

**Bound & Determined, by Jeanene Reese**  
*Christian Men and Women in Partnership*

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## Marriage as a Holy Union

Where Partnership is Most Intimate

The evening started as a date night. Jack and I had been married for just over a year. The combination of his graduate studies and part-time youth ministry and my full-time teaching job meant we had few evenings to spend relaxing together. We weren't so concerned about what movie we watched, we just wanted to get away.

Soon after the movie started, I knew we had made a mistake. It was an action thriller with graphic fire and explosions. Tears began to run down my face. I tried to quietly deal with them, but soon Jack noticed and asked if we needed to leave. We did. Sitting out in the car, I still could not gain my composure. Jack held me and let me cry it out. I felt so guilty that our date night was ruined and felt sure that somehow my grief was inappropriate at this time in my life.

I was crying about the death of my first husband, Mike Warren. He was killed in an explosion our senior year in college while helping volunteer fire fighters put out a grass fire near our country home.

Although I received a great deal of love, comfort, and support through Mike's death, I never seemed able to get past the sadness of it all. The

advice of many older women who had experienced a similar loss was, "Grieve, grieve hard, and then get over it."

Jack and I met in the middle of my grief and formed a close relationship that eventually led to our marriage. That night as my tears continued, I looked up to see Jack crying as well. I apologized, saying that I knew I shouldn't still be grieving, but somehow I couldn't get over the tragedy of Mike's death.

"Is that what you think?" Jack asked me. "You think I'm upset because you're crying over Mike's death?"

I nodded.

"Jeanene," he said, "Don't you know that I love Mike too? He was part of you, he shaped the person you are and that I love. Mike is part of our lives and always will be. You don't ever have to be concerned about expressing your grief with me."

What could I say to that expression of mature love? I wasn't crying because I wanted Mike to still be my husband; I wouldn't have called him back from being with the Lord even if I could. And I loved Jack, deeply and profoundly, and was delighted to be spending the rest of my life with him. That night, however, something shifted for me. I had already felt loved, comforted, and secure with Jack. But now I found a place of belonging, of intimacy, and of great joy.

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This discussion on partnership would not be complete without a chapter on marriage. Although I have been married most of my adult life and have spoken on the topic frequently, I am hesitant to write about it for many reasons. Marriage is the most intimate relationship that many of us experience and has the potential to bless or hurt us. Some couples, like Jack and I, live with a great deal of scrutiny of our marriages because of our positions within our community. We are often judged or criticized for how others see our marriage functioning.

Others have been deeply hurt by marriage through abuse, death, or divorce—whether it be our parents' or our own. Still others suffer grief over the fact that they never married and feel like second-class citizens, especially in the church. And too often, we portray marriage as the only appropriate, God-sanctioned partnership between men and women. As Christians, we are often not sensitive to these many reactions on the topic of marriage.


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## Thoughts on Working Together

"From the very beginning, Christians [must] realize that our responsibilities do not include being an individual in the church. God calls us through Scripture to be part of the body, which is the whole of Christianity. With this dependence on others the obvious conclusion is working together. Thus comes the team. Ecclesiastes tells us that two are better than one because when two lay down they can keep warm. Being different creatures, the product is sometimes joy and others heartache."

—Male Student



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Yet marriage was God's idea, and it is a significant Christian partnership that deserves our careful attention. We will begin the conversation by examining several views of marriage I see in the secular world that, although not acceptable to most Christians, still sometimes shape our understanding of it. Next, we will look at some pseudo-Christian views of marriage that many of us hear from pulpits, in Bible classes, and on Christian media. We will then examine a biblical perspective of marriage that has the potential to bless our marriages and focus them according to God's design. I hope that the material in this chapter will also bless our

understanding of all partnerships and cause us to think how we function within them.

## Secular Views of Marriage

*I don't need a piece of paper.* This view promotes the goodness of cohabitation outside the confines of marriage. Individuals in these relationships often say they stay because of love and commitment since they are not bound by any legality. They are free to move in and out of relationships unencumbered. When things get too difficult they can leave supposedly with less hassle and hurt than in a divorce. These types of break-ups are certainly less expensive for all involved. Others who hold this view may stay together for extended periods of time, even years. They often find a sense of stability and well-being; many report that they do not see the benefits of marriage. In some states, but not all, their union is considered a common-law marriage. While most Christians would find this view of relationship between men and women unpalatable, it is not without influence among us. I see too many people "living together" without marriage and feeling justified in doing so. Let me share a couple of experiences that I have had repeatedly.

