

WHAT IS THE PROMISE OF MARRIAGE?

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Lifelong commitments can be better than engaged couples want to believe. The dating, caring, and affection of premarital enjoyment doesn't have to be lost forever in failed expectations and disillusionment. Marriage is worth the risk in a world where divorce claims one out of two marriages. Yet, to reclaim the vision of what a marital relationship can be, we need to take a look at our expectations, our motives, and our faith in God Himself.

In the following pages, RBC staff writer David Egner shows us how the wisdom of the Bible can renew and rekindle the promise of marriage for very imperfect people.

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A FADING PROMISE

Bob stormed into his workshop, picked up a piece of wood from his workbench, and hurled it into a pile of scrap in the corner. He and **Peggy** had just had another fight. He was so sick of it and so unhappy. He thought about getting in his pickup and driving away once and for all. But then he thought of 14-year-old Amy and 16-year-old Marcie.

Bob worked hard—sometimes 60 hours a week. He had built the house they lived in, as well as the barn for the purebred quarterhorses they raised. He had tried to give Peggy and the girls a comfortable, trouble-free life. But Peggy had become distant and unappreciative of what he was trying to do. When they tried to talk, it was like they were speaking two

different languages.

Sometimes the girls didn't help matters. Bob had forgotten how much his own dad had done for him—and how little he as a young person had appreciated his own parents—until Amy and Marcie had become almost as hard to live with as Peggy. Daddy's little girls were turning into demanding, ungrateful teenagers.

Bob was not one to analyze his feelings. But now he could ignore them no longer.

Bob was not one to analyze his feelings. He had always pushed them aside so he could concentrate on the work that had to be done. But now he could ignore them no longer. "Is

this all marriage amounts to,” he wondered, “being lonely and angry and frustrated and disappointed? I feel so empty.”

Sandy and **Dave** had been married less than 10 years, and she was exhausted. Dave had gone from job to job, never quite finding “people who appreciate what I have to offer.” He had wanted a family right away, and Sandy just learned that number three was on the way. The news scrambled her emotions. She would love to have another child—but not now. They just couldn’t afford it.

It had been too easy for Dave to buy things he wanted for himself—after they had purchased a little too much house and a little too much car. Sandy was working as much as she could, but the more she earned the more Dave spent. He seldom mowed the lawn,

the dryer needed repair, and the window in the basement was still broken.

Sandy felt trapped and miserable. She never imagined it would be like this!

Her parents helped some, but Sandy hated to ask for more unless it was really necessary. If Dave would only keep his promise to find a regular job and develop financial responsibility. Oh, she had talked to him. And he had made such sincere promises—promises that he just never kept.

Now another baby was on the way. Sandy felt trapped and miserable. Ten years ago when she stood at the altar and exchanged vows with Dave, she never imagined it would be like this!

A VISION RENEWED

Both Bob and Sandy feel angry, hurt, and betrayed.

This was not what they had anticipated. The honeymoon didn't last nearly as long as they had dreamed it would. The promise of happiness and security and intimacy and mutual care is fading away in the hard realities of their marriages.

They are not alone. Their feelings are duplicated in marriage after marriage. And divorce rates would be even higher if so many young people were not choosing to just live together.

In addition, 50 percent of all young adults today grew up in homes that went through the sad, bitter, sometimes violent process of a marriage breakup. They saw what it did to Mom and

Dad, and they don't want it to happen to them.

But marriages don't have to turn out that way. In spite of divorce statistics, and in spite of the additional number of unhappy relationships that remain intact, marriage still offers a "made in heaven" opportunity to discover the real meaning and richness of love.

True, it will take a lot of work. But so does everything worthwhile.

True, we'll have to make sacrifices. But what we receive in personal dividends from a healthy relationship far outweigh the losses.

True, current odds may be against it. But if we follow a few basic principles, the odds change dramatically in our favor.

True, it's a big responsibility, especially when children come along. But with that responsibility

comes the authority and help of God to turn that responsibility into satisfying results.

True, there are other ways to satisfy the pangs of loneliness and feelings of discontent. Our generation is infatuated with “love triangles,” “office affairs,” and the illusion of “safe sex.” But who on his deathbed will say he’s glad he had the chance to enjoy sexual intimacy outside of marriage?

