

# When The Flame Flickers

Rekindling Intimacy In Your Marriage

by Tim Jackson

**S**he looks radiant in her white chiffon gown, draped with lace—her wispy veil unable to hide her excitement. He looks handsome in his tux—striking, strong, and full of anticipation as he awaits the arrival of his bride at the front of the church where they will officially join their lives together. The ceremony and celebration of this moment are fit for the coronation of a prince and his princess.

But this is not the wedding of royalty. Similar customs and emotions happen every day all over the world. A man and a woman merge their lives with the highest of expectations, and seal it with a kiss. This is the drama of countless movies and novels, poems and plays, tales and legends. Two people give themselves to each other and then live happily ever after. Or do they?

While everyone seems to love a wedding, many are skeptical of marriage. The suspicions are deserved. Disappointment predictably invades every relationship. Disillusionment erodes the hopes of couples who once

stood at an altar and pledged themselves “till death us do part.”

Too often, shattered dreams and broken hearts show up at a courthouse to dissolve in pain what began with such promise. With alarming frequency, damaged relationships are disowned like pieces of old furniture. Sometimes there’s no other choice. But often what is needed is a new vision for what could be restored rather than replaced.

A new oak table, fresh from the woodshop, once graced the dining room of a fine restaurant. Over the years, the restaurant changed ownership several times. Finally, the building was sold to be remodeled for offices. The table, now scratched and gouged, missing its legs and covered over with layers of paint, was put out with the trash to be discarded. It caught

the eye, however, of a carpenter who took an interest in the discarded piece. He salvaged the table and took it to his shop with the intent of one day doing something with it.

The table sat in the corner of the shop for years until it was finally pulled out and stripped of its old finish—revealing a richly grained oak. Delighted, he sanded it down, refinished it, and then built sturdy new legs for it. Restored to its original beauty and strength, the table now graces the woodworker’s home. All who see it are amazed at what would have been lost if new eyes hadn’t seen what was hiding under the old paint.

Worn and damaged marriages can often be restored like that table in my family room. Even after original dreams have been marred and scarred to the point that a marriage’s

value is questioned, there can be hope. Although marriage covenants are sometimes broken beyond repair, most of us can find new hope in the God who wants an opportunity to teach us to love one another as He has first loved us.

The goal of this booklet is to see the possibilities that emerge when the greatest Carpenter of all is allowed to show what He can do with the damaged lives of a troubled home. In the process, we'll look together at God's original design for oneness in marriage. We'll weigh the impact of the spiritual wear and tear that has caused so much of our pain. And we'll consider how to let God Himself move us back to the shared wonder of His original design. This is our goal, but first let's take a look at some myths that need to be exposed.

## Common Myths About Marriage

**W**e all carry myths into our marriages. We all bring our share of unrealistic expectations shaped by parents and friends, education and media, church and culture. When these dreams give way to unhappy nights and realistic mornings, marriage loses its glow. Disappointment, disillusionment, and cynicism set in. All too often, husbands and wives begin to think they have made a mistake and married the wrong person. Some become restless and look for another "special someone" who will fulfill their dashed hopes and dreams. Others, rather than risk the temptation to look outside of the relationship for fulfillment, progressively

deaden their hearts and deny the desire for something more. Endurance becomes the goal. The dream of enjoyment fades to a faint glimmer of the past.

Five of the most common myths about marriage that fuel unrealistic expectations are:

**The For-Me Myth** of personal fulfillment is expressed in the unspoken thought, “Finally I have someone who will meet my needs.” This myth grows out of a self-centered preoccupation with what seems best for *me*. Marriage is viewed not as a *we*-relationship but as a *me*-arrangement designed to meet *my* needs. This myth explodes with the realization that a healthy marriage needs two people who are committed to be there for each other, not two individuals seeking self-fulfillment.

**The Marriage-Is-Easier Myth** grows out of a legitimate understanding that burdens shared are more manageable. An engaged man or woman often assumes, “Things will get easier now that I have someone to share the load.” While financially that may be true, the combination of two people with different genders, backgrounds, experiences, and expectations adds up to a mix of mystery and madness. The marriage-is-easier myth usually begins to die after the honeymoon is over, and after a series of heated arguments about money, sex, in-laws, schedules, friends, weight, appearance, or why there is a scratch on the side of the car.

