

A Biblical Guide for Marriage in Africa

Walasa Phiri

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Introduction

When God created everything in the world, He looked at His creation and proclaimed it all “good.” He was pleased with the universe, the stars, the plants, the animals, the oceans, and even with man. Yet, surveying His entire creation, God saw one thing that was not good. Genesis 2:18 says, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’” The one thing that was out of balance and not good was for the man to be alone. So, God created a woman and brought them together because they were better together.

This theme of “better together” defines the marriage relationship and clarifies that men and women were created to be in a covenant relationship with each other. While it is true that a select few have been given the gift of singleness, which should be celebrated, one can see that God’s design from the beginning was one man and one woman in a covenant relationship with Him and with each other.

This covenant relationship is what this work defines as *marriage*. Marriage is more than a wedding ceremony; it is more than a contract between two people or the means of procreation. Marriage is the very first institution God designed, and it is the basic structure of society and the pre-cursor for the church. In fact, the analogy often used for the church is a marriage analogy where Jesus is the bridegroom, and His church is the bride. Marriage and the home are fundamental building blocks for any healthy church and any healthy nation. Therefore, the enemy typically attacks at the point of the home and the marriage.

When surveying the state of marriages and marital relationships in Africa, things look good on the outside, but there are cracks and fractures below the surface. The central premise of this book is that the African church and African continent need a biblical theology of marriage that is appropriately and contextually applied. If homes are broken, then that brokenness will extend to every aspect of African society, and this is something that must be addressed.

Some Important Pre-Understandings

Before beginning a work of this magnitude, it is essential to articulate some pre-understandings to help the reader navigate the scope and approach of the

text. These pre-understandings will govern the entire book and guide us on our journey of discovery concerning the biblical theology of marriage.

The Importance of Forming a Comprehensive Biblical Theology of Marriage

This book will cover the entire counsel of Scripture. When forming a comprehensive theology of anything, we must cover the issue from Genesis to Revelation. The vision and scope of this work are to examine every biblical passage, story, and text that deals in any way with the concept of marriage. Each text addressed will be a different lesson, and the text will be included in the chapter to help readers have the Scriptural references before them. After examining the text in question, I will then attempt to make several observations regarding marriage, considering the genre of the text, as well as the historical and biblical context of that passage.

By the end of this work, the reader will have an anthology of biblical teachings and perspectives on the theology of marriage laid out in a canonical (and somewhat chronological) format. While this work will read more like a canonical devotional on marriage, the index at the end of the book will provide a comprehensive list of topical items if needed for an in-depth study on a particular marital issue.

The Importance of Sound Hermeneutics in Biblical Theology

As mentioned earlier, this work will pay particular attention to the biblical perspectives of marriage, emphasizing sound interpretation and hermeneutics. Many are tempted to take verses out of context, particularly in the Old Testament, and misapply them today. However, this work will try to glean the “timeless truths” from each passage of Scripture while understanding them within the context of the rest of the Bible.

It is important to understand the nuances of biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and to consider the genre of a particular book of the Bible when doing bible interpretation. A text must also be understood in its context. This includes its context within the book and that book’s context within the rest of the Bible. Scripture interprets Scripture, so no passage should be taken in isolation but in conjunction with the rest of biblical teaching. Additionally, the text must be understood in a framework that considers the history of the

time it was written and the culture in which it was intended.

Finally, this work is committed to a historical/grammatical approach to biblical interpretation. In short, this refers to the original, intended meaning of the author who wrote the passage. Instead of bringing one's own meaning to the text or confusing the meaning with a current application, it is better to discover the single intended meaning of the author who wrote it for the audience to which it was intended. Upon understanding this historical/grammatical meaning, it is easier to find the "timeless truth" for readers at all times and then apply it to our specific context today.

The Importance of Effective Contextualization in Africa

Thus, the application portion of each chapter will be devoted to the African context. This book intends to look at each section of Scripture that deals with marriage and understand it in its original context. Then, after discovering the principles that are true for all marriages in that passage, the chapter will include an application section for marriages in Africa.

All believers, regardless of cultural context, are subject to the guidance and teaching of the Bible. However, there will be various nuances in marriages, depending on the cultural context of those married people, and this work will seek to take that into account. This book is not intended to be an indictment of Africa or African culture. Where African marriages are walking in step with the Holy Spirit, the author wants to note that and celebrate it. Where the word of God runs counter to African culture, this work will highlight that and offer healthy correctives.

In reality, the problem with marriages in Africa is not the issue of culture. The problem is the issue of sin. Like in the West, the enemy is attacking African marriages and the African perspective on marriage. In fact, what some are calling "marriage" in Africa is not marriage at all but two people simply living together as husband and wife. A recent poll in Nairobi discovered that only about fifteen percent of the people who claimed to be married were married (even in a traditional African sense). While sinful things exist in all cultures, this work is not about lifting one culture above another. Instead, it is about seeing the biblical theology of marriage as preeminent and then calling all believers into a right relationship with their God and their spouses according to the biblical perspective.

A Final Note About Marriage

While I will leave it to the reader to discover the biblical theology of marriage as we go through the Bible, I think giving a specific definition of marriage based on Scripture and society is essential. We will discover together that the critical components of a biblical marriage are God, and a man and woman whom He brings together. Additionally, there is an element of covenant commitment between the man and the woman and between them and God.

Weddings look different in different societies. This book is not about wedding ceremonies or the right and wrong kinds of cultural practices associated with doweries, marriage traditions, and other extra-biblical traditions. It seems that the creator of marriage (God) has allowed human societies to do different things (within reason) regarding the processes and ceremonies of marriage. The principles, though, that are found in every marriage are a man, a woman, and a covenant.

Covenants are, by their very nature, public and in front of witnesses. There is no such thing as a secret marriage or a “marriage of convenience” where people living together just call themselves husband and wife. This arrangement is not only outside the bounds of the Bible but also outside the bounds of society. Even in the African context, there are various ways to “be married,” but they all involve witnesses and an exchange of vows (covenant) before a recognized authority.

So, whether it is a “church wedding” (in the traditional Western sense), a “legal wedding” performed by a government magistrate in front of a couple of witnesses with documents signed, or a “traditional wedding” where doweries are paid and families are involved in the negotiations, there still must be a man, a woman, and a public declaration of commitment. Regardless of how the ceremony looks (or if there is a ceremony), you do not have a marriage without a wedding of some kind. This idea will be a crucial premise that this book will acknowledge as we travel through the Bible together to discover a biblical theology of marriage.



Genesis 1

In the Beginning

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Then God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you; and to every animal of the earth and to every bird of the sky and to everything that moves on the earth which has life, I have given every green plant for food”; and it was so. And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Genesis 1:27–31

Theology of Marriage

To rightly understand marriage, we must go back to the very beginning and look at God’s original purpose for humanity to understand His original purpose for marriage. We learn several things about humanity in this passage:

- We discover that we have all been created in God’s image. This means that every person on the planet has intrinsic value because they are created in the image of God. We must respect others regardless of who they are, and we must seek to preserve life

because we are image-bearers who relate to other image-bearers. Even though we will later see how sin comes into the world and mars the image of God in man, that latent image is still there, and this is why we respect ourselves and others, especially our spouses.

- We also see that God created humanity in two sexes, male and female. While all are created in the image of God, all are not the same. God intended for there to be two equally valuable types of people in the world: men and women. These two are different in many ways but equally valuable because they complete each other. Men need women, and women need men, and no gender is better than the other. Regardless of what our contemporary culture tells us, God's intention was a "binary" perspective. A person is created as a man or a woman, and the creation account has no middle ground. The current expansion or twisting of human sexuality in the LGBTQ world is not biblical, and it is not legitimate. It is instead sinful humanity's defiance of God's created order.
- God intends a husband and wife to be fruitful and multiply, which is a blessing. A part of God's blessing on the first husband and wife was the gift of sex and procreation. There is nothing sinful about sex between a husband and wife. It is a wonderful gift that God intends for us to enjoy. He is present when husbands and wives engage in sex with each other, and it pleases Him when they enjoy the gift He has given them. In addition to pleasure, God created sexual intercourse as the means of procreation, so babies would be born. This is also a blessing from God, and He intends that godly husbands and wives will produce godly offspring and subdue the world by procreating godly offspring.
- God is the source and sustainer of all life. He provides all that humanity needs to subdue the earth. He has provided food for humankind and a purpose for humanity in creation, and all of this was "good." While God wants husbands and wives to produce and raise godly offspring, He is still the ultimate source of life. Conception happens during the union of a man and woman because God is the one who creates that life inside the woman. We are responsible to procreate and to care for our children, but it is

God alone who gives life. If, for some reason, within His sovereign will, a man and a woman cannot conceive, this does not imply some fault in that couple. As the sole creator of life, the Lord must still be the one who works through that act of procreation, bringing a living soul into the world at the point of conception.

The African Context

There are many critical applications of these theological truths in the African context. Every society and culture has aspects that are both good and bad, and the African context is no different. Many aspects of African marriage should be celebrated and even emulated in the West. However, there are also some other areas where African husbands and wives would do well to pay attention to their alignment with the biblical perspective on marriage. The goal of this book is to encourage marriages that are both fully African and thoroughly biblical.

- Understanding that all have been created in the image of God is very important. Sometimes Africans feel “less than” others in the world, but they are image-bearers of God just like everyone else on the planet. God loves everyone and does not value any geographical location or skin color more than another. The African husband and wife should see that they, too, are created in the image of God, and their lives and marriage are important and should glorify God.
- God has created all to either be male or female. This fact is something that the African continent understands well, and I thank God for the African church that refuses to give in to the current LGBTQ agenda. May they continue to hold firmly to the Bible and remain the conscience for the West, calling them back to the biblical perspective. However, it is also essential for African men and women to understand that while men and women are different, they are still created equal. Each sex has different roles in marriage and even in some aspects of society, but African women should never be viewed as second class.
- Since men and women are created by God and bear His image, we must be very careful to respect the gift God has given us. One

unfortunate sinful aspect of African culture is the tendency of husbands to beat their wives. Men, your wife is a gift to you from God. You can see how God gave a wife to Adam and how God is the one who joined them together. Eve was an image-bearer of God, and she was Adam's perfect partner. It would have been a terrible sin for Adam to beat his wife, which is never condoned in the Bible. This should never be done, because she bears the image of God and because she is the gift that God has given you. Likewise, wives should not disrespect their husbands, because they are God's gift as well. When you abuse or disrespect your spouse, you are actually abusing and disrespecting God because He created your spouse and gave your spouse to you. We must remember this.

- Children are seen as a blessing in the African context, which is consistent with the biblical theology of marriage. Children are a gift from God. However, it is important to remember that they come from Him. Children belong to God, and we have children because God chooses to bless us with them. In Africa, it is quite common to view infertility as a curse from God or as something that can lead to divorce or drastic measures like utilizing witchcraft. This view is not biblical, and we must remember that God is the one who gives life, and He has His own reasons and will for all that He does. If you cannot have children, do not assume this is because of sin or some other problem, and do not blame your spouse. Continue to pray, seek God, and trust Him to give you children in His time. His will is best, and He knows what He is doing. In some instances, God does not bless with children, and while we cannot always understand the reason why, we can know that His will is perfect and He has His reasons. It is important to note that many children in Africa are orphans, and perhaps God wants some who are childless to become caregivers for those with no parents. There are other ways to be a mother and father in Africa besides having biological children.
- Historically in Africa, sex was often viewed as taboo, even between a husband and wife. This perspective is changing in modern times,

but many still cling to this traditional view. However, this is not consistent with the biblical witness. God has given this gift to be enjoyed in the marriage relationship, and there is no shame as long as it is done in a loving relationship between a husband and wife. When a husband and wife are joined together before God in a covenant relationship of marriage, this is an excellent thing. It is one way that God glorifies Himself, how godly men and women subdue the earth, and how we please God and worship Him together. Marriage should be held in very high honor, and it should always be under the Lordship of Christ. Let us respect our spouses and cherish them because, in so doing, we cherish the Lord Jesus, who loves us and died for us.

2

Genesis 2 **Not Good to Be Alone**

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, but they were not ashamed. Genesis 2:18,24–25

Theology of Marriage

Chapter 2 of Genesis goes back and fills in more details regarding the union described in chapter 1. In this chapter, we can see the intimacy of marriage and the mystical covenant between a man and woman who are joined in holy matrimony.

- First, we notice that God declares it is not good for a man to be alone. This phrase does not imply that singleness is always wrong, but it teaches us that it is often the exception and not the rule. God has created us to live in connection with others and particularly in covenant relationships with our spouse. Up to this point, everything in Creation had been declared “good,” but now the statement is made that Adam’s “aloneness” is not good. He needed someone to complete him, and he needed a helper. Yes, God is enough for all of us and especially for those whom He has called to live in singleness,

but often for us to fulfill our full potential, we need a spouse to complete us and fill in the gaps in loving interdependence.

- We see that Eve was literally fashioned from Adam, so we know that she, too, was an image-bearer of God and also that there was genuine intimacy between the husband and wife. Additionally, it is worth noting that Eve was specially prepared for Adam. There is often a discussion about whether there are “soulmates” or one person created especially for another. This chapter seems to teach that God created Eve for Adam and vice versa. It seems that within God’s sovereignty, He especially equips us to be the best gift possible for our spouses, and He also equips them to be His gift for us.
- Verse 24 is especially instructive for us about the nature and importance of marriage. It was so important that Jesus even quoted it in the gospel accounts when He taught about marriage. The verbs in this verse are very interesting. There is a **separation** of the man and the woman from their families, where the past is no more, and a new beginning with a new family takes place. There is also an intimate **joining** of the man and woman where they become one flesh. This refers to more than just physical intimacy. It also implies that they became one person with one heart, one mind, and mutual interdependence. The marriage covenant transforms the two into one where it is impossible to see where one person ends and the other begins. This blending is powerful and mystical. Finally, Jesus tells us that there is **permanence** in this union because He commented that “what God has joined together let no man separate” (Matthew 19:6).
- Finally, there is intimacy in Genesis 2:25, where the man and the woman are naked and unashamed. Sin had not yet entered the world, and they did not understand the concept of nakedness or shame. However, this verse implies much more: Adam and Eve were engaged in intimacy in the garden, and there was no shame. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in its purest form, marriage is a holy union where God expects the husband and wife to engage in sexual activity with full understanding that this pleases God and

is for His glory, their pleasure, and the building of a godly heritage of children.

The African Context

Marriage is something that has long been valued in Africa. It is often expected that one will marry. Having a spouse and children, in many African cultures, is seen as the mark of moving from adolescence to adulthood. However, what is becoming more commonplace today is those who seek to have “wives” and “children” without genuinely being married before God and witnesses. This pattern is outside of the biblical theology of marriage. We see in Genesis that God Himself created Eve and gave her to Adam. We also see that God instituted the idea of marriage, where men and women leave their families, join with each other, and create new homes and married family units. We can apply much in this chapter to the African context and situation.

- Even in Africa, we can declare that it is not good for man to be alone. Africa is a relational continent, and Africans believe we need each other. Yet we must recognize that God, not her family, gives you your spouse. There is nothing unbiblical about dowry or bride prices, but the Christian husband should recognize that his wife is a gift from God. Even if you pay respect to the family by paying what they ask for your wife, she has still come to you as a gift of God, and God enables you to pay what the family is asking. Do not let traditions like “bride price” cause you to think that she is property or that you own her or the children. Christian stewardship means that your wife belongs to God, not to you, and you have been joined to her by God so that you can care for her as a steward, not own her as property. You honor God by honoring your spouse, and He alone is the Lord of your home and your family.
- Since God is the one who owns us, and He is the one who gives us our spouse, then we must also recognize that singleness is not a curse. While it is good for a man to find a wife, he must marry the wife that God gives him. If you have not yet met the one God

has prepared for you, then you should not despair, because all these things are in God's hands. If God wants you to have a spouse, He will reveal your wife or your husband to you at the proper time, and until then, you are single because that is God's current will for you. These days of singleness are a gift to you to be devoted to Him with no divided loyalty to another person. We will discuss the gift of singleness in more detail later.

- Once you are joined to your spouse, notice that you are to “leave” your family and be joined solely to him or her. This does not mean that you never see your family again or that you are not close to them, but it does mean that your spouse becomes more important to you than your father, mother, siblings, etc. Some African families want to continue controlling their adult children after marriage, but this is not appropriate. The husband is now the head of his home, and the wife is now joined to her husband. Families should be there to offer advice and counsel when the new couple seeks it from them, but families must be careful not to meddle in the new couple's lives.
- Finally, the marriage bed should be kept pure, but it should also be enjoyed without shame. Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed, and there was no sinful connotation to sexual relations within a covenant marriage. Sex should be celebrated, but it should also be kept only within the confines of a loving marriage. It is sinful to engage in sex before marriage or outside of marriage. These things do cause great shame.

3

Genesis 3 Sin Enters Marriage

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves waist coverings. Genesis 3:6–7

Theology of Marriage

Everything was good after God created man and woman to live in a covenant marriage with one another in the garden of Eden. They enjoyed fellowship and love with each other, and they also enjoyed fellowship and love with God. God intended that this would be a three-way relationship where Adam and Eve would relate to each other as lovers and spouses, where they would relate to God as individual followers of God, and where they would relate to God as a couple (one flesh). This triune relationship between God, husband, and wife was holy and reflected God's glory. That was until Satan entered the serpent and tempted Adam and Eve to disobey God. Once they sinned against God, everything changed. The image of God in them was marred, death entered the world, and their relationship with God and each other became tainted by sin. Today, because of Christ, we can be restored to a

right relationship with God and with our spouses, but this issue of sin is something that couples now have to battle with, and we must build our marriages under the lordship of Christ.

- Satan realized he could not directly attack God because he was only a fallen angel, and God was all-powerful. So Satan craftily chose to attack God's creation, man and woman, and he attacked them at the point of their marriage relationship. He continues to do this today. The spiritual battle for this world happens in the family and in the church. If our families stand against Satan, then the church will stand against him, and he knows this.
- Notice that the devil attacked the family structure. First, he went to Eve and tempted her. This was not because she was weaker but because he was intentionally bypassing the family structure with Adam as the head of the home. He was tempting Eve to not only eat the delicious fruit but also assert her own authority by disobeying God and bypassing the leadership of her husband. She saw the fruit as an opportunity to be equal with God, and her pride led her to sin. Her conversation with the serpent should have been one of pointing back to her husband and telling the devil that she was under Adam's authority and committed to obeying her husband as the spiritual leader of their family.
- Adam is at an even greater fault than Eve. He was not in a distant part of the garden during the temptation, but he was actually "with her." He listened to their conversation and allowed his wife to be tempted and fall. Then after her sin, he followed her and committed the very same error. As the head of his family, he had been tasked with teaching her the word of God and protecting her from error. Yet, if you notice from 2:16–18, Eve was actually created *after* Adam received the commandment to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was Adam's responsibility to teach his wife and help her know how to please God. However, 3:3 shows us that Eve was a bit confused by the commandment, and she had even *added* to the word of God by saying they could not "touch" the tree. As the head of the home, Adam shares the blame

for Eve's confusion with God's word, and he also shares the blame for not intervening when she made her fatal choice. Sin comes to all of us through the line of Adam (*not Eve*). Both Adam and Eve sinned against God, and now everyone born in the *line of Adam* (everyone in the world) is born a sinner.

- This sin, unfortunately, affects every area of our lives, including our marriages. We must be especially careful to resist sin and live under the lordship of Christ. The rest of chapter 3 explains the curses that fell on the creation and on Adam and Eve due to their sin. Today, we still bear that curse, and we see the world suffering because of the entrance of sin into the very first marriage. Much like Adam and Eve, we see husbands and wives playing the "blame game," where Adam blames his wife and God, she blames the serpent, etc. We see Eve is cursed to experience pain in childbirth and be bitter with Adam's leadership in the home (see vs. 3:16). These results of sin are continuing in our marriages today. Only Jesus can deliver us from sin and make our homes like they were intended to be before sin entered the world.

The African Context

- Like in the rest of the world, Satan is busy attacking African homes, marriages, and families. Each part of Africa is different, but many families struggle with adultery, incest, and abuse of various kinds. Africa is well known for polygamy, which is against God's original intention of one man and one woman together forever. Divorce is also commonplace for couples who are unable to bear children or where other problems have entered the marriage. Satan knows that the church is only as strong as the families that make up the church, so he attacks the people of God at the family level, and he seeks to steal, kill, and destroy godly marriages.
- Africans tend to have a strong culture with a solid family structure. Most Africans recognize the husband as the head of the home. However, when husbands fail to serve God or fail to love their wives as Christ loves the church, then that position of authority turns into an opportunity for abuse. Some African husbands are

tyrants who rule by physical abuse instead of leading by love with a servant's heart. Sometimes marriages are arranged without any love in the home. This lack of love leads to a man and woman living together as husband and wife but leading separate lives without intimacy or even conversation. He has his life and his money, and she has her life and her money. God never intended for husbands and wives to live separate lives. You are to be one flesh and share everything. You should talk regularly, you should not have any secrets from your spouse, and you should be of one heart and one mind in all decisions. There should be nothing hidden from your husband and nothing hidden from your wife. You are to be one in Christ.

- Today, God still intends for the husband to be the head of the home. This means that he is the physical leader and the *spiritual* leader of the family. It is not just the church's job to teach wives and children but also the job of husbands. The church has a role to play, but husbands must not abdicate their responsibility to lead their families spiritually. Notice the failure of Adam to teach Eve well. Don't make the same mistake! Husbands should guide their wives, and if a wife is slipping into sin, her husband should talk to her and help her. Wives should submit to their husbands and follow their lead. If he is not serving God, then she will have to pray for him and help him see how he must change to be better (see 1 Peter 3:1-6). Families should be in church together, and the husband should take an active role. Too many African churches are filled with godly women whose husbands are nowhere to be seen. We need the men of Africa to step up and fulfill their roles in the church and in the home.
- Sin is a real problem in today's world, and it touches our families. We need men and women of God to submit to the lordship of Christ and let Him be Lord in the home. When the African family stands strong for Jesus and when African marriages are committed to each other and to Christ, then we will see God working through the African church to change the world. Too often, we get caught up in all the cultural stuff related to marriage and forget the biblical

requirements. We spend so much money and effort on having the right celebration, paying the right dowry, and following all the rules related to cultural weddings. Yet, we spend minimal effort ensuring our marriages are pleasing to God. It is a waste to throw away so much money on a wedding and make no effort to build a strong marriage. It would be better for the wedding to be simple and cheap and focus all your energy on building a solid marriage that will stand the test of time.



Genesis 4

Cain, Abel, Seth and Lamech

Now the man had relations with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, and she said, "I have obtained a male child with the help of the Lord."
Genesis 4:1

Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, she said, "God has appointed me another child in place of Abel, because Cain killed him." Genesis 4:25

Theology of Marriage

The significance of this text to marriage might not be obvious, but it is important to note that from the very beginning, the Lord makes it clear that He is the one who gives children. Eve understood that the sexual relationship between her and her husband was how Cain, Abel, and Seth were born, but she also knew that every sexual encounter did not lead to a child. God is the giver of life, and He is the one who creates a living soul at the point of conception. This is in accordance with His will, and it is something that should be respected and cherished as we live our lives under His sovereign rule.

Another interesting note about marriage in this chapter is the mention of Lamech, who was the first polygamist in the Bible. Polygamy is not condoned in Scripture, and, as we have seen from the creation account, it was not God's original plan. His plan has always been one man and one

woman committed to God and each other in a covenant relationship called marriage. However, here we see Lamech taking two wives. While the text does not condemn him for doing that, it appears his intentions were sinful. In 4:23–24, Lamech brazenly tells his two wives that he has killed a man for wounding him and that no one dare touch him for it. He compares himself to Cain, who is the first murderer in the Bible. Lamech’s sinful attitude about murder is similar to his sinful attitude about polygamy. He does what he wants and is not concerned with the consequences or the opinion of God. This attitude makes it clear that polygamy was not God’s will for man, but it was an example of the selfish attitude of Lamech. Polygamy fails to consider the sovereignty of God and His divine will in our marriages.

The African Context

- Like Eve, we must realize that children come to us because of God’s will, not man’s will. Having children is very important in Africa, and barrenness is often considered a curse. This has led many to divorce their wives, take a second wife, or practice witchcraft to remove the barrenness. We must realize that only God gives children, and He gives them in His time and in accordance with His will. Sometimes, children are born out of wedlock or even as a result of adultery or rape. This fact does not mean that God wanted people to commit adultery or for women to be raped, but we must realize that the child was formed in the womb by God, and it is precious, even if it is the result of a sinful act like adultery or rape. We must not punish the child because of the actions of the parents.
- Every child is precious to God and must be loved and cared for. In addition, because God is the giver of life, we must not be discouraged when we fail to conceive. We do not always know why some people can have children and others are unable, but it is not always because of sin or sickness. Sometimes seeing a medical doctor or addressing the physical situation can solve the problem, and children can be conceived. Sometimes it is just a matter of patience and trusting in God, and eventually, children will come.

Sometimes it is God's will for couples to remain childless, and He has His reasons for such a decision that must be trusted. Either way, we must surrender to God and trust Him to do what is right. We must look for what He is trying to teach us in the situation and understand that loving Him and knowing Him is more important than having many children. Regardless of what the culture says, your self-worth does not come from bearing children, and that is not what makes you an adult. Your self-worth comes from Jesus, and your identity should always be in Him, whether you are gifted with children or not.

- There is never a biblical reason for polygamy. We will discuss polygamy more as we walk through the Bible together in this book, but for now, just know that polygamy was not God's intention from the beginning. The first example of polygamy was from a brazen murderer who compared himself to Cain, who murdered his own brother.

Genesis 6

God Preserves Marriages

Now it came about, when mankind began to multiply on the face of the land, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw that the daughters of mankind were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves, whomever they chose. Genesis 6:1-2

“But I will establish My covenant with you; and you shall enter the ark—you, your sons, your wife, and your sons’ wives with you.” Genesis 6:18

Theology of Marriage

This chapter begins with a statement about the population growth in the world and how the increasing population had sunk deeper and deeper into sin. It is interesting to note that the corruption of humanity was highlighted in their approach to marriage.

- Many are confused by the passage related to the daughters of men and the “sons of God.” Contrary to some theological perspectives, the sons of God in this passage are not referring to angels having relations with human women. Scripture makes it clear that this is impossible (see Matthew 22:30). Instead, these refer to those who were born in the godly line of Seth (see Genesis 4:25–26) intermarrying with the ungodly line of Cain.
- Again, we see Satan attacking God and humanity at the point of marriage and the family. We see the sons of God making several

mistakes regarding marriage that we can learn from today.

- First, the descendants of Seth chose wives based on their appearance and not on their character. This tendency is a common mistake that many make today. The outward appearance does not qualify someone to be a good wife or husband. Of course, physical attraction in marriage is important, but it is not a primary characteristic by which to choose a spouse. Unfortunately, in this world, it is often the most important characteristic for many. It is no wonder that more than half of marriages end in divorce. Beauty fades and is fleeting, but a woman who obeys the Lord is of great value (see Proverbs 31:30). If you marry for looks, what is there to your relationship once you grow old and the appearance changes?
- Second, the descendants of Seth “took wives for themselves, whomever they chose.” This is an example of self-centeredness without any consideration for the will of God. As we have learned, a spouse is a gift from God, and we should be praying, seeking the Lord, and finding out what His will is for our lives. You don’t choose your spouse. God gives him or her to you and convinces you that he or she is the one He has chosen for you. This is the only way to ensure that you are walking in the will of God, and it is the only way to find genuine happiness in marriage. That doesn’t mean that if you are unhappy in marriage, you have married the wrong person and can divorce them. If you are married, God wants you to stay with that person no matter what (except for a couple of rare exceptions). So you must be prayerful and make the right choice in the beginning. The sons of God married the wrong people for the wrong reasons, leading to further corruption in humanity, eventually leading to the destruction of the world in the flood.
- However, chapter 6 shows us how God was working to preserve Godly marriages. He spares Noah and his wife and Noah’s sons and their wives. God was concerned about the family unit, and in the same way He preserved animals in pairs, He also preserved the family and marriage by insisting on protecting godly marriages in the ark. God cares about marriage. It was originally His idea, and it is His institution. He must be the Lord of our marriages as we serve Him as married couples.

The African Context

- Africa is much like the rest of the world today. Many are marrying the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Many Africans tell me that they look at “skin” before they look at what is in the person’s heart. It is common for many Africans to be secretive and keep things from others. It is essential when choosing a spouse that you know them well. You need to look beyond the outward appearance and look at their heart. You should spend time with them and not rush into marriage until you are sure they are who they say they are.
- It is also important to seek God’s direction in whomever you choose to marry. He has a will for your life and wants you to be with someone who will lift you up and encourage you to greater godliness. Africans often consider things like family ties, clan, tribe, appearance, money, education, and many other worldly things when choosing a spouse. However, these things are less important than whether that person is a born-again child of God. God does not intend for believers (sons or daughters of God) to marry unbelievers (sons or daughters of men). You should marry someone who is truly a Christian and someone very dedicated to the church. In addition, you should seek someone who is of the same faith as you. If you are a Baptist woman, you should seek a husband in the Baptist church. It is possible that God could unite you with a believer from another biblical church, but the closer you are in beliefs, the easier your life will be with each other. I have witnessed many marry outside of their church, and they either have to compromise and go to a church that is not what they want, or they end up going to separate churches, which is not good for their marriage or family.
- God has a will and a plan for your life, including whom you should marry. Seek Him first, and let Him show you whom to marry. Decide after you are convinced of God’s will and then submit your marriage to His lordship. As God preserved those four couples in the ark, He will also preserve you as you hide your marriage relationship in Him and under His protection.



Genesis 12

The Sanctity of Marriage

It came about, when he was approaching Egypt, that he said to his wife Sarai, “See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife;’ and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well for me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.” Now it came about, when Abram entered Egypt, that the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. Pharaoh’s officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. Therefore, he treated Abram well for her sake; and he gave him sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants and female servants, female donkeys, and camels. But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for myself as a wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go!” Genesis 12:11–19

Theology of Marriage

In this story, God demonstrates for us the holiness and sanctity of marriage. Abram allows fear to control his decision-making and chooses to lie about the nature of his relationship with his wife, Sarai. God’s response is to preserve the marriage at all costs, and He strikes Pharaoh’s house with plagues even though Pharaoh does not realize he was

violating the marriage of Abram and Sarai. There are a few important things to note regarding the importance of keeping our marriages pure.

- First, we can see that God expects marriages to remain pure and holy. Even though in a later story (see Genesis 20), we learn that technically Sarai is Abram's half-sister, he is obviously being deceitful because of the fear of what the Egyptians will do. He also seems to enjoy the benefits that come from Pharaoh, and he doesn't refuse the gifts or try to give them back. In this passage, Abram is not acting righteously, and his behavior disappoints God. God wanted Sarai to remain pure and married to Abram because it was through her that God would create His covenant people. We must realize that it is God's will for us to remain committed to our spouse and pure of heart no matter what comes up in life. We should also understand that there is more at stake than just the sanctity of marriage. If we treat our marriages lightly, we will harm the reputation of Christ and His church, and we will also damage the lives of our children, families, and neighbors. Other people paid the price in this account because Abram was not willing to do whatever was necessary to preserve his marriage relationship.
- This leads to a second issue of the responsibility of husbands to protect their wives. In this story, Abram only thinks about himself and what could happen to him. God needs the husband to be brave and to be the one who is willing to do whatever is necessary to protect his wife and protect his marriage. Abram's guile and deceit were not honoring to his wife or God, and he is reprimanded because he attempts to be clever. Instead of trying to be clever, it is much more important to be righteous and trust the Lord.
- That touches on the third point, which is that God is indeed the one we must rely on. God was fighting for Abram, even though Abram was not fighting for his marriage. God intervened on his behalf and orchestrated the circumstances so Sarai would not be violated. Of course, God had His own will and purposes for them, and sometimes bad things happen in marriages that God does not step in and prevent. Still, we can see here that God is the one who

makes a way for us in marriage, and God is the one Abram should have trusted to help him navigate the danger of the Egyptians. The bravest thing a husband can do is to do the right thing, no matter what it might cost him. You must fight to protect your marriage and to protect your spouse. Marriage is the holiest of institutions and must be guarded at all costs.

The African Context

- Africa needs brave husbands and brave wives who do what is right regardless of how difficult it might be. There is sometimes outside pressure from the culture and from well-meaning family members who try to force you to disobey God's word. You must not succumb to that pressure but stand for what is true. When the loving grandmother tries to take your son or daughter to the witch doctor because she "knows" it will work, the godly husband and wife will stand up against her and politely refuse. When friends tempt you to violate your marriage vows and sleep with another person, the godly husband and wife refuse and look for new friends who follow Christ. When family members press you to take another wife because you are not having children soon enough in your marriage, the godly man refuses to listen to his family and stands with his wife no matter what others are saying. Doing what is biblical is not always easy, but God honors that, and He will stand with you amid persecution.
- It is more important to be godly than to be clever. Many African cultures value cleverness, and people are often looking for a way to deceive others or gain some kind of benefit by hiding the truth. It is vital that we say exactly what we mean and that we mean exactly what we say. Abram (later Abraham) tries the very same trick in Genesis 20. He settles on the land of King Abimelech and tells him that Sarah (formerly Sarai) is his sister. It seems that Abraham did not learn his lesson, and he repeated the same sin of lying. God visits Abimelech in a dream and tells him he will die if he takes Sarah because she is Abraham's wife. Abimelech comes in fear and returns Sarah to Abraham, greatly annoyed at Abraham's deception.

Abraham tries to use some flimsy excuses, but once again, what is really happening is that Abraham is caught trying to be clever instead of just being honest and trusting God to take care of him.

- It is important in the African context to let your *yes* be *yes* and your *no* be *no*. Trying to hide the truth from others or trying to outsmart your adversary is never God's way. God wants the truth to reign in our marriages, and He wants the truth to reign in our other relationships. Sometimes we will even try to deceive others because we do not want to shame them. We think it is easier to tell a small lie than to tell the truth because the truth might bring embarrassment. We tell people we will come to an event, but we know we will never come. We think it is easier to just lie and say we will come than to tell the truth that we have no desire to be there. Sometimes we don't know something, but because of fear of embarrassment, we act as if we know all about it. This is never the way to please God and does not make things easier. The truth is always revealed in the end, so it is better to be honest and tell the truth from the beginning, no matter how much it might hurt. In 1 Corinthians 13:6, the Apostle Paul says, "Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth." Being truthful with others and being truthful in our marriages is the way to honor God. We must always speak the truth in love and trust that God will help us navigate any of the difficulties that come with that truth.



Genesis 16

The Problem of Polygamy

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had not borne him a child, but she had an Egyptian slave woman whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please have relations with my slave woman; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. And so after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave woman, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. Then he had relations with Hagar, and she conceived; and when Hagar became aware that she had conceived, her mistress was insignificant in her sight. So Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be upon you! I put my slave woman into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was insignificant in her sight. May the Lord judge between you and me." But Abram said to Sarai, "Look, your slave woman is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence. Genesis 16:1–6

Theology of Marriage

There is nothing more devastating to a family than polygamy. God's intention from creation was always one man and one woman in a covenant marriage until death. Yet, because of convenience or lust, we see polygamy from time to time in the Old Testament. Just because it is recorded in the text does not mean that God condones polygamy.

Instead, God is opposed to it, and every example of it in the Bible always leads to pain, hardship, and suffering. Notice several things about this story that help us to see the problem of polygamy.

- In the previous chapter, God had promised Abraham a son who would come from his own loins. Abraham and Sarah knew the promise, but like so many of us, they were unwilling to be patient and wait for God's answer. Instead, Sarah hatched a plan of her own. That plan involved giving her servant Hagar to her husband to be his second wife and bear children on her behalf.
- While it could be that Sarah was choosing a culturally appropriate remedy (in those days), it was not the will of God and never has been. God's intention from the beginning was one man and one woman together until death in a covenant marriage. Sarah's shortcut and attempt to force the promises of God to be fulfilled on her terms created terrible problems in the end.
- We often think our solution is best, but we rarely consider the consequences of our human reasoning. Notice all the fallout from that fateful decision:
 - Abraham and Hagar were led into an adulterous affair where he had sex with someone who was not his wife.
 - Hagar began to lord it over Sarah, and there was great bitterness and hostility between the two women.
 - Sarah became angry with Abraham and blamed him for following through on her wishes. There was strife and division between the husband and wife.
 - Ishmael was born to Hagar, and he and his mother were treated as outcasts because of Sarah's jealousy.
 - This enmity grew over the years, and few realize that now, *religiously speaking*, Jews and Christians are descended from Abraham through the line of Isaac, but Muslims are descended from Abraham through the line of Ishmael. The great heartache of persecution, forced conversions, radical Islam, terrorism, and so many living in lostness, blinded by

Islamic teaching, can be traced back to this terrible practice of polygamy and the poor choices of Sarah and Abraham.