True, it may seem that the best idea is to get out of a bad marriage before the bitterness and anger destroys you. But many hurting people have already discovered that as terrible as a loveless marriage is, an anger-filled divorce can’t put it all behind you.

We need to see the possibilities of people who will put as much into marriage as they did into their dating relationship.

We need to see husbands and wives filled with gratitude for being treasured in spite of all of their flaws and imperfections. We need to see the possibilities of two mature people who love each other deeply, not because of what they don’t know, but because they

***We need a vision
of our marriages
not as they are, but
as they could be.***

have learned the meaning of a love and a forgiveness that endures. We need a vision of husbands who, in spite of children and tight finances, will find ways to date their wives as they did before marriage. We need a vision of people touching and talking and embracing until parted only by death itself.

FOUR PHASES OF A GOOD MARRIAGE

So, what's in it for me?" It's a question worth asking about marriage, and not without reason. Just what is the promise of marriage?

- To the high school girl, it's her wedding day, a white gown, four beautiful bridesmaids, candles, flowers, and a friend-filled reception.
- To the newlyweds, it's shared vows, intimacy, friendship, and adventure.
- To the couple married 15 years, it's children, companionship, and building.
- To those married 35 years, it's watching grandchildren grow, the first signs of aging, and slowing down.
- To those who value God above all else, marriage

provides a testing ground of faith—a laboratory of the heart that has promise not only for this life but for the life to come.

People change, situations differ, and dreams are shattered. But the same God who made marriage made it to endure the disappointments and predictable seasons of life that mark all good relationships. God can help us grow through the cycles of (1) expectation, (2) covenant making, (3) disillusionment, and (4) growing fulfillment, which we will be considering in the remainder of this booklet.

Keep in mind, however, that the issue is not just what our Lord says about marriage. Solutions are found by discovering what He has said about basic issues of faith and character and then applying those perspectives to the seasons of marriage.

EXPECTATION



“What can I expect to get out of marriage? What’s the payoff? My hopes are high and my dreams are bright. But will they be realized?”

Let’s take a look at some of the more common expectations people have for marriage today. Then we will turn to the Bible to see what God expects of this relationship.

Our Expectations.

Our society, both religious and secular, has established expectations for the marriage relationship:

1. *Marriage will meet my needs.*

- The need for affection and sexual intimacy.
- The need for companionship.
- The need for family.
- The need for conversation.
- The need for financial security.
- The need for social acceptance.
- The need to leave home.

Many of these expectations reflect reasonable and even God-given desires. The problem comes, however, when we pursue these desires with shortsighted strategies and motives.

Many enter into marriage expecting it to solve their problems. A daughter who cannot any longer tolerate the anger and coldness of her father or the criticism of her step-mother may get married merely to get out of the house. A son who feels that he isn’t respected by his parents may see marriage as

a way of finding some of the personal affirmation he longs for. Yet all too often those who enter into marriage to solve their problems end up in the humiliation of a divorce court saying, "She [or he] just isn't meeting my needs, your honor."

Why don't couples see this coming? Part of the answer is that many of them assume that . . .

2. Marriage will change him/her. Many enter marriage with a predetermined idea of what they want their partner to become. They may disclose it a little before the wedding, but it becomes all too obvious soon enough. John, a student in seminary, was looking for his concept of an ideal pastor's wife. He wanted a woman who would be an excellent hostess, who would promote him in every way, who could speak to women's groups, who would

be content to live in the parsonage next door to the church, who could live thriftily on a tight budget, who would produce two children on schedule (preferably a boy and a girl), and who would always be upbeat and happy.

It wasn't long into his marriage before the trouble began. Becky was sometimes moody and sad. She wanted a little money to spend without having to account to him for every penny. She hated speaking to any group. The first baby didn't come on schedule, and she was often ill. The more John pushed Becky to fill his expectations, the more she withdrew. She simply could not fit his ideal, no matter how much he pressured her.

To avoid such mistakes, some people try the opposite approach.

3. Marriage can be as free as we let it be. Some enter marriage with another,

more subtle expectation. They are generous in offering their partner a great deal of latitude and freedom—more than the partner is comfortable with. But at a high price. They want even more freedom for themselves. In return, they expect few demands to be made on them. It's a live-and-let-live approach. "I won't ask any questions, and I don't expect you to ask any either."

Such attitudes are quite different from . . .

God's Expectations.