**The No-Effort Myth** represents a passive and irresponsible approach to marriage. This is the assumption that “If a

marriage is good, it just happens—like magic.” Work and painful choices are not viewed as necessary components of a healthy marital partnership.

Instead, those holding to this myth believe that if they have to work at their marriage, then something must be wrong. And the “something” quickly becomes “someone” who needs to be controlled, changed, or replaced.

### **The Happiness Myth**

is probably the most common, and the most deadly, to marriages. “And they both lived happily ever after” is the expected postscript to every wedding. This myth assumes that *my* personal happiness is the ultimate goal of marriage. Even the phrase “happily married” suggests that this relationship is expected to provide a lifetime of bliss. Yet time always reveals that unrealistic expectations are

chronically unreasonable. The hope that “a spouse will always make me happy” is impossible to fulfill.

### **The Lost-Love Myth**

is rooted in the belief that love is only a feeling. Once the initial intense affections for a spouse are buried by the reality of life together, many believe that their love has been lost. Couples fear that they have “fallen out of love” and begin to doubt that they could ever “fall back in.” In this myth, choice and commitment are not seen as a part of an ideal relationship. Love is viewed as a feeling that is fragile and fickle.

Many couples struggle or give up on myth-based marriages. They stop short of discovering the radically different portrait of marriage that God paints in the Bible. It is the wonder, design, and “oneness” of that relationship that we’ll be looking at.

# THE IDEAL OF ONENESS: What God Intended Marriage To Be

Genesis is the book of beginnings. While telling the story of creation, it also describes the first marriage—between the first man and woman. To better understand our Creator’s original design for this relationship, it is crucial to take a thoughtful look at what God had in mind “in the beginning.”

*God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27).*

This text shows that God had something uniquely different in mind for humans than for the rest of creation. While all of creation reflects the

awesome power and creative genius of the mind of God, men and women were uniquely designed to reflect the heart of their Creator. Husbands and wives are to reflect the goodness and wonder of their Maker. Even the process God used to bring our first parents to life hints at their significant place in His plan.

Instead of speaking man into existence as He had done with everything else (Gen. 1:3,6,9,14,20,24), God showed additional care by the way He used His own “hands” to mold and shape Adam. According to the book of Genesis, God formed man from “the dust of the ground” and then breathed into His creation His own living breath (2:7).

The image behind the word *formed* is that of a sculptor who moistens dry clay and squeezes and molds it into the exact shape he wants. No doubt the

intensity of God's concern in this special act of creation is related to the fact that He was making a creature in His own likeness. Adam was equipped with the capacities of personhood like God. Bible scholars affirm that such capacities as thinking, feeling, choosing, relating, and communicating with words are all manifestations of God's image in man.

So God placed this perfect man in the perfect environment of the Garden of Eden and put him in charge of ruling over it (Gen. 1:26). All was right with the world—or at least that's what we would expect in a perfect world. But God's own commentary on the situation revealed that something was "not good" (2:18). Man was alone. That was a problem. Had God forgotten to make a companion? Hardly. But why didn't He just scrape together two piles of soil, breathe into them His divine

breath, and initiate the first marriage right from the start? That would have been obvious. But God is not a God of the obvious and expected.

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doesn't confine Himself just to the facts of the narrative but also reveals glimpses of His heart in how He tells the story. We must read the Bible with both mind and heart to understand the implications

for us as modern readers.

God did have a solution for Adam's loneliness. But first He gave him a job—naming the animals.

**The Necessity For Companionship.** Giving Adam the task of naming all the animals God had created (2:19-20) seems out of place in the natural flow of the story. One would expect that once God identified Adam's need for a helper (2:18) that He would have gotten right to it (2:21-22). The statements immediately preceding and following the account of Adam's job, however, imply that God was using Adam's work to teach him something. God wanted Adam to learn the necessity for companionship by discovering for himself three timeless truths.

***It is not good for man to be alone.*** God knew that because Adam was alone, he needed a companion to help

him (2:18). Adam seemed unaware of his aloneness. But in the process of naming the animals he became aware of something. He noticed that each of the animals God brought to him had mates “according to their kinds” (7 times in Gen. 1). God made companions for the animals. What God knew from the beginning of man's creation, Adam discovered in the process of naming the animals—that there was no one of his own kind for him to relate to. He experienced human loneliness. He longed for companionship with another like himself. He learned that doing good work was not intended to be a replacement for a meaningful relationship.