- This problem of polygamy is not only Sarah's fault. As the head of the home and the one who had received the covenant promise from God, Abraham should have refused to take Hagar as a wife. His desire to just have peace in the home at the expense of righteousness is the reason for so much pain and heartache today. After Sarah became unhappy, he let her do whatever she wanted to Hagar, and the innocent second wife and her child paid the price for Sarah's bitterness. It never pays to try to outthink God. Instead, we have to do God's will in God's way. This includes marriage. It is not a matter of what culture allows, but it is instead a matter of what God's word says.

The African Context

After twenty-five years of service in Africa, I have seen firsthand the problem of polygamy and the pain that comes from it. I have served in multiple countries and seen this practice in multiple contexts, and I know that it never ends well. This is not to say that children born to other wives are cursed or that God does not care for wives who are second, third, etc. in a polygamous marriage. God is a God of grace, and I have known many children born to other wives who go on to be great men and women of God. Still, polygamy always brings pain, and it always brings problems. Some might choose to ignore the truth and try to defend the practice as African, but it is never the right choice.

- Just as in the case of Sarah and Hagar, there are often issues of bitterness and jealousy between the various wives. I have known some who looked at their rival as a sister, but still, there was always competition between them, and one wife was always favored by the husband, and often some of the children felt like second class. It is not God's intention, and polygamy usually brings division and strife into the home.

- Polygamy in Africa is almost always for selfish reasons, and selfishness is unbecoming of believers.
 - Some tribes promote polygamy because it is a sign of success or wealth to have more than one wife. This culturally driven pride is not from God and is instead a mark of selfishness in the family because they are trying to be seen as better than others.
 - Some choose polygamy for the same reason as Abraham and Sarah. When the first wife cannot have children, the husband will be encouraged by his family to take a second wife so that he can have children. I understand the cultural pressure to have children, but remember that children are a gift from God. God eventually fulfilled His promise to Sarah. If they had waited and trusted Him, they could have avoided all of the harmful consequences.
 - Some take other wives because they want to have sex with more than one woman or because they want more wives to work at home or in the fields. Some consider children to be like a retirement program, and the more children you have, the more likely you will be well-cared for in old age. Notice that in all of these cases (whether pride, desire for sex, bowing to cultural pressure, or whatever), all of these stem from selfishness on the part of the husband and his family.
- We do not have space in this book to discuss what to do if you are already in a polygamous marriage. That is a topic for another book, and there is no easy answer. One must realize that in God's eyes, you really don't have multiple "wives." Instead, you have the wife of your youth, and then you have other women you live with in an adulterous relationship. God does not want you to continue in disobedience, but now you also have (as the husband) the responsibility to care for this other woman (or women) living in your home and all of the children who are your children by birth. You should not take another wife as Abraham did, and you should also not mistreat her and her children as Sarah did. There is no easy

answer to the problem of existing polygamy, and it is best to take each situation on a case-by-case basis. However, the easiest solution for those who are only married to one spouse is to never get in the situation to start with. Avoiding polygamy is the only sure way to be free from it forever.

- One other final note related to polygamy is the importance of what it means to be married. I find some people who say they have multiple wives, but they have never been genuinely married to any. Remember, a genuine marriage is one man and one woman in a covenant marriage before God and witnesses. If you are just living with someone and having sex with them, they are not your spouse. Because of shyness in Africa, many will use the word *husband* or *wife* to describe a person they live with but are really not married to. If you have not fulfilled your responsibilities to a woman and been married legitimately, then she is not your *wife*, she is just a girlfriend, and you are living in sin. Some men in Africa say they have many *wives*, but what they truly mean is they have many girlfriends that they are having sex with. We must remember the biblical standard for marriage and be sure to avoid these pretend marriages where people are just engaging in pre-marital sex.



Genesis 24

A Wife for Isaac

“My master made me swear, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I live; but you shall go to my father’s house and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son.’ Then I said to my master, ‘Suppose the woman does not follow me.’ And he said to me, ‘The Lord, before whom I have walked, will send His angel with you to make your journey successful, and you will take a wife for my son from my relatives and from my father’s house; then you will be free from my oath, when you come to my relatives; and if they do not give her to you, you will be free from my oath.’ “So I came today to the spring, and said, ‘Lord, God of my master Abraham, if now You will make my journey on which I have been going successful; behold, I am standing by the spring, and may it be that the young unmarried woman who comes out to draw water, and to whom I say, “Please let me drink a little water from your jar”; and she says to me, “You drink, and I will draw for your camels also”—let her be the woman whom the Lord has appointed for my master’s son.’ “Before I had finished speaking in my heart, behold, Rebekah came out with her jar on her shoulder, and went down to the spring and drew water, and I said to her, ‘Please let me drink.’ She quickly lowered her jar from her shoulder, and said, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels also;’ so I drank, and she watered the camels also. Then I asked her, and said, ‘Whose daughter are you?’ And she said, ‘The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor’s son, whom Milcah bore to him;’ and I put the ring on her nose, and the bracelets on her wrists. And I bowed low and worshiped the Lord, and blessed the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who had guided me in the right way to take the daughter of my master’s brother for his son.”

Genesis 24:37–48

Theology of Marriage

This story is fascinating because it depicts biblical theology playing out in a specific cultural context. After Sarah's death, Abraham now decides to seek a wife for his son Isaac. Abraham is now mature in his faith and walking with the Lord, which shows in his instructions to his servant.

- First, he instructs him not to seek a wife for Isaac from among the pagan people who live around them. Instead, he is concerned that Isaac *marries in the Lord*. The concept of being married “in the Lord,” is found in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 7:39), and it refers to biblical priorities when seeking a mate.
 - From the biblical perspective, it first means marrying someone who is a child of God. Believers are warned not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Often, Christians marry non-Christians and think they will change them. Only the Lord can change someone, and typically when a Christian marries a non-Christian, the unbeliever ends up pulling the believer down spiritually. God's word is clear that one should seek a spouse before the Lord who is also a believer. This is illustrated in Abraham's desire for his son not to take a wife from among the unbelievers.
 - Marrying in the Lord also refers to the distinct realization that God is sovereign and in control of who you should marry. Abraham and his servant both believed that God would guide him to the right woman. It is important to realize that God's will must be the primary factor that determines whom you marry.
 - Finally, marrying in the Lord also refers to thinking about faith and practice. Abraham was not only concerned about religious beliefs. It seems that he was also concerned about cultural practices. There is no harm in marrying someone from a different cultural perspective (if they are a believer and it is God's will), but know that there will be some hurdles to cross as you navigate those cultural barriers. Additionally, it is important to consider someone's church background and

doctrinal beliefs as you seek a mate. Even if both of you are saved but come from different church backgrounds, you will face obstacles in your marriage as one of you has to choose to sacrifice your church to join your spouse's church. You will likely have some theological disagreements that you will need to solve, and when children are born, you will have to struggle with what to teach them when it comes to worship and church traditions. These obstacles can be overcome with God's help, but it is wise to consider these things in the beginning and let the Lord guide you to marry "in the Lord" so that you will enjoy peace in your home and His blessings in your marriage.

- Second, it is easy to see how God guided Abraham's servant as he went on his mission. Abraham trusted God to lead his servant in the right way and did not feel the need to take control of the situation and go himself. He trusted God, and he trusted his servant. They both felt that God had a specific plan for Isaac, and the servant went on that mission exclaiming in 24:14, "May she be the one whom You have **appointed** for Your servant Isaac." Some would disagree with this next statement, but I believe *if it His will for you to marry, the sovereignty of God demands that He has someone specific in mind for you.* He has prepared and created you for your spouse and vice versa. The story you share about how God brought you together will be one of the greatest testimonies to His glory in your life.
- Finally, there were some cultural expectations for the rites of marriage. The servant gave gifts to Rebekah, her brother (her guardian), and her mother (see 24:53). They also gave Rebekah a choice, and she was a willing participant in the agreement. Isaac did not go and live with her family (as is the case in some cultures), but instead, she returned to be publicly married in Isaac's village and to live with his family. These are all *descriptions* of what was culturally appropriate in those days and in that place, but it is not necessarily a *prescription* for how things **must** be culturally done today. Biblical marriages all share certain characteristics, but weddings often occur in various contexts with various traditions. Some of those could be

good, and some of those could be bad. Most important is that the biblical principles related to marriage are always followed and that people may engage in cultural wedding practices as long as they do not violate any principle in Scripture.

The African Context

In many ways, this story could have occurred right here on the continent of Africa. Some things in this Middle Eastern style betrothal and marriage are very similar to practices here. However, just because we see a cultural practice in the Bible that is similar to our culture, this doesn't mean it is God's *prescription* for weddings. We will talk more about things like bride price, dowry, and betrothal in a future story because there are various ways to do those things in Africa. What is most important is to realize that Abraham and his servant were able to follow God's design for marriage and still navigate the cultural expectations appropriately.

- An interesting example is a father sending a representative to the other family. This is common in Africa, and typically weddings are arranged through intermediaries like uncles, aunties, and grandparents.
- Also, it is important to note that while the servant gave a bride price to Rebekah, her brother, and her mother, there was no negotiation and haggling involved. I think this is important because sometimes, in Africa, weddings become more of an excuse for the family to make money from the union than for people to celebrate the will of God being done in the couple's life. The servant did not try to cheat the family, and they did not argue over price. Instead, it was just a show of respect because everyone realized that God had done something amazing by bringing the servant to meet with Rebekah in such a miraculous way. There was a sense that God was working out His plan, which was more about God than the families or even the couple getting married. We should have that same heart and attitude regarding marriages in our families and churches. Jesus should take center stage, not the bride or her family.

- Finally, while this was (at some level) an arranged marriage, there was a sense that God was leading Abraham's servant and that everyone was seeking the will of God for Isaac and Rebekah. People were joyfully obeying in all things. Abraham joyfully gave instructions and then left the rest to the Lord. The servant joyfully went on a long journey trusting God to lead him as he traveled. Rebekah joyfully agreed to go back to Isaac's village even though she had never met him and had known the servant for only one day (see 24:57–59). They considered her wishes. This is important to note because sometimes, in the African context, men are pressured to marry as they get older, and women are forced to marry someone they do not want to marry. While this is becoming less common in modern-day Africa, it still sometimes happens. Rebekah was given a choice, and she chose to obey the Lord. Then in verse 67, Isaac also chose her, and he loved her, and she became his wife. Even with arranged marriages, when you are sure that person is the one God has chosen for you, you should love them and be joyful to marry them because you know that they are God's prepared gift for you. ***When Jesus is Lord in the betrothal, in the engagement, and in the marriage, you find that He brings happiness, peace, and true love to that couple regardless of the circumstances that brought them together.***

Genesis 28–29

Marriage as Business

So, Esau saw that the daughters of Canaan displeased his father Isaac; and Esau went to Ishmael, and married, besides the wives that he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son, the sister of Nebaioth. Genesis 28:8–9

Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my relative, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. And Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in figure and appearance. Now Jacob loved Rachel, so he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man; stay with me." So, Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him like only a few days because of his love for her. Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife, for my time is completed, that I may have relations with her." So, Laban gathered all the people of the place and held a feast. Now in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to him; and Jacob had relations with her. Laban also gave his female slave Zilpah to his daughter Leah as a slave. So, it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah! And he said to Laban, "What is this that you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?" But Laban said, "It is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also for the service which you shall serve with me, for another seven years." Jacob did so and completed her week, and he gave him his daughter Rachel as his wife. Laban also gave his female slave Billah to his daughter Rachel as her slave. So, Jacob had relations with Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years. Genesis 29:15–30

Theology of Marriage

This story is one of the darkest in the entire Bible, and it shows the depths to which sin had corrupted marriage and marriage practices in the days of the patriarchs. While most of the people in the land in that day were pagans and had forgotten the one true God, even those who were in the godly line of Seth had now become indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors.

- Notice the response of Esau after being tricked by his brother Jacob. Esau was so angry with his parents that he married a woman from the line of Ishmael to hurt his father. He already had more than one wife, but he compounds the sin by marrying another and doing it simply from spite. By this point in history, women were viewed as property and bargaining chips, and men often married out of lust or a desire to gain some personal advantage. It seems the will of God or the bonds of love were at the bottom of the list of priorities. The biblical model from the creation account of one man and one woman, brought together by God in a covenant marriage filled with love, was becoming a thing of the past. Esau married to cause pain and for no other reason.
- Yet, even darker is the story of Jacob and Laban. In many ways, Jacob's love story echoes the story of Isaac and Rebekah. The difference is that Jacob does not start with the best of intentions. Instead of sending someone to look for a wife among his own people, Jacob is running for his life because of his deception and trickery. The story begins encouragingly with a meeting between Jacob and Rachel and the obvious spark between them. However, once Laban and Jacob begin to haggle over wages, things go downhill from there. Jacob loved Rachel and agreed to work for seven years to earn the right to marry her. However, on the wedding night, when he is supposed to receive his wife, Laban tricks the trickster Jacob, who ends up spending the night with Rachel's sister Leah. After confronting Laban, Jacob is then given Rachel as a wife as well in exchange for seven more years of work.

- Many things about this “marriage” appear to be broken. While much of it is couched in the culture of that time, you can see several things that are a blatant disregard for God’s design for holy matrimony.
 - First, it is difficult to see the covenant nature of the marriage. Jacob works for seven years in order to take Rachel as his wife, but we never see a wedding. There is a feast and a celebration, but it seems Laban never really “gives” Rachel to him as his wife. Instead, it is all about the marriage night in the dark. Jacob is shocked the next morning to find out that it is Leah instead of Rachel, but somehow, culturally, he is bound to her and is forced to take Rachel as a second wife. It says in verse 28 that Rachel was given to him “as his wife,” but it never says that about Leah (even though it is implied). The confusion over vows, covenant marriage, and biblical theology compounded the problems experienced by this family.
 - Second, you can see Laban putting culture before God’s design. Of course, he could have just been hiding behind cultural practices, but his exclamation that “it is not the practice in our place to marry off the younger before the firstborn” shows that he held culture as preeminent. This occurrence is common in many places in the world today.
 - Third, Jacob started out in a polygamous relationship, and this brought nothing but strife. The sisters bickered with each other, passed off their maids to their husband in order to shame the rival wife, and used extortion to get children (see Genesis 30:16). The disregard for God’s design led to strife, anger, hatred, and bitterness. This sentiment carried over to the entire family and seeped into every aspect of Jacob’s life, including his dealings with his father-in-law.
 - These chapters, including Jacob fleeing and his wife stealing her father’s household gods, are filled with human depravity on display in the marriage relationship. Everyone in the story tries to one-up each other and selfishly win advantages. Their

view of God and their view of marriage gets all tangled up in this big mess, and deception becomes the context for every decision. It is inappropriate for someone who would eventually become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

One last note related to this story is a comment on the sovereignty of God. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." While the people in this story do not act righteously, it seems God has a plan to use them and do something wonderful through them (even despite their actions). God did not intend for Jacob to enter a polygamous marriage, He did not desire for Laban to try to cheat Jacob, and He was not pleased with the behavior of the sisters and the way they schemed and gave their servants to try to have more children than their rival. God never wants people to sin, and it is never His will for us. However, God knows that we will sin, and He somehow works through everything (even our mistakes) to make everything work out for His glory and our good.

This fact is instructive for us because we sometimes make a mess of things. We end up marrying people that we should not have married, we sometimes have children out of wedlock, we sometimes sin against God by divorcing our spouse, we cheat, we lie, we commit adultery ... we do a lot of things that are not God's will for us. Then, we have to live with the consequences of those wrong choices. However, when we turn to Christ, God, in His grace, picks up the broken pieces of our lives and helps us figure out how to untangle the mess. Never forget that! God is in control, and if you want to serve Him and do what is right, He will make a way for you.

Perhaps you did not marry in the Lord. Divorce is not the answer, and two wrongs do not make something right. Instead, commit your marriage to the Lord and be the best witness you can be to your spouse. Love them and ask God to work everything out in your marriage for good. Perhaps you

had a baby out of wedlock or were even the victim of rape. Abortion is not the answer. Sinning won't solve the problem, even if you are the victim. Instead, commit yourself and that child to the Lord and let God do something great through that child you never imagined possible. The sin that put you in that position was not God's will, but somehow God weaves His plan to make sure that the child is a part of it, and His plan is for your good, the child's good, and His glory.

Did God want Jacob in a polygamous marriage, committing adultery with their servant girls? Of course not! However, God, in His sovereignty, worked through that, and the twelve tribes of Israel were born as a result of that crazy mess which was known as the family of Jacob. God can do the same for you and your family if you trust Him. The sins in this story are not intended to give us permission to do the same. Instead, they are recorded to show us how God is bigger than the messes we make, so we must always strive to do what is right and trust Him to help us along the way.

The African Context

This story is often repeated in the African context. The biological and cultural drive to have children is powerful on this continent and often pushes people to make many mistakes. There are many cultural connections between this story and African culture, so it is important that we understand the biblical truth and not be confused.

- First, it is disturbing that Laban wanted to trick Jacob. He knew what Jacob wanted, but he instead tried to marry off the daughter who was not loved. Laban's concern was not about whether Leah was marrying the right man but what he could get in exchange for his daughter. Jacob worked for fourteen years to get the wife he wanted, and Laban felt he had won the battle with Jacob. While we cannot say that paying a bride price is sinful, we should be cautious not to let culture or greed push us to make wrong choices.

- In some cultures, especially patrilineal cultures, it is common for the husband to have to pay for the wife. It depends on the tribe, but he often has to pay the family and sometimes the mother and aunties. This can often be punitive, and it is a tradition that can lead to many bad things. It can cause women to be treated like property where the man thinks he has paid for his property so he can do with her whatever he wants. Women are people and not property, and while paying something as a sign of respect is permissible, we should be careful not to make that the point of marriage. The point of marriage is love, God's will, and producing a godly legacy for His glory.

Many fathers in this culture are simply out to get as much as possible for their daughters instead of seeking their daughter's best interests. While there is some honor in proclaiming that your "daughter is precious and worth hundreds of cows," if you are not careful, you will create an unbearable situation for the new groom, and you will cause the new family to start out in poverty and shame. In some African societies, families bear an incredible burden to pay a bride price that is driven by greed and by sin. Don't make the marriage about money. Make it about Jesus and let things like the bride price be there but in the background. I know many living in sin with a girl because they cannot afford to marry. If the extrabiblical requirements of expensive weddings and expensive bride prices were not there, then they would get married. Instead, they live in sin because of the inability to pay for everything that everyone asks of them.

- In other cultures, especially in the West, they have something called a dowry. In those cultures, the bride has to pay to be married and not the husband. The dowry is the money or goods the bride brings to the marriage. It was a way for fathers to ensure that someone would want to marry their daughter because the groom knew she was also bringing something to

the table. This practice has translated into a tradition where now, in the West, the bride's father has to pay for almost every expense related to the wedding. However, in parts of Africa, it is the actual couple who has to pay for the expenses of the wedding.

What is the point of all of this? The point is that there are many cultural traditions around the world related to marriage and weddings. In some places, the husband pays; in others, the wife pays. In some places, the groom's family pays; in other places, the bride's family pays. Some cultures have a bride price, and others have a dowry. If you notice in this story, Laban says it was tradition for the oldest to be married first. In the previous story of Isaac and Rebekah, Abraham's servant gave valuable gifts to Rebekah's family, but in the story of Jacob and Rachel, Jacob just worked to pay for her. Every culture is different, and there is not only one right way regarding wedding traditions.

What is most important is that every marriage tradition is examined in light of Scripture and that the Bible takes precedence in our lives. In the West, they often spend too much money on the wedding and reception, making the wedding more important than the marriage itself. In Africa, they often spend too much money on the bride price, treating women as property to be owned and falling into greed and debt just to be married. Many different cultural traditions are seen in the Bible, but they are just that, cultural traditions. God was not trying to teach that one should work for seven years to be married to his wife. Instead, it is a picture of how *culture sometimes goes against God's design*, and it has to be examined in light of the Bible.

- Another important theological lesson in this story is the danger of polygamy and, as we have said already, all of the pain and suffering that comes from that. This story is filled with jealousy and bitterness, which could have been avoided if Laban and Jacob had followed God's plan for marriage.

- A final important note is to avoid using other people for personal gain. Everyone in the story was trying to trick someone else. What was needed was someone humble and willing to put others before themselves. Selfishness is what kills a marriage today. It is so important that we act selflessly and put our spouse before ourselves. Laban used his daughters to gain an advantage, and that is not love. Rachel and Leah used Jacob and their children to get back at each other, and that is not love. They also used their servant girls to get more children without any concern that they were asking Jacob to commit adultery. We must not use people, and we must serve others. In Africa, one must put their spouse above all else (including their other family members), and one must seek the best for their spouse and do whatever they can to bless them. This is the way for a truly loving African marriage.

10

Genesis 34, 38, 39

Marriage is Abused

Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. When Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he took her and lay with her and raped her. But he was deeply attracted to Dinah the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this young woman as a wife." Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob said nothing until they came in. Then Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. Now the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard about it; and the men were grieved, and they were very angry because he had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by sleeping with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done. Genesis 34:1-7

Now Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the sight of the Lord, so the Lord took his life. Then Judah said to Onan, "Have relations with your brother's wife and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her and raise up a child for your brother." Now Onan knew that the child would not be his; so, when he had relations with his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground so that he would not give a child to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord; so, He took his life also. Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, "Remain a widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up;" for he thought, "I

am afraid that he too may die like his brothers.” So, Tamar went and lived in her father’s house. Genesis 38:6–11

And it came about after these events that his master’s wife had her eyes on Joseph, and she said, “Sleep with me.” But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Look, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put me in charge of all that he owns. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?” Genesis 39:7–9

Theology of Marriage

As humankind began to grow in population after the flood, so too the impact of sin grew and permeated every aspect of life. Marriage was no exception to this, and we see the depths of this depravity in the three stories mentioned above.

- First, in chapter 34 of Genesis, we see the rape of Jacob’s daughter, Dinah, by a boy who confuses love with lust. Shechem was deeply attracted to Dinah, and his lust and sin overruled his self-control, and he raped her. We do not know if she was also attracted to him at first or if he attacked her, but either way, the Bible uses the word “rape,” which implies force and something driven by lust and not by love.

People today often confuse lust with love, but in the chapter devoted to love in 1 Corinthians 13, the first attribute of love is patience. “Love is patient, love is kind, and love is not jealous” (1 Corinthians 13:4a). Lust insists on having its own way “right now,” but love is patient and willing to wait and do things right.

Out of unbridled lust, this boy Shechem rapes the daughter of Jacob and then seeks to approach his father about taking her as a wife. The response of Dinah’s brothers is not much better. They also use marriage to their advantage and promise to intermarry with the Hivites and strike a bargain of peace that would include giving Dinah to Shechem. However, this is just a trick, and Dinah’s

brothers insist on a payment of circumcision of all the Hivite men as a bride price for Dinah. Once the pagan men have been circumcised and are recovering, the brothers of Dinah descend on them and slaughter them all. Shechem and his father Hamor were so insistent on getting Dinah that they convinced all the men of the city to be circumcised, and all of them were killed by Jacob's sons as retribution for Dinah's defilement.

This story is disgraceful because, in every way, marriage is being used as a bargaining chip to fulfill the wishes of lustful men. Shechem uses marriage to get a woman he is lusting after. Hamor uses marriage to make this happen and gain an advantage over the family of Jacob. The Hivite men see marriage as an opportunity to become rich and take all the possessions of Jacob (see 34:23), and the brothers of Dinah use the promise of marriage as the opportunity to exact their revenge. In every case, the sanctity of marriage is defiled, and we can see the depths of sin demonstrated in their callous treatment of this institution of God.

- Just four chapters later in Genesis, another shameful story related to marriage occurs in the family of Judah, one of the sons of Jacob. This story revolves around Tamar, a young woman given to Judah's first-born son, Er. The Bible says Er was wicked, so God destroyed him, leaving Tamar as a widow. Then the next son Onan was to take Tamar as his wife, but he would not father children in his brother's name, so he, too, was killed. Then Judah fears giving any more of his sons to Tamar, so she poses as a temple prostitute and actually gets pregnant by Judah himself. Somehow, this trickery is seen by Judah as "righteous," and he feels as if he has fulfilled his duty to Tamar.

Again, there is very poor treatment of the institution of marriage, and, in many ways, having children is viewed as the primary purpose of marriage by people at that time. Much of this text is foreign to us because it is laden with cultural practices of that day, like the need for children to be born to carry on the name of the deceased and the status gained by women in having children. At some level, one can understand some of the extraordinary measures people had to

take to ensure the continued survival and growth of the human race. Everyone on the planet had proceeded from Adam and Eve, and after the flood, humanity started again from just four couples.

There were likely many traditions and pagan cultural practices that had seeped into everyday life related to childbirth, families, and marriage. Still, much of what we see in this text relies on man's traditions and not God's sovereignty. There is a sense that people somehow controlled whether children were born or not, even though it was clear that God created life in the womb and even took the lives of those who were considered wicked. This text demonstrates a gradual decline in the preservation of God's design for marriage and the gradual influence of local culture and practices on humanity's theological perspectives of marriage.

- Yet, the third story teaches us that all was not lost. There were still righteous people who still held a high view of marriage. This story follows young Joseph, who has been sold into slavery by his brothers and now lives in Potiphar's home in Egypt. Potiphar was a powerful man who loved and trusted Joseph. Potiphar's wife had designs to sleep with Joseph. Like the previous stories, she was intent on giving in to her lust and following the typical practices of that day.

However, Joseph would have none of that. He wanted to do what was right because he cared about Potiphar, and he wanted to do what was right because he cared about God. Joseph knew that giving into lust was a sin against God. He knew that the bonds of marriage were sacrosanct, and he was committed to doing what was right, regardless of what it cost him. Joseph demonstrates incredible character under fire, and he also lets us know that no matter how much marriage was degraded in the eyes of others, there were still some who held to God's original intent and who desired to please God in marriage.

The African Context

In many ways, the African context is much like this context in the Old Testament. We see a variety of traditional practices and cultural

perspectives influencing people's views on marriage. As in the Old Testament times, having children is very important in African society, and it drives many of the practices. In Zambia, for instance, there is the practice of "sexual cleansing," where a family member must have sex with the widow in order to cleanse the family from the departed man's spirit and ensure that his family line will continue.

In many parts of the world, we see decisions driven by lust and a devaluing of marriage where people use marriage for personal gain. While these three stories of lust, debauchery, and selfishness are painful to read, those kinds of things are happening every day in the world. We must hold to God's high and holy view of marriage and promote true love in the Christian home. A marriage filled with a 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love is a marriage that will last and please God in the African context.

I have known many cases in Africa where girls have been defiled, and the only answer was for the man to pay a fine or to marry the girl (often without love) if she is impregnated. This practice leads to many cases of abuse and unhappy marriages. Men must be held accountable by law, and if rape and abuse are taken seriously by society, and the government executes proper punishment, then people will be discouraged from doing such things. Unfortunately, it is way too easy in Africa for people to get away with rape, abuse, and child defilement.

Like Joseph, we need young men and women who value the opinion of God more than anything else. We need people who choose to obey God regardless of the cost and who flee youthful passion and lust. Joseph lived in a corrupt world, and yet he remained holy to the Lord. In Kenya, people believe a boy and a girl can't wait until marriage. They say that if a boy has a girlfriend, this always implies that they are having sex. Joseph teaches us that this is just a lie the culture uses to justify sin. It is possible to do what is right, no matter what is happening in the lives of others. Let us strive to be like Joseph in a world that has lost its focus on the biblical view of marriage.



Exodus 18

Extended Family

Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was camped, at the mountain of God. And he sent word to Moses: "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her." Then Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other about their welfare and went into the tent. Moses told his father-in-law everything that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had confronted them on the journey, and how the Lord had rescued them. And Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the Lord had done for Israel, in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. Exodus 18:5–8

Theology of Marriage

While this section doesn't speak directly to the idea of husbands and wives, it does speak to an aspect of marriage that is very important to understand. In the beginning, God says that a man will leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. While the concept of "leaving and cleaving" is throughout the Scripture, this doesn't mean extended family and in-laws are unimportant. They often play an essential role in local culture, and the Bible affirms the importance of respecting them and having a relationship with them. The Bible illustrates this relationship for us in the story of Moses and

his father-in-law, Jethro.

- First, we see that Moses's wife, Zipporah, still had a relationship with her family. For them, leaving and cleaving did not mean "no contact." When Moses was involved in the dangerous work of leaving Egypt, he sent his wife and children back home to stay with her parents. A relationship still existed, and Moses trusted them with the care of his family.
- Also, it is worth noting that Jethro brought them back to Moses, where they belonged once the danger had passed. Sometimes the bride's parents play too significant a role in the new family, yet we see that Jethro respected Moses as the head of his home. He served his purpose and cared for his daughter and their children when asked to, but he also brought them to live with Moses when the time was right because children and wives belong with their fathers/husbands.
- We can also see the great mutual respect between Moses and Jethro in this text. Moses loved and respected his father-in-law in culturally appropriate ways (bowing down, kissing him), and they were concerned over each other's welfare. Jethro did not lord over Moses as the father-in-law, but Moses gave Jethro the respect that was due to him as a son-in-law should.
- Finally, even though Moses was the preeminent leader of Israel, he was willing to listen to his father-in-law's advice. If you continue to read this chapter, you find a section where Jethro, as the objective outsider, observes how Moses is conducting his business in judging disputes. Jethro tells Moses that he is wearing himself out and wearing the people out by settling every problem. Instead, he counsels him to appoint a leadership team to handle the more minor issues and for Moses to reserve his own time for the most challenging cases. Moses had the humility and wisdom to listen to his father-in-law, and it made a massive difference for all. The point is that Jethro did not command Moses as his elder. He simply offered advice as a trusted family member. Moses did not refuse to listen, but he weighed the advice of Jethro and followed through without any posturing or pride.

- This example is a great example to follow in our families today. We need in-laws and extended family who understand the biblical requirements of the husband as the head of his home. We also need men of God to be humble and willing to have deep relationships with extended families for the sake of their wives and children. It is true that when a marriage takes place, the bride's family has gained another son, and the groom's family has gained another daughter. If there is mutual respect and submission, you will discover that your extended family can be one of the greatest blessings in your life.

The African Context

The relationships between couples and extended family can be highly complicated in Africa. It depends on the tribe and culture, but often there is much respect demanded by the in-laws. If the in-laws are not careful, they will end up meddling in the affairs of the new family and causing many problems. At the same time, the new couple should be careful to respect their in-laws and try to be as culturally appropriate as possible while still following the Bible. This tension is often a difficult tightrope to walk.

- In my experience, I have known grandmothers who are influenced by traditional practices and will take grandchildren to the witch doctor without the mother or father's consent. When couples follow Christ, they have to stand up to these grandparents and not allow them to do such things. Your children will have long-lasting effects by being exposed to these unscriptural practices. So, grandparents must respect the parent's wishes, and the parents should listen to the older ones in a kind and respectful way but insist on following the Bible.
- I have also known examples of a problem in the home, and the in-laws insert themselves into the middle of the situation without invitation. The new couple should ask for advice, and the parents should wait until they come to request that advice. Once they come, be sure to give them biblical advice. I have known couples whose

family members advised them to take a second wife (because they were having trouble getting pregnant). I have also seen couples advised to divorce because they were finding problems at home. It is not helpful when in-laws give traditional or unbiblical advice and then pressure the children to obey it.

- It is good to respect your in-laws but be sure you are following the Bible as well as the culture. I have known some young men who would not sit next to their mother-in-law in the vehicle or who would not talk to them publicly for the first few years of marriage. Some of these practices are noble and do not contradict the Bible, so it is okay to follow them. However, one can go too far in their respect to the point where it hinders the relationship. It is essential to become like a son or a daughter to your in-laws and have a sweet relationship with them, as Moses did in this passage of Scripture.

12

Exodus 20, 21, 22

Sundry Marriage Laws

“You shall not commit adultery.” Exodus 20:14

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male slave, or his female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” Exodus 20:17

“If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall leave as a free man without a payment to you. If he comes alone, he shall leave alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall leave with him.” Exodus 21:2–3

“If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and sleeps with her, he must pay a dowry for her to be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the dowry for virgins.” Exodus 22:16–17

Theology of Marriage

If you remember, we saw the gradual corruption of God’s design for marriage during the years following the flood. In the days of the patriarchs, the institution of marriage was corrupted by sin and influenced by culture and pragmatism. This corruption does not mean that all of their marriages were wrong, but that people often did what was right in their own eyes and fell short of God’s standards laid down in creation. During the time of Moses, God introduced the Mosaic Law,

which was an attempt to define right and wrong for God's people. God was calling His people back to holiness in every area of life, and marriage was no exception. We find a variety of laws related to marriage in that day, and they are instructive for us to help us see some of the principles that God lifts up for godly marriages.

- First and foremost, God reemphasizes His standard of one man and one woman for life. The section often referred to as the Ten Commandments contains the prohibition against adultery. A husband and wife must be faithful to each other and not have intimate relations with anyone outside their marriage. This commandment effectively prohibits polygamy, pre-marital sex, and sexual relationships outside of wedlock. Jesus elaborated on this text to say that, in Christ, we must not even think about another person in a sexual way, or else we have violated the spirit of this prohibition against adultery. Faithfulness in marriage is the priority, and couples must be sure that nothing or no one causes them to be unfaithful to their spouse. God is first in our lives, but our spouse must have preeminence after Him. Prohibiting adultery is not simply about sexual intercourse but also about how we spend our time and what we think about. Nothing should come between the husband and wife in marriage.
- Adultery is directly related to the next concept of covetousness. We should not covet someone else's wife or husband, and we must be content with the good gifts that God has given us. Walking in God's will *before* you get married and choosing the person God has designed for you will make things less troublesome in your marriage. Making poor choices about whom you marry is one thing that leads to covetousness and thinking that there could be a better spouse out there. Regardless of your prior decisions, if you are already married, you must lean into God's sovereignty and trust Him to make you the right person for your spouse and vice versa. Trusting Him requires a commitment on our part to be content in our circumstances and focus on our relationship with God and our spouse. Covetousness is simply thinking that the grass is

greener somewhere else, and at the end of the day, it is just a lack of contentment and faith in God that He knows what is best for you. The answer is not in undoing the past but in walking with Him in the present and trusting Him for the future.

- The last two laws listed above refer to the importance of commitment in marriage. Marriage supersedes all prior commitments and is to be for life. While we don't have time to go into the Old Testament perspectives of slavery, it is still noteworthy that marriages during that time were also binding and intended to last, even beyond the days of someone's indentured servitude. Even premarital sex is a serious offense that requires a follow-up commitment. God expects people to be pure and refrain from sexual intercourse until marriage. However, if that happened, the offending man was expected to pay restitution and marry the woman he had slept with. If her family refused to honor his request for marriage, this did not preclude him from paying the dowry. In short, the marriage bed should be held in high esteem and taken seriously. In our current culture, people have no regard for the sanctity of sex within marriage and think it has no consequences. God illustrates for us here the seriousness of sex and the commitment required to enjoy that gift from God. We live in His grace and are sexual beings because He created us that way. God expects us to honor His good gifts by only engaging in sexual activity with the one we are married to and committed to.

The African Context

The African relationship with the Mosaic Law is an interesting one. Many aspects of African culture shadow Old Testament culture, and thus there is often a great affinity with the law. While this is helpful in some ways, it can lead to an overemphasis on the Old Testament without interpreting it in light of the New Testament. We must be careful to let the entirety of Scripture speak to our theology and view these texts in light of the freedom we now enjoy in Christ. While we now understand the law in light of God's grace in Christ, this does not negate the moral law or make it invalid. Instead, the New Testament

teaches the fulfillment of the ceremonial, sacrificial, and dietary laws when Jesus died on the cross while simultaneously reaffirming the moral law that governed God's people. The emphasis from these texts on marriage must be the timeless truths that apply to all cultures at all times. Several points are significant for Africa today:

- Adultery is a moral absolute that is timeless and relevant for all people. It is still a sin to have a love relationship (whether sexual or emotional) with another person when you are already married. This law effectively prohibits polygamy in any form and also prohibits pre-marital sex. Adultery is a huge problem across the continent. Africans tend to be very modest in public, and traditional African culture sees adultery and premarital sex as shameful. Yet, most Africans would tell you that many are unfaithful in this area in their private lives.
 - Polygamy is rife in many places and is culturally acceptable among many tribes. While God's standard is one man and one woman for life, many pragmatic, cultural, and traditional arguments are often made to justify this practice. Polygamy was never God's intent, and when a man takes more than one wife, in God's eyes, he is married to one woman and committing adultery with another, regardless of what the culture says.
 - The Bible prohibits pre-marital sex as well. While other texts point to this, and adultery is typically used for a spouse having sex outside of marriage, I believe that even pre-marital sex is a form of infidelity. God has a will and plan for your life, and if He calls you to marriage, then you must let Him lead you to the right person to marry. When you have sex before marriage, you are potentially committing adultery with someone not intended to be your husband or wife. Even if you are not yet married, you could be cheating on your future spouse by exposing yourself to sexual activity with someone you will not end up marrying.