The Bible shows that God's expectations for marriage are apt to be different from our own. When God said, "It is not good for man to be alone," and when He created Eve as an answer to that aloneness, He did more than just make a provision for man's needs. The rest of the Bible shows that God has the following expectations for marriage.

1. Marriage will enable us to serve someone else's needs.

In writing his New Testament letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul made it clear that those who are married can expect not only the joys of the relationship but also the responsibilities that come with it (1 Cor. 7:28-35). Paul indicated that in committing themselves to one another, husbands and wives actually must spend much of their time working hard to please one another (vv.33-34).

In one sense, Paul said that such a relationship, while not wrong (v.28), actually limits the amount of time that a person can spend in undistracted service to the Lord. Paul must have been very aware that much of what he accomplished as a traveling ambassador for Christ could not have been accomplished if he had the responsibilities and cares of a wife, home, and family. For

all of its joys, marriage has responsibilities that limit our freedom to serve God in an unencumbered way. Our Lord knows that when we marry, we are choosing to serve Him by serving the needs of our partner. Over time, we even have to learn how to keep the marital commitment from rivaling our commitment to, and dependence on, the Lord.

That brings us to a second expectation. While we might enter into marriage hoping to change our partner, God's expectation is that . . .

2. Marriage will change us for the better.

Scripture doesn't tell us to make sure our life-partner loves, respects, and gives us all the affectional, financial, and physical satisfaction we long for. The Bible never promises that God will make our mates into the kind of people we pray they will be. It does tell us, however,

what kind of a heart God can enable us to have if we do our part in bringing out the best in our mate.

Marriage by its very nature demands our own spiritual growth. For us to live with and love someone else "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness

More than any other relationship, marriage will expose our hearts and demand our growth.

and in health" requires that we learn to put his or her interests ahead of our own. Such love is a general biblical principle (Phil. 2:1-4), but the closeness and responsibilities of marriage give us an ideal setting to help us learn the real meaning of love.

By its very nature, marriage demands commitment, risk, and unselfish investment. For a couple to achieve the unity and love and loyalty and blessing God expects, they must take giant strides of personal growth. They must learn how and when to abandon personal rights so they can experience the richness that comes when the true needs of others (not the selfish demands) are put before their own desires.

As a husband and wife learn to love in this way, they become a window through which others can see the kingdom of God at work. As they surrender themselves to the Spirit and rule of God, they become exhibits of the kind of spirituality that God designed marriage to produce. Friends, children, and extended family are given a chance to see the kind of faithful love, honesty,

moral courage, true humility, incredible patience, and tender understanding God can give in marriage. People will not see manipulative or fearful compliance that so often marks marriage. They will see honest caring and friendship.

This kind of love requires us to focus not primarily on our mate's faults but on our own motives and actions. Such love, however, does not give us permission to assume, "If I don't demand anything of you, then you won't demand anything of me." God's expectation is that in the most intimate and interdependent way . . .

3. *Marriage will place us under the mutual spirit of love.* The Bible makes it clear that when a man and woman join in marriage, they become one. And the controlling factor of their oneness is their mutual commitment to care for one another's well-being for as

long as they both live.

This commitment to love means that we must always be looking for positive ways to bring out the best in our mates. It also means that after dealing with our own faults and sins (Mt. 7:1-5), we will find timely and sensitive ways to discourage significant faults in one another. Proverbs 27:6 reminds us that to be faithful, a friend must sometimes say things that will be painful to hear.

The Bible does not give permission to nag, harp, or harshly criticize one another. Proverbs says that it is better to live on the roof than in a big house with a brawling or contentious woman (21:9). But with love comes the responsibility to do everything possible to bring out the best in a mate rather than the worst. Love will not let us indulge the immorality or support the destructive addictions of our

partner. As our God shows us by His own example, love is tough when circumstances call for it.

The most significant of God's expectations for marriage, however, seems to be reflected in His intent that . . .

4. *Marriage will be a picture of Christ's relationship to the church.* God's expectation is that husbands and wives will develop an enduring love by keeping their eyes on the "marriage" between Christ and His church (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33). After urging both husbands and wives to see their distinct roles defined by the relationship between Christ and the church, the apostle Paul wrote:

We are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the

two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church (Eph. 5:30-32).