Jake and Sara,<sup>1</sup> both Christians, came to me for premarital counseling. In the course of our discussion, they revealed that they were already "married in their hearts." When asked what this meant, they explained that they had already shared vows with each other and were sexually involved. They were only going through the formality of a wedding for their parents' sakes. As we discussed how they came to this understanding, it was clear that both felt they needed sex to find out if they were truly compatible, and they obviously were. However, as the counseling continued, they discovered other areas of major concern. Eventually, they broke off the engagement and went their separate ways.

In another case, Ashley came into my office crying because she could no longer deal with her roommate situation. Although she had signed

a one-year lease, she was not sure that she could continue to live in the house with the present situation. As she talked, it came out that two of her roommates were having regular sleepovers with their boyfriends. When Ashley confronted them with the inappropriateness of their actions, they assured her that everything was fine. They explained to her that they were not literally having sex. They were retaining what many call "technical virginity" by participating in all forms of sexual expression except actual intercourse. When I called all the girls in for a conversation about their choices and the impact on those concerned, the roommates were surprised to discover that I thought what they were doing was not in keeping with a Christian commitment.

*What's in it for me?* People who hold this position seek relationship for the perceived benefit it holds for them. They may marry because their prospective spouse is especially attractive or wealthy. The marriage may offer financial security, social status, or the promise of emotional support. Marriage from this vantage point offers the elusive happiness sought by so many in our culture. Individuals who hold this view often have selfish impulses and unreasonable expectations of what it takes to make a marriage work. Again, we may be tempted to assume that Christians would not be easily influenced by such shallow impulses, but experience tells me otherwise.

Andy and Susan were fellow graduate students with us. They were one of the few couples we knew at that time who were practicing Christians. Andy pursued his doctorate during the day while Susan watched the children. She worked the night shift as a nurse so that they didn't have to pay for childcare. Both of them were exhausted much of the time, but Susan seemed barely able to function at times from lack of sleep. Somehow, they felt it was all worth it to pursue their dreams and nurture their children. Imagine our surprise when, right after graduation, Andy announced that he was leaving Susan for another woman. He reported

that Susan was no longer his intellectual equal but his new girlfriend definitely was. He suggested that perhaps his and Susan's marriage had been best for getting him through grad school but was not meant to be a lifetime partnership.

Another time, we sat in our living room talking with close friends. Celia had told us the week before that she had simply outgrown their marriage. She wanted time to travel, to have some adventures, to be free from the responsibilities of job, husband, and children. When we asked if she couldn't pursue those interests without abandoning her family, she said, "No. For once I have to think about what's best for me. I've spent most of my life putting others first, but now it's my time." As she walked out, she gave us a line that I have heard too many times from people who ought to know better: "I just know that God wants me to be happy." I didn't know what to say in response. Should I suggest that God wants her to be unhappy? We sat there for a few more minutes trying to absorb what had just happened. I have often wondered if Celia found the happiness she so desired, and if it was enough. We will talk more about the pursuit of happiness later in the chapter.

Few Christians would embrace either of these views of marriage. Yet they creep into our subconsciouses and affect the ways in which we see our marriages and ourselves. It is not surprising that as they do, we seek ways to justify the resulting negative thoughts and actions by appealing to God. What we end up with are distorted pictures of humanity, of relationships, and of the Divine. I would suggest that equally damaging are pseudo-Christian views of marriage. While they may seem to be more spiritual at first glance, they too lead us away from God's intention for how we are to be in our most intimate relationships.

### Pseudo-Christian Views of Marriage

*The family that prays together, stays together.* I have seen this phrase on billboards in numerous cities and on more church marquees than I care

to count. I am confident that anyone reading this chapter will wonder what is the matter with this truism? Isn't prayer important for believing Christians? How can this possibly not be a good motto for Christian men and women striving to keep God at the center of their home and relationship? I understand the concern. But what I find to be most problematic is how the phrase begins. The focus is on the human relationships and how God can make them stick if we simply engage in spiritual practices. I'm not questioning the priority of prayer but rather its place in this schema.