Yet, premarital sex is one of the most common sins in Africa today. African society frowns on this publicly, and it is traditionally unacceptable. Like Exodus 22, African society has severe consequences for premarital sex, and heavy fines are levied on a boy who impregnates his girlfriend. However, while all agree it is wrong, all also agree that everyone is doing it. In East Africa, there is no category for a boyfriend and girlfriend who are courting and NOT having sex. People assume that if you have someone you call your girlfriend, you are sleeping together. Most Africans believe that every dating couple is doing that.

Additionally, many are encouraged to practice before marriage in Southern Africa. Some say they will not marry someone they have not slept with because they must “test drive” before committing. These ungodly practices lead to high rates of HIV infection and the terrible curses that befall many marriages. We must do God’s will in God’s way. He designed marriage, and He created sex. The only way to true marital happiness is to follow His guidelines for a marriage.

- Additionally, adultery is often common in Africa, and it damages many marriages. This commandment against adultery was not intended to just be for the Israelites at that time. This moral law is reaffirmed many times in the New Testament and is intended to be for all people at all times.
- Exodus 20 describes the prohibition against covetousness and is also something that must be understood well in the African context. Covetousness is akin to jealousy, and it is a great problem across the continent. Many Africans will quote the proverb, “Jealousy is poison,” because they have seen the damage that jealousy and covetousness can cause. The secret to happiness in Christ is to be content in all things (see Philippians 4:11–13). We must submit our lives to God’s control and trust Him to give us what we need. Many African languages do not distinguish between *want* and *need* and use similar, or sometimes, the same word. People need to understand the difference between wants and needs in the

African context. God promises to give us everything He thinks we need. He never promised to provide us with everything we want. However, if we submit our lives to Him and enjoy Him above all other things, God will transform us so that His desires will become our desires. Then we will have all that we need or want, and we will know the secret of contentment.

Recognizing that your spouse is God's gift to you and what you need will go a long way to a happy marriage. Perhaps they are not what you need or want at the moment, but this means that you have to pray for God to change them and make them who they need to be and who *you* need them to be. Additionally, you must work on yourself and ensure you are who you need to be for your spouse. Sometimes we think the other person is the problem, so we want another spouse, but instead, we truly need to let God change us. Once we change, we will see God also changing things in our marriage.

- Finally, people must focus on commitment for African marriages to be healthy. Instead of being tempted to give up easily, it is better to commit to keeping our promises. My wife and I have committed to each other that no matter what happens, we will never separate. We know that God has given us to each other, which helps us with our contentment, but it is also necessary for us to fully commit to each other. Things are not always easy, and we can see God's goodness in the good times, and then we are committed to enduring with each other during the bad times. This commitment honors God, ensuring that the devil can never tear us from each other.



Leviticus 20

The Danger of Adultery

“If there is a man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, one who commits adultery with his friend’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.” Leviticus 20:10

Theology of Marriage

I have written much in this book about the holiness of marriage and the importance of faithfulness between husband and wife. No verse illustrates this greater than the one listed above that states the penalty for adultery. In Old Testament Israel, death was the penalty for adultery, and some essential things can be learned from this.

- First, God has high standards for marriage, and He expects the husband and wife to be faithful to each other for life. This standard of faithfulness includes physical fidelity as well as emotional, spiritual, and mental fidelity. Jesus made it clear that one can commit adultery in his or her mind, which is also off-limits. God expects us to be wholly devoted to our spouse, and nothing except for Jesus is worthy of our greater love. One must even be careful about significant friendships with others of the opposite sex. These can sometimes become cases of emotional adultery, even without a physical relationship. You can be friendly and care for others, but if you give more time and emotional attachment to another person than to your spouse, this can be as damaging as the physical act of adultery.

- Second, God is no respecter of persons when it comes to adultery. Even though the world and culture of that day saw women as second class, God held both men and women equally accountable in an adulterous relationship. This equal accountability will be essential to understand in the next chapter, but it is clear that God’s standards are universal. He expects faithfulness from all, and He demanded equal punishment for all who violated this commandment.
- Adultery is not a private but a public sin. This fact may shock many, but you hurt many others, including your children, family, and community, when you commit adultery. Some believe they can do this kind of thing behind closed doors and get away with it, but you cannot. God sees everything, and He commanded that it be dealt with publicly because the damage caused by adultery is far-reaching. Our relationship with our spouse is not a private matter to be kept behind closed doors. Your marriage and family life reflect your spiritual life. If you are a man, it reflects your leadership ability. It is no wonder that Paul later clarifies that a biblical marriage and family are foundational for pastoral leadership in the local church. In God’s kingdom, we do not have the right to our “private lives” without accountability. We are accountable to God, the church, and our communities. The world sees when God’s people fall short. So, God insisted that the community be a part of the solution so that His holy standards could be maintained and so that others would focus on fidelity in their own marriages.

The African Context

- In relational communities, very little is private. It is common for the community to know about the mistakes of others, and adultery is no different. There is no possibility of keeping an affair secret, and when the couple is eventually exposed, it brings shame to the community and the church. As African believers, we must be careful to ensure we live in purity with one another.
- Even though historically, women were considered second class in African society, the influence of Christianity is beginning to raise the status of women to be seen as equal to men. This new perspective is a positive move, but we must be careful to ensure that responsibility for sin is also equally shared. There is no double standard in God’s mind for men and women. Some cultures

incorrectly believe it is natural for a man to commit adultery, but it is wrong for a woman to do so. Scripture teaches that it is equally wrong for both sexes and that it is something that God takes very seriously. Even though it is not a crime punishable by death today, it does not mean it is a sin that should go unpunished. There are severe consequences for adultery, and the church must set high standards for its couples and insist on church discipline and accountability for those caught in such things. Most lost people see the church as no better than the world because we have taken things like marriage and adultery so lightly.

- Because marriage should be held in high esteem and is so essential in African society, we must be careful to guard our marriages at all costs. Many people fall into adulterous relationships because of carelessness in their marriage. You should pay careful attention to your spouse's needs and always work on your marriage so that you can "affair-proof" your marriage. People do not just decide overnight to commit adultery. Instead, it is usually the result of a pattern of neglect and carelessness between a husband and a wife. If you are constantly romancing your spouse, they will not have their head turned to another. This idea is vital for both the husband and the wife to practice.

Additionally, you need to be wise in your relationships with others. What might seem like a harmless flirtation or time spent with someone of the opposite sex can actually be the first step on the path that leads to adultery. Do not put yourself in a situation where you are alone with another person of the opposite sex. Do not share your concerns about your spouse or go for counsel to someone of the opposite sex. If you need counseling or help, talk with your pastor, and if you are the wife, be sure that the pastor's wife is also in the counseling room with you. Being careful about your time and who you are spending your time with is a way to avoid being in an awkward situation that will cause others to gossip or perhaps open you up to temptation. The devil is always looking for ways to destroy your marriage, so don't put yourself in any situation where he can get a foothold or tempt you. An English proverb says, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." In other words, it is easier to prevent problems from happening than to try and solve them after they have already occurred. Be wise and be careful; your marriage is worth it.



Numbers 5

Equality in Marriage

“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘If any man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, and a man has sexual relations with her and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband and she remains undiscovered, although she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act, if an attitude of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has defiled herself, or if an attitude of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has not defiled herself, the man shall then bring his wife to the priest, and shall bring as an offering for her a tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he shall not pour oil on it nor put frankincense on it, because it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of reminder, a reminder of wrongdoing. Then the priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the Lord.’”
Numbers 5:12–16

Theology of Marriage

This particular passage and the verses that follow are difficult to understand. In the following verses, God gives the Israelites instructions for how the accused woman can drink a concoction of water mixed with dust from the temple floor and either prove her innocence in adultery or suffer the consequences if she is guilty. The practice seems barbaric and weighted heavily to favor the man on a first reading. This Old Testament law is only for a wife accused of adultery, and from this

text, there doesn't seem to be any recourse for a wife to accuse her husband.

It appears to be a perspective of a society that sees women as property and as second-class citizens. While it is sometimes hard to interpret this passage, when rightly understood, we can see that this is actually an example of God working within a culture to lift the status of women and bring His people back to a biblical perspective on marriage.

- First, what appears to be an act of judgment against the woman was actually an act of mercy. In those days, women had very little voice, and a husband could accuse his wife of anything and take any action he wanted. Instead, the husband is prevented from judging his wife based on jealousy or executing vigilante justice. He is required to bring her before the Lord and the religious establishment where she could find mercy.
- Because infidelity affected the entire covenant community, it was dealt with publicly. This public nature would prevent frivolous accusations on the part of a husband. To truly assert her unfaithfulness would mean also exposing himself to public humiliation, thus ensuring that only the most serious circumstances would come before the high priest.
- In a male-dominated society, this law was actually an attempt to give women equal justice and ensure they were treated fairly. “The trial she is taken to is not a kangaroo court; it is in the precincts of the Tabernacle, under the jurisdiction of priests, in concert with a solemn sacrifice—she places herself under the hand of the Lord.”¹
- While the church today is no longer under Levitical Law, it is essential to note that God's hatred of adultery is universal in time and culture. It is something that we must take seriously. Because of Christ, the status of women has significantly improved over time. The purpose of this law was not to create equality for women, but it did serve to ensure that women would have equal access to justice when accused. As with slavery and many other practices

¹ Ronald B. Allen, *Numbers*, Expositor's Bible Commentary Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 744.

considered acceptable by ancient cultures but hated by God, the law's approach was to address the inequity of the practices rather than overthrow them overnight. This approach created an ethos over time, which elevated the status of women while ensuring justice for them at the moment. Today, women have equal rights, slavery is outlawed, and many other ancient cultural abuses have changed. Rather than set out to transform culture, the Bible instead sets out to elevate the holiness and glory of God. As people align themselves under His lordship, these peripheral cultural issues tend to sort themselves out.

The African Context

- It is fascinating to note that there are similar practices in ancient Africa to this practice of women being tested for adultery. In the Luangwa district of Zambia, the small village of Chitope has the mwavi tree. This is where people accused of witchcraft were forced to drink a poisonous concoction (*mwavi*) that legend says would kill them if they were witches or only make them sick if they were innocent. Africans can trace their heritage back to North African Christians who migrated to sub-Saharan Africa almost 1500 years ago. Perhaps this practice in Zambia is a corrupted version of this passage passed down through generations of ancestors. Either way, today, there is no need for a test to prove guilt or innocence in adultery. Instead, both men and women should walk in the Spirit and in holiness and be pure in all things.
- Another holdover from ancient African history has been the tendency to treat women as second-class. As we have seen from creation, God views both men and women as equal, and He endowed them with value because they are all created in the image of God. Yes, there is an order in the home, and it is biblical for the husband to be the head of the home. The wife is also expected to be submissive to her husband. However, submissiveness does not equal slavery, and the husband's headship does not mean that he is the lord of the family. We mutually serve and respect each other in our Christian marriage relationships. It is possible to observe God's

order in the home and still be equals as man and woman before the Lord. This passage in Numbers and others shows God's value for women, and this value is equally important in today's African context.

- The most important takeaway from this text is God's desire for the husband and wife to be faithful to each other. Adultery is a grievous sin, and it is something that destroys marriages, churches, communities, and individuals. Seek to be pure and Christlike in your marriage and put God first. Husbands, be pure and true to your wives, and don't even think about other women or look at other women in a lustful way. Wives, be humble and godly in all things, taking great care to live in purity with your husband. The Christian marriage is a sacred institution, and it is an image of the relationship between Christ and His church. Let us live in marriage in such a way that we bring God glory and not shame.

Numbers 30

Leadership in the home

“Every vow and every binding oath to humble herself, her husband may confirm it or her husband may annul it. But if her husband in fact says nothing to her from day to day, then he confirms all her vows or all her binding obligations which are on her; he has confirmed them, because he said nothing to her on the day he heard them. However, if he actually annuls them after he has heard them, then he shall bear the responsibility for her guilt.” These are the statutes which the Lord commanded Moses concerning matters between a man and his wife, and between a father and his daughter while she is in her youth in her father’s house.
Numbers 30:13–16

Theology of Marriage

In the last chapter, we saw the Old Testament emphasize marriage equality. This equality between husband and wife does not mean they are the same or play the same role. Scripture is also clear that the husband is the head of the home, and the wife must be submissive to the husband. They are equal, but they are not the same. An excellent example of this is the laws regarding a woman and whether her vows to the Lord are binding. It seemed that in the Mosaic Law, if a woman made a vow to the Lord that was permitted by her father or (if she was married) by her husband, then that vow was binding. It was not binding if her father or husband somehow refused the vow. While we no longer live under the Mosaic Law, and even though many of these practices seem foreign

to us, there are still some important timeless principles to note for our understanding of God's design for marriage.

- We are all responsible before God for our decisions and the vows we take. However, our decisions and promises do not just affect ourselves in the marriage. They also affect our family. God sees you as an individual before you are married, but your entire life is bound up with your spouse after marriage since the two have become one flesh. Thus, the decisions you make in marriage affect your spouse and family.
- For this reason, it is not God's desire for a wife to make a decision that will be contrary to her husband or for a daughter to make a decision that will be contrary to her father. God has decreed that the responsibility for leadership in the home rests with the husband/father. A wise husband will make decisions in consultation with his wife, and he will encourage his wife to obey God in all things. Yet, because of his headship in the home, God gives him a say in the affairs of his wife.
- This male headship and authority come with a high price tag. Men often rejoice in the biblical mandate for the husband to be the head of the home, but they fail to recognize the responsibility that comes with that role. Every father will give an account to God for the decisions and shortcomings of his children. As the head of the home, he bears some responsibility for their behavior. The same is true for the husband. When a wife stands before the Lord, she will have to account for how she lived her life and bear individual responsibility for that. However, when the husband stands before the Lord, he will not only account for himself *but even for his wife*.
- This responsibility is the reason for his authority regarding her vows, promises, and decisions. If he observes her making unwise choices and fails to intervene, *he bears some responsibility for her guilt!* What an amazing statement. While we no longer live under Mosaic Law, God's setup for the family is still the same. He intends for the husband to be the spiritual and earthly leader of the family, but with that calling comes a huge responsibility to lead his family well. Being a husband and father does not mean you are the king of the family. On the contrary, Jesus is the king of your family. Instead, it means you have considerable responsibility to steward

and shepherd your family. One day you will give an answer to God for how you performed that task.

The African Context

- In most parts of Africa, one finds a male-dominated society. These biblical concepts of the husband or father having a say in the affairs of a woman are not strange to us. Yet, in African culture, there is a tendency for some men to abuse this privilege and lord over their wives and children. As men, we must never forget that Jesus is the Lord, and we are simply shepherds of our wives and children. We are in a leadership position, but that leadership must be with grace and in consideration and consultation with our wife.
- African husbands must realize their ultimate accountability to God for their families. Additionally, African wives must recognize their God-given privilege of submitting to their husbands. Resist the influence of the West that confuses equality with feminism. Submitting to your husband does not make you “less than” him, nor does it mean you are unequal. Instead, it is one of the beautiful ways women honor God. Submission is a Christlike way to show love and glorify God.
- Husbands, you must lead so that you are worthy of your wife’s submission. Many women resist submission to their husbands because they are tyrants or unconcerned with the family. You are responsible for the spiritual nurture of your family, and yet, one of the saddest statements about our churches today is that seventy-five percent of the worshipers there are women. Where are the men? Why have they abdicated their responsibility to lead their families and lead in the church?

Today, the greatest weakness in the African church and the African family is the lack of godly men who intentionally play their part and lead by example. Most men are selfishly looking to their own interests instead of to the interests of others. We need godly men in Africa who will take up their responsibilities. Whether you realize it or not, you will stand before God someday, and you will give an account to Him for how you led your wife and family. You will give an account to Him for how you served and led in the church. What would you say to God if you stood before Him today and had to answer for how you are serving as a husband and father?

Deuteronomy 7

Marry “in the Lord”

“Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them: you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, and they will serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you.” Deuteronomy 7:3–4

Theology of Marriage

In this passage, Moses instructs the children of Israel as they enter the promised land. He warns them that they will face significant opposition from the people who reside there, and he encourages them to trust in the Lord because it will take God’s intervention to defeat them. Then, he changes his tone and warns that the war will not end when physical battles cease. Instead, they must be vigilant to continue overcoming the spiritual war that will plague them from all sides.

Defeating the enemy and possessing the land was only the beginning of their struggle. They would then have to live in that land and live in it in a way that would characterize holiness in every area of life. To that end, he warned them not to make covenants with the pagan nations or show favor to them; this included intermarrying with them. The marriage relationship is the most intimate of covenant relationships, and it can either be a relationship that leads to God’s glory or one that

leads to spiritual failure. This idea is repeated in the New Testament and consistent throughout the biblical witness.

- The words of Moses in the two verses above are very similar to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians chapter 6. Paul warns believers not to be "unequally yoked" or bound to unbelievers. While Paul was not simply limiting his remarks to marriage only, he does warn of the danger of being in covenant relationships with those spiritually opposed to us.
- Moses warns the children of Israel not to intermarry with others from an opposing religious perspective because they will inevitably become a hindrance to following God. Many believe they can marry an unbeliever and somehow change or convert them. We must note that we do not change anyone, but the Holy Spirit does that. Marrying an unbeliever will more than likely change you instead of changing them.
- Even if you can somehow get along, you will be spiritually weakened because you must compromise to be with them. There are rare occasions where the unbeliever changes and begins to grow, but more often, the believer is the one who is brought down. Notice the words of Moses that intermarriage will not change the pagan people but will inevitably cause the child of God to turn away from following Him.
- Those who are "equally yoked" or coming from the same place spiritually can encourage one another to even greater heights of devotion to Jesus. If you are spiritually opposed, then it means that God will become a source of conflict in your marriage. Either you will stagnate spiritually or have contention that will cause problems in the future. The best thing to do is to look for a spouse who is walking with God and who will build you up spiritually.
- Because of the prohibition against marrying unbelievers, we should be more selective in who we date. Different cultures have different rules about courtship leading to marriage, but in each case, a Christian should not consider marriage with a non-Christian. This statement means that you should not even date a non-

Christian because this will either lead to an unbiblical marriage or to potential heartache if you have to break up with that person before marriage. Only court (or date) believers and actual potential candidates for marriage.

- This prohibition is a preventative one. Moses said not to intermarry with other tribes that follow other gods. Paul said do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. These were things to avoid, but they were not excuses for divorce. We will see this in later chapters, but there is more godly counsel on how to get through that and please God if you are already in that situation. God desires for couples to stay together, and He hates divorce. Being unequally yoked is to be avoided by the believer, but it does not justify divorce if you are already married. Instead, you must trust the Lord to work those things out and somehow change your spouse so your marriage can become a story of redemption that glorifies God.

The African Context

In the African culture, there is much that goes into the selection of a spouse. People often consider tribal backgrounds and family connections when choosing someone to marry. Additionally, one must be sure that all protocols are observed, that all dowries or bride prices have been paid, and that all the right family members are involved in the decision-making process. Yet, with all this forethought that goes into a marriage, people rarely consider the religious background of their spouse or whether they are truly a child of God or not.

Sometimes, when a Muslim considers marrying a “Christian,”² there are questions about religious perspective and if it is permissible for them to marry. These questions usually revolve around the children and how to raise them. Still, even in those cases, we often see so-called Christians

² The word *Christian* is in quotations here because it refers to someone who identifies as a Christian. In Africa, there are some who believe that being born into a Christian family makes one a Christian, and most Muslims would see those who are not Muslim as being Christian, or that there are only two categories. However, biblically, a Christian is someone who has been born again because they repented of their sins and professed Christ as Lord. Thus, the use of the word Christian is in the cultural African sense and not the biblical sense.

and Muslims occasionally getting married to each other. However, if both parties claim to be from a different denomination or have no religious preference, then there are rarely any questions asked by the families or those proposing marriage. This tendency is a real problem that needs to be addressed.

Your relationship with God is not just on Sunday, and you cannot leave it outside the door of your home. Jesus should influence every decision you make, and He wants control of every aspect of your life. This control includes who you will marry. He wants you to marry someone that will make you more like Him, and He wants you to marry someone that shares your spiritual perspective. Marrying a non-Christian, or someone who claims to be a Christian but comes from a false church will ensure that you have problems in your marriage that will haunt you for the rest of your life.

The spiritual state of your potential spouse is more important than any tribal question or cultural protocol. It is the first thing to settle before you proceed. Additionally, you should look in the right place when looking for a spouse. I am amazed at the number of Baptist young men who find wives in other denominations when there are plenty of godly, beautiful Baptist young women in their church. Why look in a distant place, among people who do not believe like you, when God has placed the answer right before you? These are issues that must be dealt with if African marriages are to prosper.

As I stated above, many are already in unhealthy marriages because they did not think about these things before marriage. To those people, the Scripture is clear. You must stay together, trust the Lord, work on yourself, and pray for your spouse. God can and will do miracles, but it will be a long and challenging road. However, for those who are still single, Deuteronomy is clear: do not marry them, or they will turn your heart away from following God. Choose wisely before you marry, and you will find great grace and joy in your marriage for as long as you both live.

Deuteronomy 22

Purity Before Marriage

“If any man takes a wife and goes in to her and then turns against her, and he charges her with shameful behavior and publicly defames her, and says, ‘I took this woman, but when I came near her, I did not find her to have evidence of virginity,’ then the girl’s father and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of the girl’s virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. And the girl’s father shall say to the elders, ‘I gave my daughter to this man as a wife, but he turned against her; and behold, he has charged her with shameful behavior, saying, “I did not find your daughter to have evidence of virginity.” But this is the evidence of my daughter’s virginity.’ And they shall spread out the garment before the elders of the city. Then the elders of that city shall take the man and rebuke him, and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give it to the girl’s father, because he publicly defamed a virgin of Israel. And she shall remain his wife; he is not allowed to divorce her all his days. But if this charge is true, and they did not find the girl to have evidence of virginity, then they shall bring the girl out to the doorway of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death, because she has committed a disgraceful sin in Israel by playing the prostitute in her father’s house; so you shall eliminate the evil from among you.” Deuteronomy 22:13–21

Theology of Marriage

The Bible's perspective on purity is very different from the perspective of the world today. We find a shared culture worldwide that sees sex before marriage as normal and expected. Even in historically modest cultures like Africa, we find a common consensus that boys and girls engage in sexual relationships long before they settle down and marry. This global trend towards promiscuity, incessant pornography, and fulfilling every lust of the flesh flies in the face of God's standards for us.

This passage in Deuteronomy is consistent with the biblical expectation that men and women will wait until marriage to engage in sexual activity. God expects us not to be promiscuous with the opposite sex before marriage, and God created sex as a gift to be enjoyed in the marriage relationship only. Historically, many cultures have also held this standard to one degree or another. Today, though, we find a consistent disregard for God's standards of purity.

In the Old Testament times, the couple would enjoy intercourse for the first time on the wedding night, and her father would keep the blood evidence from the bride's torn hymen as a memorial of her purity. This practice protected her from any false accusations that might come. This bridal proof does not mean that the woman was held to a different standard than the man, for he, too, was expected to be pure. Yet, because of the severe patriarchal system of that day and the penalties associated with impurity, it was important for the bride's family to hold on to that proof.

While today we no longer live under Mosaic Law as Christians, these verses help us see the seriousness of purity before marriage. God expects us to treat the sexual act as sacred and only belonging to husbands and wives. He expects us to be wholly devoted to Him before marriage and abstain from sexual activity until marriage. He expects the husband to preserve the honor of his bride and be holy in all physical relationships.

While we no longer stone those who violate these principles, this Old Testament penalty demonstrates how important pre-marital purity was and still is today. God expects purity between unwed boys and girls, and He expects you to wait until you are married to be intimate. Anything less than that is a violation of God's standards and sin in His sight. Sin still has severe consequences, and the Church must counsel youths to be holy and pure before marriage.

The African Context

Purity before marriage is culturally and biblically vital in today's African context. I have already mentioned some of the cultural perspectives on sex before marriage. All tribal groups would insist that it is wrong, but they would also insist that it is common in their society. It is something that is winked at and often encouraged so that one may practice before marriage.

Many of the rites of passage for girls and boys involve instruction on how to engage in sex once you are married, leading young people to "practice" these things secretly before they settle down. Some tribes even counsel young men to "sample" a girl before marrying her to make sure she will be worth the bride price. African culture has shifted and evolved to accommodate promiscuity and even encourage it at times.

It is no wonder that many countries have HIV infection rates of over twenty-five percent of the population and that, in some areas, more than half of young girls have babies outside of wedlock. Globalization also contributes to this trend as they view others in the West engaging in promiscuous acts, encouraging African young people to do the same.

Additionally, urbanization influences heightened sexual activity because extended families are not there to keep tabs on their youth, who can live anonymous lives and do things without others knowing. When people move to the cities, most cultural moorings and barriers that

govern village life are removed, and African youth are influenced by the wrong messages and people.

Many young people attend boarding schools, away from the eyes of their parents, and as a result, they are initiated into all kinds of illicit behavior. Historically, it was grandparents or older relatives who counseled African youth as they went through puberty, but now most live away from home, and they do not have access to trusted cultural or spiritual counselors.

These aspects, and many more, have led to an increase in sexual impurity in African society. African young people are paying the price, and today we are witnessing a breakdown of that society. The church and godly parents must stand up and take responsibility for the hearts and minds of its youth. We must insist on God's standards of purity and point people back to His word. While African youth are not in danger of being stoned because of immorality, they still face death, sickness, and broken families because of it. Sin carries a heavy price, and only Jesus, through His church, can turn the tide today.



Deuteronomy 20,24

Priority of Marriage

“And who is the man that is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her.” Deuteronomy 20:7

“When a man takes a new wife, he is not to go out with the army, nor be assigned any duty; he shall be free at home for one year and shall make his wife whom he has taken happy.” Deuteronomy 24:5

Theology of Marriage

When we think about biblical priorities in our lives, of course, God comes first. He created us and redeemed us, and we belong to Him. All our allegiance is due to Him, and He must come first. Yet, notice how in these texts, the clear indication is that, after God, the marriage relationship (or your spouse) gets the next precedence in your life.

In ancient Israel, every man was expected to go to battle for his people. They were a nation of warriors, and service to the people was somehow a service to God. Yet, God so highly esteemed the marriage covenant that He gave a pass to those engaged to be married or newlyweds. The population needed to grow, and the marriage covenant needed to be maintained in Israel. It was not to be supplanted, even during times of war.

Most of us today do not engage in physical battles, but we can still learn something about the priority of marriage. Even a critical task at hand was not to come between a husband and wife. Yes, men had to report for duty after the honeymoon period, but the message was clear: marriage comes first. Men were not even assigned any duty but were to be “free at home for one year” to spend time loving and pleasing their wife. This time was so important they were given a whole year to enjoy each other.

Today’s families face the pressures of work, church, and other responsibilities. We all have a list of priorities that we must maintain in our lives. Yet, Scripture illustrates that God comes first, and your spouse comes next. Work, extended families, ministry, and other duties are essential and should be maintained, but they come after God and your spouse.

The critical thing to understand is that if one’s priorities are in line, God gives time to succeed in every other area of life. We often feel like we don’t have enough time, but that is because our priorities are misaligned. Putting God first in your life and then your spouse next will ensure you have enough time to do the other things that must be done. If there is no time for things on the bottom of the list, then perhaps they should not be on the list at all.

The African Context

In African weddings, many couples observe honeymoon periods. It is common for people to be given time off to spend with their new mates before returning to work or school. We must encourage people to continue the practice of spending time with each other, even after the honeymoon period is over. Marriages are relationships, and the more time you spend with someone, the closer you become.

Your spouse should be your best friend, and they must be the person you most want to be with. It takes time to learn a person and to grow to appreciate them. While a week or two together alone is beautiful,

that should not be the end. Even after returning to work and life, you should chat with your spouse daily. You should think about how you treated them before you were married and continue to do so every day that follows.

We often take our spouse for granted, which leads to marital problems. Whatever you did that contributed to their falling in love with you before you were married is something you should continue to do after you are married. Where I live, flowers are cheap, and I have begun the practice of buying flowers for my wife every Monday. I try to dedicate that day to doing romantic things for her to keep the romance alive in our marriage.

Perhaps you can think of other little things you can do to show love and appreciation to your spouse, but they need to feel like the most important person in the world to you after God. Some African marriages are simply marriages of convenience where the man is just a provider, and the woman is just a housekeeper. This situation should not be! Instead, a marriage should be a relationship of love where you grow closer and more romantic every day.

Sometimes, there are too many secrets in African marriages, and spouses have private lives that their partners do not know about. Sometimes you can be in a crowd and not even know two people are married because they do not express affection or even sit beside each other. God values the marriage covenant and wants us to give it the needed attention so it will grow and blossom as each day passes.



Joshua 24

Leadership in the Home

“But if it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served, which were beyond the Euphrates River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua 24:15

Theology of Marriage

This passage is not a classic passage on marriage, but it contains some interesting points related to the marriage-and-family dynamic. As Joshua looks back on the history of Israel and their repeated spiritual failures, he challenges them to decide which “god” they will follow. As the leader of Israel and as the leader of his family, Joshua makes it clear that as much as it depends on him, those under his care and concern will serve the Lord (the God of the Bible).

Joshua clearly illustrates some spiritual truths for us in the marriage relationship. To begin with, he could not dictate what all of the people in Israel would do. He was the nation’s leader and was responsible for being a good example. Yet, at the end of the day, each of the heads of households had to decide for themselves and their families whom they would serve. Joshua was an example for all, but he had an even greater responsibility to lead his family. As far as his family was concerned (those under his roof), he could dictate which god their family would serve.

Likewise, all men today are responsible for being an excellent example to other people in their sphere of influence. However, they have an even greater responsibility to lead well those under their control. This responsibility presumes that the husband is not only the physical head of the family but also the spiritual one. It is not enough for the husband to just have the final say about various decisions being made in the home. He must also fully embrace his spiritual responsibility to lead his family well in all things spiritual.

Every individual in my immediate family is responsible before God for their actions. Each of them will have to stand before God and account for their personal lives. Yet, as the head of the home, I am held to an even greater standard where I am responsible for how I live my life and *also responsible for how I lead my family*. Joshua could not control the other families, only encourage them to follow his lead. Yet, in his own family, he had the right **and the responsibility** to declare that *his family would serve the Lord*.

There comes a time when children grow and leave home. At that point, they are either responsible as the heads of their own households or as wives under another head of household. Until then, while they live under your roof, the Christian father has the calling and obligation to shepherd his children and raise them in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Too many today abdicate that responsibility and put it solely on their wives or the local church. The Christian mother has a huge role to play in the spiritual life of her children, but this is never intended to supplant the husband. The local church has a vital spiritual ministry to the children who attend, but it is not a replacement for the father.

Today, we need men of God to lead their families and take the shepherding role in their families seriously. You cannot (and should not) force your wife and kids to follow Jesus, but it is your life's work to do everything in your power to lead so that they hunger and thirst for the Lord. You are to be the chief example of Christ to them, and you are to love and live sacrificially for them. No earthly accomplishment

can justify losing your wife and children spiritually. They are the top priority, and they need your example and your spiritual leadership.

The African Context

There is no greater weakness in African marriages than the lack of male spiritual leadership. Culturally, most African people groups are patriarchal and believe that the husband is the head of the home. He is responsible for leading in decision-making and caring for the family. Yet, most of the spiritual decisions and day-to-day care decisions are left to the wives and mothers in the family.

Whether you go to a medical clinic or a witch doctor, you will find that most of the people in line there are women. They see these decisions, especially for children, as being in the hands of the wives. Additionally, you will find that in most churches, two-thirds to three-fourths of the members are women. Women are the ones who are spiritually sensitive, and they are the ones making the decisions for the children on spiritual things.

This lack of spiritual leadership on the part of African husbands is killing the African family. Most African men see their role as the provider and the final word on earthly decisions regarding the family. When it comes to the spiritual leadership of their wives or children, most African men abdicate that responsibility to their wives or the pastor of a local church. What is needed is a generation of African men who are the spiritual leaders in their homes.

This spiritual leadership will mean that they will be the most active member of their family in the local church. Men will not leave their wives at home or send them off to another church, but they will go with the whole family to the same church, and they will all be actively involved in the church together with the children. Men will not sit back and let the wives do all the work or giving in the church alone but will lead out in those areas and do those things with them in the church as a team.

The godly African husband will witness to his colleagues at work and be a man of prayer who studies the word. If you are a husband, you should know the Bible well so you can disciple your family, and you should be the one teaching your wife and children at home. It is not just the pastor's job to instruct your family. You will have to stand before God someday and give an account of how you taught them, led them, and prayed for them.

As Joshua took responsibility for the spiritual life of his family, we need godly African men to take spiritual responsibility for their families as well. They should teach and lead their children to follow God. They should love, pray for, and spiritually support their wives. They should be a leader in their churches and in their communities. They should be a witness for Jesus and the kind of man who is an example to other families around them. We need more and more Joshuas today so that the African church can rise and take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Where are the African Joshuas? Are you one of them?



Judges 14

Do Right in God's Eyes, Pt. 1

Then his father and his mother said to him, "Is there no woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she looks good to me." Judges 14:3

Theology of Marriage

There is a theme throughout the book of Judges where basically everyone "did what was right in their own eyes" and did not consider the will of God. Judges were people that God would raise up to deliver Israel because of their cycles of failure. They would serve God for a time and follow His law. Then, they would forget God and serve false gods. God would allow other nations to rule and persecute them until they remembered Him and cried out to Him. Then He would raise up a judge to restore them and set them on the right path. This restoration would last for a while, but the same cycle would repeat itself. Everyone did what they wanted, and their religion was a mix of God's law and pagan traditions.

This disregard for God's ways was visible in how people viewed marriage and how they treated each other. Samson was a great hero in the Bible, but like most of Israel in that day, he did whatever he thought was right for him. Notice the verse above. Like many today, Samson did not

consider marriage a sacred covenant between the woman God chose for him and God. Instead, he only focused on physical pleasure and the physical nature of marriage. For him, marriage was about sex and finding the most beautiful woman. This perspective only leads to selfishness in a marriage where the goal is what I can get from this person and not how I can serve this person and glorify God in the process.

If you read the story, you will discover this marriage was a catastrophe. Because there was no true love in the marriage, the woman became a pawn between her people and Samson. They used her to get information from him so they could defeat him. Then, he escalated things by killing more Philistines and hating her for betraying him. Ultimately, she was given to his friend, and Samson lost the woman. He hated the shame caused by her being given to his best friend, but he never mourned losing her. Instead, he then goes from pagan harlot to pagan harlot throughout the rest of his story. Clearly, Samson had a low view of marriage. He had supernatural physical strength from God, but his character left something to be desired.

There are some important lessons to be learned from his story. First, one should marry “in the Lord.” In other words, he started wrong by looking for a wife in the wrong place. His parents realized this and implored him to marry among those who believed as he did, but he wasn’t concerned about his wife’s character or religious background. As I have said many times, God wants believers to marry other believers, and it is best if they come from the same church tradition as you. This standard will make things so much smoother during your marriage.

Second, Samson focused more on the physical than on the spiritual. I often see this where single people consistently rate physical attractiveness as the most critical characteristic in a mate. The internet and dating apps have contributed to this. People are not looking for a spouse in church or their religious circles anymore, but now they are using various dating apps where the first thing you see is the person’s picture. If the picture looks good, then you check out the other qualities listed to see if they

might be a match. Samson's fatal flaw in his marriage was choosing based on looks alone. Nothing is wrong with being physically attracted to your spouse; it is essential. However, it is not the most important quality or the thing on which you build a relationship. Looks fade over time, so your marriage must have another foundation.

Finally, Samson treated marriage too lightly, and he was not committed to his wife. He allowed her to be given to another, and he simply began seeing a string of pagan harlots. These loose women were eventually his downfall and the reason he lost his power and eventually died. He saw women as simply objects of passion, and his disregard for the sanctity of marriage caused him to suffer significant harm. We must be committed to our spouse and willing to do whatever it takes to make things work. Too many people give up too quickly these days, and this is not the will of God.

The African Context

One often finds the same mistakes in Africa that were there in the days of Samson. Instead of marrying "in the Lord," people often marry outside their faith for different reasons. This mistake leads to later frustration in marriage, making it difficult for your marriage to honor God. Believers should marry believers and not be yoked together with unbelievers.

A common saying in Zambia is that people "marry because of skin." This idiom is just a traditional way of saying that they look for outward beauty as the primary factor in choosing a wife. Women are equally guilty when looking for a man with big muscles or someone rich. These physical qualities are something to consider, but they should be very low on the list of importance. Inner beauty should be more desired in women (see 1 Peter 3:4), and good character, kindness, and godliness are of greater worth than physical strength in men.