***Purposeful work is not fulfilling enough.*** Put yourself in Adam's place. Imagine the joy he must have felt as an active participant with God. No

longer was he just one of the creatures. Instead, he was making a difference in his world. What a privilege to be asked and entrusted with the creative process of naming the animals. Adam got his first taste of being made in the image of the Creator God by experiencing the joy of creative work. His God-likeness must have amazed and humbled him at the same time. While he must have been energized by the monumental task of naming what God had made, Adam soon realized that creative work would never fulfill his longing for relationship. Creative management of the garden was an expression of Godlikeness, but man was made to reflect God's image most fully in the context of relationships. Amazingly, Adam discovered that his longing for relationship was not fulfilled by his relationship with God.

***Relationship with God alone is not enough.*** For those familiar with the Bible, that might sound like heresy. Asaph's words ring in our ears: "Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You" (Ps. 73:25). But it is God Himself who designed Adam for more than a relationship with Himself. He made man to deeply connect with others as well. Jesus reaffirmed God's design in Matthew 22:37-40 when He declared that the summary of all the Law and Prophets hangs on the two commands to love God and to love others. God has always intended for us to have a passionately heartfelt relationship with Him that overflows into loving relationships with others.

So God planned for Adam to discover through his own work that he had been designed and equipped for companionship. God's

solution for man's aloneness was a woman.

**The Provision Of A Partner.** God put Adam to sleep and then proceeded to form a woman from the material He took from Adam's side (Gen. 2:21-22). To simply say that "God made a woman" is too bland a translation of the Hebrew (v.22). It is more descriptive to say that God "built" the woman with His own hands—just as He sculpted the man from dust. Again, as in the creation of Adam, God was intimately involved in handcrafting a woman who was tailor-made for the man.

***The perfect match for man.*** It is difficult for us to comprehend what Adam experienced when he awoke from his divinely induced sleep and was introduced to the first woman. The biblical author records his words at seeing this vision of feminine beauty:

*This is now bone of my*

*bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman," for she was taken out of man (Gen. 2:23).*

A joyful exuberance must have swept over Adam, because he burst forth in poetic verse—not a common response for most men! Adam knew prior to his "operation" that he was the only one of his kind, yet now God had made two from one. He recognized at once that the woman was more like him than any other creature and yet uniquely and wonderfully distinct. He must have been attracted to her in every way possible, because God knew exactly what man needed and desired the most.

I think we can safely assume that something deep within Adam's masculine heart was moved toward the woman who so perfectly completed and complemented him. Clearly

it wasn't just her body that pleased Adam; it was the potential for a relationship with one who was so obviously his counterpart.

***The perfect complement.*** In time it would become apparent that God's plan was for man to love and protect the woman as God Himself cared for both of them (Eph. 5:25). From the first pages of Genesis, though, we learn that woman was built *from* man and *for* man (see also 1 Cor. 11:8-12). She was the helper specially designed by God and in His image to complete what was lacking in Adam (Gen. 2:18). Therefore, a relationship with a woman provides a man with the opportunity to experience his maleness most fully. Conversely, it is in a relationship with a man that a woman discovers a special union that draws out her femaleness most fully. Prior to the creation of

woman, man's maleness was undefined. But in a relationship with a woman, a man is drawn to respond in ways that define his masculinity.

Much can be learned from observing this first relationship. God began with one, made two from the one, and then made one from the two. God's plan for marriage is reunification—connecting a man and a woman in the holy bonds of matrimony to celebrate their oneness in likeness to their Creator.

**The Process Of Making Two Into One.** In Genesis 2:24, God uses the occasion of the first marriage to outline a threefold process for building oneness that remains as the ideal model for all marriages:

*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*

For a man and a woman to build an intimate union that has no rivals requires separation, bonding, and celebration.

**Separation** describes a process of exchanging the natural loyalties one has to parents for a new loyalty with one's spouse. The Hebrew term translated "leave" is a strong one that is often translated "forsake" elsewhere. The rest of Scripture makes it clear that this doesn't mean that a couple is to cut off all contact and communication with one's family. It does indicate, however, that a clear separation from parental priorities, traditions, and influence is necessary if a couple is to bond together in their own home.