We often talk about the problem of idolatry in biblical times. When we discuss what possible idols exist today, we list things such as cars, homes, paychecks, vacations, etc. What I find troubling, however, is that for many Christians our marriages, and subsequently our families, are our idols. They misplace God and become the center of our lives. And in the process, the church is reduced to being just another resource to be used by the family. I am not saying that we shouldn't value our families and allow the church to help us with them, but I think the question of what is central is a critical one. And that leads to a second view, which has the same underlying problem as this one but with a different center of focus.

*As long as we are focused on Christian service, our marriage will be fine.* While I have never heard this view spoken aloud, I have certainly witnessed it being lived out. I am not exactly sure of its root, but I can think of several possibilities. Perhaps it grows out of a works-righteousness understanding of salvation—the belief that we have to earn our way to heaven. Or maybe it is a way to bargain with God—I'll serve you in this way Lord so that you will (fill in the blank). Or it may be a way to get attention—accolades from all kinds of people about my good works. Possibly it is linked to compulsive behavior that has been put to good use—at least other people are being helped. Or it may be a cover for low self esteem and intimacy issues that have never been dealt with—busyness for the

Lord at least offers some release. Whatever the source, this approach to relationship also misplaces God and potentially damages relationships.

Ministry to others is part of any committed Christian life. But if it misplaces God's rightful place as the center of our lives, then it too becomes a form of idolatry, and even worse. I think that for many over-committed servants, their ministry becomes their love affair. They are practicing a form of spiritual adultery that has all of the same ramifications of relational adultery. And yet, who can question them about it? After all, they are only doing the Lord's work.



### Thoughts on Working Together

"I learned many important principles about working in a group setting. First of all, I must be willing to take a back seat. I cannot always be the one to lead every project and solve every problem. This was a hard lesson for me to learn because I like being in charge and carrying the weight of the decisions. Throughout this project, however, I had to take a back seat because my time was divided between this project and my daughter. I was forced to share responsibility because I knew that I would not be successful if I took on many heavy responsibilities. I also learned that my team members eagerly carried their weight and had no problem dispersing responsibilities evenly."

—Female Student



The offended spouse in this relationship is in a catch-22—nothing he or she can say or do seems to be able to get to the real source of the problem. Just as in physical affairs the offending spouse is able to project the difficulties back onto his or her offended mate. Think of the possibilities:

1) obviously the accusing spouses don't love the Lord as much, 2) perhaps they misunderstand the importance of a particular ministry, 3) possibly they are underestimating the offenders' significant contributions to ministry, or 4) maybe they just need to learn to be more supportive.

What troubles me about both of these views is not only their prevalence, but also how destructive they can be. I am confident that there are other such pseudo-Christian views of marriage but these two at least put us on the alert and prepare us to consider what I believe is God's intention for our marriages.

### God's Design for Marriage

*Covenant.* The word conjures up all kinds of responses. For some, it refers to a binding contract in which each person signing must be careful to read the fine print. For others, it may be an amiable agreement that both enter hoping for the best. For Christians, however, covenant is tied to the nature of God. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we read of God, who is holy and faithful, entering a covenant with human beings who are flawed and sinful. Familiar language describes God's tender love for the people (see Hosea 11:3–4, Isa. 66:13) and none is more intimate than in the use of the marriage metaphor (Hosea 2:16, 19–20). The prophet Isaiah records this message from God to Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. . . . Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (Isa. 43:1a, 4a).

It is not surprising that Christians have adopted this loving, intimate expectation of covenant as a lens through which we see the sacred union of marriage. For Christians, this connection means that the covenant of marriage is not only made between the husband and wife but also with God. Also, the covenant is considered valid only after others witness it, a practice still required to complete most marriage licenses. The ceremony binding the covenant, the wedding, includes witnesses but also is full of

the promises of fulfillment. Just as God promises faithfulness, steadfastness, and constancy to Israel, so the man and woman commit to live with God and one another.