While sex is a gift from God given to the married couple, there is more to marriage than just sex. Samson's great mistake was that he only saw

value in women from a physical perspective. African men would be wise to look below the surface of the physical and focus on a potential mate's spiritual qualities. Historically, men in Africa only valued women who could bear many children or work hard at home and in the field. In short, they focused on the physical nature of the wife. God gives you a wife and intends for you to have a spiritual bond with her that goes beyond the physical.

African marriages must be marked by commitment and start with the proper foundation to last a lifetime. Some treat marriage lightly and think if things don't work out with one woman, they can divorce her or add another wife they like better. Samson gave up on his wife too quickly, and African men must not make this same mistake. Enter into your marriage with an "until death do us part" kind of commitment.

God's plan is one man and one woman for life. Your spouse is more important than extended family or any earthly concern. The wife of Samson allowed herself to be used by his enemies. A Christian wife sees herself as the guardian of her husband's character and well-being. We should fight for our spouses and stand with them no matter how difficult it becomes. Sometimes, we are often asked to choose between the wishes of our family and the wishes of our husband or wife. We should stand with our spouses and be committed to them. We must endeavor to have stronger and more sure marriages than Samson's. Then we will honor God and find His favor.



Judges 19

Do Right in God's Eyes, Pt. 2

Then the man, the owner of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my fellows, please do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not commit this act of folly. Here is my virgin daughter and his concubine. Please let me bring them out that you may ravish them and do to them whatever you wish. But do not commit such an act of folly against this man.” But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and brought her out to them; and they raped her and abused her all night until morning, then let her go at the approach of dawn. Judges 19:23–25

Theology of Marriage

As we saw in the last chapter, the book of Judges describes life in Israel when people were lawless and did what was right in their own eyes rather than doing what was right before the Lord. I think there is no darker example of this than the events of chapters 19–21. This story is by far one of the most horrible stories in the Bible, and it illustrates the depths of human depravity.

In this story, a Levite travels to Bethlehem to retrieve his concubine, who had returned to her father's house. We must pause here and dive into this concept a bit deeper. First, this was a Levite and someone entrusted with spiritual leadership in Israel. Yet, instead of taking a wife, he chooses to take a concubine. Concubinage was an ancient Eastern practice where

a woman would become the property of a man. Sometimes they were slaves taken in war, or sometimes they were women who served a sexual purpose. It was not uncommon for a man who already had a wife to take a concubine to bear more children or satisfy his sexual appetite. They typically served some practical purpose and had status with the man but were of a lower class than his actual wife. In later times in Israel, only kings and the wealthy could afford concubines, and sometimes they had harems of hundreds of these women.

This practice was obviously outside God's design for marriage. In this case, the Levite has no wife but chooses to take a concubine instead. In short, the concubines's sole purpose was to satisfy his sexual desires, and he had no intention of making the commitments to her that were necessary when marrying a wife.

Even though she was not his wife, he had a connection to her because the Bible calls the Levite her "husband," and her father was the Levite's "father-in-law." So, he had not married this woman and was unwilling to commit to marriage, but he owed her protection and respect because she lived with him. Yet, his treatment of her was appalling. Rather than protect her as a husband would, he threw her out to the wicked men of Gibeah like a piece of property to protect himself. His behavior is some of the most shameless in all of the Bible.

After finding her dead the next day on the stoop, he puts her lifeless body on his donkey and returns it to his house. There, he dismembers her like some animal and sends her body parts to every tribe in Israel. They are shocked by this story, and they marshal their forces together to go and destroy the men of Gibeah for their terrible behavior. While they are right to be outraged by the wicked men of Gibeah, they should have been equally shocked by the callous behavior of this priest. His behavior shows the depths to which the Israelite people had sunk regarding marriage.

God's perspective is that marriage is sacred, and human beings created in God's image have worth and should be respected. Women should

never be treated as property, yet the Levite showed his disrespect for this woman by making her a concubine and treating her like garbage. God wants men to love the women He gives them enough to marry them and sacrifice for them. He wants men to respect their wives and be willing to make commitments to them and stand by them.

The African Context

It is quite common in Africa to have a concubine today. I am not referring to simple adultery, but men who live with a woman as if she is his wife without actually marrying her. Estimates in Nairobi are that only about fifteen percent of couples are actually married. Most men live with a woman and call her a wife, but she is a concubine in reality. A modern-day concubine would be a woman you are living with and treating like a wife, but you don't love or respect her enough to marry her. Perhaps that seems offensive to those not biblically married, but this conclusion is logical when considering why people refuse to marry.

Sometimes men live with women they are not married to because they do not want to pay the exorbitant bride price her family asks. It is common to be charged a price of many cows or large sums of money to marry because families see their daughters as an opportunity to benefit financially. Regardless of how you feel about this traditional practice, if a man *really loves a woman and is truly committed to her, he will move heaven and earth* to marry her. Consider Jacob and his working for fourteen years to be with the woman he loved. Many are too selfish and would prefer to live with the woman as a concubine, enjoying all the physical benefits of marriage without committing to marry her and paying the necessary price.

Another common excuse is the high expense of weddings. Some say they have paid the bride price and even negotiated with the family, but they cannot afford the wedding. What they truly mean is they cannot afford the exorbitant cultural weddings that are all the rage these days. Instead, if they are committed to the woman and the Lord, they can do

an inexpensive wedding and not worry about impressing the neighbors. However, since they can't afford to impress the neighbors, they choose to live with her like a concubine.

You often find that men in the city have wives and children back in the village, but they want the benefits of a wife here, so they find a woman and live with her as a concubine without marrying her. They are committed to her in the city, but they are already married, so they cannot marry again. Regardless of his commitment to her, she is a concubine, and the man is out of God's will to be with her.

From our perspective, concubinage is adultery, but it is adultery with a level of cultural commitment that others around them find acceptable. God never approves of concubines, and a man should either love the woman enough to marry her, no matter the cost or trouble, or he should stay single and not live with her like a wife. There is no in-between, and that kind of concubine perspective only leads to women being treated like property and marriage being degraded in the eyes of all. If you live with a woman you love and have children with her, and you call her your wife and think of her family as your in-laws, then why not marry her? Laziness and selfishness are no excuses. True love will move you to do whatever is necessary to make her your wife. Stop treating her like a concubine. In the end, you are no better than this Levite.



Judges 21

Do Right in God's Eyes, Pt. 3

And they commanded the sons of Benjamin, saying, "Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to take part in the dances, then you shall come out of the vineyards and each of you shall catch his wife from the daughters of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin. It shall come about, when their fathers or their brothers come to complain to us, that we shall say to them, 'Give them to us voluntarily, because we did not take for each man of Benjamin a wife in battle, nor did you give them to them, else you would now be guilty.'" The sons of Benjamin did so, and took wives according to their number from those who danced, whom they carried away. And they went and returned to their inheritance and rebuilt the cities and lived in them. Judges 21:20–23

Theology of Marriage

One of the striking things about the book of Judges is how one sin leads to another. If you think that you are sinning in secret or that your sins will only affect you, you are mistaken. Your sin touches everyone, and the story of the treatment of the Levite's concubine actually leads to more death and more lives devastated. After the entire nation of Israel goes to war with the tribe of Benjamin for siding with the evil men of Gibeah, most of the men of Benjamin are destroyed. Additionally, all the other tribes had taken a vow that they would not give their daughters to marry the men of Benjamin because of the sin they had committed.

This rash vow and the previous civil war led to the tribe of Benjamin being on the brink of extinction. As the people sat together to ponder this problem, they came up with a foolish answer.

They decided to destroy one of the cities that had not participated in the civil war and get virgins for the remaining 600 men of Benjamin. When this was not enough, they instructed them to lie in wait for the daughters of Shiloh and catch them when they came out to dance in the vineyards. If the brides were stolen, there would be no breach of the vow not to intermarry with them. They promised to run interference with the girl's families and bend the rules to restore Benjamin as a tribe. It is unfortunate that Benjamin was destroyed because they allowed their tribal connection with Gibeah to lead them to defend the wicked men. However, it did not justify the destruction of another city to find them wives or the stealing of daughters from their families to satisfy a vow made in foolish anger. This poor thinking is why in verse 25 it says, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." This whole sordid affair was emblematic of a more significant problem in Israel. They had lost their way and descended into depravity and anarchy.

While cultural traditions are not necessarily good or evil, they must be weighed in light of God's standards in His word. The men of Benjamin not only violated the cultural practice of negotiating with the family to arrange healthy marriages, but they also violated the biblical practice where a man and a woman who are both created in the image of God come together in a covenant of love to glorify God. What occurred in Judges 21 was little more than sanctioned kidnapping and rape of girls who had no voice or choice in the matter.

The cultural perspective of losing one of the twelve tribes was understandably disturbing. Yet, treating these daughters of Shiloh like stolen property did not magnify God's vision of biblical marriage. In the West, there is a saying, "Two wrongs do not make a right." In other words, if something wrong happens, it doesn't justify a second wrong act to make up for the first mistake. This thinking, however, is quintessential

Israel in the book of Judges. People did what they thought was right and sinned against God, then others would sin to deal with that sin, and then more would have to sin to solve that sin. The book is a downward spiral of one wrong act after another, and women and marriage are degraded in the process. Thankfully, as we shall see in the next chapter, there are also some good examples of biblical marriage during the time of the judges.

The African Context

We must be careful in our own cultural practices that we are examining them in the light of the biblical witness. Many cultural practices in Africa are consistent with the biblical theology of marriage, and they can and should continue. However, other practices inconsistent with the Bible must be changed, and we must follow the Biblical model.

We must be careful not to create more problems by trying to solve existing problems in unbiblical ways. We should focus on elevating God's glory in our marriages and respecting the image of God in our spouse when we marry. While the husband is the head of the home, and the wife is to be his helper, she is equally valuable in the eyes of God. The two become one flesh, so you cannot say that one is more important than the other. Women must be treated with dignity and respect, and we should avoid any cultural practices that devalue women or treat them as property.

While arranged marriages are not necessarily wrong, it is vital to ensure that the girl is a willing participant and senses God's leadership in marrying the man to whom she has been promised. Sometimes girls are given in marriage too young before they can make wise choices, and godly parents will protect their daughters from this. The woman should have a voice in who she marries, and she must feel as if this is the will of God for her life. It is very possible to follow the African culture biblically if all the parties involved are committed to Jesus and following His will. What is most important is God's word and that God is the one who brings the couple together.



Ruth 1–4

A Ray of Light in a Dark Time

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went in to her. And the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed is the Lord who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” Ruth 4:13–15

Theology of Marriage

The last three chapters covering the book of Judges show how far people can fall from God’s design for marriage. Sin infects every area of life, and what we see in today’s society is no different. Biblical marriage is under siege from every direction. Many want to redefine marriage and even the very definition of male and female. Over half of all marriages end in divorce, which is true of Christians and non-Christians alike. While the depravity might not look the same as it did in the book of Judges, it is easy to see that sin unchecked in society attacks the very heart of God’s design for husband and wife.

However, not everyone in that time had abandoned God’s plan for marriage. It is as if God knew that we would need some encouragement after reading Judges, so He provides a positive story in the book of Ruth. The events in Ruth actually happened in the same period as

Judges, but here we see honorable people who sought to follow the Lord in all that they said and did.

This story follows Naomi, who moves to a foreign land with her husband and two sons because of famine in Israel. While she is there, tragedy seems to follow her as she loses her husband and sons to death. She remains with two, quite honorable, daughters-in-law. The story emphasizes the bond between her and those two young women, and Ruth even begs to return to Israel with Naomi once the famine ends.

Naomi and Ruth return together to Naomi's hometown. It is essential to read the entire story in one sitting because you can see how the hand of the Lord was on Naomi and Ruth as His plans for their lives unfolded. If you haven't read it yet, pause here and read those four chapters. What follows is a story of love and concern between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and God's restoration of their family through a kinsman-redeemer named Boaz.

In those days, Israel's tradition was to keep the dead man's name and inheritance intact by the appropriate person serving as a redeemer in the man's family. While we no longer follow that tradition in the West, parts of Africa still think similarly. Yet, it is important to note that these people also clung to God's perspective on marriage. There was a closer redeemer to Ruth, but he refused to marry Ruth because taking another wife would complicate his life. The kinsman-redeemer law was not intended to promote polygamy or to be used as an opportunity for sex outside of marriage. Instead, it was to preserve widow's rights and the memories of men who died early. Yet it was to be done in a consistent way with purity and God's plan for marriage.

This story is a charming and godly story of a man and woman who fall in love and yet want to do things the right way. Boaz is only concerned with preserving Ruth's honor and helping her family. Ruth is only concerned with blessing Naomi and having a loving, godly marriage with Boaz. They follow all standards of decency, and they find a way to have a culturally appropriate marriage that honors God. Considering

the day in which they lived, that is quite a testimony. As one reads the book of Ruth, we see a blueprint for what God will do in your life when you put Him first. If you seek to honor Him in your relationships, He will bless you and give you His best in His time and in His way.

The African Context

This story of Ruth and Boaz is admirable. It shows two people who navigate all of the cultural expectations of their day while seeking to follow God's truth regarding marriage. It is a story of love in a time when love seemed to be lacking in most marriages. It was a story of purity and holiness when others around them in that day were not pure and holy. It is an excellent example for those who live in the African context.

Today in Africa, many Christian couples have to navigate the same challenges as Boaz and Ruth. They wanted to follow the appropriate cultural practices and still do things according to God's design. Boaz was the spiritual leader in this, preserving Ruth's integrity in every way. There was no hint of pre-marital sex or any breach of integrity between them. They showed that even while others around them were "doing what was right in their own eyes," they could be different.

Today, many are driven by pragmatism or lust in their relationships. Pre-marital sex is widespread in Africa, even though it is a conservative society on the surface. There are expectations that inappropriate things happen behind closed doors, but what Africa needs are modern Ruths and Boazes who will do what is right regardless of what others are doing.

We also see in African society many traditional practices that create abuse. In Zambia, there is a practice called *sexual cleansing*, which is a perversion of the kinsman-redeemer idea. In short, if a husband dies, his brother is expected to sleep with the widow in order to "cleanse his spirit" and keep the family from being cursed. This sinful tradition has led to the proliferation of AIDS in Zambia and many other problems.

For years, Christians have opposed this practice because it is simply a way for men to abuse widows when they are most vulnerable.

While sexual cleansing is not in the Bible, the kinsman-redeemer law is. Yet, these people followed that law in a way that promoted purity and did not lend itself to polygamy. Africa needs more godly men and women who know how to navigate African culture in a way that honors the Lord. As the church opposes sexual cleansing and other unbiblical practices, we need more believers willing to do what is right. It is possible to be African and be a Christian in a culturally appropriate biblical way. However, one needs wisdom in how to walk with God in a particular context.

Finally, Boaz and Ruth were excellent examples of two people who put God first, and then He took care of the rest. When you put God as the priority in your life, He leads you to the one you should marry. You do not have to settle, worry, or make poor choices. You only have to be patient and trust Him. You do not have to hurry or get ahead of God when you meet that right person. Instead, you can trust His timing and that He will work things out. I imagine that Boaz's heart sunk when the other redeemer said he would redeem the land. Yet, God turned the man's heart when he realized he would have to marry Ruth, and Boaz's dreams came true. Trusting God's will and His timing are crucial to a godly marriage. Seek Him, and He will open the doors for you.



1 Samuel 1

The Pain of Polygamy

Now there was a man from Ramathaim-zophim from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. And he had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of armies in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the Lord there. When the day came that Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he would give a double portion, because he loved Hannah, but the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival, moreover, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. And it happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, that she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat. Then Elkanah her husband would say to her, "Hannah, why do you weep, and why do you not eat, and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?" 1 Samuel 1:1–8

Theology of Marriage

The story of the birth of Samuel is a beautiful story of God's provision in the life of a heartbroken woman. Hannah was loved by her husband, but she had no children, and having children was of great importance

to the people of Israel. Hannah's inability to bear children is likely what prompted her husband to take another wife, and his preference for Hannah was likely what prompted Peninnah to abuse Hannah verbally. After all, Elkanah "loved Hannah," but there is no mention of his love for Peninnah; her purpose was to bear children. It was a toxic situation that produced great family strife.

Even though Elkanah favored Hannah, that love could not replace the maternal instinct she had and the shame she felt at being childless. So, she cried out to the Lord, and through God's miraculous intervention, she gave birth to Samuel. You probably remember the story of Samuel and Hannah's sacrifice. She was so thankful to God and so devoted to Him that she gave him up to serve in the temple at a very young age, and he became a great prophet in Israel. Moreover, God blessed Hannah and gave her more children after the birth of Samuel.

Yet, this story is very illustrative of the pain of polygamy. Hannah felt remorse because of her inability to bear children, and Peninnah felt anger at Elkanah's special treatment of Hannah. The Bible even calls Peninnah Hannah's rival, and the bitterness between them grew to the point where the family was being ripped apart. Every polygamous marriage is a breeding ground for this kind of toxic situation.

Many who defend polygamous marriage have tried to convince me that the women get along and are closer than sisters who are thrilled with their situation. Yet, in every case, when you dig below the surface, you find out that there is a rivalry. Some are treated as first class, and others feel like second class. Usually, the first wife feels hurt and replaced by the other wives who come along because they are younger and catch the eye of their husband.

When God intended for one man to be with one woman from the beginning, we must realize that upsetting that system by bringing another "love" into the house will only lead to fighting and hurt feelings. Polygamy is always wrong and is not God's way. Any attempt to follow our way for marriage instead of God's way will lead to marriages that

are less than they should be. Follow the creator's design for marriage, and you will find happiness. After all, He created marriage, and He knows how it works best.

The African Context

Polygamy is, of course, commonplace across the continent. Even in today's modern Africa, some tribes practice polygamy as a matter of course, and others occasionally practice polygamy for convenience's sake. Whether the culture sees polygamy as the sign of a successful man or a solution for some problem like the barrenness of the first wife, there is no biblical reason for polygamy.

Hannah is an excellent example to all of us of the power of God and the importance of faith. Instead of seeking a worldly solution to barrenness, like marrying a second wife, Elkanah should have cried out to the Lord at the temple as Hannah did. In our daily lives, we often come up with human-centered solutions for problems that only Jesus can solve.

If you cannot bear children, trust the Lord, and ask Him to help you. The Bible is full of examples of barren women who were enabled to give birth by God. If He does not answer right away, trust Him to either give you a child in His time or give you the grace you need to live without children. God is the one who creates life, and it is not just the will of a man and a woman. Whatever children you have now or will have in the future, they came because God gave them to you. Barrenness is no issue for God, and your prayer should be for His will to be done because that is the only way children are born. If it is His will for you not to have children, then He will give you the grace to live in that way, and perhaps He will open opportunities for you to care for other children, especially those with no parents.

Some men practice polygamy because it is a sign of wealth and success. Others practice polygamy because they want more sexual partners or more help in the fields. These worldly and ungodly desires fall outside the realm of God's will for marriage. Understand that your marriage is

supposed to glorify God, and the purpose of marriage is to honor God together as a couple. When you fall outside of God's design for marriage, you are not glorifying Him. Instead, you are sinning against Him.

Polygamy in Africa creates heartache and strife in the family, just like in Elkanah's family. One is always at the top, which brings strife to the other women. Then other consequences come from polygamous marriages, like inheritance issues and rivalry between children. If the other wives feel second class, then how do their children feel? Once you are in that polygamous marriage, it is almost impossible to get out without causing more and more pain. The wisest course of action is to understand God's word and avoid polygamy from the start.

If you are already in a polygamous marriage, you must see a good Christian counselor or pastor to get help to solve the problem. There is not enough space in this chapter to discuss all the nuances of extricating oneself from polygamy, but I have learned that He will always make a way if you truly want to follow God. Perhaps your best bet is to reach out to the author of this text and let them have a private conversation with you about how to fix your situation now. Either way, know that it will take hard work and great faith for things to be put back right, but also know that all things are possible with God.



1 Samuel 18

A Shepherd Boy Marries

Then Saul commanded his servants, “Speak to David secretly, saying, ‘Behold, the king delights in you, and all his servants love you; now therefore, become the king’s son-in-law.’” So Saul’s servants spoke these words to David. But David said, “Is it trivial in your sight to become the king’s son-in-law, since I am a poor man and lightly esteemed?” 1 Samuel 18:22–23

Theology of Marriage

David was a man after God’s own heart. He was the youngest of eight sons, a warrior, musician, and poet. Most of all, though, he was the servant of God. In this chapter, David finds his way into Saul’s good graces. David already served Saul as a musician, and now, after defeating Goliath, the king again notices David.

It is interesting how God makes a way for his people to be where He wants them to be without them having to orchestrate the details. It seems we spend a lot of time trying to make our own way in the world instead of walking in God’s ways and letting Him open the door. Saul had already noticed David as a musician. He didn’t apply for that job, but someone sought him out. Now, David becomes the chief warrior in Saul’s army because of God’s divine will.

While David is in Saul’s presence, Saul offers to give David his oldest daughter as his wife. Amazingly, David refuses and feels that he (and his family) is not worthy of being in the king’s family. But verse 20 of chapter

18 declares that “Michal, Saul’s daughter, loved David.” Saul now wants to give his younger daughter to David, and David again refuses because he is not rich enough to pay the bride price for a king’s daughter.

When Saul learns the issue is his status and poverty, he changes the bride price to something David can afford. If David can kill 100 of Saul’s enemies, that can be enough. David gladly goes with his men and kills 200 instead and marries Michal. Of course, a careful reading of the text reveals that Saul was hoping David would be killed in all of this, but still, there are some essential things to learn about marriage.

First, what matters the most in a husband is not how rich he is but his character and the integrity of his heart. Second, love is an important consideration. It is no mistake that David married the woman he loved and who loved him rather than just following the custom and marrying the oldest. Third, David’s humility is impressive. He did not think he deserved anything, and those are the kind of people God rewards the most.

Saul had ulterior motives and wanted to use his daughter to become a “snare” to David, but David and Michal had no idea. Instead, this is a story of an honest, humble, and godly man overcoming his poverty and station in life to marry the woman God had for him. He probably never dreamed of marrying a princess, but God made it happen anyway. God can make a way for marriage where it seems impossible because He is God and in control of everything. The most important thing you can do in your life and marriage is honor Him and trust Him to open the doors He wants you to walk through.

The African Context

The greatest thing a man can do to be a good husband is to be a man after God’s heart. The husband sets the tone for the rest of the family. This example is what it means for the man to be the head of the home. It is not simply that he is in control or the boss, but that he is to lead his family by example so they can look at him and see an example of integrity and character.

David showed grace and integrity as a young single man before ever marrying. He wanted to do what God wanted him to do, and he tried

to live his life to please God. This attitude moved God to open up opportunities and doors for David so that God could have His man in the palace. Saul had failed as a king, and God was working out His plan for David to be His replacement.

David never thought he deserved anything. Instead, he thought of others as more important than himself. Thus, God made a way for him to marry a princess. In our society today, we sometimes think that we can only marry a particular tribe or a particular person from our own class or clan. Yet, God wants you to marry who He has for you. It might not be who you expect, and God can make the unexpected happen.

The promise from Saul (in the story of Goliath) was that whoever defeated Goliath would get his daughter in marriage. Yet, David never demanded that or expected Saul to keep that promise. Instead, he said he didn't feel worthy of marrying a king's daughter. This type of man is precisely the kind of man that I want to marry my daughter. He will surely fail as a husband if he thinks he is worthy. However, if he thinks he is not worthy, he will depend on the Lord and thank God for his grace. David was the kind of man who lived in the grace of God and never expected that he deserved anything.

Matthew 6:33 says, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all things will be added unto you." If you seek God first, God will give you what He wants you to have. You will not have to earn it, but you will receive it by grace. What God gives you is His best for you, and you can lean into that. David married a woman who loved him, and you can see the hand of God in all that happened to them. Today, we need young African men and women who depend on God and trust Him to provide the spouse that they need.

Marriage is not about riches; it is about love. Marriage is not about what you deserve but about the grace of God in the life of the humble. God can make a way for the poorest African boy to pay the most exorbitant bride price. We think that marriage is up to us, but it is really up to God, and if we are committed to doing what is right in marriage, God will help us and make a way. Honor Him by trusting Him in your marriage.



1 Samuel 25

A Shepherd Boy on the Run

When the servants of David came to Abigail at Carmel, they spoke to her, saying, “David has sent us to you to take you as his wife.” She arose and bowed with her face to the ground and said, “Behold, your maidservant is a maid to wash the feet of my lord’s servants.” Then Abigail quickly arose, and rode on a donkey, with her five maidens who attended her; and she followed the messengers of David and became his wife. David had also taken Ahinoam of Jezreel, and they both became his wives. Now Saul had given Michal his daughter, David’s wife, to Palti the son of Laish, who was from Gallim. 1 Samuel 25:40–44

Theology of Marriage

This story from chapter 25 is more about Abigail’s honorable behavior than it is about marriage. In this story, David asks for food and help from a man he has helped many times. This man, Nabal, behaves poorly and almost faces the wrath of David and his rag-tag army. However, Abigail, the wife of Nabal, wisely takes matters into her own hands and intercedes to protect her family and husband. When Nabal hears of the close call, he actually has a heart attack and dies.

What follows in the verses above is the aftermath of that entire encounter. David is undoubtedly smitten with the beautiful and wise Abigail, but he also realizes that he had some small role in her becoming a widow. We do not know whether it was out of kindness or attraction, but we do know that he decides to take her as a wife.

There is nothing wrong with marrying someone who is a widow, and David likely thought he was blessing her by proposing marriage. Also, verse 44 lets us know that David was probably hurting because Saul had actually taken his wife, Michal, and given her to another man. Saul did this to hurt his enemy David and strip away everything from him so that he lived like a stray dog, always on the run.

Even though David was on the run without his wife, this did not justify David taking another wife in Abigail. One could argue that he and Michal were no longer husband and wife because her father had given her to someone else, and one could also argue that David was trying to do the noble thing with Abigail. Yet, the truth of the matter is that Abigail was not David's second wife. In fact, she was his third. Verse 43 reveals that David had taken another wife named Ahinoam.

While this was culturally acceptable and something common among kings, this was also a slippery slope that would continue to haunt David and his sons. He began a habit of taking wives from other men, sometimes with the pretense of doing the right thing. God's design is one man and one woman for life, and no matter how you try to dress it up, David's descent into polygamy only led to further sin.

After temporarily losing Michal (because he does get her back), he feels justified in taking Ahinoam, which leads to helping the widow Abigail, eventually leading to the murder of Uriah and stealing Bathsheba. Being a king and living in a culture where kings had harems did not justify a "man after God's own heart" following the world's ways. As believers, we must be careful to let the word of God guide our decisions and not pragmatism or modern culture.

The African Context

Pragmatism, or doing what is most convenient, and modern culture tend to be tremendous temptations in Africa today. Yet, the godly men and women of Africa must never compromise biblical standards and give into culture or pragmatism. The only way to heal the marriages

and nations of Africa is for Jesus to be at the heart of our thinking and actions. He is Lord and, therefore, must also be Lord in our marriages.

It is tempting to give in to the easiest and most convenient path, but the way we walk with Jesus is a narrow one. Being on the narrow path means being different from the crowd and doing things differently. There is tremendous pressure to conform to African traditions, but the believer must resist this pressure. If these traditions are consistent with the Scripture, that is fine, but if they are not, we must choose the narrow path over the easy one.

Many believe that wealth or power entitles you to live by a different standard. Many years ago, I had a debate with an immigration official in Eswatini who criticized me because I disapproved of former President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. When I told him that I expected leaders to be examples to all of us, he scoffed at this because the king of Swaziland had five wives. In his opinion, it was okay for leaders to do things ordinary people could not do. In the eyes of God, the fact that David would be the future king did not entitle him to engage in polygamy any more than it entitled him to commit adultery with Bathsheba and murder her husband, Uriah.

A Christian leader in Africa should be even more holy and upright and an even greater example to everyone else. No one is the "big man," and we are all just servants of the Lord. As servants of the Lord, we are not entitled to special treatment. Instead, we must do our duty.

David was a great man, and he became a great king, but his actions here in this chapter reveal that he was also human and not perfect. He almost sinned against God and nearly destroyed Nabal in his anger. Were it not for the intervention of Abigail, this would have occurred. He also erred by marrying her, and there were other times in Scripture when his judgment was flawed. It is healthy for us to remember that no one is perfect, and we must be careful to keep in step with His Spirit, lest we, too, make simple mistakes today that lead to more significant errors tomorrow.



2 Samuel 3

David's Downward Spiral

Sons were born to David at Hebron: his firstborn was Amnon, by Ahinoam the Jezreelitess; and his second, Chileab, by Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite; and the third, Absalom the son of Maacah, the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur; and the fourth, Adonijah the son of Haggith; and the fifth, Shephatiah the son of Abital; and the sixth, Ithream, by David's wife Eglah. These were born to David at Hebron. 2 Samuel 3:2–5

So David sent messengers to Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, saying, "Give me my wife Michal, to whom I was betrothed for a hundred foreskins of the Philistines." Ish-bosheth sent and took her from her husband, from Paltiel the son of Laish. But her husband went with her, weeping as he went, and followed her as far as Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, "Go, return." So he returned. 2 Samuel 3:14–16

Meanwhile David took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron; and more sons and daughters were born to David. 2 Samuel 5:13

"I will be more lightly esteemed than this and will be humble in my own eyes, but with the maids of whom you have spoken, with them I will be distinguished." 2 Samuel 6:22

Theology of Marriage

We left David in 1 Samuel with two wives (in addition to Michal, who had been given to another) and a transition to becoming king of Israel.

Now, in the next chapter of his life, he is consolidating his power and establishing the nation. Unfortunately, “the man after God’s own heart” continues to go the way of the kings of that day and deviate from God’s plan for marriage. By chapter 5 of 2 Samuel, David has gone from two wives to six wives as he reigns from Hebron.

Then David decides to undo the wrong done to him by retrieving Michal. In the process, he breaks the heart of her current husband and brings her home by force. This act leads to bitterness in her heart and a confrontation where she derides him for his shameless dancing before the ark. There is no indication that David’s dancing is inappropriate, but his comments to Michal are harsh. He lets her know that he would enjoy the advances of the adoring women of Israel. Then Michal remains childless for the rest of her life as David takes more wives and more concubines.

Many have sought to justify David’s behavior during this consolidation of power. After all, Michal was stolen from him, and it only seems fitting for him to take her back, even if he hurts others in the process. Others have said David was not yet exposed to the law, which was sealed up in the ark, so he should not be blamed for his ignorance. However, what is truly happening is a downward spiral of the man of God where he begins to seem less and less like the boy who strode into the valley to face the giant and more and more like the king he replaced.

David is now the warrior king, and with so much blood on his hands, he will not be allowed to build the temple. He is now the man who enjoys kingly power and all of the cultural privileges that come with it. He is now the man who will soon see another woman who strikes his fancy, and he will go to great lengths to steal her from her husband and kill him in the process. David’s time will come, and God will not allow His servant to persist in sin, but just know that David’s sin with Bathsheba did not happen in a moment of weakness. Instead, it was the inevitable result of a downward spiritual spiral comprised of many poor choices along the way.

In our lives and in our marriages, we must understand that one sin begets another. We are often the victim of a culture or a familial example that causes us to continue the brokenness in our own lives. As people of God, we must break the cycle and do things in God's way. You do not want your children to face the challenges you faced, and the only answer is to covenant with God to do things differently now.

Studies have shown that children of divorce are more likely to divorce, and abused children are more likely to become abusers. Decide right now that you will break the cycle of suffering and ungodliness in your family. Decide that you will be the one who will change things for the next generation and show them a better way. Following the bad examples of others will only ensure pain and suffering in your own life. God needs men and women who will be different. Our children and grandchildren need men and women who will be different.

The African Context

Generational sin is one of the great problems in Africa. Many people suffer because of issues they inherited from their families. It is quite common to see harmful things passed down from generation to generation. Today's believers need to put a stop to these things. We do not have to scold our relatives but just choose to live differently. This choice will be uncomfortable, and you will find that family members will often pressure you to comply with "traditions," but God is looking for a faithful man of God to stand in the gap and create change that starts with his own wife and children.

Just because others around you do things a certain way, or because it was a tradition inherited from your forefathers, does not mean you have to comply. Knowing your identity in Christ and making Him number one in your life is the key to being who God wants you to be. There are too many examples of these kinds of things to list, but let me try to name a few. Sometimes, you will find families that are steeped in polygamy. This tradition is hard to oppose, especially if you are the child of a second or

third wife, but you can thank God for your past while committing to do better in your future. You cannot let your past define you, but you must let God and His word define you. This commitment includes issues of divorce. Commit to stay faithful to your husband or wife and to be true to them until death.

Other generational problems that plague families are things like a proclivity toward adultery, where men believe they are expected to have multiple sexual partners. Other families are steeped in witchcraft and might even have a generational connection to certain spirits and witch doctors. It takes courage and faith in God to break free from that and proclaim that you will never be a witch doctor or take your child to a witch doctor.

Even things like theft, poverty, child abuse, and many other issues can be linked to people falling into the same traps as their parents. As a child of God, you have to covenant and commit to break free from these things and do things the biblical way. David was a man after God's own heart, but when it came to women, he allowed his culture, environment, and pride to bring him down to where he made the same mistakes as his predecessor. What is worse, we will see how even his children fell into the same kinds of traps because they followed their father's example. Be different and change the society around you.



2 Samuel 11–12

David's Ultimate Failure

Now at evening time David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So David sent servants and inquired about the woman. And someone said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers and had her brought, and when she came to him, he slept with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her house. 2 Samuel 11:2–4

Now when Uriah's wife heard that her husband Uriah was dead, she mourned for her husband. When the time of mourning was over, David sent servants and had her brought to his house and she became his wife; then she bore him a son. But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord. 2 Samuel 11:26–27

Theology of Marriage

As previously noted, this adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah were the result of David's callous regard for God's original design for marriage. David had slipped into a pattern of thinking that because he was the king, he could do things others were not allowed to do. He married as many women as he wanted, had intercourse with as many concubines as he wanted, and took from other men to strengthen his dynasty. Now he crosses a line that prompts God to intervene directly with devastating consequences.

God sends the prophet Nathan to confront David in chapter 12 and expose all his sins. David rightly repents of his sin of adultery and murder and prays for God's forgiveness. He receives forgiveness for his sin, but he also learns that he is still destined to face the consequences of that sin. This point is a good lesson for us to learn. Regardless of our wrongdoings, God will forgive us if we genuinely repent. Yet just because He forgives us, this does not mean we will not suffer the consequences of that wrongdoing.

This truth is why it is better to do the right thing initially. Will God forgive polygamy, divorce, or adultery? Of course, He will forgive those things for those who genuinely repent. Yet, you might still face the consequences of that polygamy, divorce, or adultery. Many people have pain and complications in their marriages because they did not do things God's way initially. It is better to obey the Lord and follow His path than to live with the many painful consequences of sinful actions.

Consider what Nathan tells David in 12:10–14:

“Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ Thus says the Lord, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. Indeed, you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun.’” Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And Nathan said to David, “The Lord also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born to you shall surely die.”

What terrible results came from not following God's design! The next few chapters show all the painful things that came because David could not be faithful to one woman. First, the baby born to Bathsheba dies because of the sins of David. Never think that you sin in isolation! Your sin affects those around you. Then one of David's sons rapes David's daughter Tamar.

He then shames her and drives her brother Absalom to bitterness and revenge killing. Then David's son Absalom is estranged from the family because of the murder and revolts against his father. This revolt led to a civil war where over 20,000 men died in battle, all because David insisted on multiple wives and concubines at the expense of others.

David was a man after God's own heart, but he lost his way because of the lust of the flesh and how he handled marriage issues. Today, Christians must learn from those mistakes and insist on following God's plan. Society's inability to follow the biblical path has led to countless abortions, unwanted children and orphans, broken homes, broken marriages, adultery, murder, incest, rape, and every manner of wickedness. How long will it be before we treat marriage as holy and a gift from God? How long will it be until our marriages reflect the nature and character of Christ? God created marriage, and it only works if we operate it according to the creator's instruction manual.

The African Context

Many marriages in Africa are suffering today because people fail to stay true to the word of God. Since many marriages start the wrong way, they are then plagued with countless problems in the future. I have counseled many people in marriage in my years as a pastor, and typically people do not come and ask how to start well in courtship and marriage. Instead, they usually come needing help to untangle the terrible mess they have created in their family. It is wiser to start right than to try and repair what is completely shattered.

Consider David. He created such a mess that everyone around him suffered because of his choices. He loved God and wanted to serve God, but he still fell short. Even many Christians today are falling short in things related to marriage, family, and children. Repairing those mistakes is not easy.

In 2 Samuel 20:3, David has to sort out some of his mistakes. He takes the concubines he had left behind in Jerusalem, and who had been

defiled by his son, and he keeps them in a house under guard. He provides for them for the rest of their lives, but he does not go into them again in a sexual way. It seems that David has learned some hard lessons and is now trying to repair what is broken. Sometimes the treatment is as painful as the disease. Yet, we can respect David for trying to make things right.