These expectations of God offer great promise for a new or restored marriage. They are expectations that lift us above ourselves, and call from us the kind of love that has its source in God.

These expectations form a basis for the covenant that is at the heart of marriage.

COVENANT



The relatives and friends are seated. The organ is playing softly while candles flicker in

the background. The attendants are standing in place. The father has said, “Her mother and I.” The soloist has just finished.

The audience is silent. The minister speaks. “Please join hands and repeat after me. I, James, take you, Susan . . .”

Expectation moves into reality through the exchanging of vows. The man and woman make solemn promises before God, family, and friends that they will “love, honor, and cherish” one another until “death us do part.” By repeating vows and signing the license, a man and woman enter into a covenant relationship that embodies all that God intended for marriage.

Exchanged vows also anticipate those times of married life that are always more than we bargained for. The covenant anticipates those experiences of life in which marriage, with its

unexpected twists and turns, reaches deeper, becomes more absorbing, and pulls more out of us than we ever anticipated. “Worse,” “poorer,” and “sickness,” do happen. And when they do, we can go back again and again to the promises we made to one another. Understanding what the Lord intended those vows to mean—at a depth we could not have anticipated when we made them—will help us over and over again as we experience all that marriage is.

A Lifetime Commitment. When a man and woman say, “I do,” they are vowing to each other before the Lord that they will stay together until one of them dies. The Lord Jesus clearly taught what God expected when He said:

Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning “made them male and female,” and

said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (Mt. 19:4-6).

“But what about divorce?”

someone asked the Lord.

“Isn’t that always an option? Can’t I keep a back door open just in case it doesn’t work out?” Jesus replied:

Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery (Mt. 19:8-9).

The marriage vow is the verbal expression of a

lifelong commitment made in the mind and heart. That's God's design. The richest fulfillment of the promise of marriage is anchored in that concept. When we say in the vow, "from this day forward," we mean a lifetime. This promise is not made to be broken (Eccl. 5:4).

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"How limiting!" some might say. Yes, such commitment is limiting. But it also sets a man or woman free to concentrate on the task of living out and adjusting and improving a loving relationship through the sincere give-and-take of

life. Such a covenant allows husband and wife to give one another the gift of a vowed love—a lifetime promise—that will carry them through physical illness and divergent interests and job pressures and problems with teenagers and unbelievable stress in the relationship. So complex—yet so simple. "I made a promise, and with the help of God I intend to keep it. I'm a person of my word. I'm in this for life."

A Shared Identity. In the fulfillment of the marital covenant, two become one. The man no longer lives only for himself, nor the woman only for herself. A new unity, a new diversity, a new family is established. Both remain distinct persons. Yet, from the Bible's point of view, two now share a mystery of oneness. The apostle Paul wrote:

So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves

his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church (Eph. 5:28-32).

As the church is united to Christ, so woman and man become one. They walk up the aisle a diversity—a man and woman apart. They come back down the aisle as one flesh—a shared identity. Different backgrounds, different families, different educations, different hurts, different habits—yet now, in covenant, they are one . . .

- When he is stationed in the Middle East and she must stay in New Jersey.

- When she is struggling through the first trimester of a difficult pregnancy.
- When he is told that his job has been phased out and she gets a promotion.
- When she contracts MS or he hears the words, “I’m sorry, but the cancer is inoperable.”
- When he must devote a lot of time and energy to caring for his aged parents.
- When their youngest child walks down the aisle to say her marriage vows.

Yes, the man and woman are one. These two unique people have promised to walk the pathway of life together as one in a new, shared identity.

An Exclusive Relationship. The covenant relationship the man and woman enter when they say their vows calls for total faithfulness. Husband and wife are to love and be

true to and cherish each other—exclusively! The man is to be true to his wife and she to him. The Bible gives no ground on this point.

Can a man take fire to his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one walk on hot coals, and his feet not be seared? So is he who goes in to his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her shall not be innocent (Prov. 6:27-29).

Current social practices notwithstanding, the covenant of marriage is with one person only. Paul told Titus to have the older women of the church at Crete teach the younger women “to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste” (Ti. 2:4-5).

The seventh commandment given at Sinai is, “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). Jesus repeated this commandment (Mt. 19:18).

And Paul named adultery first in his list of the sins of the flesh (Gal. 5:19).