Traditional marriage vows mirror all of these expectations: "I, \_\_\_\_\_, take you \_\_\_\_\_, to be my [wife/husband], to have and to hold, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part." With these promises, death is the only thing that can sever the marriage relationship. "I'll stay with you," the couples declare, "no matter what."

*One-flesh.* The first chapter of Genesis ends with God blessing the newly created man and woman and giving them the cultural mandate to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion [over all creation]" (Gen. 1:28ff). At the end of chapter two, God's directive is different: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:24-25). Both passages clearly refer to sexual union, even though neither states it explicitly. Yet the process of becoming one flesh is far greater than the joining of the male and female bodies physically in marriage. I would suggest that God is creating a whole new being—a marriage. I have heard it described in mathematical terms: one whole person plus one other whole person in marriage does not equal two but one. The man and the woman bring all that they are to this union but lose none of the fullness of who each is as a person in doing so. Any other construct means that a woman is only a half without a man and vice versa—a perspective that was articulated in the movie *Jerry Maguire*. When the leading male, Tom Cruise, finally comes to his senses and realizes that he loves the leading female, Rene Zellweger, he tells her, "You complete me." Without her, would he be less of a human being? So many of us imply the same sentiment when

we speak about marriage. (And we wonder why the singles among us feel second-rate?) The best way I can illustrate this idea is through the lens of my own marriage.

Several years ago our family "adopted" one of our international students, Sunny, from South Korea. She is a delightful young woman who enriched our lives immeasurably. When she first arrived in the States, she struggled not only to converse in English but also to understand cultural expectations. If you know anything about most Asian cultures, showing honor to those who are older is a strong social value. Jack and I, however, were in a unique relationship with Sunny. She was both our daughter and our student. She did not know what to call us. Mom and Dad was too intimate, Jack and Jeanene too casual, and so she addressed us as Dr. Janeese (a combination of Jack, Jeanene, and Reese). We loved it. Unwittingly, she gave "us" a singular name.

Jack and I have been married a number of years. This year, he is 59 years old and I am 58. Our marriage, however, is not the sum of the two of us in terms of age or maturity. If it were, it would be 117 years old! Rather our marriage is a 35-year-old relationship. It is a young adult in that sense and must be treated as such. Just think of the difference it would make if we allowed our marriages to be treated as one-year-olds, ten-year-olds, twenty-year-olds, and so on. Wouldn't our expectations be different? Our approach to its care and nurturing altered?

Our unity in marriage reflects the unity of the Trinity, and the joining of the male and female, both made in the image of God, allows marriage to reflect God's glory and God's nature. The one-flesh perspective also upholds Jesus' teaching on marriage found in the Gospels (Mark 10:2-12; Matt. 19:3-12). In both accounts, the Pharisees question Jesus about the legality of divorce and note that Moses allowed husbands to give their wives a certificate of divorce. Jesus answered their first question by referencing Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the

two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:6-9; Matt. 19:5-6).

In addressing the Pharisees, Jesus made it clear that God is the one who joins the man and woman. In English, the word "join" has the potential for a double meaning—God is the one who brings them together creating a marriage, and God becomes part of the marriage. Yet in Greek, the meaning is entirely different, join carries the sense of being yoked together.<sup>2</sup> And what do we yoke together and for what purpose? We yoke oxen for the purpose of work. Not a very romantic picture but a very realistic one.

Work is intrinsic to the relationship of marriage. We establish homes, bear children, work jobs, and hopefully contribute to the good of the community. For Christians, however, the work is even more significant. Our marriages are formed for work in God's Kingdom. I have often wished that at weddings we asked, "Do we have the yoke ready?" instead of "Do we have rings?" It would certainly be a more sobering moment for all concerned. Though not exactly the same, I did once hear a question asked with a similar sentiment in mind.

We all watched with delight as two of my closest friends growing up, Mark and Karen,<sup>3</sup> started dating, fell in love, and decided to be married. She was the maid of honor at my first wedding and both were attendants for Jack and me. I was the matron of honor at their wedding, and Mark's grandfather, a very godly man, performed the ceremony. At the place where the traditional question is asked, "Does anyone have a just cause why this man and woman should not be married?" he asked something far more significant. He addressed the audience and asked, "Does anyone know why the wedding of these two, Karen and Mark, will hinder either of them from being with the Lord when he comes again?" What a great question! I will tell you that I do not know of any marriage that has served the church more faithfully than theirs.