People often ask me for advice about untangling themselves from adultery, polygamy, divorce, and children born outside of marriage. The answers I give are not always easy to hear. It will mean going against culture, sacrificing your pleasure, and putting God first in your life. People often think it's too much work to fix what they have broken. However, the only way to have peace is to repent and, with God's help, do the hard work of repairing the damage your sin has caused.

One thing we can learn from David is the importance of being faithful in the little things. As I said, David had already entered a pattern of sinfulness that led to this painful chapter with Bathsheba and Uriah. Yet, this could have been avoided if David had been intentional in his spiritual life. The moment he saw Bathsheba on the roof, he should have fled from sin as Joseph fled from Potiphar's wife. However, David lingered and fell into lust and temptation.

Some have speculated that David would never have fallen into this temptation if he had been where he was supposed to be. The Bible says that his adultery happened in the spring when kings went out to battle (see 11:1). Why was David's army on the battlefield, but he was not with them? We do not know for sure, but if David had been with his army, he would never have been tempted by Bathsheba. Think about that in your own life. Many temptations can be avoided by ensuring you are in the right place with the right people.

If you frequent bars and places where sin is rampant, you will also be tempted to fall into sin. Having other African friends who are godly and who sharpen you spiritually will help you stay strong in your spiritual life. Bad company will corrupt good character. Today, many fall into sin

because they spend time with the wrong people in the wrong places and join in their bad habits. Being faithful in church, faithful to spend time with your spouse, and faithful with godly friends will help prevent sin from entering your marriage.

Many Africans today spend little time with their spouses. Both spouses work all day, and then they come home and must care for the children and rest before being gone again the next day. If your spouse is the love of your life, you should spend lots of quality time with them. If you spend more time with others than with your spouse, you are opening up your marriage to potential temptation.

It is common for African husbands and wives to have separate lives, separate businesses, and separate churches. They rarely spend time together, and they don't share their hearts with each other. This silence and secrecy are not healthy for a marriage. You should know everything about your spouse, and they should be your best friend. If you keep secrets from them and live a private life, then just know you are making mistakes that will one day cause the marriage to suffer.

I know many African couples where the husband and wife go to different churches. This practice is also unhealthy. The husband and wife should be committed to one another and committed to the same church so they are serving in the same Christian community and having the same friends. Be careful about having a separate life from your spouse. Sometimes the best medicine for your marriage is preventative, where you stop problems before they even start.



1 Kings 11

Solomon's Lack of Wisdom

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the sons of Israel, "You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods." Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not follow the Lord fully, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods. Now the Lord was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the Lord, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. 1 Kings 11:1–9

Theology of Marriage

A Western proverb says, "Like father, like son." In other words, sons often follow the examples set by their fathers. Solomon was no exception. He is lauded for being wise in all things and for taking the nation of Israel

into what can only be described as a Golden Age of progress. First Kings is filled with stories related to Solomon's wisdom, his humility, and in some cases, even his godliness. He begins very well in many respects and is a man after God's own heart, like his father, David.

Yet, like his father, David, Solomon has one fatal weakness. That weakness is a desire for multiple wives and concubines. In fact, Solomon must have set a record, for he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Even if he slept with a different one each night, it would take him three years to be intimate with each woman. It is unknown if he had sexual relationships with all of them or if the massive harem was just a status symbol. However, the Scripture is clear that Solomon allowed his feelings for them to cloud his spiritual judgment.

Solomon is known as the wisest king, but in his later years, he entered into depression and despair (as seen in the book of Ecclesiastes). He began to worship false gods to please his many wives, many of whom were pagans, who also worshiped false gods. Even though Solomon is praised for starting well, he is not remembered for finishing well. He is a tragic example of the dangers of polygamy and the dangers of being unequally yoked with those who do not follow God.

In this text, the Bible says that these wives turned his heart away from God. When choosing a spouse, we must, first and foremost, look for one who will inspire us to be as close to Jesus as possible. An excellent standard to adopt is to look for someone who loves God more than they love you. If they put God first in their life, then the rest of their priorities will fall in line. Someone who worships you and loves you more than God will become a spiritual drag on your life. When we put God first in our lives, He gives us the supernatural capacity to love others with His love, and in the end, we become better husbands or wives.

Another important note for all of us is the power of God to give grace and work through the worst of circumstances. Yes, we see these kings slowly moving away from God's design for marriage and giving into the polygamous culture of their day. We see the devastating consequences of polygamy, adultery, and the denigration of women, and we see how this worsens with each successive generation. However, God's purposes are not foiled by the sinfulness of humanity.

This truth is an important reminder because humans tend to make a mess of things. We know what is right and good, but we often stray from the best and follow our own thinking. When we do that, we land in trouble and face the consequences of our sin. However, we should not despair, because there is no sin too big for God to forgive in Christ, and when you truly serve and obey the Lord, He has a way of working all things out together for His glory and our good (see Romans 8:28).

I say this because some of you are reading this and feeling very discouraged because you have been through a divorce or are caught, in some way, in a polygamous marriage. You are probably wondering, “What hope is there for me?” My encouragement to you is that God can work everything out for your good if you trust Him and are willing to make the hard choices to obey Him. Yes, it is better to start on the right road, but if you are currently caught up in a messy situation caused by your own sin (or someone else’s), God can still work through that to accomplish His plan.

Consider Solomon in this text. He was the son of David and Bathsheba. Remember, David sinned by committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband Uriah murdered. That child from the adultery died, but after they had wed, Solomon was born from that same union. Did God want David to sin with Bathsheba? Of course not! However, the God who knows everything knew that David would sin, and He worked in David’s heart to bring about repentance, and He worked in their marriage to bring about the next king, Solomon! It was not God’s will for David to sin, but somehow God sorted that out and wove that all into His ultimate plan for Israel.

Some of you have been through a divorce already, or you are living with someone, or you are the child of a polygamous marriage, and you are wondering, “Can God use me?” The answer is a resounding “Yes.” While Solomon followed in his father’s sinful footsteps regarding marriage, he still wrote some of the Bible and had many good years as a faithful king. Sin must be avoided at all costs, and sin devastates our lives and relationships. However, there is forgiveness for sin, and God is a God of second chances.

Even though God never condones polygamy in the Bible, He never judges those born as a result of a polygamous marriage or as the result of adultery. God did not want your parents to sin, but He does not see you through the eyes of their sin. Instead, He sees you as His beloved creation, and He wants you to do great things. He wants you to rise above the example of your family, and He wants you to be someone who brings glory to Him in your own unique way. The fact that God could choose Solomon to be king lets us know that God is greater than our sins or the sins of our parents. God has a plan for you, and somehow, He finds a way to make everything (even our mistakes) work together for our good and His glory. Be encouraged by this today.

The African Context

Solomon's example demonstrates several key concerns that must be noted in today's families.

- The example of a father carries significant weight in children's lives. Mothers are essential in Africa, and we need them in every area of our lives. However, we tend to underestimate the importance of fatherhood. Some men believe their purpose as fathers is simply to produce children and provide for them. However, men must be the spiritual leaders of their homes as well. They must love their wives and love their children by spending time with them, playing with them, teaching the Bible, and being the best example possible.

Many do not realize that a child's perception of God the Father is often created by the example they see in an earthly father. If you are constantly harsh and abusive, they will see God the Father as a God of judgment without any love. If you are never there and never seen at home, they will think of the Father as someone who lives far away and cares not for his children. You do not want your children to have this perception of their heavenly Father, so you must be an excellent example on Earth. This will help them have the correct view of God in heaven.

David was a good man and a good king, but he had many flaws, and those flaws showed up in his children. Some rebelled, others

abused women, and some, like Solomon, followed his penchant for multiple wives and concubines. David did not set the right example for Solomon, and Solomon suffered. What kind of example are you setting for your children as a father and husband? Do they see their father as one who walks with God or one who follows the world? Children see more than we realize, and they walk in our footsteps.

- We must be careful to marry “in the Lord” and marry people who will point us toward Christ. Solomon fell away from the Lord because of the women he married. To please them, he slipped into pagan worship. I am sure that he did not do this overnight, but it was a gradual slide into paganism. If you marry someone who is spiritually weak, they will pull you down. Perhaps you think you will pull them up, but this is seldom the case. Even the wisest man in the world could not pull up the pagan women he married. Instead, they pulled him down.

When looking for a spouse, consider their spiritual life and the church they come from. There are so many churches in the African context, but many of them are unhealthy. They might look culturally similar to your church or even biblically sound on the surface, but dig beneath the surface and find out what they believe. Ask your potential spouse what they believe, talk to their pastor, and investigate the church. There could be significant doctrinal differences that don’t come up initially but that will be a problem in your marriage after you have children.

- If you look back on your family and upbringing and realize that you came from a family that did not practice biblical marriage, do not despair. This past does not mean that you are a lesser person or that you are doomed to repeat those same mistakes. Instead, come to grips with the issues from your family and seek counseling on how to avoid those mistakes in your own marriage. God gives fresh starts to all of us, and many of the greatest servants of God came from broken homes and broken family situations. Love the family you were born into but commit to breaking the curse in your own life and setting a different example for your children in the future.



Ezra 9

Marrying “in the Lord”

“And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have abandoned Your commandments, which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end, and with their impurity. So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, so that you may be strong and may eat the good things of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’ And after everything that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have spared us by inflicting less than our wrongdoing deserves, and have given us such an escaped remnant as this, shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there would be no remnant nor any who would escape? Lord God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this.” Ezra 9:10–15

Theology of Marriage

In this story, the people of God have been taken into captivity in Babylon for breaking the covenant. Jerusalem had been wiped out, the temple destroyed, and the most gifted Israelites had been enslaved. This

situation came about because God's people had continually spurned their covenant with Him. There was a steady decline in Israel from the time of David until the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. A survey of Kings and Chronicles reveals king after king who led the nations to break faith with God and slowly become like the pagans around them. Some kings attempted to bring reforms, but ultimately, the decline was steady and dramatic. Ultimately, God decided to wash His hands of the whole mess and allow the Assyrians and Babylonians to wipe out His special people and take them into captivity.

The events of Ezra and Nehemiah occurred during that captivity, and they detail the story of God's remnant who remained in Jerusalem and the fate of the captives in Babylon. Even though the captivity was a time of great punishment, God still remembered His chosen people and desired to bring them back to the land—changed and, perhaps by His grace, more repentant.

God tasked Ezra with going back and rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, and Nehemiah was tasked with returning to rebuild the wall. These men greatly loved God and desired to see significant reforms come to His people. Remember where we left things with Solomon and the kings who followed? By that time, marriage had become something that was treated lightly for convenience, and God's design for marriage had all but been lost. Yet, these men of God understood God's desire and sought to promote it.

In the above passage, Ezra realizes that some who had remained in Jerusalem intermarried with all of the pagan tribes surrounding them. This realization broke Ezra's heart and led him to pray, intervene, and demand that the people of God do what is right. Notice his reaction in verses 2–4 of the same chapter:

“For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the officials and the leaders have taken the lead in this unfaithfulness.” When I heard about this matter,

I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled out some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. Then everyone who was frightened by the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.”

Ezra’s reaction was not due to racism, tribalism, or social injustice. Instead, this was an issue of faithfulness to God and the importance of spiritual fidelity. Solomon was the perfect example to them of a great man who allowed pagan wives to pull him away from God. This tendency to be led astray is why God had commanded from the beginning that His people should not intermarry with those who do not follow the one, true God. Now, when God has begun to show grace to them again and restore them to their land, Ezra discovers that they have been unfaithful in marriage.

The solution was to put away (divorce) their pagan wives and only marry in the Lord. This response sounds like an extreme and complicated scenario. Obviously, some felt great affection for their wives and were being asked to choose God over them. There were also likely children who were involved and who would have to be somehow cared for. Ezra’s response does not mean God advocates divorce in all situations (which we will see later), and I do not believe God had no concern for these pagan women and children. However, God’s greatest concern was that His people maintain His standard of holiness. When we allow our culture or our circumstances to dictate how we approach marriage, we make a bigger mess than can be imagined.

Many people today are in marital situations that are not pleasing to God, and now they wonder how they can untangle themselves from it. Our sinful choices often put us into situations that cannot be easily unraveled. The answer is not to sin a second time to solve the first sin but instead to do what is right in the beginning. The key principle of marriage taught in Ezra is that God has standards for who we should marry and that He wants His children to marry like-minded people

who serve the same God. Marrying an unbeliever doesn't mean that your marriage is invalid or that you now have to divorce, but your choice created a scenario that will require God's intervention to solve. You must pray for that spouse to be saved, and you must be a good and faithful example at all times. Most importantly, though, you must make wise choices *before* marriage to marry according to God's will.

He cares about who you marry, and you cannot just marry anyone. This story recorded in Ezra was very painful, and it might not even seem fair to the pagan women caught in the middle. However, we must remember that this was not God's fault. Instead, it was the fault of sinful men who made the wrong choices for the wrong reasons. Remember this when making your own choices.

The African Context

When considering the application of this story in Ezra, it is essential to look at the passage in its context. We are not the Israelites today and are not returning from captivity to the promised land. For believers today, our promised land is still to come, and we will enjoy it for eternity in heaven with Jesus. God takes divorce very seriously, and there are several passages in the rest of the Old Testament and New Testament that teach this.

Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 7 is a beneficial companion text for this story. In that passage, Paul instructs believers to marry "in the Lord." In other words, born-again Christians should only marry other born-again Christians. For believers, marrying unbelievers is not just forbidden but a recipe for problems. This is a principle echoed in Ezra. The problem was that they married the wrong people in the beginning. Now, how can that be sorted out? Paul says in the same passage that if two unbelievers are married, and one of them gets saved, it does not mean that they should divorce their unbelieving spouse. On the contrary, they should stay with them and try to win them. However, if the unbeliever leaves the believer, then the believer is free to remarry.

We will discuss this more in this book once we get to those passages, but my point is that God hates divorce, and it is only reserved for the most terrible of situations. In Ezra, the people took a radical step to deal with a severe problem. In light of the former captivity and the restoration to Israel, the holiness of God's people was of paramount importance. It is not clear if this was just their thinking or God's, but it is clear that holiness is very important to God and that divorce is a painful last resort that God rarely permits.

In Africa, people rarely consider religion as something that determines whom they marry. I know people who will marry according to tribe or various worldly criteria, but few consider religious background when choosing a wife. In East Africa, it is common for Christians to marry Muslims and for lost people to marry saved people. It is common for husbands and wives to go to different churches and keep their former religious connections after marriage.

Yet, the Bible makes it clear that the two are to leave their past, cleave to one another and become one flesh. When you marry, you are starting a new home with a new person, and you become new as well. Now the two have become one. Being one in mind and heart should also mean becoming one in church fellowship. This transition is best when you come from the same place spiritually. Then, you won't have to make such radical compromises later down the road.

This story also clearly shows that unbelieving spouses tend to pull the believers down. We often hope it will be the other way and think we will change the lost person to be a faithful church member like us, but it rarely happens. You will either find strife in the marriage because of religion, or the believer will compromise and become less faithful. Either that happens, or they live two separate lives where the Christian has a "church life" that their spouse knows nothing about.

God's plan is for like-minded believers to marry each other and then serve together in the local church. God is not the divider of families but the one who brings them together. Yet, if we marry someone who

does not love God like we do, we sometimes have to choose between serving God and loving them. This was the choice that the men in Ezra's day had to make. They ended up choosing God over their wives, but imagine the pain and distress those decisions caused. Marry the person God has for you, and look for that person in the right place. They will probably not be found in nightclubs or on the streets. They will likely be found in a congregation just like yours.

If you have already married and realize that you should have made another choice, do not take Ezra's story to mean that you should divorce. That would be to take the text out of its context. However, it does teach that you should humble yourself as Ezra did and cry out to God for Him to help your situation. Begin praying for your spouse, loving and serving your spouse in such a way that God can use you to be a witness to them. He can change them, but it often takes a long time. Do not give up. Stay faithful to your spouse and trust the Lord.

Esther, Job 2

Marriage in Hard Places

“Go, gather all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants also will fast in the same way. And then I will go in to the king, which is not in accordance with the law; and if I perish, I perish.” Esther 4:16

Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die!” But he said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips. Job 2:9–10

Theology of Marriage

Many marriages in the Bible were not easy ones. Consider Esther, who was born in captivity in Babylon and forced to be in the harem of the Persian king. In those days, she had no choice about who she would marry, so she could only make the best of her circumstances. If you are familiar with the story of Esther, you know that she was one of many forced concubines of the king, but because of God’s grace and her beauty and charm, she was chosen to become queen. This turn of events might sound like a blessing, but I am not sure Esther saw it that way. She was forced to marry someone against her will, and she was forced to sleep with him and serve him as queen.

In those days, the Persian king had ultimate power, and no one could even enter his presence uninvited, not even his own wife. Yet, when Esther realized the plight of her people and the need for intervention, she bolstered her courage and took her life into her hands to advocate for what was right and holy. She realized that God had placed her in this position for a purpose, and she somehow found a way to honor the king, be true to her marriage and station in life, and also be faithful to her God. Esther is a fantastic story of grace under fire and someone who made the most of her situation in a less-than-ideal marriage.

Contrast that with the wife of Job in the next book. In the first two chapters of Job, you see the incredible suffering that he endured. In fairness, it was not only Job but his wife who also suffered. All of their possessions, servants, and children were destroyed in one day. This crisis also affected his wife as they were her children too. Unquestionably, her comments come from a place of deep bitterness and resentment toward God.

However, after the devil went beyond the family and began to torment Job's body, his wife came to him and counseled him to curse God and die. Her health was not affected, so she did not suffer as much as Job, but her pain was real. The difference between her and Esther, for example, is how she responded to adversity. Her answer was to "curse God" and quit doing what was right.

We all find ourselves in difficult situations from time to time, but what matters is how we respond to those situations. Being a wife is sometimes difficult. Many women in this world find themselves in challenging situations, and they are often faced with difficult choices. Husbands need wives like Esther, who will rise to the occasion and do the right thing regardless of the consequences. Sometimes that means risking her husband's anger by telling him the truth, no matter how he will take it.

At the same time, husbands also need wives who are encouragers in times of trouble. Job's wife was not trying to encourage him or counsel him to do the right thing. Instead, she wanted to bring him down into the pit of bitterness where she lived and make him as emotionally

miserable as she was. Thankfully, Job insisted on worshiping the Lord no matter what happened.

From the beginning of the Bible, wives have always served as partners and helpers to their husbands. They are equal with them, but they serve the family and submit to their husband in Christlike humility. The writer of Proverbs tells us that “He who has found a wife finds a good thing” (Proverbs 18:22). Yet, husbands need brave, honest, loyal, and encouraging wives. Even though Esther was in a forced marriage to a pagan king, she managed to rise to the challenge and bless all the Jews around her. Job’s wife was married to the husband of her youth, who had given her a good life and many children, yet she fell short of what he needed. No matter how difficult the situation, be a wife like Esther, and your husband will rise up and call you blessed.

The African Context

Many women in Africa find themselves in difficult marriages. While arranged marriages can sometimes work, they often result in problems. Other women have found themselves in polygamous relationships, or they have had husbands who have been unfaithful to them. Sadly, in Africa, it is very common for husbands to beat their wives, and many women are abused by men in their lives. All of these things are tragic, and they are things that should change in the culture.

I would never condone or advocate the bad things that often happen to women on this continent. However, African women must ask themselves how they should respond in difficult circumstances. I would never counsel a woman to stay in an abusive situation, but some difficulties cannot be avoided. What does one do when a husband or child dies? What does one do when they are in a marriage with difficult in-laws or facing poverty, hunger, or sickness?

The godly woman will rise to the occasion when facing marriage and family difficulties. She will do whatever it takes to do the **right** thing, even if it means going against culture and extended family. Like Esther,

African women must be brave and willing to take risks to stand for God. It is possible to be faithful to your husband, family, marriage, and God, but it takes God's grace to help you navigate those things.

At the same time, husbands need wives who are encouragers, not wives who constantly nag them as Job's wife did. While facing her own pain and turmoil, she did not see her husband's situation with spiritual eyes. Instead, she looked at him with worldly eyes and counseled him to just give up on God. Today, more than ever, we need women of prayer who stand for what is right. We need women who strengthen their husbands and help them stand for God.

This is the kind of woman who pleases God and who blesses her family and husband. When men love their wives as Christ loved the church, women find it easy to follow a man like that. It is essential that men lead well. Yet, it is also vital that women fulfill their roles as well. It is a two-way street, and a woman who walks in grace encourages her husband in the Lord. Interestingly, we know Esther's name, but Job's wife's name is never mentioned. God wants us to remember Esther and try to be like her.



Psalm 128

God's Desire: Marital Bliss

“How blessed is everyone who fears the LORD, who walks in His ways. When you shall eat of the fruit of your hands, you will be happy and it will be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house, your children like olive plants around your table. Behold, for thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.” Psalm 128:1–4

Theology of Marriage

In this Psalm of Ascent, the writer gives us what could be considered an ideal picture of home life. In this vision, the man of God walks in the ways of God and enjoys the blessings that come from a deep abiding relationship with Him. In this picture, his home is filled with a loving wife who is fruitful and a blessing in all ways. The family table is surrounded by many children who are growing and strong like young olive plants, promising a legacy of blessing and a heritage that will continue to fear the Lord.

This vision is indeed ideal, but it doesn't mean that every believer's life will be picture-perfect. We live in a fallen world where sin abounds, problems arise, and families are often less than perfect. For instance, we should be careful not to assume that if someone has no children that they do not fear the Lord, or if their children are sometimes less than “olive plants,” that it is always the parents' fault.

The Psalms and Proverbs are considered poetic wisdom literature, and we must consider the genre or type of literature we are reading when doing good biblical interpretation. In wisdom literature, the writers often portray a standard or picture of what is generally true, but it doesn't mean there are zero exceptions. For instance, in Psalm 37:25, David says he has never seen the children of the righteous begging for bread. This does not mean that no child of a righteous man has ever begged, and it doesn't mean the righteous will never experience hunger. It is simply a poetic way of saying that God always cares for the needs of His people.

The same is true here. There are many biblical examples of godly people struggling to bear children and many biblical examples of righteous people with unrighteous children. The point of this psalm is to illustrate God's ideal family life with poetic language. In fact, it points back to God's desire and design in the garden before sin ever entered the world. What can we learn from this blessed picture?

First, it is interesting that this righteous man does not have "wives" or "fruitful vines," but he has one wife who is a fruitful vine in his home. As we have said before, God's design was one man and one woman in a covenant relationship with him and each other. A godly wife is God's greatest gift to the righteous man. She is enough for him. Indeed, she is a blessing in many ways, not just in the bearing of children. While I cherish my wife for being the mother of our precious "olive plants," she is also my confidant, lover, equal partner, and best friend. God wants you to experience marital happiness by walking in a covenant relationship with the spouse He gives as a love gift to you.

Second, it is essential to see that God does want men and women to procreate and produce a godly heritage. While it is His will in rare instances for husbands and wives to remain childless, His design for most of us is for us to have children and raise them in the fear and admonition of the Lord. There is an incipient selfishness in some cultures where couples marry but refuse to attempt to have any children. It is

not that God prevented them from conceiving by His sovereign will, but instead, the couple decides they would rather avoid the “burden” of children and spend their time, energy, and resources on themselves. My personal belief is that this goes against God’s design for the home. If He prevents you from having children or specifically leads you to wait, that is understood, but if selfishness drives you to remain childless, you are missing the great joy of those little olive plants around your table.

Children are a gift from God, and in this psalm, they are a part of the idyllic setting where the righteous man experiences genuine familial happiness. In this poetic image, he looks around his dining room table and sees a loving wife perfectly matched for him. He also sees children following in his righteous footsteps, growing up like olive shoots, and carrying on a godly legacy of righteousness. He has a home of peace and a home of prosperity. This design was God’s plan in the garden. While sin has marred that vision for many of us, it is still the ideal for which we strive and the standard by which we should judge the health of our marriages and families.

The African Context

In the African context, marriage is rarely optional. Instead, it is highly prized and sought after by most single people. In most African cultures, choosing singleness over marriage is unacceptable and suspicious. This perspective is both good and bad. Marriage is highly esteemed in the culture, and that is consistent with the biblical witness. This is good because marriage was God’s idea from the beginning. However, the cultural pressure to marry often causes people to marry to please their families instead of to please God.

While marriage should be valued, we should only marry as God leads us to marry. We should also give space to those (like the apostle Paul) who were called to singleness to be freer to serve the Lord. We must beware not to overgeneralize and paint singleness as inappropriate and all marriages as good. Singleness is God’s will sometimes, and one

should only marry the person God has chosen for them. As believers, we do not marry because of tribe, physical beauty, or family pressure. We marry because God is leading us to marry, and we act in obedience to Him.

Again, African culture tends to esteem the bearing of children, which is highly desired by all married couples. Among many tribes, procreation is the chief purpose of marriage, and many would say that if you cannot bear children, something is wrong in the marriage. Yet, as believers, we must remember that God is the one who blesses us with children, and there is nothing we can do to force His hand. He gives and takes away, but no matter what His will is for your life, blessed be the name of the Lord.

As Christians, we must be careful to remember where children come from and that no child is born apart from the miracle of God at conception. There is nothing wrong with greatly desiring children, but the answer to barrenness is to pray, seek the Lord, and ask Him for wisdom. Historically, Africans have often taken matters into their own hands and sinned against the Lord. Resorting to witchcraft or traditional medicine is not a biblical response to the inability to conceive. In Malawi, if they determine the fault is with the husband, they will sometimes hire a *fisi* (*word for hyena referring to a surrogate man*) to sneak into the house at night and impregnate the woman. In many countries, if the woman cannot bear children, it is common for the husband to take other wives. These answers are unbiblical and will only lead to further sin and heartache. These worldly solutions are the same mistake Abraham and Sarah made when he took Hagar to bear children for Sarah. We must learn from these biblical mistakes and not repeat them.

Children are a gift from God, and just like the psalmist describes in the text, they are a blessing seated around our table. We do not own our children; instead, they belong to God, who gives them to us to steward, shepherd, and present back to Him as people who love Jesus and follow Him. Like olive shoots, they will grow tall and bear more fruit if we

care for them and carefully cultivate them. Our children need discipline, love and care, and nourishment, both physical and spiritual if they are to grow to become the people God intends.

Sometimes African fathers abdicate the responsibility for the care and raising of the children to the mother. However, this biblical example clearly puts the responsibility for those olive plants on the shoulders of the righteous man. As the husband, it is your place to teach them, care for them, and help them become godly men and women. This is not a picture of a husband far away in another city working while the mother is around the table caring for the children. No, the family is together in this picture, and the husband and wife each have their place and care for those children. An African father is not just a provider. He is also a teacher, mentor, shepherd, minister, and friend. It takes a godly man to intentionally spend time with his children to raise them to be godly people.



Proverbs 5

Faithfulness in Marriage

Drink water from your own cistern and fresh water from your own well. Should your springs be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be yours alone and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; Be exhilarated always with her love. For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress and embrace the bosom of a foreigner? For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths. Proverbs 5:15–21

Theology of Marriage

Proverbs has much to say about marriage. This text refers explicitly to the importance of faithfulness in marriage and avoiding adultery of any kind. In beautiful, poetic language, Solomon describes the importance of physical love in a marital relationship. He clarifies that one should only be satisfied with “water” from their own well. In short, he uses this euphemism of water and well to refer to the wife of your youth. God’s will is for you to only have one wife and be physically and emotionally faithful to her. Adultery is a sin against God and your spouse.

Yet this text has so much more to say. In the language of these verses, we see the deep “one flesh” connection between the husband and the wife. They are to serve each other, and they exist to glorify God through

loving one another intimately. Consider Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 7:4, where he states that the husband does not have authority over his body, but the wife does. Likewise, the husband has authority over his wife's body. In short, the two become one flesh, and each exists to serve the other physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

In this text, one can also see that sex is clearly a gift from God that should be enjoyed in marriage without any shame. Sex within marriage is beautiful and something God wants us to enjoy. Notice the language, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth. Let her breasts satisfy you. Be exhilarated with her love." These are not prohibitions but exhortations to relish the pleasure of the marriage bed. However, when God's good gift is practiced outside of the prescribed bounds of marriage, this leads to sin and shame. Unfortunately, because of sin and misuse of God's gift, some wrongly see all sex as shameful, even between the husband and wife. Remember Adam and Eve in the garden before the fall. They were naked and unashamed.

Sex should be enjoyed often between husband and wife, and you should work hard to be good at it. You should please each other, and it should be exhilarating for both. God is pleased when we are physically pleased and pleasing each other. We must be careful to be unselfish in lovemaking with our spouse and seek their pleasure instead of our own. As husbands and wives seek to serve each other physically and meet each other's needs, the act of lovemaking becomes one of beauty, sacrifice, and mutual gratification.

Solomon also emphasizes that you should only have eyes for your spouse. As God is pleased when you delight in the spouse He has given you, He is equally displeased when you are exhilarated with another. This exhilaration can be emotional as well as physical. Don't entertain any thoughts or actions that would give room for sin in your heart. God is watching, and a violation of your vows is not only a violation of your relationship with your spouse but also with God. As husbands and wives become familiar with each other, they can sometimes lose that spark.

Then the enemy will send someone along to tempt you. What seems like an innocent flirtation or a harmless friendship can become adultery. While you might have acquaintances of the opposite sex, it is wise to avoid all close friendships with them. Adultery is not just an act of the body but also of the heart and mind. Your spouse is to be the object of all your romantic affections, even those that are purely emotional.

The African Context

African cultures tend to be conservative in nature and value modesty and decorum. While Africa is slowly being influenced by modern Western promiscuity and hedonism, most Africans still hold conservative views on gender roles, dress, and sexual taboos. It is common to attend churches where men and women sit on opposite sides of the church and where there is little interaction between men and women except in marriage or at formal functions. In rural Africa, women still wear skirts below the knees, and people feel it is essential to dress modestly. Homosexuality is unheard of in most of Africa, and while pre-marital sex and adultery often occur, it is frowned upon and met with harsh consequences.

On the surface, these cultural norms seem positive because they more closely mirror the biblical perspective. Yet, that is not enough if one is doing what is right just because it is culturally appropriate. Understanding the biblical perspective on sexuality is important because that never changes. Cultures fluctuate. Even today, African culture is becoming more tolerant of sexual sin. It is not enough for one's belief system to be grounded in the culture. It must be grounded in the Bible. I often ask Africans who believe the correct thing, "Do you believe that because it's what the Bible teaches or because that's your cultural worldview?" The Christian must sort through that and ensure they do the right thing *for the right reasons*.

Unfortunately, this cultural propensity to be sexually conservative is a two-edged sword. While it discourages promiscuity, it also distorts the

biblical view of sex in marriage. Instead of rightly seeing that sex in marriage is good and sex outside of marriage is wrong, some Africans view all sex as shameful and dirty. Some mistakenly believe that the original sin in the garden was not eating the forbidden fruit, but instead, that Adam and Eve engaged in sexual intercourse. Cultural taboos designed to keep people from committing adultery have backfired, creating a perspective that all sex is shameful.

This view based on culture without a proper theology of marriage has led to many misunderstandings. I know pastors who think it's wrong to have sex with their wives the night before taking the Lord's supper because you are unclean after marital sex. The shame around sex in marriage prevents fathers and mothers from talking with their children, and it is typically left to grandparents or friends to help those in puberty understand what is happening in their bodies. Often there are rites of passage designed to help kids understand sex that typically lead to experimentation and children born out of wedlock.

From all the questions my wife and I have asked of African friends in multiple countries, we have learned that child abuse is common, and most women are sexually assaulted at some point. Africans are not more sinful than others. These things happen worldwide. However, the shame associated with all sex forces people to sweep these things under the rug instead of discussing them openly. This is not a call for Africa to be like the West. On the contrary, the West is too open about sex, and Western culture is rife with sexual sin. Children are exposed to inappropriate things at too early an age, leading to gender confusion and all of the terrible hedonism we see today.

Instead, the African church needs a healthy, balanced theology of marriage and sex. We need to talk about it with our youth appropriately and help them see the beauty and goodness of sex when it is practiced as God intended between a husband and wife. People need to know it is good to be exhilarated with your wife and to rejoice in her physical body. However, we also need a theology of marriage and sex that clearly

points out the danger of sex outside of marriage. We need to have biblical values around gender and homosexuality and be vocal about those values. We need to celebrate what is good and preach against what is evil and twisted.

Many of the African values about sex and marriage are on point and consistent with the Bible's teaching. However, the cultural perspective alone is insufficient to promote healthy marriages and purity in our relationships. A biblical theology of marriage will value the role of sex and mutual sacrifice in the marriage relationship while safeguarding the next generation against the dangers of sexual sin. We can celebrate marital love as God intended and still stand against promiscuity, sexual sin, gender confusion, and homosexuality.



Proverbs 12

The Crown of Her Husband

An excellent wife is the crown of her husband, but she who shames him is like rottenness in his bones. Proverbs 12:4

Theology of Marriage

Because the two become one in marriage, our behavior reflects on our partner. God would have us strive for excellence in our marital roles because, in so doing, we glorify Him, and we also honor our spouse. In this text, Solomon mentions the honor that comes to a husband because of his excellent wife. She is like a crown upon his head and brings him honor in public (see Proverbs 31:23).

I have experienced this in my own life with my wife, Suzie. No woman I know is more loved or admired by others than her. Instead of making me look bad because she is so good, she actually makes me look good because I married her! I am not a great man, but I am married to a great woman whose influence in my life improves me. We sometimes forget that our actions affect everyone around us, either positively or negatively.

Sadly, the opposite is also true. Solomon says a wife who brings shame to her husband is like rottenness in his bones. What we do affects our spouses. This principle is true in our private lives and outside the home in our public behavior. A wife (or husband) who behaves shamefully

embarrasses their spouse as much as themselves. We should seek to be the kind of people who live above reproach outside the home so that we bring honor to the ones we love in our family.

The African Context

Honor and shame are essential concepts in African life. These concepts drive much of the behavior in daily life, and it is vital to bring honor to those you love. In relational societies, people are sensitive to personal behavior because they understand how personal behavior affects others around them. No person is an island in Africa. Instead, they feel deeply connected to a larger network of tribes, families, friends, and churches.

Because of this deep sense of honor and shame, wives must be careful to bring honor to their husbands through their reputation and behavior. A godly wife brings honor to her husband, like a jeweled crown brings honor to a king. Likewise, the husband should honor his wife through his words and behavior. He honors his wife through faithfulness, leading well in the home, and living a godly life.

Too many men focus on providing for their families but fail to lead them spiritually. When a husband attends church with his wife and children, when he is active in the church and faithful to God publicly and privately, this honors God and his wife. It brings a special joy to her heart. However, a husband who is unfaithful to God or his wife is like rotteness in the bones. Solomon is talking specifically of wives in this text, but it is easy to see that it can be applied to both sides of marriage. The husband and wife are one flesh, and the marriage relationship has a profound unity. How we live affects our spouses; let us strive to be a crown that brings them honor.



Proverbs 18, 19, 21

A Good Wife

He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord. Proverbs 18:22

A foolish son is destruction to his father, and the contentions of a wife are a constant dripping. House and wealth are an inheritance from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord. Proverbs 19:13–14

It is better to live in a desert land than with a contentious and vexing woman. Proverbs 21:19

Theology of Marriage

A godly wife is truly a gift from the Lord. While Solomon says that finding a wife is good, he also clarifies that she comes from God. Not only is your wife God's love gift to you, but she is also a means of gaining God's favor. When a man loves, cherishes, and honors his wife, he will not only have a blessing in her, but the Lord will continue to pour out His blessings in his life *through* her.

I have been married to my wife for 33 years, and I truly love her more today than ever before. When I found her (or, more accurately, when God brought us together), I had no idea what a wonderful blessing she would be. I thought I was simply looking for my next girlfriend, but God had designed that I would meet the woman He would use to

change my life. My wife is the one who led me to Christ before we married. She is the one who prays for me daily. She is the mother of my children and the light in our home.

A wife is more than just someone who cooks, cleans, or raises children. She sometimes does all those things, but she is also the husband's partner, confidant, advisor, lover, and friend. Finding the woman God created for you is like finding a treasure you never knew existed and then realizing that this treasure continues to pay dividends for the rest of your life. I have watched my wife grow, mature, and become more beautiful with each passing day. She was a gift the very first day I met her, but she continues to be a source of God's favor to me every day of my life.

This does not mean that things will always be perfect between a husband and wife. Since the wife knows the husband better than anyone, she knows exactly how to love him best, and she also knows how to annoy him. While a godly wife is a source of blessing, and a prudent wife is from the Lord, a contentious wife is like a constant dripping. Proverbs will say more about this as we proceed, so I won't comment much here. I will only say, ladies, that it is essential that you be an agent of grace in your husband's life and not a source of strife.

Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25). Christ loves us regardless of our shortcomings, so there is no excuse not to love your wife, men. Regardless of what she does, no matter how contentious she becomes or what happens, you must love her and honor her unconditionally. However, wives, you should make it easy to be loved by being lovable. Yes, your husband is bound to love you whether you are lovable or not, but it is much easier to honor those who are honorable. Fight the temptation to be contentious. Husbands, listen to your wives, and love and respect them.

The African Context

African wives are a gift from God to their husbands. It is important to pray and seek the Lord before you marry to know you are entering

into a covenant with the right person. However, once you have entered into the marriage covenant, whomever you have married is God's gift to you, and you should not be thinking about divorce or trying to add another. He who finds a wife has found a good thing and obtains favor from the Lord.

However, as a man of God, you must love your wife and cherish her. Many see marriage as the opportunity to get someone who cooks, cleans, and cares for everything at home. Your wife is much more than that. She must be at the center of your heart and the object of your love and affection. Please don't treat your wife like a hired maid. Treat her as you would an equal, a partner, and a friend. Encourage her to reach her full potential according to her gifting and talents, both inside and outside the home.

Wives should honor and respect their husbands, and husbands must treat their wives with gentleness and compassion. Wives should not be contentious or try to cause strife in the home. However, if they do, their husbands must continue loving them gently as Christ loves the church. There is no excuse to beat or abuse wives, even if they are contentious and talkative. When the Bible says it is better to live in the desert than with a vexing woman, this is not saying her husband should leave her. Instead, it just warns wives that they should not be contentious and vexing.

Many women do not realize how highly their husbands value peace. When men come home from work, they want the home to be a refuge of peace and tranquility. Obviously, there will be arguments occasionally, and problems will occur with the house and children. But wives should strive to avoid arguing and nagging their husbands. A nagging wife is difficult for a husband to bear, so if you love him, you will try to avoid contentions. Strive to be a prudent wife who loves her husband and avoids arguing.

African husbands should also know that their wives hate to be ignored. Often the husband will come home and wants quiet, but the wife has

been at home all day with the children and wants to talk to an adult. I have known wives who start arguments with their husbands and even incite them to violence because they would rather fight than be ignored. This fact should warn husbands to cultivate a good relationship with their wives and talk to them and listen to them. This text warns wives to understand their husbands and be sensitive to their needs. When husbands and wives love each other in an understanding way, that is when harmony and peace rule in the home.



Proverbs 31

An Excellent Wife

An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life. She looks for wool and flax and works with her hands in delight. She is like merchant ships; she brings her food from afar. She rises also while it is still night and gives food to her household and portions to her maidens. She considers a field and buys it; from her earnings she plants a vineyard. She girds herself with strength and makes her arms strong. She senses that her gain is good; her lamp does not go out at night. She stretches out her hands to the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor, and she stretches out her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet. She makes coverings for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies belts to the tradesmen. Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she smiles at the future. She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and bless her; her husband also, and he praises her, saying: "Many daughters have done nobly, but you excel them all." Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her the product of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates. Proverbs 31:10–31

Theology of Marriage

This text has historically been viewed as the classic text for the perfect wife and mother. As mentioned earlier, poetic literature often paints a portrait of ideals for which we should strive. The writers used sweeping generalizations to describe generally true things without precluding exceptions in some circumstances (see notes on Psalm 128). Additionally, this passage does not literally refer to a particular historical figure but is instead to be understood figuratively, pointing to characteristics each woman should strive for.

There are also cultural aspects particular to the time and region of Solomon that must be considered. Few women today will have the equipment to spin yarn or use a distaff and spindle. Many do not have servant girls, and men do not sit at the city gates anymore. The point of the text is not that a woman should mimic the things in this text in order to be an excellent wife and mother. Instead, general principles are put forward in the text that are timeless and can apply to any culture. Those are the things a wife would strive for in her context to be excellent.

A wife who demonstrates the qualities pictured in this passage is indeed worth more than fine jewels. When your life mirrors those qualities, it inspires trust in your husband and brings him good all the days of his life. A godly woman is a gift from God, and husbands should cultivate that gift by encouraging them when they succeed and being patient when they fail. Women of excellent caliber are not born, but their parents and their Lord mold them. This process continues even in marriage as the husband, through prayer and love, helps his mate become better and as she positively influences and shapes her husband as iron sharpens iron.

This passage clarifies that a godly woman is creative, hardworking, and faithful. All of the language suggests that diligence is a virtue, and this woman was exceptional because she worked hard, was clothed in strength, rose early, and slept late. You don't have to purchase a field or cook for your servant girls to be like this. Many are the mothers who labor for their husbands and children, either in the marketplace or at

home, in the early hours at prayer or late into the night, caring for those in their homes.

This woman was also compassionate, caring for the poor and seeing to the needs of others outside her home. She was also wise, ensuring that everything was prepared in time so that nothing would be lacking in her home. This preparation is not to say that one can anticipate every problem. Of course, there will be times when we are unprepared. The point is that the excellent wife cares for those in and out of her home. She is intentional and “smiles at the future” because she knows she has done everything possible to prepare herself and her family, and she trusts fully in the One who holds the future.

Godly wives and mothers are strong, kind, wise, compassionate, and hardworking. It is no wonder that her husband rejoices in her, because she never brings him shame, only honor. Even her children rise up and call her blessed. This does not mean that you are somehow less than excellent if your kids talk back or dishonor you. On the contrary, it often takes years for children to recognize the worth of their mothers, but those who are godly will eventually be praised by their children. How sad that this praise sometimes comes at their funeral when it should have been voiced sooner. Solomon’s final point is the most poignant. At the end of the day, it is not about beauty or what the world sees. What matters is what God sees, and this is what makes you exceedingly excellent. A woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.

The African Context

There are no busier or harder-working women on the planet than African women. After twenty-five years of living on this continent, I continue to be amazed at the resilience and strength of African women. They typically bear heavy burdens at home while working in some way or doing some business to earn for their families, and they still find the time to be more active in their local churches than most men. Many African women have experienced significant trauma, yet they continue

to have joy and a smile. While I am sure they exist, I have yet to meet an African woman I thought was lazy.

However, it is essential to note that being physically strong, hardworking, and resilient is not enough. These things are honored in this text, but they are honored as *spiritual attributes*. In other words, the excellent woman has those qualities because she is a woman of faith whom the Holy Spirit empowers. She girds herself with strength, but it is the strength of the Lord. One might look at this text too quickly and assume a quality of an excellent wife is good business sense. However, the passage goes much deeper than how a woman runs her home. Instead, it emphasizes the Christ-like nature of a woman who fears the Lord, and all she does comes from that inner quality.

In the same way that beauty is fleeting (here today and gone tomorrow), physical strength and business acumen are also fleeting. Even compassion for the wrong reasons is not commendable. If you are active in your community because you are trying to make a name for yourself, then that is not godly. Godly compassion comes when you allow the Spirit of God to love others through you. African mothers are always loved, but one who fears the Lord is above them all. That is the standard for which we must strive.



Ecclesiastes 9

A Wonderful Life

Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Ecclesiastes 9:9

Theology of Marriage

As we have said many times, marriage is a gift from God. Even pessimistic Solomon recognized this. Solomon authored many books, including Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and this book of Ecclesiastes. At some level, you have to take his words in this book with a grain of salt. Yes, it is the word of God, but it is the word of God authored by a man who had, in many ways, become jaded and far from God.

In our previous study of Kings, we saw the decline of Solomon from someone who started out very close to God but who later was led astray by many foreign wives. We noticed how his refusal to hold to God's design for marriage actually ended up being his undoing. As Solomon aged, he wrote this book of Ecclesiastes, looking back on the good and bad in his life. His great wisdom is evident in the book, and so is his great pessimism.

In the end, he decides that life is futile since death awaits everyone, so the best thing to do is to eat and drink and enjoy your work (see 5:18). He does recognize his faults as he finally comes to his senses at the very

end of the book and proclaims that the wise man should fear God and keep his commandments. In short, for all of his wisdom and seeking after knowledge, Solomon goes through a journey where he starts well, gets off track, and then finally comes back to where he started.

While Solomon is often pessimistic and laments the brevity and futility of many aspects of life, he recognizes the beauty and importance of marital love. Perhaps this is why he wrote the wonderful love poem, Song of Songs. In that book, he emphasizes the beauty and gift of romantic love. Also, in the text above, Solomon encourages men to enjoy their lives with the women they love. God gives us the gift of work, He gives us the gift of life, and He gives us the gift of time. One of the greatest joys one can experience is enjoying those gifts of life and time with the person God created especially for you.

From this text above, we can learn many quick things about marriage. First, God wants you to enjoy your life and enjoy your spouse. This fact doesn't mean you won't have problems or suffer loss. Some often suffer the loss of a spouse, which is devastating. However, generally speaking, marriage is God's gift to you and something He wants you to enjoy. It is hard work, but it is essential to continually pursue your spouse and try to keep the spark alive. Many simply live together with the romance gone. This must never be! Work at your marriage and work on yourself to be the best possible partner.

Second, notice that life is fleeting. God gives us the gift of time on this earth, but our time is short. We should not waste that time but invest that time in others, in our spouse, and in our marriage. This time with our spouse is a reward for us as we toil. God gives you a spouse, so you don't have to toil alone. Life is hard, and work is hard, which is God's design. However, along the way, He gives us His gifts, and our spouse is one of the best gifts we can have. Celebrate that gift, cherish that gift, and work hard to care for that gift.

The African Context

Marriage is intended to be more than just a cultural norm or a means of having children and growing a family. Marriage is a wonderful gift to enjoy. Marriage should not be a burden. Instead, it is an opportunity to grow together with someone who makes you better and more like Jesus. The excitement in marriage is always understood on the wedding day. People always celebrate love and romance on the day young couples are wed. We expect that they will have sex, and we expect that they will enjoy each other during their honeymoon.

However, the love and romance should not end after a couple returns from their honeymoon. God wants you to enjoy your spouse even more after thirty years than you do in the first three days. When you truly love someone, that love and respect should grow more and more each day. Your spouse should become your confidant, best friend, counselor, helper, and soulmate. The seed that is planted on the wedding day is something that should be cultivated and continue to bloom until death comes.

Sadly, for many couples, this is not the case. Once the children come and the family grows, young couples often begin focusing on other things besides their mates. Sometimes, it is the pressure of work that keeps couples apart. Sometimes, the struggles of life, the needs of the children, or pressure from extended family can be things that cause couples to stop paying attention to each other. However, God wants you to give your spouse the best you have. If you put other things before them, the marriage will grow cold.

God wants you to enjoy your marriage, and He wants you to continue to pursue your spouse. After thirty-two years of marriage, my wife and I went through a dry time where it seemed like we were more focused on work and ministry than on each other. When I began to see the warning signs in our relationship, I realized it was my responsibility to address the issue as the head of the relationship. I started something I called “Magic Mondays,” where I would surprise my wife with flowers

and an inexpensive date to someplace she had never been. When I got intentional, we saw radical changes in our life. You don't have to spend money or take time away from work to date your spouse. You just have to create a specific time when they get all your attention, love, and focus.

As men, we often work really hard to win our wives before we marry them, but after marriage, we begin to take them for granted. When wives feel loved and pursued, they will typically reciprocate and also begin to love well and pursue their husbands. Think of your marriage like a field. If you till the soil, water and fertilize the field, and remove the weeds, you will see an excellent harvest. However, you will often see worse results if you neglect your field and let the weeds take over. Marriages must be cultivated, and husbands and wives must do the hard work of tilling, watering, and weeding to see the love grow stronger with each passing year.

God wants your marriage to bloom, and He wants to be glorified in your marriage. As the husband loves his wife well, he glorifies God. As the wife loves the husband well, she glorifies God. When you are enjoying the marriage bed and pleasing your spouse sexually, you are bringing glory to God because you are enjoying His gift as He intended. When you sacrifice for your spouse and serve them in various ways, you also serve the God who created your marriage. Time is short, and there is no time to waste. Focus on your spouse while you have time. Someday, one of you will be gone, and you must be careful to make the most of the time God has given you.



Song of Solomon 7

Exciting Romance

“I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me. Come, my beloved, let us go out into the country, Let us spend the night in the villages. Let us rise early and go to the vineyards; let us see whether the vine has budded and its blossoms have opened, and whether the pomegranates have bloomed. There I will give you my love. The mandrakes have given forth fragrance; and over our doors are all choice fruits, both new and old, which I have saved up for you, my beloved.” Song of Solomon 7:10–13

Theology of Marriage

Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) has long been known for its sensuality and poetic genius. This story, set to a poem, follows the romance of King Solomon and his Shunammite bride. The poetic story has several characters who dialogue about their romance, physical attraction, and the ultimate story of their wedding. Many who read the story are shocked to see the emphasis on physical pleasure, romance, and marital love.

While the discourse might seem risqué at times, and the sequence of events and who is speaking is often confusing, much can be understood about sex, love, and marriage from this book. First, it is essential to note that this was included in the canon of Scripture for a reason. That, more than anything, speaks volumes about the importance of the book’s

content. Why would God include a love poem in the Bible, even if it was written by the wisest King in Israel's history? The answer is simple: Marriage, romantic love, and sex are important aspects of our lives. They are holy and gifts from God.

A second important lesson from this book is that sexual attraction between husband and wife should not involve any shame. God created us as sexual creatures and gave us the sexual desire we have. However, it is crucial to direct our sexual desires in keeping with God's design for our lives. While we are created as sexual beings, God only intends for us to direct our sexual desires toward our spouse. Until we are united in biblical marriage, we are to practice self-control as a fruit of the Spirit and trust God to give us the grace to resist all unhealthy or sinful sexual practices.

It is never God's will for you to have sex outside of marriage. Sex with your marriage partner is beautiful, passionate, and pleasing to God. He wants you to engage in sex with your marital partner often and without any shame. It is common for husbands and wives to be ashamed of their bodies and want to only have sex in the dark. This is nothing more than our perspective on sex being shaped by false theology and thinking it is only about physical attraction. The sex act between a husband and wife is more than just physical. It is also deeply emotional and spiritual. If you can see your own body through God's eyes and through your spouse's eyes, then you won't feel ashamed of how you look.

There are other unbiblical ways in which people misuse the gift of sex besides sex before marriage. It is never God's will for you to engage in sexual relations with someone of the same sex. While someone may struggle with homosexual tendencies, gender confusion, or a host of other modern problems, this is an area where one must practice self-control and allow the Holy Spirit to transform their thinking and desires. Contrary to popular belief, no one is born a homosexual. Instead, because of trauma, sinful cultural constructs, and misinformation, many find themselves drawn to distorted perspectives of sexual desire.

Sexual desire, whether homosexual or heterosexual, must be brought under the lordship of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. While it is sinful, homosexual sex is no more sinful than heterosexual sex outside marriage. Additionally, God never approves of “gay marriage.” Our desires must be given to Christ and only practiced in the God-given outlet of loving sex between a husband and wife. Even masturbation is outside of the bounds of God’s design because He created us to express sexual desire with our spouse only and not even ourselves. Sex, as God intended, is beautiful, holy, and wonderful. Sex practiced out of God’s design, whether it be viewing pornography, adultery, masturbation, homosexuality, or premarital sex, is all misdirected sexual desire and a perversion of God’s good gift.

Song of Solomon helps us see the good, God-given aspects of sex, and it spurs us to pursue that same kind of passion in our marriage relationship. You should have sex with your spouse, and you should have it often. Sex should be more than just procreation but a sharing of body, mind, and soul. It should be something you practice, and as you learn your partner and their likes and dislikes, you should become more proficient at pleasing one another. In the end, you will become the expert at pleasuring your spouse. The act of sex brings about children in God’s time, but it also allows the couple to know each other more intimately and become one in both mind and body. The more you please each other in the bedroom, the more God is pleased in your marriage.

The African Context

The language of this little book definitely has a Middle Eastern “feel” reminiscent of African culture. Solomon often uses euphemisms and analogies to describe intimate things. Like most African cultures, the culture of Solomon’s day was quite reserved, so rather than plainly say things, they would use figures of speech to describe intimate things. Thus, the book is full of phrases with deeper meanings.

When describing the physical attributes, Solomon uses many agricultural pictures of fruit, animals, blossoms, etc., to describe the most delicate features of his bride. In chapter 7, he describes her breasts as clusters of palms and other intimate parts as blossoms that will open. The book is indeed very sensual while trying to also be somehow discreet. Still, there is no hiding the fact that his discreet phrases speak volumes about intimate things, and the book is charged with sexual tension.

In the African context, there is often great shyness around these concepts, and we typically avoid these topics. However, children must be adequately schooled on these things. Because of shame, we have left the instruction about sex to other people in our children's lives, and as a result, there is much confusion and misinformation. African parents would do well to find culturally appropriate ways to discuss these things with their children. We fear that talking about it will lead them to experiment outside marriage, but talking about it correctly can prevent that experimentation. Our failure to talk about it is causing them to experiment and make huge mistakes.

The secret is to not only talk about sex with our children but also to help them see that it is a gift from God when practiced biblically. If we remove the shame from biblical sex and help them see the danger and poison of unbiblical sex, then our children will be more likely to wait. When we fail to discuss it at all, we end up letting other ungodly people and ideas influence them, and then all is lost.



Hosea 1–3

A Wife of Harlotry

When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, “Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord.” So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. Hosea 1:2–3

Then the Lord said to me, “Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the sons of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.” So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a half of barley. Then I said to her, “You shall stay with me for many days. You shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man; so I will also be toward you.” For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the Lord and to His goodness in the last days. Hosea 3:1–5

Theology of Marriage

Hosea’s task as a prophet was a difficult one in many ways. Not only did he have to prophesy against the nation of Israel, who had left its first love of Yahweh, but his marriage had to serve as a living illustration of unfaithfulness to the nation he prophesied about. Commentators have debated these texts for years and considered whether this was a literal

marriage and, if it was, why a Holy God would tell Hosea to marry an unholy woman.

Without diving too deeply into the various views and the intricacies of the Hebrew language, suffice it to say that this was a real marriage to a real woman, Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim. If we assume that this was a literal marriage, then that leaves only three options to explain God's command to marry a woman of harlotry: (1) Gomer was a prostitute, and God instructed Hosea to break the covenant and marry a prostitute as an illustration of how Israel had broken the covenant. (2) The word *harlotry* refers to "paganism," and Hosea was instructed to marry a pagan. Still, this is a breaking of the covenant and God instructing Hosea to enter into sin to make a point. Or (3) more likely, God instructed Hosea to *marry a woman He knew would one day become a harlot*, and thus she is called a woman of harlotry.

This third option seems most likely and more closely mirrors the situation between God and Israel. The entire book outlines a love relationship between God and Israel, who was like His beloved bride who ran after other lovers (false gods) and committed adultery (or literally worshiped those false gods). God uses a physical picture of marital unfaithfulness to illustrate the spiritual reality of Israel's unfaithfulness to Him. Hosea's marriage and even the names of his children illustrate this unseen spiritual adultery that had been going on for many years with God's chosen people. They claimed on the surface to be dedicated to God, but in their heart of hearts, they were syncretistic and worshiping the false gods of the surrounding nations. They either flagrantly worshiped under every tree and on every shrine on every hill, or they secretly mixed this false worship with their worship of God. Ultimately, it amounted to spiritual adultery.

Hosea's marriage was intended to mirror this truth. What a hard thing to marry a woman that God says would one day let him down. Yet, this story is also a beautiful picture of love, hope, and forgiveness. You see, he marries Gomer in chapter 1 despite what God says will happen and

how she will fail. Then as God promises to woo Israel back to Himself in chapter 2, this is also what Hosea does. He does all that he can to save Gomer and restore her. Ultimately, in chapter 3, this is not a new wife he purchases in the slave market but the very same woman who left him.

God tells Hosea to take Gomer back regardless of how far she has fallen, so he goes to the slave market and buys her for silver and barley. He tells her that she will be fully restored as his wife, and all will be forgiven. This act is a foreshadowing of what God promises for Israel as well. Though God is hurt and angry over their idolatry, there is hope that Israel will one day be restored, just as Gomer was. This restoration is ultimately found in the person of Jesus and the sacrifice He paid at Calvary to purchase and redeem us from spiritual slavery and adultery. The story of Hosea and Gomer is a beautiful picture of persevering love in marriage and a beautiful picture of God's pursuit of the ones He loves.

One can see in this book the connection between marriage and our relationship with God. The intimate love relationship between a man and woman is often used in Scripture as a physical example of our spiritual connection to God. When we get to the New Testament, we will again see language describing the church as the bride of Christ and Jesus as the bridegroom. Concepts like fidelity, forgiveness, and devotion to God are mirrored in our relationships with our spouses. The first thing we should glean from Hosea is that our relationship with God is intimate, and our faithfulness to Him is just as crucial as marital faithfulness. When Israel plays the harlot with other gods, this wounds God even more deeply than Hosea is wounded by Gomer. Imagine the pain you would feel if your spouse betrayed you and know that you cause God exponentially more pain every time you selfishly sin against Him.

Secondly, God's perspective toward Hosea and Gomer is very instructive for us. God did not ask Hosea to sin or break the covenant, but He did ask him to take a woman who would someday fail. We all are prone

to failure, and neither you nor your spouse is perfect. Yet, we can learn from Hosea the beauty and power of forgiveness when failure comes. Gomer's sin was public, it was blatant, and it was devastating. Yet, God still instructed Hosea to find her, love her, and redeem her from the consequences of her sin.

While divorce is allowed on rare occasions in Scripture, it is never the desire of God. Even for someone like Gomer, who was a prostitute and had committed repeated acts of adultery and infidelity, there was redemption. Hosea loved her despite the pain, paid the price to bring her home, and took her back without any caveats. His example is instructive for anyone who deals with a cheating spouse, and it is something we desire spiritually every time we fall short with God. Hosea was asked to treat Gomer the way God treated Israel. Yes, God let Israel face the suffering that came from their failure, but He also promised ultimate restoration and healing. This is what God expects in our marriages as well.

The kind of forgiveness that Hosea demonstrated can only be accomplished by the power of God, and when our spouses fail, we must depend on God to help us do what's right. Our first response is often driven by pain, and we want to punish and even destroy the other person. Thank God that He doesn't treat us like that when we are unfaithful to Him. God is our standard of forgiveness and grace in marriage. He calls us to love and forgive our spouse as He loves and forgives us. Our marriages should illustrate His character and grace for the rest of the world, just like Hosea's example illustrated that to the nation of Israel.

The African Context

Marital unfaithfulness occurs in Africa, just like in the rest of the world. It is especially common among men, and it is sometimes winked at by African society. Some cultures resort to polygamy or divorce to address these issues, but both approaches fall short of God's standards. Instead, God wants us to marry one person and stay married to them for life.

He wants our marriages to be examples of faithfulness to the society around us, just as He wants our relationship with Him to be an example of faithfulness to the world.

Adultery in Africa brings great danger, as many are exposed to HIV/AIDS and other terrible consequences that come from unfaithfulness. We must be very careful to stay faithful to our spouse and never commit adultery. Adultery not only brings shame to our family and spouse, but it also brings shame to the church and community.

However, if one spouse strays, the couple must receive counseling and help to heal and restore the marriage. God does not want a single act of unfaithfulness to shatter your marriage. I am not advocating for the husband or wife to be able to sin without consequences. On the contrary, your faithfulness in marriage is your greatest witness to your community. This testimony will help you stand out from the rest of the culture and will help them see Jesus in your marriage. However, if the worst happens, how you respond can also be a witness to the community.

It is shameful for one spouse to take advantage of the other and for the entire community to know about the sin. Yet, when God does a work in the family and brings forgiveness, healing, and restoration, this speaks volumes to the lost world around us. The world's answer is to divorce, be unforgiving, or even worse, cheat on the other spouse to punish them for their original sin. All of these responses are ungodly. Genuine biblical forgiveness, repentance, and restoration show the world a different way and help them to see Jesus in you.

While no one wants to endure the suffering Hosea endured, the entire world continues to benefit from his example. He shows us how to love and forgive. He also shows us the seriousness of sin in our own relationship with God and how many times we commit spiritual adultery. Hosea teaches us about the connection between marriage and our covenant relationship with God, and Hosea helps us rejoice in His ultimate forgiveness and restoration. We must never let culture determine our response to our spouse or to God. Instead, we must rise above culture and follow God's standards in our marriages and relationship with Him.



Malachi 2

God Hates Divorce

“This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with wrong,” says the Lord of hosts. “So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.” Malachi 2:13–16

Theology of Marriage

The state of our marriage affects every area of our lives. Throughout Scripture, God tells the husband to treat his wife with respect so that his prayers will not be hindered (1 Peter 3:7). Wives are to respect their husbands too, and that same text in 1 Peter says that God will even use their behavior in marriage to win their husbands to the Lord. Also, problems in your marriage can result from a weak relationship with God. When you walk with the Lord, put Him first in your life, and serve Him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, you will find your

marriage will be stronger. Rather than being the cause of your problem, marital strife is often the symptom of deeper spiritual issues between you and God.

Regardless, there is a deep connection between your marriage and your relationship with your heavenly Father. This fact is the point of the text in Malachi. God had stopped regarding the offerings the Jewish men were making because they had sinned in their marriages. They were treating their wives with contempt and breaking their covenant of marriage. This sin of divorce also affected their connection with God.

In extreme cases, the Old Testament makes an allowance for divorce, but as we will see later in the New Testament, this concept had often been abused by the Jewish people. By the time we get to the days of Jesus, it was common for a Jewish man to divorce his wife and take another for no reason at all. Divorce is never God's plan. He wants us to work out our problems in our marriage and to have holy and pure marriages which will help us have holy and pure spiritual lives.

Just because rare divorce exceptions exist in the Old Testament, this does not mean it was God's desire. Jesus later says divorce was allowed because of the hardness of our hearts and the sin in our lives. Rather than being something normal, it is devastatingly painful and only allowed in the most extreme of cases. A good analogy is the cancer drugs used for chemotherapy. Those drugs are poisonous and cause vomiting, hair loss, and extreme illness. Yet, those drugs are sometimes the only way to deal with the more hideous disease of cancer. Divorce was never God's desire but the rare exception to deal with the cancer of sin in a marriage that could not be repaired.

Therefore, the text says plainly that God "hates" divorce. Divorce is always painful and never good. Divorce must be avoided at all costs because it is sinful. Divorce will prevent you from being able to serve as a pastor or deacon, and divorce will ruin your family, devastate your children, and cause pain that you will never forget. Only in cases of repeated, willful adultery is a divorce allowed, and then only after

multiple rounds of forgiveness and restoration. Yet, in Malachi's day, the Jews treated marriage and divorce lightly, which God hated. He still hates divorce today, and we live in a time where people are even more cavalier about the issue of divorce. What pleases God is when you do the hard work of righteously working through your problems and strengthening your marriage. What pleases God is when He is the Lord of your marriage and when He brings healing to what is broken.

A divorce is someone saying, "God cannot fix this marriage. The only answer is to break it." That kind of thinking lacks faith and the resolve to put Him first in your life. God wanted the Jews in Malachi's day to treat each other respectfully and honor their vows. God wants the same thing for all married couples today. You and your spouse must commit to fight for your marriage and do whatever it takes to heal it. Marriage is a covenant, and divorce is a betrayal of that covenant and treacherous behavior. Avoid that poison at all costs!

The African Context

While sin is as prevalent in Africa as elsewhere in the world, the divorce rate appears to be much lower. There are numerous reasons for this fact. One significant reason is that divorce is culturally frowned upon in most African contexts. Divorce is allowed, but usually because of something not working well in the marriage. Divorce may be culturally acceptable if a husband and wife are incredibly estranged or unable to bear children, but those cases are rare. Typically, Africans avoid divorce as taboo.

A second significant reason there are few divorces in Africa is that some couples are not truly married. As we have mentioned in this book already, in some places in Africa, people call each other husband or wife, but they have never been through the traditional or religious process of having a wedding. Thus, it is not legally considered divorce when they dissolve the relationship. While it is still significant because these couples have been together for many years and have children, these breakups would not technically be a divorce.

A third reason is that African culture often has other ways of accommodating problems or dealing with brokenness in a marriage. Polygamy is one of the common ways of doing this. In some tribes, if the wife cannot bear children, rather than divorce her and marry another wife who can bear children, it is common for the man simply to take a second wife (or even more). Another common tactic in big cities is to have multiple households. A man might be married to the “wife of his youth,” but he could have a girlfriend in another household somewhere else in the city. Rather than putting his wife away to take another, he simply adds to the number of relationships he has with girlfriends in multiple locations. This approach is often considered less problematic and more culturally appropriate than getting a divorce.

Still, we must recognize that God hates divorce in Africa as much as He does elsewhere. Divorce is rarely the answer. Instead, a man and a woman must be biblically married in a covenant marriage and be faithful to each other. When problems arise, they should look to the Lord to help them heal those problems and restore their marriage. Culturally appropriate solutions, like polygamy, are not the answer to address sin in the marriage. Repentance, forgiveness, and change are necessary to solve the problem between a husband and wife. In the same way, Christian couples should not see divorce as the answer to solve a problem. Instead, they must also be committed to repentance, forgiveness, and change.

God hates divorce because He knows the pain and suffering that divorces cause. He sees divorce as the most drastic of solutions for the most drastic of cases. What honors God in Africa is when His children solve their problems with the help of the Holy Spirit and when healing comes to the marriage. The wise husband and wife will not allow divorce to be a part of their vocabulary. It should never be on the table as an option, but communication, grace, and forgiveness have to be the orders of the day. This pleases God. Resist divorce for biblical reasons and not just for cultural ones.



Matthew 1

A Righteous Man

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.” Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. Matthew 1:18–25

Theology of Marriage

This story of Joseph and Mary gives us deep insight into that day’s culture and some important lessons for today’s marriages. The Bible says that Mary had been betrothed (or engaged) to Joseph, and this pregnancy occurred before they were married. In those days, the betrothal period

could last as long as a year. During that time, the commitment to each other was equivalent to marriage.

In short, Joseph and Mary were committed to one another but not yet allowed to sleep together. However, a sexual encounter outside the relationship would be the same (culturally) as adultery. So, even though they were not yet husband and wife, they were still deeply committed to each other. Thus, when Mary came to him and informed him that she was pregnant (by the Holy Spirit), this initially seemed like a betrayal.

This response is where we see the righteous nature of Joseph. He still loved Mary, even though it appeared as if she had betrayed him, and so to spare her humiliation, he decided to “put her away” (or break off the betrothal) quietly. While Joseph was hurt, he did not want to disgrace her. At that time, the punishment for her crime (if it had been a sexual affair) would have been public humiliation or even stoning. Joseph, on his own accord, decided to spare Mary from all of this.

Then, however, he has a dream. In the dream, an angel reveals to him that this child is not the result of adultery, but the Son of God, born by the power of the Holy Spirit. The angel adjures Joseph to take Mary as his wife, love the child, and raise Him as an earthly father would. Now at this point, we see the depths of Joseph’s righteousness. He goes beyond the point of just trying to spare Mary shame and suffering to joining her in her humiliation. Doubtless, the couple endured many questions and accusations as it looks like she is pregnant due to their inability to abstain before marriage.

By all accounts, Joseph endured the humiliation with his wife, and yet he kept her pure and did not have any sexual relationship with her until after they were married and gave birth. Joseph did many other noble things as a young man who married the woman who would become the mother of God, but these are found in other texts. Yet, Joseph’s example is a beautiful example to all men who are married or engaged to someone.

- First, Joseph and Mary exemplify people who put obedience to God before all else. Not only did Mary bear the burden the Lord had asked her to bear, but Joseph also obeyed God and did exactly as He asked. He obeyed God at a significant personal cost and demonstrated complete faith that what the angel told him in the dream was indeed God's plan for his life.
- Joseph also treated Mary with great respect. He was pure in his own heart and treated Mary with purity, keeping her a virgin even in this marriage-like betrothal period. After they were married, Joseph even went above and beyond, choosing to wait to have sexual relations with her until after she gave birth. Joseph's self-control is commendable. At each turn, his primary concern was Mary and what was best for her.
- He also repeatedly demonstrated this in how he treated her kindly when he thought she had been unfaithful to him. Then he showed his kindness by joining in the shame of pregnancy outside of wedlock and choosing to walk with her through that when everyone around him thought he was the culprit.
- Joseph was a model of self-control. He demonstrated this at every step of the process. This self-control is essential because many believe it is impossible to be self-controlled. Yet, Joseph demonstrated how he could control his anger, emotions, and sexual desire. Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it is a lie from the enemy that men are incapable of self-control.
- Finally, Joseph was a man who put others before himself and who put God first in his life. He is an example of faith and purity of heart for all men. Whether you are just dating someone, engaged to be married, or already married, you should strive to have a character like Joseph. God uses people like this.

The African Context

Men like Joseph are hard to come by today, even in Africa. We would all like to think that we would respond as nobly as Joseph did in those circumstances, but that kind of man is rare. For most of us, if our fiancé

became pregnant and we had not had sexual relations with her, we would assume the worst. It would be hard for us to accept any other explanation, even if God revealed otherwise in a dream.

Additionally, most people would respond bitterly to the news that the woman they loved had become pregnant by some other means. We might desire to hurt her, to punish her somehow, and humiliate her. Even if we rose above the fray enough to go through with the marriage, raising another man's child would be hard. While Mary was pure and not to blame, Joseph *responded nobly even before he knew the truth*. He always put her first, even when his heart was breaking.

The righteous African man should respond to the woman he loves in the same way, regardless of what she does. Of course, sin has consequences, and difficulties can arise, but one must always put kindness, forgiveness, and grace first. Like Joseph, we should be willing to forgive and willing to help soften the pain for our wives or fiancés. Joseph was not vindictive. He just wanted to do what was right.

The African husband can also learn something about self-control from Joseph. A common myth in Africa is that men cannot control themselves; however, this is untrue. We can do all things through Christ, and if we are walking in the Spirit, then we can do what is right no matter how hard it is. I have had discussions with men about what they would do if their wives committed adultery and got AIDS. Without fail, the men respond that they would divorce and marry another woman or take a second wife. They say they would be willing to forgive (eventually), even though it would be challenging, but they could not have sex with her because of AIDS. While I agree that would be unwise, I then ask, "Well, what if you just live with her as your wife but choose not to have sex anymore?" Every time the men are shocked and say that it is impossible. I agree it would not be easy, but all things are possible with God.

We need an African society of men who believe Jesus can give them control over their own bodies. The excuse that the African male has

no self-control is what they use for all kinds of evil. Men leave their families in the village and move to the city for work. During that time, they have sex with other women, and people think it is normal because they are away from their wives. It is not normal. It is a sin.

If your wife is not with you, you must abstain. Anything else is a sin. Soldiers who leave their wives to go and serve have no excuse to misbehave, even if they are away for a year. Truck drivers who travel away from home have no excuse to sleep with other women. They must abstain. God expects the husband to have sex only with his one wife and to be faithful to her above all things. This attitude was the attitude of Joseph. He was willing to put the holiness of God before his own sexual desire. If Joseph can do that, then we can too.

Joseph chose Mary above the opinions of the village or the family. Joseph obeyed God, and his faithfulness to Mary was a part of that obedience. We must learn that we serve God by serving our wives. We love God by loving our wives. When we choose to do what is best for them, regardless of the opinions of others, then we will be the kind of men who please God. Because of the relational nature of Africa, it is sometimes hard to go against family, clan, or tribe, but when you become one flesh with a woman, she becomes the center of your family. Loyalty to her goes beyond loyalty to any other human being. We need African men who have this kind of heart toward their wives. Then they will be righteous men like Joseph.



Matthew 19

Is it Lawful to Divorce?

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and his 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, no person is to separate.” They said to Him, “Why, then, did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”
Matthew 19:3–9

Theology of Marriage

At the outset, it is important to note that this entire question was posed to Jesus to trap Him. In short, the Pharisees were trying to put Jesus in the difficult position of choosing between following God’s word and pleasing the people. This is a common issue today in many churches when it comes to the subject of divorce. Marriage, remarriage, and divorce are hotly debated topics and typically elicit an emotional response from people. It is necessary to navigate the truth of Scripture

and the feelings of those who have been through the pain of divorce, which is not an easy task.

For those who have never been through a divorce or had a family member divorce, it is easier to approach the subject with some objectivity. Yet, when individual experience, emotions, and marital pain are involved, it is not as easy to be objective. Divorce is one of those topics that divide many Christians, and because it is so personal in nature, it can be tricky to answer if you are not thoughtful. The Pharisees loved to pick something that was personally divisive in that day, like paying taxes or the reality of the resurrection to put Jesus in a difficult place. However, each time, He answered with the wisdom and insight one would expect from the Son of God.

Like today, divorce was a hotly debated topic in Jesus's day also, there were two schools of thought regarding the divorce, one led by Rabbi Hillel and the other by Rabbi Shammai. Both schools permitted divorce by men but disagreed on the grounds for divorce. Shammai was more conservative and thought a man could only divorce his wife over "gross indecency," while Hillel was looser with his perspective and believed that a husband could put his wife away for any reason, even for poorly cooked food.³ This debate is why they asked Jesus if a man could divorce "for any reason at all."