The man is directed to initiate the separation. He must abandon the nurturing parent-child relationship to prepare for the nurturing husband-wife relationship.

By detaching from his parents, he frees himself to form a new alliance with his bride. This willful shift in core loyalties is necessary for the bride as well. There must never be a loyalty to

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anyone else, whether parent or child, friend or family, that is greater than the loyalty to one's spouse.

“The failure to shift loyalty from parents to spouse is a central issue in almost all marital conflict.”<sup>1</sup> Every couple must hammer out their own values,

traditions, and priorities that will define their home without allowing parental intrusion or interference. Once separation from parents is initiated, a couple can begin building a new bond together.

**Bonding** is the relational heart of a marriage. The term translated “be united to” literally conveys the idea of being attached or glued together. This emotional, relational, and spiritual bonding makes a couple inseparable. Jesus described the divine power of this adhesive by declaring that no man should try to separate what God has joined together in marriage (Mt. 19:4-6).

An analogy from the carpenter’s shop may help our understanding. All cabinetmakers agree that the strongest and most beautiful joint for building drawers is a dovetail joint. It is also the most expensive

and time-consuming to produce. It requires a craftsman to cut opposing sets of pins and tails so that they interlock with each other. Once the joint is glued and set, the wood on either side of the joint can splinter under pressure but the joint will hold strong. Because of the cross-grain design of the joint and the resin used to connect them, beauty and strength are both enhanced. So it is in marriage.

When the bold strength of a man’s heart is joined with the tender beauty of a woman’s, their ability to mirror the strength and beauty of the God they are designed to reflect is enhanced. The relationship of two hearts that are bound together by commitment, communication, and conjoined life stories must always precede the celebration of oneness through the intercourse of their bodies.

**Celebration** of marital oneness is what emotional and sexual intimacy is about. It follows separating and bonding. A sexual relationship apart from bonding is an immature groping for physical pleasure that pales in comparison to what God intended. When a couple is bonding spiritually, the most natural desire is to merge physically. “Becoming one flesh” is the biblical terminology for sexual intercourse. God indicated that the pleasures of sexual intimacy are exclusively intended for those who have first committed to do the hard work of building emotional, relational, and spiritual intimacy. The divine intention for husband and wife from the very beginning was monogamy.

God’s observation that “the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25) affirms

the purity of sexual intimacy in marriage. Nakedness without shame is symbolic of the fact that openness was normal. Self-centered acts against God and against each other had not yet corrupted the hearts of Adam and Eve. Nothing was wrong with anything. Everything was “very good” (1:31). Neither person was self-conscious. Uninhibited enjoyment was marked by each giving unashamedly to the other without a hint of exploitation. The celebration of their love was complete.

There is an awe that can be experienced in the act of sexual intimacy between a husband and wife that parallels the experience of worship. Such an intimate and vulnerable union with another who equally bears the image of God can compel the hearts of lovers to celebrate in awe and wonder the immensity of God’s goodness and His

willingness to share His glory with men and women.

### **The Purpose Of Oneness In Marriage.**

Oneness is the joyful sense of connection that a husband and wife experience as a result of their exclusive and unparalleled devotion to each other. Such oneness reflects the union enjoyed in the triunity of God (Jn. 17:20-24) and fleshes out an example of Christ's sacrificial and enduring love for His church (Rom. 8:35-39; Eph. 5:25-32). Unity enhances the couple's ability to reflect the goodness of God as they live out their calling to fill, subdue, rule over, and care for the earth (Gen. 1:28; 2:15).

Oneness is the sense of completion and complement that a husband and wife experience with each other that is often indescribable. It is much more than familiarity or predictability.

There is a union of heart, soul, mind, body, will, direction, passion, and purpose. They long to share life's experiences together. They know each other deeply and still delight in each other's presence, not just in their performance. Marriage partners who are "soul mates" have a joyful sense of interdependence that deepens as a result of the lifetime connection with a devoted companion.

But for many couples, oneness has not been their experience. Conflict and chaos have replaced connection and celebration. Instead of being allies, they act more like enemies.

What has so deeply marred the beauty of God's original design for marriage that, like the oak table mentioned earlier, it is being discarded as undesirable?