This yoke perspective is also useful in answering many of the questions that surround the decision about whom to marry or whether to marry or not. If we used godly principles to make these decisions, then our marriages would be more likely to fit God's purposes. In situations where people are not sure if they should marry some particular person, I advise them to consider what living with that person will mean for their lifetime commitments to Christ. If the romantic relationship will hinder the spiritual, the individual inquiries have an answer.

When Jack and I met, we both had come to the conclusion that we would serve God as singles. I was recently widowed, and he saw no apparent prospects for marriage. We were both headed toward different ministries and were prepared to be unmarried. When it became obvious, however, that our relationship had the potential to be a serious one, we asked ourselves: Would we be more effective serving together or alone? The conclusion we came to seems obvious now, but it was not made without a lot of prayer and wise counsel.

Looking back at Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees, we see that there is more to the discussion. The second part of their inquiry focuses on the fact that Moses permitted certificates of divorce to be written. Jesus explained that this action was allowed only because of the hardness of the people's hearts. Divorce was never part of God's plan. We know that God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16).

In both Gospel accounts, Jesus has even more to say. According to Matthew, the only acceptable reason for divorce is sexual infidelity; in Mark, Jesus says that anyone who marries a divorced person commits adultery. These teachings have been the source of much debate among Christians. It is not my intention to undertake a full treatment of divorce and remarriage in this discussion. However, I think we must consider a few elements.

I want to acknowledge first how difficult it is to discuss divorce because of its potential to hurt many people—those who have chosen it and

those who have suffered from others' choices. I have both family members and dear friends who have suffered the trauma and pain of divorce. I do not know one of them who would say that is an easy or good choice at all. Yet circumstances sometimes leave people in impossible situations.

At the same time, as Christians, we have so emphasized what we often call "scriptural grounds" for divorce that I think some people resort to adultery as a means of getting out of a bad marriage. Too often we begin our marriages with a tiny clause in the covenant. I'll stay with you unless one of us commits adultery. Knowing Jesus' desire for marriage to be for a lifetime, I am confident that he did not intend for us to enter it with a loophole. It seems as if we think it is easier to be forgiven for adultery than for divorce. Divorce is not an unforgiveable sin. I believe the church can hold up the sanctity of marriage and still journey with those whose marriages have failed. I am committed to both.

The concept of covenant is a good lens through which we see marriage, but the metaphor of one-flesh best represents God's design for it. The author of Ephesians, in discussing how Christian wives and husbands should relate to one another, also refers to Genesis 2:24 but applies it to Christ and the church. It is one of three mysteries revealed in the epistle. The first is that God reconciled humanity to God's self (1:7b-10). The second is that God reconciled Jews and Gentiles to one another and made them joint heirs of the Kingdom (3:1-6). The third is that Christ is the loving head over his bride, the church (5:31-32). Since the final mystery is revealed in the context of headship and submission for husbands and wives, it seems only appropriate to examine it next.

## Headship and Submission

Several years ago, I was involved in several evangelistic studies. One young woman, Sandra, was so eager to hear about Jesus that she actually knocked on my door and asked me to study with her. Of course, I was delighted and soon she committed her life to Christ and was baptized.

Her husband, Tony, supported her faith decision but was not very interested in following suit. Sandra was convinced that if he studied with us he would eventually become a Christian.

Jack and I agreed to meet with them and talk about how to have a better marriage. Sandra thought that this approach might be easier for Tony to take than a more direct one. At our first meeting, Tony suggested that if we would just tell Sandra what the Bible said about wives obeying their husbands, there would be no need for further discussion. Even though Tony had limited knowledge of Scripture, he knew Ephesians 5:22, or at least he thought he did.

In that moment, Tony made the same mistake that many of us make in approaching Scripture—he pulled something completely out of its context, made it say what he wanted to hear, and applied it to his immediate situation. But the text he used, just like all Scripture, has a specific context that must be considered if we are to better understand its meaning. Insights on how the church at Ephesus was established and some of the developments that took place within it are found in various places in the New Testament other than Ephesians (see Acts 18:24-20:1, 17-38; 1 and 2 Tim.; Rev. 2:1-7). It is obvious when reading these that the Ephesian church struggled with issues of spiritual power, false teaching, and faithful leadership.