Rather than get drawn into a current cultural debate, Jesus pointed back to a biblical theology of marriage. He went back to the beginning to address the foundation of marriage and what marriage really means. This approach is sound advice for anyone trying to address a person's personal perspective. Rather than make the issue about a particular situation or parse all the details of who was right and wrong, it is much wiser to simply point back to the biblical theology of marriage and let the Holy Spirit apply the word of God to a particular context. The Pharisees did not care what Jesus thought about divorce. They were, instead, trying to trap Him and find some basis to accuse Him. Jesus

³ See the article by D.A. Carson on this topic in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol 8. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 411.

deftly sidestepped their trap and drilled down on the real issue at hand: What does the Bible say about marriage, and how is a biblical theology of marriage an antidote for divorce?

This biblical theology of marriage encompasses everything this book has covered thus far. To begin with, God created men and women. God created us to be male or female and designed us to love and complement each other. God is our creator, and thus we belong to him. We do not do what we want in marriage. Instead, it is our role as God's special creation to follow His will for our lives. Many enter marriage thinking that they will do what's best for themselves, or if they are exceptionally kind, they might try to do what is best for their spouse. Yet, God's perspective is that we belong to Him, and He brings us together, so the goal of marriage is to do what is best for Him, not for ourselves or even *our spouse*.

This is a radical adjustment from the perspective the Pharisees had. Their whole debate about divorce was initially founded on selfishness. Women had no right in that day to divorce, and the debate was whether a man could freely divorce his wife for any reason or if he had to be patient and only divorce for the gravest of indiscretions. Jesus upended their whole argument by saying this was not about them or even their wives but about the will of the God who created them and created marriage. His biblical theology of marriage forced them to look at divorce from God's perspective instead of their selfish perspective, which focused on their sinful desires.

In addition to being God's special creation, Jesus made His second point that the two have become one flesh. In other words, there is something holy and unique in the marriage relationship after the wedding. The husband and wife are no longer two but one, and *God has joined them together*. How can man undo what God Himself has created? Thus, God's ownership of the man and woman means that His will is supreme for their marriage, and the union He creates gives birth to a new relationship between the husband and wife. To break that relationship would be as difficult as becoming "unborn." Man should not destroy the covenant relationship that God created.

This entire statement takes the Pharisees aback, and they incredulously ask, “Then why did Moses permit a certificate of divorce?” Now, they think they have Him because He has somehow opposed the law of Moses. Yet, Jesus clarifies that while divorce was *permitted*, it was *never the desire of God*. Instead, divorce was a painful concession to their sin and hardness of heart. Jesus cleverly puts things back on the Pharisees and says, “Divorce is there because you are sinners.” He clarifies that this is not about their wives or whether there is a good reason to divorce but about their sinfulness.

Then, He clarifies that divorce is only a solution in the most extreme of indiscretions. The word for sexual immorality here is the word *porneia*, which can refer to multiple kinds of sexual immorality. However, there is no mention of this exception in the same encounter in Mark (see Mark 10:2–12). Does this mean that there is a contradiction? Not at all. Mark doesn’t mention the exception for divorce in the case of sexual immorality because the focus of Jesus’s teaching is not how to divorce but that marriage is permanent and should not be broken.

Jesus did say in Matthew that in the most extreme cases of sexual immorality, divorce is sometimes the painful solution. Still, one must also understand this in the context of “turning the other cheek” and “forgiving seventy times seven.” In short, Jesus is calling us to a higher standard than the Pharisees ever imagined. He wants us to see our marriages as lasting our entire lives with no room allowed for divorce. When our spouse sins against us, we forgive them. When we have problems in our marriage, we work them out. No matter what, we enter marriage with a heart of permanence and a commitment never to separate what God has put together. Divorce is only there for the most extreme, unrepentant, and repeated acts of *porneia* (sexual immorality), and even then, it is God’s concession for our hardness of heart.

Divorce is like chemotherapy for cancer. Chemotherapy is basically a poison medically administered in the most severe cases. The side effects of chemo are numerous and devastating, including hair loss, nausea, vomiting, weight loss, and destruction of your immune system. Yet sometimes, the poison of chemotherapy is the only solution for

deadly cancer. While Jesus wants us to have healthy marriages, in the most extreme and wicked situations, divorce is permitted for sexual immorality. The effects of divorce are as devastating to our lives and family as chemotherapy is to the body, but because of “*the hardness of our hearts,*” it is occasionally permitted.

The point of Jesus’s statement is not that divorce is acceptable. Instead, His point is that marriage is from God and should be guarded and nurtured at all costs. Asking, “When can I divorce” shows that we already have the wrong theology of marriage. The answer is that no matter what, we must do whatever it takes to have healthy, biblical marriages. In the most extreme cases, divorce and remarriage are permitted, but it is never the will and desire of God. It honors Him most when we work things out and put Him first in our marriages. He is in the marriage-saving business.

The African Context

Divorce is as painful in Africa as it is anywhere else in the world. Women and children often suffer more when the nuclear family is divided by divorce. Traditionally, husbands are the providers, and when the family has been ripped apart, the wife can often be left without any source of support. Few laws govern divorce, and things like child support or alimony are more Western concepts than African ones.

However, a positive aspect of Africa is that extended family is often the safety net for children and women who are shattered by divorce. Yet, as urbanization and globalization overtake Africa, these traditional structures of the extended family are becoming less and less prominent. Women often face the choice of staying in abusive situations or living in poverty with their children. Neither is a good choice, and it is easy to see the damaging effects of sin on the modern African marriage and family.

While divorce is culturally frowned upon in African society, it is becoming more common today. The pain and distress of divorce are real, yet many feel there is no other way out. While I would never counsel

a woman to stay in an abusive situation or see divorce as *always* a sin, I would say, as Jesus did, that the issue is not so much about if divorce is acceptable but it is about the importance of marriage. The entire premise of this book is that having a biblical theology of marriage from the beginning can keep your marriage on track and prevent things like adultery, abuse, or divorce. Jesus did allow for divorce in rare instances, but this is understood within the context of forgiveness and patience. African believers must approach their marriages as if they are until death. We must go into our marriages committed to each other and refusing to give up no matter what.

If you are committed to Christ, He will help you find a way to reconcile no matter how serious the circumstances, so long as you refuse to give up. The devil is attacking the church at the level of the family. He knows the church will crumble if he can destroy the family. He does not want your marriage to succeed. Instead, he wants you to separate and divorce. If you go through with that option, you allow him to win. Couples must be committed to Christ first and then to each other. They must realize that God brought them together and that their marriage serves God and His kingdom. Refusing to give up and fighting for your marriage is what honors God the most. This attitude defeats the devil and advances the name of Jesus.

God wants you to fight for your spouse and your marriage. He wants you to realize that your spouse is not the enemy, no matter what they have done. Instead, the world and the devil are the enemies, and we must stand with each other. This fact does not give one spouse permission to always sin and continually ask for forgiveness. It means that each spouse strives their best to remain pure and holy, and each spouse strives their best to be forgiving and patient. This is how we win the fight and honor God in marriage.

Matthew 19

Singleness and Children

The disciples said to Him, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” But He said to them, “Not all men can accept this statement, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this, let him accept it.” Then some children were brought to Him so that He would lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, “Leave the children alone, and do not forbid them to come to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” After laying His hands on them, He departed from there. Matthew 19:10–15

Theology of Marriage

After Jesus finished His teaching on divorce, His disciples were somewhat taken aback. They, too, lived in the cultural context of the debate between Hillel and Shammai, and they doubtless had their own opinions about the nuances of divorce. We don’t know if his disciples followed Hillel or Shammai, but we do know that they were challenged by Jesus’s strict stance on the biblical theology of marriage.

Upon hearing His teaching, they exclaimed, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry.” This statement

does not mean they did not value marriage. On the contrary, it was culturally expected that a Jewish man would marry, and this was so important that families sometimes arranged marriages to ensure they occurred. Their point was, *If there is no easy way to get rid of a wife I don't want, then it's better not to marry at all!*

They were not asking about singleness but instead asking, “How does one have control in a culture like ours if divorce is only allowed in the most egregious circumstances?” Yet, as Jesus often did, He answered the question they were not asking because that is the answer they needed to hear. In short, He let them know that singleness is actually an option, but God is the one in control of that decision, not them.

Jesus then made a remarkable statement on marriage by saying that marriage (and, in particular, the ability to have sex and procreate) is not intended for everyone. He qualified His statement by saying that not all people can accept this. In other words, singleness is not for everyone, but is a gift given to a select few. It might not seem like a gift to many people, but that is because they have not been given the gift and cannot imagine a life without marriage and sexual relations.

The apostle Paul will say much more about this “gift of singleness” when we come to the book of 1 Corinthians, but his teaching mirrors what Jesus said here in this text. A eunuch was a particular class of person committed to celibacy. Sometimes this commitment was voluntary, and sometimes it was the result of a physical defect that prevented them from being able to engage in sex. At times, the role would be forced upon a slave, and they would be castrated so they could care for young women without being sexually tempted.

However, Jesus addresses another possibility—those who choose celibacy or singleness for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. While most are called to marriage, Jesus makes it clear that some are called to a life of singleness, and this singleness has a purpose. This is not because they are unable to marry but because they want to be unentangled from marriage commitments and free to dedicate their lives to the service of

the kingdom fully. This dedication doesn't make them more holy than those who are married. Some look down on singles as "less than," and others regard those who choose singleness for ministry's sake as more spiritual. It is not that one class is better than the other, but that Jesus has a will for your life, and you must accept the calling He gives you, whether marriage or celibacy.

Both marriage and celibacy serve His purposes, and both are gifts from Him. So you marry not just because you want to but because *He calls you to that*. You do not just choose singleness because of money or because you want to live your own life however you please. You choose singleness because *He calls you to that*. When it is your calling, even singleness is a gift from God. It is important to note that Jesus uses the term *eunuch* because He is not just referring to freedom from marriage. Instead, He is advocating a life of purity and chastity where you never engage in sex with others or self-gratification. Spiritual eunuchs are not singles who have sex outside of wedlock. They never have sex and find their worth and intimacy in Christ alone. This standard is why it is a gift, and this is why it is something that should not be entered into lightly. It is a commitment that requires a calling from God and great sacrifice on the part of the one who answers that call. Yet, the blessing is that they do it so that they may be even more effective in kingdom service.

It is fascinating that the discussion on the gift of chaste singleness is followed immediately by a section on the blessings of children. Children are a gift from God, and the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. We must be childlike in our faith and see our children as God's gift. Our goal as parents is to bring our children to Jesus so that they know Him and are blessed by Him. The calling to singleness is not about freedom from having children. Children are important to Him, but they are not intended for every person.

The point of all this is that God is sovereign and in control of every aspect of our lives. He gives us spouses because that is His will, and they are a gift from God. He sometimes gives us children because that is His

will, and they are a gift from God. Sometimes He calls us to a life of chaste singleness to find our intimacy in Him alone. That, too, is because of His will, and it is His gift to some. No matter your context or your situation in life. Your goal is to walk in the path He has chosen for you and fully appreciate and respect the paths God has chosen for others. Yet He wants you to do this without coveting someone else's path for yourself. Your journey with Him is paramount, and it is best to keep your eyes on Him and no one else.

The African Context

Jesus's perspective on singleness is contrary to much of African culture. Most Africans highly value marriage and see the birth of children as the pinnacle of adulthood. You are considered a youth (regardless of age) in many places until you marry and have children. If you manage to get married but fail to have children, it is considered a desperate problem that must be solved. Some even go as far as polygamy, divorce, and witchcraft in the quest to have children and be "normal" in the society.

Yet singleness is not something that should be shunned. Jesus never married and was chaste for His entire life. He is our example, so there is no shame in not getting married. Even Paul and other great men of God were called to a life of singleness, so we should not see singleness as a flaw. Instead, God gives us what He wants us to have. If He thinks we need a spouse, then He provides the right person who was created for us. If He thinks we need children, then He will give those children to us in His time. If He decides we do not need children, He gives us the grace to live that way, though it is sometimes very hard. If He thinks we need to be single, He will call us to that and give us the grace to stay pure in our singleness. This does not mean that singles will not face temptation. Like other people, they often face many temptations, but if God has called them to singleness, He will also help them stay pure in that calling. If they fail in that purity, it doesn't mean they haven't been

called to it, but that they must seek His forgiveness and walk in the Spirit to avoid sin in the future.

The point of all of this is to know Jesus and walk with Him. It is vital to trust His sovereignty and know that He knows best. African parents would do well to teach their children this and help them see that, for some people, singleness can be a gift from God. However, they should be encouraged not to choose singleness for selfish reasons but for biblical ones.

The church mustn't stigmatize singleness and should provide fellowships and ministry opportunities for singles. While marriage is a worthy goal, it is not the ultimate purpose for everyone. A biblical church will find a way to celebrate the diversity in their fellowship and equally honor those who are single or married, with or without children.

We must also recognize that children are a gift from God, and biblical churches should value children as much as adults. Creating fellowship, teaching, and ministry opportunities for children is vital, as the children are tomorrow's leaders, pastors, and missionaries. We must invest in our children, youth, and singles because they all play a vital role in the kingdom of God. God has divinely gifted them to go places and do things that married couples cannot. We must nurture that gift and not let culture force everyone into the same mold.



Matthew 22, Mark 12

Happily Ever After

On that day some Sadducees (who say there is no resurrection) came to Jesus and questioned Him, asking, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies having no children, his brother as next of kin shall marry his wife, and raise up children for his brother.’ Now there were seven brothers with us; and the first married and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother; so also the second, and the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had married her.” But Jesus answered and said to them, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. Matthew 22:23–30

Theology of Marriage

Just as the Pharisees tried to trap Jesus over the issue of divorce, Matthew and Mark recount a time when the Sadducees tried to trap Him over the issue of the resurrection. The Sadducees were another Jewish sect in Jesus’s day who denied miracles, the resurrection, and other supernatural phenomena. On this particular day, they recount what appears to be a made-up story about a woman who was married to seven different brothers who all died. In their minds, a strict following of the law of the kinsman-redeemer would mean that all would be her husband. So, if there really is a resurrection, then when that occurs, who will be her

real husband? In their minds, this paradox would be one that Jesus could not answer and would force Him to admit there was no afterlife.

They were not really asking a question about marriage but instead trying to show Him the foolishness of believing in the resurrection. Yet, Jesus used this as an opportunity to show us things about marriage and the afterlife. First, Jesus made it clear that only death breaks the marriage bond. A husband and wife are bound to each other for their entire life,. Only death should break that bond. Second, His response shows us that as beautiful as the marriage relationship is, it only foreshadows how we will relate to each other in heaven. By saying we will be like angels in heaven, Jesus is not saying we will sit on clouds and play harps, as many envision heaven to be. Instead, He indicates that we will not be married in the afterlife but will be like the angels whose focus is entirely on serving and worshiping God.

Angels in the Bible are portrayed as sexless beings. They are not like humans with wings. Instead, they are different creatures with intelligence, power, and the ability to choose (like humans) but who are so much more. Angels are neither male nor female (as we are), and they do not marry or relate to each other biologically. Jesus's point is that we will be like them in our *perspective* when we get to heaven. We will still be who we are created to be as male and female, both biologically and emotionally, but our connection with one another will go deeper than biology.

This truth used to make me feel sad because I dearly love my wife, and I love the idea of her being my wife for all of eternity. The thought of not “knowing” each other as husband and wife made me feel like I was possibly losing something I have now. However, Jesus is saying that we will still be connected, but on a much deeper level than even husband and wife can be. My wife and I will not be married in heaven, and we will not engage in sexual intercourse in heaven. Yet, we will know each other and still love each other, but it will be like our love has graduated to another level.

This graduation doesn't only apply to my wife, but it will apply to every other child of God I relate to in heaven. The relationships we have today are simply shadows of what true oneness, love, and unity will be in heaven. We will know Jesus more intimately and be connected to Him more deeply than we are now. First Corinthians 13:12 says, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known." This truth also applies to our relationships with friends and even our spouses. We will know them fully, and the marriage relationship foreshadows the deep love we will share in heaven. I won't lose anything in heaven. Instead, I will gain much, much more.

So, marriage is temporary and for this life. It is one of God's greatest gifts to us, and the privilege of knowing our spouse is a blessing too rich to describe. Yet, one day, you will love them even more and be closer to them than ever. It will be more profound than marriage and deeper than sexual intimacy. These heavenly relationships will transcend all that we know today, and we will be like the angels. Our focus will be on serving and worshiping the Lord. We will spend eternity growing closer to Him and each other into greater depths of grace and splendor.

The African Context

Your marriage is a gift from God, and it will be for the rest of your life. However, the focus of marriage is continually growing closer to each other and closer to Jesus. The temporary nature of marriage ("till death do us part") is not intended to make us sad but is instead a blessed taste of the richness and fullness of the relationships we will enjoy in heaven.

In many ways, your marriage today is a dress rehearsal for heaven. God is using your spouse to sanctify you and to prepare you for what is to come. You are learning to love here on earth so that you can love even more deeply in the afterlife. Marriage is more than just sex. While sex is a beautiful gift from God and something He wants married couples to enjoy, marriage is more than that. Sex is designed to enhance the

marriage, but it is not the point of marriage. Having children is one of God's gifts in marriage, but *it is not the point of marriage*. Marriage is more than procreation. Those without children can still have a very rewarding and rich marriage.

Marriage is an opportunity for you to grow more deeply in love and to honor Jesus more with each passing day. As we cling to our spouse and glorify Jesus in our marriage, we are actually preparing ourselves for the day when we will be like the angels in heaven. Of course, we will still be who we are, and we will be male or female because that is a part of our identity. Yet, we will magnify Jesus more than we do today and love our brethren more than we do today. Marriage is one of the dress rehearsals God gives us on earth to equip us for our ultimate eternal task of knowing, loving, serving, and worshiping Him for eternity.

Sometimes we think we have arrived. We think, "I have a good spouse, I have children and grandchildren, I am successful and nearing retirement. I have accomplished all that God has set before me." Yet, this life is only a shadow of the life to come. You never stop learning and growing, and you should never be satisfied with the status quo. Instead, always be striving to grow deeper in grace and love. One day we will be like the angels in heaven.



John 2

A Wedding in Cana

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding.
John 2:1–2*

Theology of Marriage

It is important to remember that Jesus lived in an everyday world like the people of His time. He was not hidden away from the world but fully participated in the day-to-day life around Him. Yet, He lived as no man before Him because He always kept in step with the Spirit, following His Father's plan for Him. This fact gives us great insight into how we should live our lives. Even though He was the Messiah with His own agenda, He valued certain things, which gives us a clue as to the ordinary things we should value.

First, we see here that Jesus valued family. He loved His mother and cared for her throughout the period of His ministry recorded in the Gospels. She sometimes accompanied Him on His itinerant preaching ministry and cared for Him physically and emotionally. She was there at the cross, and He was concerned about who would care for her after He died. And now, in this text, we see Him attending a wedding with His mother. He was not too busy to spend time with her, but He was always in step with His heavenly Father and never forgot His calling.

Second, we see in this text that Jesus likely valued the institution of marriage. We know from other passages that Jesus valued marriage and saw it as something established by God. However, here we see that He even valued the wedding ceremony. Knowing that His time was limited and His ministry would be difficult, He still took time away to visit this wedding, which is significant. This story in John 2 highlights His very first miracle and the inauguration of His public ministry. Yet, He chose to begin His public ministry within the context of a wedding, which says something.

This story is obviously about much more than just a wedding. Jesus turned water into wine, performed His first public miracle, and revealed Himself for who He really was. The wedding was just an occasion for Him to do all of this. Yet, we can see He valued marriage and weddings, so we should too. Marriage is an institution designed and created by God and should not be taken lightly. It is also something that deserves celebration.

We engage in wedding ceremonies for at least two reasons: One is that the nature of marriage is a public covenant between a man and a woman before their God and witnesses. The ceremony facilitates this public joining. The second reason is that the wedding allows us to celebrate. The celebration is not just an excuse to party and dance, but it is a celebration of love. It is a celebration of God's sovereignty in bringing the bride and groom together, and it is a celebration of God's grace as they commit to living their lives together in Him. It appears that Jesus valued the institution of marriage AND the wedding celebration. May He be the honored guest in all our marriages and weddings in the days to come.

The African Context

Culturally, Africans have always valued marriage and weddings. Each tribe has its own traditions related to these things, but one consistent thing is how highly valued marriage is across Africa. Jesus valued

the institution of marriage, and Africans also hold it in high esteem. Marriage is something that almost all Africans desire for multiple reasons. Wedding ceremonies are also held in high esteem, and families and friends are typically engaged in helping the new couple have a ceremony they will never forget.

However, there are some disturbing trends that the African church needs to address if marriages will continue to be honored in Africa. One thing that must be addressed is the purpose and goal of marriage. Some think marriage is necessary to be an adult, or perhaps its purpose is simply to bear children. While marriage is a mark of maturity, and God does give some couples the blessing of children, marriage is more than that. Marriage is an opportunity to serve God and glorify Him by being united together. He is the heart of marriage, and we join with our spouse in obedience to Christ.

Another trend on the other end of the spectrum is that some in Africa define marriage in Western terms. Western culture is no better than African culture, and there are many disturbing approaches to marriage in the West that Africans would do well to avoid. As Africa is more exposed to marriage traditions in the West, I see more focus on Western dress, elaborate ceremonies, and an overemphasis on the reception. For many Western weddings, the focus is not on Jesus but on the bride and putting on the best show possible. There is nothing wrong with ceremony and celebration, but it can become too much if one is not careful.

Another trend to avoid is an overemphasis on the bride price. Many young men avoid marriage because the price they must pay is so high it is as if the bride's family is punishing them. There is nothing wrong with the cultural practice of bride price or dowries, but marriage is not an excuse for the bride's family to get rich. If you believe this young man is the one God has chosen for your daughter, then the godly thing is to encourage him, not abuse him by forcing him to pay too much. You only hurt your daughter and make the new family poor from the beginning.

Most African couples are also spending too much on the wedding ceremony. While Jesus blessed the wedding in John 2 with His presence, this doesn't mean He would condone the spending we see today. The marriage is supposed to be about Him, and the wedding ceremony should highlight Him and the gospel message. When the wedding revolves around the bride, a lavish reception for the guests, or vast amounts of money spent to be like other weddings, the whole point of the wedding has been lost.

The wedding ceremony is more important than the reception because this is the holy moment when God joins the bride and groom together. It should be the focus of the day, but for some, it has become the afterthought, and the party is the center of attention. There is nothing wrong with celebration, but the celebration is not the point. Jesus and the covenant of marriage should be the point. The celebration should enhance the wedding and be done in a godly way so that the focus stays where it should.

When two people marry, we must do all we can to help the bride and groom succeed in their new life. They need good counseling and encouragement from family. They do not need to make themselves poor by paying a huge bride price or having an expensive ceremony. They need to keep the focus on Jesus and each other, and the families should stand with them to help them in all of these things when asked. Because of the difficulties surrounding marriage, some in Africa choose not to marry but just live together, which is even worse. We must be careful to follow the Bible in our marriages and weddings and not let the culture hijack what God wants to do in and through us.



Romans 7

Widows Marry “in the Lord”

For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. Romans 7:2–3

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God. 1 Corinthians 7:39–40

Theology of Marriage

In the Romans passage, Paul refers to the Mosaic law and the guidelines given to the Jewish people for marriage. Also, the context is not really about marriage (as it is in the 1 Corinthians passage), but it is about our relationship to the law. In other words, the law has jurisdiction over a person’s life while they are alive, but it no longer applies after death. This, he says, is why a woman is free from the law of only marrying one man *after* he passes away. Death ends the application of that law in her life. So, Paul goes on to say that we have died to the law and now have a new life in Christ.

While Paul's reference to a widow losing her husband was just an analogy describing our relationship to the law before we met Christ, there are still some good lessons on marriage that can be gleaned from this text. The first significant thing that stands out is that marriage is to be for life. We have already discussed in this volume the intention that marriage is a lasting commitment between one man and one woman until death. While there are very rare exceptions, it is the desire of God that the husband and wife never separate. If her husband is alive and she is joined to another, it is considered adultery. The same would apply to a man who marries another woman while his wife is still living.

This does not preclude a man and woman from separating and remaining unmarried. While God wants husbands and wives to stay together in marital bliss, there are times when one spouse is so abusive that it is not safe or wise for the other one to remain in the home. The prohibition here is not that one must always be together regardless of the circumstances, but that one must not marry another. Couples should always seek reconciliation and pursue marriages founded on love and mutual respect. In some cases, this is just not possible, but Paul is saying that remarriage is only allowed after the other spouse's death.

A second important thing to notice here is Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians that if someone wants to remarry after the death of a spouse, they should marry "in the Lord." In other words, they are only to marry a believer God has chosen for them. Just because your wife dies, this does not mean that you can now marry anyone you want. You must continue seeking God's will for your life. Paul mentions that it could be the will of the Lord for you to remain single.

It is not uncommon for people who have been married for many years to remarry quickly after the death of a spouse. They have been so used to having that other person around to fill a void in their life or to care for them that the thought of being alone is debilitating. However, Christ is with you as a believer, so you are never alone. It is good to find your worth and sufficiency in Him, and it is not a must that you

have to remarry after your spouse dies. Beware of a second marriage of convenience. Instead, only marry again if God brings someone into your life, and it is His perfect will that you marry them. As we have discussed, singleness can be a gift from God as well as marriage. The most important thing is to keep in step with the Spirit and pursue God's perfect will for your life. This is the key to happiness, even after the death of a spouse.

The African Context

Life is often uncertain in Africa, and there are many who face the loss of a spouse at a relatively young age. What is one to do if the person you have spent your life with suddenly passes? In many countries, there is no developed social welfare system. Widows, in particular, can be vulnerable. This was also a common occurrence in Paul's day. It created the temptation to marry for social or economic reasons instead of spiritual ones.

Thus, it was necessary to give guidance to people who lost their spouses and were still young enough to remarry. Whether this is a remarriage or your first marriage, the most important thing to remember is to marry "in the Lord." It is a mistake for a Christian to marry a non-Christian, which will bring many problems later. Also, if you have been married before for many years and choose to remarry another, you have to know that it will not be easy. You are now set in your ways and routine, and so is the other person you are marrying. When you are young, you can grow together with your spouse, but when you are older, it will require more work to accommodate each other's way of doing things.

Paul gives his opinion that staying a widow (or widower) is not a bad thing, and one can be happier staying in the situation they are already in. He is not saying it is wrong to remarry after the death of a spouse, but that it might be much more difficult than staying single. For sure, one is freer in ministry if they remain unmarried. Ultimately, you must seek God's will for your life, and if you remarry, remarry for the right reasons.

Don't remarry just so that person will provide for you. God is the ultimate provider, and He can do that through your new spouse, or He can do that through other means. Don't remarry just because of loneliness. God is with you, and He is the one who will protect you and fellowship with you constantly. Instead, only remarry if you are led to do so by God. Make sure you are marrying someone God has chosen for you, and make sure that this person is a dynamic believer. Make sure this person will bring you closer to God instead of pulling you farther away. This is the only way to ensure lasting peace after you marry again.



1 Corinthians 7

Intimacy in Marriage

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband. The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. 1 Corinthians 7:1–9

Theology of Marriage

I believe these are some of the most neglected verses in Scripture. Paul's theological insights into the intimacy of husband and wife are crucial for us to understand if we are to have biblical marriages. Our marriages have external and internal qualities, all of which must fall under the lordship of Christ. Paul discourages immorality and discusses

how marriage is one of the ways that God has given us to live holy lives. Sexual immorality is destructive to us personally and publicly to the kingdom of God because it affects our witness to the world. Your marriage is not just about you or your needs but also about your witness to the world. Yes, we are created as sexual beings, but there is only one legitimate outlet for that sexuality: the marriage bed between a husband and wife. So publicly, sex in marriage is designed to help us avoid sexual immorality.

Privately, though, sex in marriage is about so much more. First, it is a holy union between a man and woman where they can be intimate and genuinely vulnerable. Notice that the design is between wife and husband, woman and man. Any other pairing is against God's will and God's design. Second, sexual intimacy is not optional, but it is actually a marital "duty." The word *duty* does not mean that it is to be a chore. On the contrary, sex should be joyful, blissful, and pleasurable to both husband and wife. The word *duty* here refers to the husband's *responsibility* to the wife and vice versa.

In other words, it is my responsibility to please my wife sexually, and my entire focus needs to be on her needs in sex and not my own. Conversely, it is her responsibility to please me and focus on my needs, not hers. Sexual intercourse (as God intended) is the ultimate example of mutual submission in marriage. My body is not mine, but my wife's. One reason it exists is for her pleasure. Her body is not hers, but mine, and one reason it exists is for my pleasure. Paul clarifies that it is wrong to withhold sex or deprive your spouse except for healthy, agreed-upon reasons. Additionally, that should not be a permanent state but just a temporary one, where the two come together again, quickly and often.

Sex is a gift from God that He wants us to enjoy. However, we must enjoy it in His way to please Him. There is no place for selfishness or abuse in sex. My role is to serve my wife and submit to her just as her role is to serve and submit to me. As we put the other one's needs before our own, we demonstrate the holiness and love that is evident in the

Godhead. Sex is not dirty when it occurs in God's way. Instead, God is pleased when the husband and wife enjoy each other often and when they sacrifice and serve each other in the marriage bed.

What is dirty and displeases God is when sex occurs out of wedlock or when there is abuse, selfishness, or deprivation in a couple's sexual relationship. There is a place for fasting from sex, but notice that those are for spiritual reasons, and logically there could be some physical reasons as well (like sickness or when a wife is recovering from childbirth). However, that time of deprivation should be mutually agreed upon and no longer than necessary. Sex in marriage is given to keep our sexual desires focused on our spouse in a holy way. If we deprive each other, we run the danger of temptation that could lead to more destructive choices. Sometimes we have to practice self-control, like when we are single, but if one can marry, it is better to marry than to "burn with passion."

The African Context

I find that these concepts are often very confused in Africa. Many Africans see sex as something that is shameful and inappropriate, even if it happens between a husband and wife. There is a stigma attached to sexual activity, though all know it is common in society. However, in God's mind, sex is a beautiful thing that He designed to be enjoyed without shame between a husband and wife.

Indeed, sex outside of marriage or used abusively in marriage does not please God, and there should be shame attached to that, but as long as people are enjoying God's gift in God's way, there is nothing to be shy about. By not being shy, I am not saying that it should not be private. Of course, what happens in the bedroom between a husband and wife is just for them, and we should be careful to keep our private lives private. However, there should be no shame between the husband and wife in the privacy of their bedroom. This freedom and spontaneity was God's design in the garden, and this is His will for you now.

Another misconception in Africa is that somehow the pleasure of sex is wrong. In some parts of Africa, they actually circumcise and remove the pleasure points of the woman's vagina to keep her from feeling pleasure in sex. In my view, this is wrong and an abuse of the body that God created. God intended for the husband to please the wife to orgasm and for the wife to please the husband. He created our bodies in this way as a gift to us. Often, the man only feels pleasure, and the woman has to simply endure and bear children. This is not God's will. God wants the husband to please and serve the wife, and He commands in this text that the husband should not deprive her. The African husband should see his purpose in the bedroom to bring kindness, love, and pleasure to his wife in the marriage bed. Likewise, the wife should see her goal as bringing her husband kindness, love, and pleasure. Selfishness has no place in marriage, especially in the marriage bed. A godly spouse will look to their spouse's needs, not their own.

When the African couple decides to fast from sex, let it be for spiritual reasons like those listed in the text. Sometimes it is not physically advisable for a woman to engage in intercourse, and her husband should understand this and respect her wishes. At the same time, the wife should understand that her husband has needs and find other ways to meet those needs herself, even if she cannot physically have sex for some reason. As couples fast from sex, it should be a time of prayer and focusing on God, and then, very soon, they should come together again.

By using the picture of fasting here, Paul lets us know that sex is as essential for the married couple as food is for the body. You cannot survive if you don't eat, and your marriage will not survive if you do not have a healthy sexual relationship based on love and mutual submission. You need food to be strong, and your marriage needs intimacy to remain strong. Sex is more than just physical pleasure. It is also a means by which couples grow closer together emotionally in love, intimacy, and romance.

In the way that food is good for our bodies, sex is good for our marriages. It helps our marriages become more vibrant, healthy, and strong. Yet, one must eat the right kind of food. The sexual relationship should also be enjoyed in God's way. Selfishness, abuse, immorality, deprivation, pornography, masturbation, et al., poison the sexual relationship, and they should have no place in your marriage. These kinds of things can taint your sex life and cause as much harm as prolonged sexual fasting. A good rule of thumb is to enjoy sex as God intended—often, with love, mutual submission, freedom from guilt, and with the husband or wife of your youth.



1 Corinthians 7

The Issue of Desertion

But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife. But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he must not divorce her. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, she must not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife? 1 Corinthians 7:10–16

Theology of Marriage

Again, Paul insists that it is vital for the husband and wife to stay together in marriage. This is a core principle that is repeated throughout Scripture. Another core principle is that believers marry other believers. However, here he explores the issue of one spouse getting saved after marriage and how that should affect the marriage. This situation was likely a common occurrence in Paul's day because there were no churches or

believers, and all the churches being planted were in a pioneer context. Even today, on the mission field, it is common for one spouse to receive Christ while the other remains lost.

So, what is one to do? What if two pagans are married, one gets saved, and Jesus is in the way? Should they divorce, or should they stay together? What are the options? First, it is noteworthy that the relationship with Christ is paramount. As important as marriage is, it comes after your relationship with Jesus. You should not sacrifice Christ for marriage. Yet, God created marriage and wants us to honor the marriage commitment. So, the believer must do everything in their power to both stay faithful to Christ and honor their unbelieving spouse.

Paul's admonition is that the believing spouse should stay together with the unbelieving spouse and do their best to reach them with the gospel. We will discuss this concept more when we look at the book of 1 Peter, but for now, it is essential to note that the believer is not called to desert the unbeliever. Instead, the believer is supposed to stay with the unbeliever and try to help them know the truth. Sanctifying here does not mean saving, because no person can save another. Instead, Paul is likely referring to two things.

First, the believing spouse can be the means that the unbeliever hears the gospel. Thus, while the believer doesn't save the unbeliever, they are the means God can use to save the lost person and thus sanctify them. A second possible meaning is that Paul refers to the legitimacy of the marriage and family. In other words, that one person getting saved doesn't invalidate the marriage in the eyes of God since both are not saved. Instead, the believer *connects* the children and husband to God and makes the relationships legitimate in the eyes of God. The believing spouse becomes the link between God and the lost spouse and children, thus ensuring God's blessing on the family and His desire to see it glorify Him.

Then in that same vein, Paul entertains the possibility of the unbeliever leaving the believer. The believer is supposed to stay and do their best to

make it work with the unbeliever. God hates divorce. But what about a case where the believer is deserted because the lost spouse cannot stand the changes (albeit positive and holy) that are happening in the saved spouse? In that case, Paul says the deserted believing spouse is not “bound” in such cases.

In other words, they are free to accept the divorce after they have done all they can to work things out, and they are free to remarry (in the Lord) in the future. This is the second allowance for divorce given in Scripture (the first was by Jesus in the case of chronic, unrepentant adultery). It seems that desertion of a believer by an unbeliever is grounds for a future remarriage. It is not the fault of the saved spouse that they chose Christ above all. That is expected of all of us. The believer is supposed to stay with the unbeliever, doing their best to be a witness and a loving spouse. However, if the unbeliever deserts the believer, in the end, the Lord gives recourse for such a situation. The critical point is that God has called us to peace, and we must do all we can to work things out before surrendering to divorce.

The African Context

Most people who identify as Christians in Africa grew up in Christian families. Still, it is not uncommon for a believer to marry an unbeliever or even marry someone from a different religion. Those kinds of marriages are not advisable because they lead to problems, but if you are already in a mixed marriage, this passage teaches you to stay in the situation you find yourself in.

You must devote yourself to Christ and do your best to be a witness to your unbelieving spouse and be the light of God to your children. God wants to use you to bring holiness and righteousness to your family and be the means He uses to accomplish their sanctification. If you are already married to a lost person, and then you get saved, God does not want you to divorce. Instead, He wants you to stay with your spouse and try to work things out and be a witness to them. Your children need you

to stay together, and honestly, your lost spouse needs you to be a good witness to them.

However, if your lost spouse leaves you because of Jesus, the Bible says you are not “bound.” This does not mean you can “drive them away” just to get remarried. It is talking about a case where you have done everything in your power to make things work and get them to stay, but they refuse to stay with you because they are offended by Christ in you. This is the kind of situation that Paul refers to, which is grounds for accepting their divorce and eventually remarrying if God leads you to do that.