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“I pledge you my faithfulness.” About these words, Mike Mason wrote, “This is how we must love one another, with a vowed love that is not dependent on happiness nor any of the external hallmarks of success. Where is such love to begin if it does not begin with the one closest to us, the life partner whom we have chosen out of all the other people in the world as the apple of our eye?” (*The Mystery Of Marriage*, p.106).

From this commitment

onward, the man and woman are expected to be true to each other. This is God's expectation for marriage. And if they follow it, they will experience the wonderful promise of marriage. Because of this . . .

- We will concentrate our love on our mate.
- We will not be disloyal, even in little matters.
- We will not initiate nor encourage flirtations.
- We will flee temptation. Oh, we will be tested.

From within our own deceitful hearts, and from outside, will come urges to ignore that vow. The promise of marriage is built on a covenant, on the integrity of our word still being intact when one of us is called home.

Only by remaining true to our word, and only by a deep desire to trust God's plan, can we weather the next important phase of marriage . . .

DISILLUSIONMENT



It might begin as early as the honeymoon. The suspicion, the shadow that might already have been cast on the back edge of his or her thinking or emotions. A little smudge has appeared on her halo; a little tarnish on his suit of shining armor.

She ignores it. But it keeps coming back. He's not the gentle man she thought he was. He forgets about her feelings. She makes plans without consulting him. He makes financial commitments without telling her. She ends their

arguments without resolution.

Meanwhile, she's disturbed by the thoughts she's having. She has become preoccupied with his shortcomings. She remembers how good it felt as a single to be able to make her own decisions and spend her money on whatever she wanted. The more time goes by, the more unhappy and disillusioned she becomes.

Christian counselor Norman Wright, in his premarital counseling workbook titled *Before You Say I Do*, indicates that every marriage goes through stages of disillusionment. The new husband and wife run headlong into a gap between what they expected of their marriage and how it is actually turning out. It may occur on the honeymoon or while they are arranging the furniture in their apartment. They work it through, only to

discover that disillusionment keeps on coming. It appears during the first months of the pregnancy, while their children are small, in career changes, when their children reach the teens, during their late 40s and middle 50s, and if the Lord gives them good health, into their 70s and 80s.

This is how it is with a man and woman. Neither can be God to the other. Both are inclined toward their own selfishness. Neither is always satisfied to find contentment in God (Phil. 4:11-13). Both struggle with and often give in to a heart that is as sinful as the Bible says (Rom. 7:14-25). And nothing exposes the flaws of human nature like marriage.

The Closeness Of Marriage. The very intimacy and shared identity of the marital relationship can cause disillusionment because that degree of closeness exposes our

hearts. Unlike business relationships, where the roles are defined to allow for professional “distance,” marriage is designed for oneness. The man and woman soon know each other so very well. They share the pleasure of sex, the stages of pregnancy and childbirth, the excitement of purchasing a new home, the good news of his promotion or her opportunity. They work through health or parental or teenage or financial crises together. They become so close that they know how each other feels and what the other is thinking.

But this closeness has a dark side. They know the best and the worst about each other. His inattention and absorption with work frustrates her. Her refusal to listen and trust his judgment angers him. She knows which words will make him angry or humiliate him. He

knows she’ll be hurt by his compulsive spending, but he does it anyway.

In the intimacy of marriage we show our selfishness, our impatience, our insensitivity, our anger. We become insulting, punitive, wounding. The closeness of marriage brings it out. It exposes us to our mate and, perhaps even more painfully, to ourselves. We

The closeness of marriage shows us what our hearts are really like.

begin to realize that our mate is not fulfilling our longings for security and affirmation and contentment. We feel betrayed. We trusted one another. Yet in unexpected ways marriage has exposed not only the faults of our mate but also of ourselves.

Wrong Motives For Marriage.

All men and women, often without realizing it, enter marriage for some unhealthy reasons. Oh, they have a lot of right reasons—to find companionship, to have someone to love and care for, to enter a lifelong relationship, to honor the Lord. But as time goes by, it becomes obvious that even though “opposites attract,” this can become a source of frustrating opposition.

Suppose the man knows he tends to be impulsive. He’s never learned to manage money. He makes compulsive purchases that keep him at the edge of financial disaster. So he chooses a marital partner who is not only physically attractive to him but who also is a steady, self-controlled person. Before marriage, she seems to like his casual and spontaneous approach to life. He, on the

other hand, feels safe when he’s with her.