In writing to the church, Paul focuses the first three chapters on who God is and what God has done on behalf of all Christians.<sup>4</sup> This section of the letter lays the theological foundation from which the rest of the book flows. It ends with Paul's powerful prayer for the believers to know all the fullness of God (3:19). In the last three chapters, Paul focuses on how believers ought to live, beginning with the words, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:1-3).



Interwoven throughout the instruction found in chapters 4–6 are further theological insights that keep Christian conduct tied to God's nature and activity. Look for example at Ephesians 4:17–24. In this section, Christians are told to abandon their former way of life and to put on the new self “according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (24). The same is true of the second half of Ephesians 5, the section from which Tony took his misunderstanding of marital relations. Here Christians are given a series of injunctions that organize the ideas. We are to “be careful how [we] live not as unwise people but as wise” (5:15); “be filled with the Spirit” as we address one another (5:18b); and “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). Each of these represents a basic tenet of life in Christ: a faithful life filled with wisdom, a Spirit-filled countenance that encourages others, and a submissive posture that flows from our reverence for the Lord.

Immediately following these instructions we find a household code, a societal structure usually addressed to the ruler of the household, the *paterfamilias*, who held absolute power over his subjects (wives, children, and slaves).<sup>5</sup> However, several elements of this household code are substantially different from those found in extra-biblical codes. Not least is the fact that these instructions are placed within what Richard B. Hays calls “a vision for community whose social relations are impacted by the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

The hierarchical structure of the code is tempered by the comprehensive nature of the call to the whole church to live with the basic tenets of Christian faith listed above. The structure of this particular code is also quite distinct: Most ancient codes were addressed only to the person who held power. In turn, that individual was given instruction for his subordinates. In Paul's structure, the subordinates are addressed and are called to *choose* a submissive position, something unheard of in the ancient world. Paul's code in Ephesians 5 is also reciprocal—the least powerful in the house is called to submit to the most powerful, but the one in the

ruling position is challenged to act in a Christ-like manner, with humility and gentleness (6:5–9). It is hard for us today to imagine the impact these kinds of changes would have had on those receiving Paul's letter.

We may be tempted to ask, why did the apostle not abolish the injustices found in the extreme subordination of women, children, and slaves? But any overt challenge to Rome's power would have been immediately squelched. Instead, Paul is demonstrating a unique example of cultural engagement. Rather than overturning the conventional authority structure, Paul chooses to subvert it.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, he allows the household code not only to serve those in the community according to Christ's lordship and example but also to be a witness to the rest of the world.

I don't think we have any unified household codes in the U.S. today. That is not to say that we can't take the principles Paul is giving in this letter and apply them to our relationships. Of course we can. But instead of spending so much time defining headship and what it means for husbands or discovering how submission must be practiced by wives, what if we gospelsed our one-flesh partnerships, putting them under the lordship of Jesus Christ? The results would not only bless those relationships but also serve as a witness to those outside of Christ. We would once again engage our culture through transformed lives in surprising and effective ways.

Back to Tony's comment about Sandra “obeying” him. That night, Jack and I did not have all of the insights that have come in later years of life together and study of God's word. What we *were* able to tell him was that the word for obedience is not applied in Scripture to the marriage relationship except once. In 1 Corinthians 7:3–5, Paul instructs believers on how to conduct themselves sexually within the marriage. He explains that the wife has authority over her husband's body and he over hers. It is a mutually expressive and fulfilling relationship.

Instead of writing this chapter as a guide to marriage, I have tried to take us behind this partnership to see what God intended it to be. In these last paragraphs, I would like to explore a premise that came to me

through one of my favorite books on marriage, *Sacred Marriage: What if God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to author Gary Thomas for many of the insights that follow.