# THE IMPACT OF FALLENNESS: What Marriage Has Become

**U**nderstanding God's original design for marriage will help us to see why we are not experiencing the kind of intimacy, passion, and union that our Creator intended. The self-centeredness and alienation that all marriages now wrestle with tells us that something has gone wrong. According to the book of Genesis, our struggles can be traced back to a defining moment.

**The Temptation And Fall** are recorded in Genesis 3:1-6. Satan, the great deceiver, entered the garden disguised as a beautiful and cunning creature. He convinced the woman that God was

holding out on her and Adam by denying them the right to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:16-17). The deceiver raised doubts about God's goodness, suggesting that the Creator didn't want Adam and Eve to be as wise as He was. Being deceived, Eve ate of the fruit and "gave some to her husband, who was with her" (3:6).

Without any recorded word of objection, Adam ate. (The language of the narrative seems to indicate that Adam may have been present when Eve ate the fruit but did nothing to intervene.) What we do know is that he wasn't deceived (1 Tim. 2:14). Adam chose his relationship with his wife over obedience to his God. And all of mankind and creation since then have groaned under the bitter consequences of his choice (Rom. 8:22-23).

## **The Consequences Of The Fall** are found in Genesis 3:7,10:

*Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. . . . "I heard You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."*

Three major consequences of the fall to the marriage relationship were shame, fear, and hiding.

### ***Shame produces fear.***

Adam and Eve immediately knew something inside of them had changed. While physically unaltered, they saw their nakedness differently and experienced shame for the first time. No longer did they feel comfortable being uncovered in each other's presence. They became self-conscious. Their embarrassment was

not that they saw each other's naked body for the first time. Rather, it was the way they looked at each other that had changed. No longer were they looking with eyes of pure love and devotion. Sin had separated them spiritually from God as their life source. From now on they would see each other not only as someone whose love and companionship they craved, but also as a threat to their well-being.

Spiritual alienation from God has made us a threat to one another. Because we all are painfully aware that there are things about us that are flawed and unacceptable, the closer the relationship, the greater the risk of exposure and consequent rejection. Nowhere is that felt more acutely than in the closeness required in marriage. With time comes the awareness of faults and failures. That's

why we fear openness—with each other and with God. “The world is not set up for intimacy, but on the contrary for privacy, and for the most part it abhors the pain and the honesty and the humility which characterize deep human relationships.”<sup>2</sup> The threat of exposing our sinfulness often compels us to hide.

***Fear results in hiding.***

After doing the one thing God told them not to do, Adam and Eve were afraid (Gen. 2:10). They must have remembered that God said they would die if they ever ate of that one tree (v.17). So, not thinking clearly (which is usually the case when sin is ruling our hearts), they hid. They should have known that if God really was all-seeing and all-knowing, hiding would be futile.

As they hid among the trees, Adam and Eve had no concept of God’s forgiveness

and grace. They knew only that they had broken the one rule they had been given—and they were afraid of the consequences.

Ever since that day, fear and hiding have scarred and marred all human relationships. All of us now discover for ourselves that “in a fallen world, the most profoundly experienced human touch is often one that hurts.”<sup>3</sup> We learn in so many ways that it is dangerous to let down our guard. Fear rules our relationships, and hiding seems perfectly reasonable.

***Hiding becomes a way of life*** when distance is preferred to closeness, and when risking exposure threatens one’s sense of wholeness. In spite of the fact that we were created to reflect the likeness of God in our relationships, we spend more time protecting our own interests and self-image than promoting God’s

interests and reflecting His image.

As we have learned to hide our bodies to protect ourselves and avoid disgrace, we have learned to hide our hearts as well (Jer. 17:9). In fact, we are so adept at it that we are often

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unaware that we're hiding. Sometimes, however, we know exactly what we're doing. And when we're caught hiding, we typically look for a way to shift the blame to others. Time after time we repeat the pattern of our first parents who

when caught red-handed tried to shift blame away from themselves (Gen. 3:12-13).

Since the fateful fall of the first couple, our *modus operandi* has become self-protection at all costs. While we say we long for intimacy (and we do), the fact is that we abhor the pain it requires and avoid the honesty and humility that it demands. We feel trapped. We long to be close, yet we refuse to pay the price of the closeness we crave and can't live without. Marriage torments us with its call to enjoy intimacy but with fear of its exacting price of self-exposure and vulnerability. Because of the unique closeness it requires, marriage is probably the most delightful and demanding of all human relationships.