After the marriage, neither can figure out what’s happening. Suddenly they find themselves in a battle of wills over money. She has to play the role of the one who always says no. She’s disappointed in him. She feels the isolation and pressure of carrying a burden that should be shared. She married him to be his wife, not his mother.

The marriage is in trouble because he entered into it with a wrong motive. Other wrong motives a person may carry into marriage are:

- To get strength to fight an addiction.
- To get away from a bad home situation.
- To get protection from a domineering parent.
- To promote a career.
- To find much-needed approval.
- To resolve unhealthy sexual issues.

Sooner or later, these underlying motives will show up. And when they do, they will lead to disillusionment that is also rooted in . . .

Destructive Behavior In Marriage.

Some of those sinful, destructive patterns may be:

1. Nagging Criticism.

It is “better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman” (Prov. 21:19). This is also true of a critical husband. Either may be motivated by feelings of inferiority or a need to divert attention from his or her own behavior. (Those addicted to alcohol are usually extremely critical of the spouse who does not drink. They want to “prove” that they are not the only one whose behavior is destructive.)

Such criticism helps us to see why Jesus taught us to first deal with our own sins before “helping others” with their problems (Mt. 7:1-5).

Criticism is a dangerous source of disillusionment when it is used to keep attention off our own faults.

2. Anger. Outbursts of anger, unchecked and often over minor issues, attack the security of the marriage. Uncontrolled anger is dangerous to any relationship. Proverbs 22:24 says, “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man do not go.” Yet, when anger suddenly shows up after vows are exchanged, the partner feels disillusioned and trapped.

3. Self-centeredness. When one spouse always has to have it his or her way, the result is contrary to the ways of God (Phil. 2:1-4). This can be disillusioning to those who thought that marriage would provide someone who would care for them.

4. Irritating Behaviors. The apostle Paul wrote that love “does not behave

rudely” (1 Cor. 13:5). So when selfish insensitivities show up either in public or private, a spouse feels unloved. He or she feels vulnerable, undermined, disrespected, and endangered. If our “best friend” treats us like this, where can we run from our enemies?

5. *Emotional*

Dishonesty. One spouse may deny his or her feelings of frustration or disappointment. The perceived reason may be not to “hurt” the other person. The deeper motive, however, is to protect oneself from further hurt or conflict. Self-protection results in a lack of truth, a lack of love, and a growing distance and coolness that leads to deeper feelings of hopelessness.

Disillusionment appears in every marriage. It’s inevitable. To claim that it hasn’t or won’t happen to us is to deny reality. How

we face it when it appears may be the most crucial element of our marriage.

FULLILLMENT



The key question is, “Now what? Now that we have hit this rough spot in our marriage, what are we going to do about it?” The man’s and woman’s commitment to work through and resolve the issues creating the disillusionment is vitally important. It can lead to the kind of reconciliation and acceptance that makes marriage worth it for life.

Some of us have known what it is like to feel the

frustration and fear. The marriage is stuck. It isn't growing. Yet we also see that running into the bedroom, slamming the door, and staying there for hours is not working.

At this point, we need to realize that all is not lost. There still is hope. In fact, our disillusionment has actually brought us to the threshold of the very love and security we've been looking for. To cross over this threshold of fulfillment, however, we must . . .

Let Our Marital Disappointment Help Us To Face Our Disappointment With God. This step won't be easy. After all, God is the One before whom we took our vows. He is the One we asked to bless our marriage. Yet, once again, He is the One who seems to have let us down. We may ask, "Should I be surprised? Isn't He the One who let me have

an alcoholic father or a suicidal mother? Should I now be surprised that He didn't reach in and stop me when I drifted into a difficult marital relationship?

He's the One who hasn't answered my prayers. He hasn't changed my mate or taken away the gnawing emptiness inside me."

In his book *Bold Love*, Christian counselor Dan Allender wrote, "A sexually abused person once told me, 'When God did not intervene to stop the abuser, He lost any right to require me to do anything. He owes me; I owe Him nothing.' Her words are stark and brutal, but I believe she represents the core posture of the heart that struggles with God. She simply had the angry courage to put words to the battle to understand God's goodness, His response to injustice, and the burden of fulfilling the royal law of love" (*Bold Love*, p.70).