### Holy vs. Happy

When I ask almost any group of parents what they really want for their children, many share the same response. "All I want," they say, "is for my children to be happy." I am floored every time I hear it. Let me assure you that I am not trying to make my children unhappy. I just don't think happiness is the goal. Yet many of us chase this illusive emotion and never quite catch it. I think it is why we accumulate so many things, why we strive for bigger, better positions, why we anesthetize our children with entertainment, and why we become convinced that our spouses just aren't cutting it.

Happiness has the same root as "happenings." Often, what we are seeking is just the right set of circumstances so that we can be happy. But circumstances rarely work out like we want—and frankly, I don't think God cares that much about our happiness. What God desires is for us to be changed more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Marriage becomes a crucible, an intense way for God to teach us, through great joy and deep sorrow, exactly what that means. I would like to give attention to three of the principles Thomas examines in his book.

*Marriage teaches us to love like God loves.* Anytime we practice love, we can assume that God is at work whether we acknowledge it or not. For we know "... love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7b-8). And marriage is all about love, or at least it's supposed to be.

Many of us remember the beautiful days of first love. When everything the other said was funny or insightful. When I found my spouse's idiosyncrasies intriguing and his faults endearing. When we thought each other so appealing that we could hardly keep our hands off each other.

But it doesn't last long and it shouldn't. To live in that sort of dream world is not to experience real life, or I would suggest, real love. After all, we are yoked for a purpose.

Soon the daily grind of bills, jobs, housework, children, yards, mortgages, cars, repairs, and more takes a toll. If we are not attentive, we soon slip into a myriad of bad habits that eat away at the joy of the relationship and erode the love we share. But if we keep God at the center, things can be different. I remember vividly watching an older, well-respected couple greet one another with warmth and enthusiasm after only being separated from each other for a matter of hours. I asked the wife, Freda, how they kept that "spark" alive. I expected her to give me some insight that I could file away to use in the future. Instead she said, "The Lord is right there in the middle of us." I wanted to say, "I knew that." But I didn't really. Instead of giving me something I could store for the future, she gave me the key to living every day as a Christian wife.

Do I always feel love? No. Love is not an emotional response but an ongoing choice. There are times, however, when I don't even have the will to choose love. Jack and I, like all married couples, have experienced our share of hard times. I used to think that if things got difficult enough that I couldn't love with my love, I could always love with God's. Then I discovered that I cannot love with God's love unless I am fully surrendered to it.

The choice to keep God at the center of my marriage begins with the choice to keep God at the center of my life. Only when I choose to be a loving, committed person am I able to also be that kind of spouse. And this decision is a daily one. It does not occur automatically across the span of my life or my marriage. Just as God is continually transforming me, so God is at work in us to make our partnership what it needs to be.

*Marriage teaches us to be faithful as God is faithful.* It is interesting that God uses the marriage union as an analogy for God's relationship with

Israel. The whole book of Hosea is about the prophet's faithfulness in marriage to his adulterous wife, Gomer. Their human relationship mirrors the spiritual union between Israel and God. Yet this analogy or metaphor is not what most of us have in mind when we think of our marriage. We prefer the loving, sacrificial metaphor discussed earlier from Ephesians 5: There, Christ, the bridegroom, sacrifices everything in order to present the church, his bride, in splendor and glory.

In a recent television interview, Elizabeth Edwards, wife of John Edwards, spoke about his sexual affair and the subsequent book she wrote about their lives. He was one of the last three candidates for the Democratic nominee for president. During the campaign, doctors discovered that Elizabeth had cancer, but the Edwards decided to proceed with the grueling schedule anyway. John eventually withdrew from the election process when it became apparent he would not win the nomination.

Months later, John Edwards' affair became public and the news broke that he fathered the other woman's child. In spite of it all, the Edwards tried to keep their lives together. One comment that Elizabeth made during the telecast, however, really stuck with me. She said, "All I ever asked of John was that he be faithful to me." She, of course, meant that she never wanted him to betray her with another woman. And now he had.

I bring this situation up with hesitancy. I do not want to be guilty of undermining the gravity of their situation or of removing the expectation for sexual faithfulness in marriage. And of course, none of us can know what goes on in any marriage behind closed doors. But in our celebrity-obsessed, media-driven culture, short sound bytes often take on the weight of truth. While I can't make any assertions about John and Elizabeth Edwards' marriage, I have watched adultery impact the lives of couples I love dearly. What I do want to challenge, however, is the sense that faithfulness means never faltering. None of us are able to walk in perfection in any of our relationships. We are all sinners.

