only one set of parents is opposed to the relationship, this could represent a serious breach in the family. How are you going to handle it?

Have you ever spoken to the grandparents? Their wisdom coupled with their unique perspective could be invaluable. Incidentally, how does your boyfriend or girlfriend interact with his or her parents, siblings and grandparents? If the young man is not kind and gracious to his mother, then why would he treat his wife any differently? It is good, also, to observe how your boyfriend or girlfriend interacts with your family and specially your parents. Do they treat them with respect or are they dismissive? Of course, if you've bad-mouthed your parents, then your friend will probably also. If this is the case, you need to set things right at home before pursuing the relationship.

What about the advice of friends? A true friend may be counted upon for faithful counsel. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov. 27:6). Beware, however, of one who casually wishes the best for you — that your dreams might come true. Caught up in the excitement of the moment, their advice will not be objective. If our friends are as wayward as we are, then their advice can be downright bad — as with Jonadab and Amnon.

Bad Reasons to Marry

The decision to marry is a serious one; one that cannot be annulled Scripturally when things don't turn out as we expect. Marrying because we are lonely, or because there isn't anyone else that will have us, is a very bad idea. The happiness that we so desire is unlikely to be found in such a union. Worse still, the misery that could result will far exceed the loneliness that we once felt. Marrying for pity, or because we think we can fix someone, are also recipes for disaster. A girl may be attracted to a bad boy because she believes that he just needs a little love — please, please don't go there. How many hearts have been broken — not just of the young girl or man — but of parents and grandparents,

because of such ill-considered unions. Marrying to escape home suggests deeper needs that must be addressed; these issues will simply be carried over into the marriage relationship.

This is the one place where I will encourage you to marry for love; true love on the part of both parties — unselfish love that desires the very best for the other person. Seek a relationship that will bring glory and honor to God; a union that He can truly bless.

Warning Signs

If you wake up in the morning thinking: Is she still angry with me? Will he speak to me today? Surely, these aren't good signs! If your significant other isn't someone that you can freely speak with, one with whom you can share your heart; if there aren't common goals, and a desire to be together; if there isn't a thrill when their number lights up your phone, then there is something missing from the relationship. If a person's annoying traits outweigh their attractive ones, these are clear warning signs!

Think about the things you do: are they flowing from an affection that you have for your boyfriend or girlfriend, or is it to get a response. It's amazing how people can change when they want to give a certain impression, but such deception doesn't last long. If you go to the assembly meetings and Bible conferences simply to be with a certain person, then this doesn't bode well for the relationship. This acting will begin to unravel in time. On the other hand, a strong relationship will be established if you're at the meetings because you want to be there; because you want to learn and grow, and because you jointly value God's Word. Such a relationship has its foundation on a rock; there's a common objective of the highest character. Marriage requires effort, but it must start on the right footing. Surely no one wants the honeymoon to end after the first week.

Though there are undoubtedly many warning signs, especially behavior and actions contrary to that which I've written so far, I will touch upon just one other — jealousy. Jealousy is an interesting word. It has both a good side and a bad. God is jealous for His people, and it is certainly not inappropriate to have a jealous concern for the one you love. However, that being said, jealousy that takes the form of mistrustful envy is very destructive. "Jealousy is cruel as the grave" (Song of Sol. 8:6). "Who is able to stand before envy?" (Prov. 27:4). Jealousy is like a weed that grows until it chokes out all life. Relationships must be built on trust; if you cannot trust a person, then, quite frankly, there isn't much of a relationship. I would add this one caveat: when we do profess to be in a relationship with another, then our behavior must change. A guy, who is seeing a particular girl, should not flirt with others who cross his path; things aren't as they were before. If there is no special attachment, this should be made clear and it should be reflected in your conduct. Don't keep a girl on a string while you explore other interests. Though I've used the example of a guy with a girl, the converse is equally true. If you profess to have an attachment to a certain young man, then act like it, or else clear up the confusion. Don't deliberately leave a person wondering.