The most important thing is that Jesus be Lord of all. We will discuss later how to navigate a marriage with someone who is not a Christian and what to do in such cases, but for now, just know that Jesus comes first. If we put Him first, He will give us the grace and wisdom to be the best husband or wife possible and to live in an understanding way with our lost spouse. I have known Muslim couples where one got saved and could stay together with their spouse. God gave them the grace to stay together even when one refused to accept the gospel. Sometimes God even uses the saved spouse to reach their Muslim spouse with the gospel. God can do anything, and nothing is beyond His power. We must trust Him and give our situations to Him. He will work all things out for our good and His glory.



Ephesians 5

Marriage and the Church

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband. Ephesians 5:22–33

Theology of Marriage

This text on marriage is one of the most informative in the New Testament. It not only serves to outline several key points about how husbands and wives relate to each other, but it also highlights the connection between marriage and how the church relates to Christ.

Marriages serve as a mirror and analogy of the church's relationship with God, which gives us insights into the purpose of marriage and the importance of the covenant relationship between a man, a woman, and their God.

The first topic that Paul broaches here is the topic of submission. In the same way that the church is submissive to the Lord, a wife is to be submissive to her husband. Interestingly, Paul emphasizes that a wife should be subject to her "own" husband. The issue of submission in marriage is a very hot topic today, and many people take things too far. Some believe that women should be "seen and not heard" and that men should be in charge of everything. This perspective is not the will of God, and it is not the teaching of this text.

Submission by a woman does not extend to all men but just her "own" husband. God created men and women to be equal before Him, and the wife's submission is not an equality issue but an issue of honoring God by honoring her husband. A godly wife's submission illustrates the beauty of the church's submission to Jesus. As He is the head of the church, the husband is the head of the home and his wife. This is not an example of a woman being "less than" but instead an example of her magnifying Christ.

Philippians 2:4–8 teaches that we all should be examples of humility and submission to Christ and each other. Jesus is the ultimate example of someone who is God but willingly humbled Himself and took on the form of a servant. We are to follow His example and serve one another. The coming paragraphs will emphasize the husband's service to his wife. Yet, the teaching of Scripture is clear that the wife is to be submissive to her husband because this honors God.

It is no surprise that this idea of submission is challenging for many women because the Bible guaranteed that would be the case. After the fall, the man was cursed, the ground was cursed, the serpent was cursed, and even the woman. One of those curses for the woman was that "her desire would be for her husband." Some interpret that to mean that she

would desire to rule over the husband, and this would not be allowed. God did tell Eve, in Genesis, that “he will rule over you.” However, here Paul says when a woman walks in the power of Christ and honors God by submitting to her husband, God gives her the ability to find joy in that submission as Christ did when He humbled Himself and submitted to His Father. Our sin and pride chafe at someone being “over” us, but voluntary submission for the glory of God and the love of your husband turns the curse into a demonstration of grace.

While wives are to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Jesus, husbands have an even higher standard to attain. Husbands are instructed to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Paul explains the gravity of this statement by emphasizing the incredible work that Christ has done on our behalf. Christ gave Himself up for us to cleanse us, sanctify us, and present us holy and blameless as a spotless bride. Husbands are to love their wives no less.

They cannot cleanse their wives from sin or sanctify them. That is the Holy Spirit’s job. However, they are to love them, sacrifice for them, and also be concerned for their spiritual growth. While Jesus is the one who makes His bride spotless and without wrinkle, husbands, too, have a role to play in the edification, discipleship, and growth of their wives. The perspective here is not as much the church’s obedience as the work of Jesus in developing His bride. Likewise, while wives should submit to their husbands, the real emphasis is on the husband’s role to aid in the growth and development of his wife.

Husbands do this by loving their wives as they love their own bodies. In the same way, one cares for himself, one must also care for his wife. Of course, this is a physical analogy, but the force of the statement extends beyond into the spiritual. Men are to nurture their wives and care for them physically, spiritually, and emotionally. They should sacrifice for their wives as Christ sacrificed for the church. Think about the extent of His sacrifice and His suffering. He endured physical, emotional, and spiritual torment to save us.

Like Christ, the husband should be willing to die for his wife. Even more, he should be willing to live for her. As a husband, your commitment involves caring for her physical needs, providing for her, protecting her, and serving her physically. Your commitment should involve caring for her emotional needs, listening to her, empathizing with her, showing concern for her thoughts and wishes, and giving her the very best of your time, love, gentleness, and patience. Your commitment even extends to her spiritual needs, leading her gently as Christ leads you and guiding her to be her best spiritual self.

These are high standards for the husband, but rest assured that most women will have no problem being submissive to a man who loves them this way. As the kindness, love, and grace of Jesus create in us a desire to serve and submit to Him, the kindness, love, and grace of a godly husband make it all joy to submit to his leadership. When both spouses are living out Ephesians 5 for the glory of God, you will find perfect harmony and peace in their marriage. When one or both fall short of these standards, problems arise. Your goal is not to shove these things in your spouse's face but to focus on your role and trust the Spirit of God to use your faithfulness and His word to change their lives.

The African Context

These truths are as relevant in Africa today as they were when Paul wrote them in the first century. The wife's submission to her husband and the gentle, loving leadership of a husband in his wife's life is vital to the testimony of the local church. People often think they live in a vacuum, as if their actions only affect themselves. However, as believers, our actions affect everyone around us and reflect on our family, church, and Lord.

If Christian marriage is a picture of the mystical union between Christ and His church, then wives need to emulate the holiness and reverence expected of the church, and husbands need to demonstrate the sacrifice and service we see in the Lord Jesus. We need a different

kind of marriage in Africa today. We need the kind of marriage that resists cultural norms and refuses to bow to the sinful patterns of this world. We need Christian marriages that exemplify holiness, mutual submission, sacrifice, and love. We need marriages that help people see that Jesus has changed us.

The purpose of your marriage is to glorify God and point people to Him. This is why the covenant connection we see in the garden when God gave away the first bride, is used as an analogy of the church's connection with her bridegroom. Does your marriage make people hunger and thirst for Jesus? Does your marriage attract people to your church? Does your church's relationship with Christ look like it should, and does it appeal to people looking for something real and different?

It is common for African women to submit to their husbands, but often they do this for cultural reasons instead of spiritual ones. You must do the right thing for the right reason. Being submissive to your husband does not give him the right to rule with an iron fist. You should submit to him as you would to the Lord, but your husband must serve and love you as Jesus does. Jesus does expect obedience from us, and He does have high standards. Yet, He also gave Himself for us and died for us.

Husbands, do you sacrifice for your wife the way Jesus has sacrificed for you? Do you treat her with the same love and respect that Jesus treats you? If you talk abusively to your wife, beat her, or cheat on her with other women, is this how Jesus treats you? As the head of the home, you have a responsibility to lead your family spiritually as well as physically. Spiritual leadership means you should be active in church and teach your wife and children at home. Do you leave all the spiritual things to your wife while you go and do other things on Sunday? Your role as a leader extends to the spiritual leadership of your home. Your children and wife are looking to you to lead them, and you must not fail. Many men complain that their wives will not obey, but you must ask, "Am I a leader worthy of being followed?" If you lead well with love and patience, your wife will follow.

Our marriages and families are supposed to reflect the relationship between God and the church. What do people learn about God from your marriage and family? Are you living so differently from others that people can tell you are truly Christians? Submitting to each other, serving, loving, and supporting each other are ways to show the world who Jesus is and what His church should be like. This connection is profoundly spiritual and mysterious. A godly marriage is a powerful witness that the world cannot overcome.



Colossians 3

A Happy Home

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them. Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart. Colossians 3:18–21

Theology of Marriage

In much the same language he uses for the Ephesians, Paul reiterates the idea of a godly family for the Colossian believers. His instructions for wives are simple: they should be subject to their husbands. As we observed in the previous chapter, this subjection is not one of inequality, but where a woman, who is created equal with her husband, willingly submits to him because of her love for God. This submission is founded on the concept of being fitting to the Lord. Love of God and husband is what motivates a wife to joyful submission.

Likewise, husbands are to love their wives. Paul made it clear in Ephesians that this love is the kind of love that Christ has emulated for His church. This love is not simply romantic or brotherly love but the highest form of *agape* love. Husbands are to love their wives selflessly and sacrificially. They must put their wives' needs above their own and love in such a way that it creates a willingness in the wife to submit to her husband. God never intends for marriage to be a one-sided affair but a relationship

where both husband and wife give one hundred percent, thus making it a joy to be together.

Here Paul tells us that a husband's failure to love his wife completely can actually create bitterness against them. Some versions of this verse say that the husband should not be harsh with his wife. The call to love sacrificially can make the spiritually weak man chafe on the inside. Love for one's wife should come from the Holy Spirit. As you serve and love her with God's power, He will enable you to serve and lead joyfully. However, if you are walking in the flesh, the high call of being a husband can be a source of bitterness or something that moves you to be harsh with your spouse.

Nothing is more disappointing or off-putting than a husband who is harsh with his wife. We have all been around couples where the husband was gruff, impatient, and unkind to his wife. It is embarrassing to those around them, and it is also a bad witness for the church. People filled with the Spirit are to bear the fruit of peace and patience, but those who walk in the flesh often demonstrate a spirit of rudeness, impatience, and callousness with those they are supposed to love. Husbands, do not be embittered with your wives, and do not be harsh with them. This displeases God.

Likewise, children must also be obedient, and parents should not exasperate their children. *Exasperate* means one should not irritate or aggravate them. Of course, parents are to discipline their children, and notice that the emphasis here is on the father leading and not exasperating. The husband is the head of the home, and most of the discipline falls to him. He must lead in patience and kindness, not always harshly punishing or allowing his children to be disrespectful. There is a godly balance between grace and discipline that God calls the man of God to maintain. This balance must be evident in all the relationships in the home.

The African Context

In my experience, most African women are submissive to their husbands. However, there is a difference between being submissive because it is the command of God or because it is a cultural norm. Yes, in most African contexts, submission is highly valued, but the African Christian woman should be sure she is doing the right thing for the right reasons. Submission is not just a cultural value but also a biblical value.

The African woman should realize that biblical submission is not about the issue of gender equality. Scripture makes it clear that all are created equal in the eyes of God but that women serve the Lord by submitting lovingly to their husbands. It is because men and women are equal that this is such a sacrificial act of worship. We saw in Genesis that the idea of submission would trouble women, but as they walk in the Spirit, God gives them the grace to glorify Him through submission.

Likewise, husbands glorify God by sacrificially loving their wives. It is common for many women to be treated like second-class people in Africa, but God would have the African husband to love, cherish, and build up his wife. He should encourage her publicly and use words of affirmation in how he talks to her. His wife should feel as if he is her greatest supporter and fan. Men, loving your wife as Jesus loves you means putting her needs before your own and giving yourself to her. Jesus loved us unto death. We must be willing to die and live for our wives. This honors and glorifies God.

Paul makes it clear that the husband should not be embittered or harsh towards his wife. This is a common problem on the African continent. Many men beat their wives or talk harshly to them, which goes directly against this Scripture. God wants you to cherish your wife. If she is in sin, you should correct her as a brother in the Lord, but she is not your child, and you should not discipline her like a child. She is your equal before God and is to be respected and loved.

When husbands hit their wives or shout at their wives, they are persecuting someone who is a child of God, and it brings shame to all of us. It is a bad witness in the community if fights and shouts are coming from your home. Everyone knows you are supposed to be Christian, but they can hear and see ungodly behavior from your family, hurting the kingdom of God.

This idea also applies to how we raise our children. Children should obey their parents because this pleases the Lord and gives a good testimony to the community. Fathers, also, should not exasperate their children. Yes, you must discipline them and ensure that they are a good example to others, but it must be in a way that demonstrates grace. There is a time for talking, and there is a time for spanking children. All these things are biblical, but you must deal gently with your children while helping them obey adults. This begins when they are young and will build an important foundation for them for the rest of their lives.

We want our children to be godly, but we do not want them to lose heart. Mothers and fathers must raise their children in church and have them participate with the rest of the family. Additionally, they should teach them the Bible at home and help them to grow up loving Jesus. Some children turn away from God because their parents allow them too much freedom, and others turn away from God because their parents are too harsh and make them lose heart. Walking in the Holy Spirit is the only way to strike a good balance between grace and discipline.



1 Timothy 5

Instructions for Widows

Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the enemy no occasion for reproach; for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed. 1 Timothy 5:14–16

Theology of Marriage

One of the countercultural aspects of the Bible is its emphasis on the importance of women. While some might feel the call to submission in marriage and other things is denigrating toward women, nothing could be further from the truth. The New Testament has much to say about the importance of women in the local church and how they are genuinely a gender to be honored and cherished.

This is most evident in the early church's care for widows. Early in the book of Acts, we see the church stepping up to care for widows and orphans in their midst. The first deacons in Acts 6 were commissioned to help with the feeding and care of widows and orphans. Here in 1 Timothy, Paul gives detailed instructions about the care of widows. In 5:3, Paul says the church must "honor widows who are truly widows." In other words, if they have family who can care for them, let the family do so, but in the absence of extended family, the church is to care for

her widows.

In 1 Timothy 5, Paul also talks about the role of widows in the church and what they can teach younger women. Widows who have moved beyond the years of marriage and family and can devote their time to prayer and ministering to others. However, for those whose husbands die young, those younger widows are free to remarry. This brings us to the verses above. Older widows can focus on ministry, but younger widows are encouraged to focus on family, which is considered ministry.

Paul encourages them to marry, bear children, keep house, and not allow the enemy to bring problems into their lives. This does not mean it is wrong for a woman to work outside the home or remain single. Instead, it is a celebration of motherhood and brings worth to the stay-at-home mom. Some cultures look down on those who work outside the home, but other, more modern, cultures tend to denigrate the stay-at-home mom. Paul makes it clear that this is a position worthy of honor.

Marriage, raising children, and even housekeeping are things that Paul elevates as an honorable ministry. The woman who does that well is fighting a spiritual battle and keeping the enemy from having a foothold in her home. Being a stay-at-home mom is just as spiritually honorable as any other kingdom work, and it is something that the local church should support.

It seems that running a household does not preclude a woman from ministry. In this passage, Paul talks about the young wife taking care of dependent widows and thus relieving a burden from the church. In true Proverbs 31 style, a godly woman is not just one who serves in the home but even who serves the community around her. Whatever station God has called you to, whether married, single, or widow, God sees your role as honorable and wants to use you for his glory.

Additionally, local churches today must consider their ministry to widows and orphans. I hear much concern for orphans, but very few talk about how to minister to widows. I think they are an overlooked

segment of the church that we should consider. How can we honor marriage by honoring those who were good examples of marriage and now suffer alone after the death of a spouse? Widow care is one way of encouraging the flock of God while showing the worth and value of women and marriage.

The African Context

Widow care is a real thing in the African context. In the absence of social welfare programs, many widows have few options for care. If a woman has a family and children she can rely on, then she is most blessed, but what about the woman who has no extended family and no means of income? It is suitable for the African church to keep a list of widows just like they did in the early church and find ways to help widows with no other source of help.

Likewise, widows should find ways to be productive in the local church. Paul's concern was that the church would support widows who would do nothing and become lazy busybodies. Instead, today widows who are supported can use their free time to work in the local church and help in many ways. There are opportunities to teach children and younger women how to be godly in all they do. Widows can pray, witness, and serve the local church in various ways. God sees great value in African women, and the local church should also see their value and utilize them as a kingdom resource.

Many women in the African context are stay-at-home moms. It does not mean that they should not work outside the home, but often it is necessary for the African mother to stay close to home to raise her children. The church must recognize that this does not make her a second-class member. Instead, she is a vital part of the church and community, and caring for children and keeping house are honorable ministries to the community and the church.

God cares about the family, and the health of the family directly affects the local church's health. Interestingly, in a book dedicated to how the church should run (1 Timothy), Paul talks much about the care of widows and the honorable position of homemakers. It helps us see their importance to church health and that they should not be neglected in favor of those who are doing more work outside the home or giving more money. God loves these women and uses them significantly, and the church must recognize this if it is to be healthy.

Women who stay at home, whether because of being widows or housewives, must find ways to be faithful to the work of the church. Paul mentioned that some had already fallen into the trap of the enemy. We have an old European saying, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." In other words, if you sit around doing nothing, you might be tempted to begin doing evil things. Being a gossip, busybody, or lazy person does not help the kingdom of God. If he has put you in a position where you can be at home and free, then use that time for His glory and to work in His church. This will honor Him and ensure that your family is a blessing to all in the community.



Titus 2

Sensible and Pure

Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. Titus 2:3–5

Theology of Marriage

In the same vein of his instructions concerning widows in 1 Timothy, Paul also tells his young disciple Titus how women should behave in the church and at home. This topic relates directly to marriage because he covers wives' behavior and how their marital character is directly connected to their relationship with Jesus. Older women should be reverent in their behavior, kind to others, and good examples. This will not only allow them to be respectable but also able to teach the younger women. They are to encourage the younger women to love their families and work hard so that the word of God is not dishonored. This text also gives us insight into some critical components of our personal lives. First, it is clear that our personal life affects our public life. Being godly in your private life will make you the kind of person who can teach others. Also, being a good example will keep you from dishonoring the word of God. Obviously, we are all accountable for our

behavior, but many fail to realize that their behavior reflects on their church and the rest of the Christian community. No one sins in secret, so we must live as good examples regardless of our station in life.

Second, this text points out the importance of mentorship. Older women are to disciple younger women and mentor them. Everyone needs a mentor to guide them and to whom they are accountable. Mentoring is not just something for the pastor or someone in a public position. Even the everyday homemaker and mom should have a godly woman in the church who is pouring into her. Likewise, as she matures in her faith, she must pour into the other young women in her church. This text shows us the interconnectedness and vitality of the kingdom community as we do life together.

Finally, this text elevates the role of the wife and mother as vital to the church, community, and the kingdom of God. In a book that gives instructions for pastors in the local church (see Titus 1), Paul gives equal attention to the qualifications and work of older women and the role and importance of young wives and mothers. We sometimes think of homemakers or mothers as of lower status, but to Paul, they were just as crucial as pastors or deacons. He gave qualifications and job descriptions for the church offices, and he gave qualifications and job descriptions for widows and stay-at-home moms. No one is unimportant or lesser in the kingdom of God. We all have a role to play and are vital to God's plan. This is why marriage is so important and why we must endeavor to have biblical marriages.

The African Context

The African wife and mother are vital in society. Women are known for being the heart of the family, and most people in Africa look back fondly to their mothers who cared for them when they were young. Biological mothers and other people we call mothers (like aunts) are the ones who raise us, care for our physical needs, keep us healthy, and love us unconditionally. In Africa, the wife and mother are still just as vital as Paul says in the book of Titus.

Thus, it is essential for the African woman to be a woman of good behavior who loves God and is an excellent example in her community. The African wife and mother must have good character because her children and the community look at her example. Paul's admonition for older women to mentor younger women is also very important. Once your children are grown and gone, your ministry as a woman, wife, or mother does not stop. Instead, you now have the responsibility to disciple the young women in your church and help them to learn from your vast experience. Africans tend to value the elderly greatly, so you are uniquely positioned as an older woman to influence the next generation of African women.

The African woman is the heart of the home, the heart of the church, and the heart of African society. It is easy to see that they are just as important as men in daily life and should be honored as such. While leadership in the family or local church is often male, this does not diminish the importance of African women. They are the backbone of the local church, and they are the strength of the African family. It is no wonder that most churches have more women than men. African women tend to be faithful, and it is important to honor them for their faithfulness.

Paul's words to Titus are just as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. If you are an African woman, seek to honor the word of God by living in such a way that God is glorified. Be the heart of your family and church, and honor God by obeying Him. If you are an older woman, find younger women you can influence and mentor and begin praying for them. Hosting a Bible study in your home and pouring into the next generation of African women is a good idea. The world is becoming increasingly disobedient to God, and your influence is greatly needed in their lives.



Hebrews 13

The Honor of Marriage

Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge. Hebrews 13:4

Theology of Marriage

This brief statement by the writer of Hebrews is significant in today's society. It seems that marriage is being less and less honored as time marches on. It is common to see people living as single but having multiple sexual partners for their entire life. Increasingly, you find more and more couples cohabitating without actually getting married. It is common for couples to live together and enjoy all the benefits of marriage without actually committing to each other in holy matrimony.

Yet, God, in His word, tells us that marriage should be held in honor among all. Marriage is a holy covenant between a man and a woman and their God. It is an honorable estate, and it is not to be taken lightly. One should be sure they are prayerfully entering into matrimony with the person God has created them for because, as we have seen, marriage is to be for life. The world would be much better if people took marriage more seriously and understood marriage as the Creator designed it.

God wants us to honor our marriages and the marriages of others. Notice that it is to be held in honor among all. How do we do that? First, we do that by staying committed to the idea of marriage and not

fornicating (having premarital sex) with people outside of wedlock. When a young couple is interested in each other and considering marriage, their abstinence from sex until marriage honors the wedding covenant, which they will one day enjoy. By staying pure, you not only honor your future marriage, but you also honor the future marriage of the person you are dating. Even if you do not marry that person, they will one day be someone else's spouse, and you are showing honor to their future marriage by your purity.

Second, we honor marriage by staying faithful to our spouse after marriage. The writer says that the marriage bed "is to be undefiled." Undefiled means abstaining from fornication before marriage and avoiding adultery after marriage. Adultery is having sex with someone who is not your spouse while you are married or the other person is married. Once you make that wedding covenant commitment, you are committed to your spouse for the rest of their life. You honor the commitment when you keep your marriage bed pure.

We should also keep our marriage bed pure by being physically, spiritually, and emotionally devoted to our spouse. Sometimes people look at pornography or masturbate while married, but this is also a violation of the marriage bed. When you fantasize about having sex with someone else or picture someone else while having sex with your spouse, it violates your relationship. Self-gratification does not bring glory to God because it is the place of your spouse to gratify you.

It might seem harmless because it is unknown to them or because it just occurs in your mind, but those thoughts betray your vow to keep yourself only for them. Your spouse should not just have the sole rights to your body but also to your mind and heart as well. If your mind is filled with adulterous thoughts, even for a nameless body and face on a screen, you are not devoted to your spouse or honoring your commitment. If you have an emotional attachment to someone else, even if you have not acted on it physically, it is still adultery. Your spouse and God have the sole rights to your heart.

Sometimes, one spouse will develop a relationship with someone of the opposite sex because they make them feel seen, validated, loved, or appreciated. These relationships can become emotional affairs even if the two people never have sex. Your spouse is the one who should make you feel seen, validated, loved, or appreciated. If that is missing, the answer is not to seek it with someone else. That is emotional adultery. Instead, the answer is to talk to your spouse about it and seek help from a couple's counselor to heal your relationship so your spouse meets your needs.

What starts as a harmless flirtation, or what seems like just a friendship with the opposite sex, will often become something more that causes you to dishonor marriage. God wants your heart and mind to be devoted to your spouse, along with your body. The marriage that honors God is one where the marriage bed (physically, emotionally, and spiritually) is undefiled and where your heart, body, and soul belong to the one you are committed to in a marriage covenant.

The African Context

On the surface, marriage is highly valued in African culture. Every tribe has its own unique traditions related to marriage and wedding ceremonies, and marriage is something that has been practiced in Africa from the earliest times. However, increasingly, marriage is becoming less and less valued in African society.

As stated previously, it is common for African men and women to live together outside of marriage today. People use the term *husband*, *wife*, or *marriage*, but they have not actually been joined together in holy matrimony. There are many reasons for this, some of which are cultural and others just practical. The high cost of weddings and bride prices often force people to live together in sin but still talk as if they are husband and wife. Sometimes, cultural traditions like polygamy or experimenting with sex as single teenagers cause people to defile the marriage bed. People who have sex outside of marriage will sometimes

get pregnant and then see each other as husband and wife, even though they have not been married. All of these practices dishonor marriage.

God wants young people to stay pure and abstain from sex until they are properly married. It doesn't necessarily have to be a church wedding, but it has to be a covenant commitment before culturally recognized authorities. Whether you call someone husband or wife, have children with them, or live together is not the issue. Those things do not make the marriage. The public commitment to each other before witnesses and God is what makes the marriage.

God wants your marriage bed to remain pure. Purity implies abstaining from sex before marriage so your future wedding bed is pure, and it also means being faithful to your spouse after marriage. All African people see adultery as something sinful and wrong. Yet, it happens all too often. Men commonly have sex with other women outside of marriage, but this dishonors marriage and defiles the marriage bed. When you have sex with another person, you are emotionally (and even physically) bringing them into your marriage relationship.

Some years ago, in most of sub-Saharan Africa, families were ravaged by the HIV/AIDS virus. I have personally participated in the funerals of many women who died from AIDS but were faithful to their husbands. Instead, the husband had sex with someone else and became infected. He then came home and had sex with his wife infecting her. She would bear children infected with the disease who would eventually die, and she would also die herself. He thought that he could commit adultery without consequence or that it was okay because he was an "African man," but instead, he ended up killing his wife and children because of his sin.

God wants the marriage bed to remain undefiled because there are consequences to our sins. These consequences don't just include physical illnesses like AIDS, but there are other emotional and spiritual consequences to fornication and adultery as well. Unplanned pregnancies, jealousy, bitterness, heartbreak, divorce, and a host of other

issues come from men and women who are unfaithful to their spouses. Marriage must be truly honored in Africa, and it must not just be words or cultural platitudes.

In Africa, marriage is genuinely honored when young people save themselves for marriage and abstain from sex until then. Marriage is honored when boys and men respect women and refuse to violate, rape, or abuse them because they value them as people. Marriage is honored when young girls behave in a pure manner and find their love and self-worth in Christ, not in empty words and promises from those who want to take advantage of them.

The marriage bed is undefiled when men are committed to their wives and live holy lives while apart from them. Marriage is honored when men find their validation and acceptance in the loving arms of their wives and not in some other woman who makes them feel young and virile again. Marriage is lifted up when a woman has all her emotional needs met by a husband who loves and understands her unconditionally. When your husband or wife is the most important person to you, you capture the spirit of this text. These kinds of marriages will cause Africa to become an example to the rest of the world for Christ-honoring marriages.



1 Peter 3

Influencing Your Spouse

In the same way, you wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves, being submissive to their own husbands; just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear. You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered. 1 Peter 3:1–7

Theology of Marriage

This text is one of the most helpful in the Bible when it comes to the marriage relationship. Like most wisdom from Scripture, it is deeply profound and countercultural. Whenever we have a problem with someone else, our default mode is typically to go to God or someone else to show us how to change that person. Yet, the answer in Scripture is wisely, *Don't focus on changing the other person, but instead change yourself.*

What a profound suggestion! Only God can change someone, so if we have a problematic spouse, we are wasting our time by trying “fix” them. Typically, trying to fix someone only makes them angry and exacerbates the problem. Also, seeing the problems in others is easier than seeing the problems in ourselves. Perhaps our spouse is not the problem. Maybe we are the one who is the issue. Peter wisely advises us to focus on being the best person we can be and let God use our behavior and His Spirit to change the other person in His time. He gives this same advice to both men and women.

The recipients of this book were new churches and new believers who were coming to Christ amid persecution. It would seem reasonable that women who were already married would come to Jesus and be married to an unbelieving husband. What is this woman to do? We have already learned in 1 Corinthians that she should not leave him, but how can she influence him or even help him get saved? The same could be true for men who came to Christ and had unbelieving wives. What are Peter’s instructions for them?

To the wives, he says, “Be a good wife.” He instructs them to be submissive to their husbands and to be godly. Peter says that when their husbands observe their godly behavior, God can use this to be a witness to them and help them see that the gospel is true. Peter also tells the women to be beautiful wives. This beauty is not the outward beauty that comes from clothes or jewelry but an inner beauty that comes from Jesus. This is not a prohibition on clothes, makeup, or jewelry. Instead, it is an emphasis on the source of true beauty, the inner spirit of a woman devoted to Christ.

A godly, gentle, humble, and devoted wife is the most beautiful person in the world. We have all met women who looked beautiful on the outside, but up close, you can see their vain, selfish, and ugly inner personalities. True beauty is not in outward appearances because those can change over time. True beauty is found within, and it is a beauty that comes from holiness and devotion to God and her husband. These

things tend to shine through a godly woman and make her attractive. These are the kinds of qualities that the Spirit uses to change the heart of a disobedient husband.

Ladies, if your husband is not a believer, the most important thing you can do for him is to pray for him constantly. You cannot change him. Only Jesus can do that. Your prayers for him will make all the difference if you pray with faith, consistency, and perseverance. The second most important thing you can do is to be the best wife you can be. As you put Jesus first and love God by loving your husband, he will notice this. Perhaps he has known you to be someone who was not submissive or who argued all the time. When he sees your submissive service and humble sacrifice, God will use this consistent behavior to break through the walls and change his heart. If he can see Jesus in you, then the Spirit of God can use this to help him know Jesus personally. Trying to preach to him or change him will only make things worse. Instead, trust God and let God love him through you so that he comes to repentance.

Husbands, likewise, you can love your unbelieving wife into the arms of Jesus. Peter says to live with her in an “understanding way.” You have to be patient with her and give her time to come to the same truth to which you have come. You cannot just leave her and look for another wife. Instead, God wants you to be patient with your wife, lead her by your good example, and gently guide her to the truth. Remember, you cannot save her. Only God can do that, so your top priority is to pray for her. Your second is to be the best husband you can be. Let her see the change that God has brought in you. This will make her hungry for the same change in her life.

Peter doesn't advise trying to change a spouse who is not walking with God. Instead, he advises that we focus on ourselves and let God do His work in them. Notice that the husband who is harsh with his wife will have his prayers hindered. In other words, our relationship with our spouse affects our relationship with God. If I mistreat my wife, then God is not happy with me, no matter how she behaves. If a woman is

not gently loving her husband, God is not happy with her, regardless of his behavior. We tend to think that if the other person changes, we will change, but this is not how things work. Instead, we need to BE the change WE WANT TO SEE. In other words, if you want to see your spouse change, you must first change, and then God will work in them through your example.

The African Context

I often use this text in counseling those with unbelieving spouses. It is always troubling to the Christian woman to see her husband living a sinful life, and as she knows the peace of God, she wonders, “How can I help my husband to change?” She indeed needs to be a witness to him and be ready to share the gospel with him. Yet, it is often hard for men to listen to these things from their wives. After all, God created him to be the spiritual leader, and it is humiliating when he realizes his wife is the strong one. What is the wife to do, and how can she navigate this?

Peter says she can win him “without words” through the kind of life she lives. Of course, the time will come for her to speak. In the next chapter, Peter says that believers should always be ready to give an answer for the hope that they have. Yet, the wife can help her husband be ready to hear those answers by how she behaves towards him. Sometimes wives want to nag their husbands into doing what is right. They think that he will change if they scold him or remind him enough (like a child). However, this usually has the opposite effect.

When a woman loves her husband unconditionally (especially when he is not doing the same) and submits to her husband because she loves God, this profoundly affects him. I have known men who saw a profound change in their wife’s behavior and understood God was working in them. God has a way of using the gentle and quiet spirit of a godly woman to break down the walls in a man’s heart. Submissive service done in the name of Jesus will always bear fruit.

Listen to this story from West Africa,

In March 2018, a West African Christian woman, Adabele Okeke, stood up at an annual church meeting asking for prayer for her Muslim husband, Makena. She also testified that because she wanted to go to a week-long church meeting ... Makena was furious and beat her severely—again. She went to the meeting anyway, and while she was gone, he locked her out of their home. He declared to the neighbors that his wife would never enter his home again. To make his point, as he headed to his girlfriend’s house, he threw Adabele’s house key in the river.

As Adabele returned home, she stopped at the market, planning to prepare a hearty meal praying to appease Makena. When she reached the house, she was puzzled that it was locked up tight. So, she began to prepare the meal assuming Makena would be home soon. While cleaning the fish, a key fell out of its belly. Puzzled, she noticed the key looked similar to her own house key; she tried it, and it worked— thank YOU, Lord! While the food cooked, she cleaned the house, waiting for Makena to return.

When Makena arrived home from his Islamic Friday prayers, he saw his house was open and a fire going in the outdoor kitchen. He was enraged, thinking Adabele had broken into the locked house. He soon saw nothing was damaged and demanded to know how she got in. Adabele explained about the key in the fish. Makena was a superstitious man and was stunned, deciding he should check out her ‘religion.’

On Sunday, Makena went to church with Adabele, and after the sermon, he spoke to the pastor recounting the incredulous story about the house key, and said, “I want to serve the God of the Christians. He is the One who knows and has power to do what no one else can.” Adabele’s prayers were answered. Makena accepted Christ and was born again!⁴

⁴ Story found at <https://www.jesus-our-blessed-hope.com/blog/africa-woman-finds-key-in-fish>

It is not easy for women to deal with unsaved husbands in Africa, but God is faithful and will help you find a way to reach them if you follow Peter's advice. The focus must be on yourself and not on your lost husband. The same is true for husbands with lost wives. African women greatly cherish a humble, patient, loving husband. To find a man who will put his wife before himself is a true treasure. If you focus on yourself and pray for your wife, God can use your behavior to change her life.

The problem is that many African men expect unconditional obedience, and they allow the bad behavior of their wives to drive them to do equally bad things. If your wife sees your patience despite her bad behavior, and if she senses your love even when she is not submissive, these things can break through to her heart and cause her to want to listen to your words. It might take time, but God works through our behavior to change those who are disobedient to the word.

Conclusion

Revelation 19

The Final Bride

Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.” It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, “Write, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” Revelation 19:7–9

Theology of Marriage

We end our biblical theology of marriage with a look at a different bride and groom. In this text, the bride is the church of Jesus Christ, and the groom is the Lord Jesus Himself. This connection is significant because there is an interdependent relationship between earthly biblical marriages and the marriage between Christ and His church. In fact, the entire biblical narrative is a historical arc starting in the garden with the first marriage and then taking us to heaven in Revelation and the ultimate marriage.

In the beginning, marriage’s very purpose was to foreshadow our ultimate relationship with Christ. This fact is why the biblical writers repeatedly point to earthly marriage as a physical analogy of the relationship of

Christ with His church, and they note how these relationships must mirror each other. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Wives are to be submissive to husbands as the church is submissive to God. Qualities like unconditional love, mutual respect, and sacrificial service that will mark our ultimate spiritual reality are to be emulated in the marriage relationship on a personal level.

When God, Himself, gave the first bride to the first groom in the garden of Eden, it pointed forward to a continual covenant practice that would be instituted at every time and in every culture on earth. This pervasive, holy tradition, found across the globe, points to an even more profound and pervasive connection between God and His bride, the church. There is a mystical connection between God and His people that is somehow foreshadowed in the mystical union of husband and wife.

Thus, it is imperative that we marry who God has for us and function in our marriages the way God intended. A biblical marriage brings glory to God and elevates that mystical union between God and His church. A Christ-like marriage foreshadows a more profound union that is now present in our hearts and we will one day experience face to face when we are seated around the marriage supper table as a bride, prepared for her bridegroom. Likewise, an unhealthy marriage or a blatant disregard for the institution of marriage casts a grim shadow on what should be on Earth and what will be in heaven. To bring marriage down is to bring the church down, and to bring the church down is to sully the very name of the bridegroom who died to save us and prepare us for this ultimate wedding day.

May our earthly marriages be a worthy foreshadowing of that glorious marriage that is to come. May our earthly marriages be a celebration of life and love that is found in the Holy One. When the holy Son of God is the sanctifying center of our marriage bond, we can know true joy and true love. Only then can we be greater together than we are apart. Only then can we mirror the splendor of the adorned bride of Christ,

the sanctified and triumphant church seated around that marriage table of the Lamb who died for us.

The African Context

There is little to add to this because this ultimate view of marriage in heaven is universal for every time and culture. While African marriages will have a decidedly African flavor, the purpose and nature of those marriages remain the same. God intends for your marriage to reflect His glory and point everyone to a more glorious wedding in heaven one day. May your light so shine in your marriage that everyone who sees your marriage will rejoice and glorify the God of heaven who created you and brought you together.

I am fully convinced that while we will all be one in heaven, we will all retain some sanctified semblance of ourselves, our personalities, and our cultures. Those of us who are African will still retain some “Africanness” in heaven, and this is a beautiful thing. Revelation 7:9 says that around the throne of the lamb, there will be people from every tribe, people, tongue, and nation. God is not creating a single-colored or cultured body in heaven but a rainbow-like tapestry made up of the beautiful flavors and shades of all He has created on earth.

African marriages have their own special flavor and, as such, bring something important to His kingdom. Your marriage should be biblical, and it should be a foreshadowing of that ultimate relationship between God and His church. However, it is still African and a critical piece of the overall tapestry. You have much to contribute to God’s kingdom and much to contribute to His bride. May God use your marriage to be a witness to those in other places and other cultures so that they can see an African biblical marriage. This honors God and is the entire point of this book. I trust that you have learned something valuable and that you will pass these truths on to those around you.

May God richly bless you and your marriage,

Walasa Phiri