We hurt one another and betray one another in small and large ways. And each time we do, we are given another opportunity to repent and to forgive. I cannot imagine what marriage would be like without both of these elements.

*Marriage teaches us to bear witness to God's activity in our lives.* Sometimes we get so caught up in the daily pressures that we fail to stop and take stock of what God is actually doing in our lives. Years ago, Jack and I began a practice that has really blessed our marriage. We have a five-year review. I would love to say that we thought through this process carefully and initiated it intentionally, but in truth, we stumbled into it. At our fifth anniversary, we were just beginning to realize some of our life goals. As we talked about them, we looked back over our time together and realized how gracious the Lord had been to us in the good and bad times.

At ten years of marriage, we did the same. This time, I was very pregnant with our third child, Jack was busy preaching to a growing church, and our conversation was quite different. By now, however, we had established a pattern of looking for how God was blessing us and challenging us in our life together. I highly recommend the practice and look forward to our next anniversary—our thirty-fifth. Who knows what God will accomplish by then?

What I think is most encouraging is not only the opportunity to acknowledge God's activity in our lives but to share it with others. In the movie, *Shall We Dance?* the female lead says, "We all want a witness to our lives." She is sharing it in the context of why we want to be married. I agree with her in part. I think all of us want to think that our lives, our marriages, our children, our heritage matter. But for Christians none of those are actually our own; they belong to God. When we share not only this reality but also how God is at work in all of them, then we are witnesses for the gospel in our time and in our place.

So who benefits from living with the expectation that marriage is designed to make us holy instead of happy? I think the first blessing goes to the husband and wife. Living with an open heart to what God will teach us in our marriages brings a sense of deep joy and peace instead of disappointment and failure. We know that it is not all up to us, we have help from the Lord and from the community of faith. Also, our children witness the authenticity with which we relate to one another and to them. They gain a greater sense of security and hope for how their lives can be in the Lord and in their future relationships, married or otherwise.



### Thoughts on Working Together

"I learned that being in teams when I get into full time ministry can be a great benefit to me but also a great task. It is not as simple as it seems, and lots of feelings can get hurt when working together. I have learned that I need to become more flexible, encouraging, loving, and patient before I am ready to go into partnership in ministry. I can also see the importance of communicating honestly with one another because I am just now realizing that a lot of the things that I wrote down I never discussed with my teammates. Doing so could have lightened a lot of the stress and frustration that I am realizing now that I have."

—Male Student



Our church and our neighbors also are blessed when we live in pursuit of holiness and not happiness. I am always aware that others are watching us. Yes, some watch out of simple curiosity—we are a weird bunch. Others observe in order to criticize—vultures are often on the horizon. But still others want to learn how to be in marriage, how to raise children, and

how to do it all in the Lord. Our homes can become a refuge to people as our lives are beacons of light. Our being vulnerable and needing help does not diminish our witness. Actually, I believe it offers others hope. No one I know is looking for people who have their act together. Most people want to know that God will bless even our messes.

### Conclusion

Looking back to that night after the movie, I am astonished at the sweetness and wisdom we shared that night. The thirty-five years Jack and I have had together have been rich. Many of them filled with a sense of purpose, closeness, excitement, and fulfillment. Others have been difficult, challenging, and full of disappointment. Yet I wouldn't change one of them.

We have learned a lot about what it means to really partner together. We have raised three children, seen two of them marry wonderful partners, and now have two beautiful grandchildren and the hope of more in the future.

God has blessed each of us with rich ministry opportunities. But we recognize that our family is just one small link in a long line of faithful men and women, married and single, who have lived holy lives.

There is a beautiful song that we have sung in worship and for weddings. The words always resonate in my heart and tonight, as I close this chapter, the tune has been playing constantly in my head.

*Will all who come behind us find us faithful?*

*Will the fire of our devotion light their way?*

*Will the footprints that we leave,*

*Lead them to believe*

*And the lives we live inspire them to obey?*

*Oh will all who come behind us find us faithful?*

I hope the answer is yes, Lord. Please make it so.