We may be angry with God because our marriage is not going as we expected. We may be holding Him accountable or accusing Him of breaking His promise of happiness to us. But as we struggle, we are at least taking Him seriously. And in our struggle we can compare our experience with the stories of other people who have been disappointed with God before finding fulfillment in Him.

The Bible tells about a man named Job who felt that God had been unfair to him. It tells us about a man named Joseph who was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, and then falsely accused of trying to rape his employer's wife. The Bible tells us about a whole nation of people who, after being delivered from the slave-yards of Egypt, concluded that God had led them out into a barren wilderness to destroy them. The Bible tells us about Jesus, the Son of God, who

on the night before His betrayal and death pled with the Father to deliver Him from the suffering He was about to face. Over and over, the Bible introduces us to people whose disappointment with God bleeds through the pages of their lives.

Yet again and again the Bible shows that disillusionment can become the doorway to fulfillment. Job lived long enough to see his confidence in God restored and deepened (42:1-6). Joseph lived long enough to say to those family members who had harmed him, "You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Time after time the children of Israel saw bitter and frightening experiences turn into opportunities to witness the power and goodness of God. Jesus endured to the point of saying in Gethsemane, "Nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done" (Lk. 22:42).

No one has ever suffered the betrayal, aloneness, abandonment, and abuse that Christ did in the course of His life and death. No one ever experienced the kind of unfair treatment that He endured when He paid the price for our sins. Yet He lived and died and rose from the dead to declare along with Job and Joseph and other godly men and women of Israel, that, in time, God always shows Himself good and powerful and faithful to those who are willing to trust Him to the end. He can do the same for us in our marriage.

Christ showed us by His own example that we were not made to find complete fulfillment or security in any human relationship. He showed us that we are made to find our protection and contentment in God, and that only in this realization can we be free to love and submit to one another.

By His own example Christ also helps us . . .

Let Our Relationship With God Become Our Source Of Marital Fulfillment. Followers of Christ are in a great position to face the issues that have brought disillusionment to their marriage. Biblical counselor Larry Crabb wrote, “The difference between godly and ungodly people is not that one group never hurts and the other group does, or that one reports more happiness than the other. The difference lies in what people do with their hurt. Either they do what comes naturally: use their hurt to justify self-centered efforts to relieve it, caring less about how they affect others and more about whether they are comfortable; or they do what comes *unnaturally*: use their hurt to better understand and encourage others while they cling desperately to the

Lord for promised deliverance, passionately determined to do His will” (*Men And Women*, p.93).

Once we learn that our ultimate well-being depends on God and not on our spouse, we will begin to experience the strength of the Lord. Once a husband believes that his relationship to God is more important than his relationship to his wife, he will begin to find a personal sense of significance that doesn't depend on his wife's responses or affirmation. He will begin to love her out of the love that he has found in Christ (Eph. 5:25).

Once a wife believes that her relationship with Christ is more important than her relationship to her husband, she can begin to find a source of security and acceptance that doesn't depend on her husband's ability to meet her needs. She can begin to accept her

role as a wife out of the conviction that rightly motivated submission is actually a way of submitting herself to the lordship and provision of Christ (Eph. 5:22-24).

This is not to say, however, that godly husbands and wives become independent of one another. It is important that we also . . .

Let Our Dependence On God Become A Basis For Loving Interdependence.

A husband and wife who depend on God—who find their strength and sufficiency in Him—will not be overly dependent on each other. Nor will they demand an unhealthy independence or domination.

God made man and woman as unique, specially gifted beings in His image. Neither of them is to rob the other of that God-given uniqueness. But when they

say, "I do," they are choosing to give themselves to each other in a lifelong relationship.

The Bible helps us to understand how a husband and wife can be one, yet also be true to the unique person God made each to be. God made woman to be a companion and helper her husband can depend on. Genesis tells us, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him'" (2:18). Proverbs 31 describes an initiative-taking, God-gifted woman who did just that. She entered into an enterprise that her husband fully supported.

There was an interdependent relationship between this couple in Proverbs 31. God gave the wife multiple gifts, including good business sense. Her husband apparently was not jealous of her gifts, nor did

he deny her their use. He did not try to remake her into something she was not. We can assume that he loved her for the woman God made her to be. She, in turn, used her gifts in a way that produced harmony and marital success, as well as business success. Scripture gives no evidence of her doing anything but respecting her husband and his gifts as the man God made him to be.

This kind of interdependence does not come easy for a generation that has seen divorce become epidemic. Yet for those who find their security in the Lord, and for those who are rightly motivated, it is possible for wives to accept and trust the Bible when it says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church" (Eph. 5:22-23).

The interdependence of husbands and wives also has

implications for their sexual relationship. The Scriptures make it clear that husbands and wives are to protect, enjoy, and share mutual expectations in the intimacy of the marital bed. The sexual dimension of marriage is designed by the Lord to bring continuing pleasure and exhilarating renewal to the relationship. The wise author of Proverbs wrote these words to husbands:

Drink water from your own cistern, and running water from your own well. Should your fountains be dispersed abroad, streams of water in the streets? Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love (Prov. 5:15-19).

When a man and woman marry, they have the right to expect sexual fulfillment from each other:

Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does (1 Cor. 7:3-4).

If one partner decides to abstain for a time, they must mutually agree and keep the time brief:

Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Cor. 7:5).

For such mutual pleasure, husbands and wives are to

depend on one another. When we offer ourselves to one another in love, God Himself is pleased. When we fail, the pleasure goes to Satan.

THE ACTIONS OF LOVE

Love is both a motive and an action. Jesus Christ's love for the church led to action: His sacrificial death on the cross. It will result in the wonderful fellowship of heaven (Rev. 19).

Paul told husbands to love their wives (Eph. 5:25). He instructed older women to teach the younger women to love their husbands (Ti. 2:4). In a marriage where the promise is fading, love translated into action can bring the brightness back into the promise.

This brings us to 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter about love has no greater application

than within the context of marriage. Verses 4-8 tell us what love does. As you read these verses, consider how they apply to your marriage.

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.

You might want to read this passage again. Where the word *love* appears, put in your name. Now ask yourself if this is how you treat your husband or your wife. This is what it means to love.

People who experience the joy of marriage for 20, 40, or 50 years without one "swallowing up" the other have learned how to work through the differences that

lead to disillusionment and, perhaps, divorce. They are not merely “married to marriage” for the sake of marriage but because it is a fulfilling, rewarding, adventurous, loving relationship for both. They have stayed together in part because of a mutual willingness to talk, compromise, and work through their differences. Let me illustrate.

Suppose there’s a stalemate in a marriage. Say the woman is a “neat freak” and the man is kind of sloppy. The differences begin to drive them apart. She nags incessantly; he gets a severe case of “selective deafness.” Both withdraw.

What would love do? It would take action. Facing the problem and overcoming fear, love would initiate the kind of communication that would lead to resolution, calling constantly on the help of our all-sufficient God.

But how do we do this? One way is to make a determined effort to look at the issue through the other’s eyes. See it from that person’s perspective. In this case, he needs to remember her home life and understand how insecure she feels when things are out of place. She needs to admit that it’s not a major crime nor a sin to leave a shirt hanging on the back of a chair. Then they both need to change their behavior.

True, it will be hard. In deeper marital issues, such as rage or emotional abuse, it will seem impossible. But the principles of love are backed by a God who is love (1 Jn. 4:7-8), and by a Savior who fills us with His power.

In some cases, Bible-centered counseling may be necessary. That’s okay. The point is that love takes action and trusts God to give the promise of marriage to couples who are willing to trust Him.

THE REALITY BEHIND THE PICTURE

Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. Jesus called the church His bride, and the Bible refers to Him as the Bridegroom. The church is made up of all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. The allegiance, sacrificial love, and faithfulness of the husband and wife is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. The promise of their “marriage” will be fulfilled when Jesus returns for His bride.

What about you? What is your relationship with Jesus Christ? Are you part of His bride through faith in Him? Or will you be left behind at His coming because you have never trusted in Him?

The way to experience

the promise of heaven is through faith. If you will acknowledge that you are a sinner and cannot save yourself (Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:8-9), and if you will trust Jesus Christ as your Savior, you will become part of His bride. He came to earth to live the sinless life you could not live. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sin. And by His resurrection from the dead, God showed that His sacrifice had been accepted, that the penalty for sin had been paid in full.

Your part is to believe. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16).

Trust Jesus today. You will experience the promise of a wonderful relationship with Christ and can look forward to the promise of heaven.

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