And as if that wasn't enough, God levied a curse on Adam and Eve. This was

not merely to frustrate mankind but to lovingly reveal that, in our fallen state, relationships will not work apart from a humble brokenness that drives us back to God as our only source of life and hope.

**Gender-Specific Consequences.** The Creator's apparent intent in the curse was to rig the world so that mankind's best efforts to make life and relationships work without reliance on Him would constantly be frustrated. This consequence wasn't just punishment. It was designed to draw straying men and women back to their God.

***The impact on women (Gen. 3:16).*** The curse on the woman targeted her relationships.

*Relationship is marred by pain.* To the woman, God said, "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing." With these words, God was

signaling that the fruit of intimacy with her husband would not only produce joy but also pain and sorrow. This pain, however, would not be confined to childbirth. Looking back, we can see that all of a woman's attempts to nurture life and cultivate beauty through loving relationships have been fraught with heartache. And marriage has been one of her primary battlefields.

*Conflict is normal in marriage.* God warned Eve, "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." This text describes the roots of the battle between the sexes. A woman's "desire" in this context likely implies a desire for control (compare the same word in Gen. 4:7).<sup>4</sup> A man's "rule" likely refers to domination by force. Marriage has become what God never intended it to be—a struggle for power

and control instead of a complementary relationship of equals.

A woman often struggles to control her relationship with her husband because she's afraid of being controlled by him if she doesn't. While God has not taken away a man's responsibility to provide loving, self-sacrificing, servant leadership, He knows that a man's self-centered tendency will be to misuse his strength and overpower his wife to get what he wants. This abuse of male power fuels the urge for control on the part of women.

This intensifies a woman's core struggle with insecurity. A wife longs to be secure in the strength of her husband's love. She feels most secure when he takes the initiative in tenderly leading her. But when a man violates his call by either abdicating his leadership or

abusing it, a woman feels abandoned and unloved.

But rather than face their vulnerability and painful disappointment, women tend to hide their femininity by controlling or conceding.

Women often strive to *control* the relationship to minimize their feelings of insecurity. If they risk letting their vulnerability be seen, they fear it will be ignored. When their security is threatened, they take control by efficiently managing their world (such as being so competent that no one would ever suspect their fears), being so nice (so that anyone denying their requests would feel like a cad), or by relying on their physical attractiveness to ensure that they are not abandoned. Women who practice hiding their heartache by seeking control seldom risk experiencing their insecurity without a safety net. A well-thought-out contingency

plan is essential to their survival because “no man is truly trustworthy.”

On the other hand, some women have been so overpowered and overwhelmed by abusive men that they hide their feminine hearts by *concession*. They may have fought for control earlier, but after being repeatedly crushed by an overbearing man, they have given up on ever feeling safe and secure in their marriage. They go along to get along, and they avoid conflict. They end up settling for a hollow relationship that is mere survival—not truly living.

***The impact on men (Gen. 3:17-19).*** The curse on a man relates to his adequacy to creatively manage his work and initiate leadership with his wife.

*Men’s struggle with work.* While productive work was always a part of God’s plan for man (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15),

God told Adam that all his attempts to sustain life from the earth would now involve “painful toil” (3:17). The earth would become more his foe than his friend. The ground that had once yielded abundantly to his touch would “produce thorns and thistles” that would frustrate his attempts to eke out a living (v.18). Work now became hard. Resistance became the norm. Blood, sweat, and tears were required to survive.

*Men’s struggle with adequacy.* Men are typically haunted by the question of whether or not they have what it takes to love and lead in the way God expects. Chronic fears of inadequacy are the lingering legacy of God’s curse on men. The curse exposes their battle to balance all that life throws at them. “Thorns and thistles” produce hostile opposition not only in their work but also in their

relationships. Commonly, a man's efforts to measure up in his marriage are especially frustrated when he is threatened by his wife's vulnerability (which he can't fix) and her demand for control (which he can't change). The battle for control in a marriage with a woman who feels vulnerable and unprotected by a man who feels inadequate and unfairly criticized is a formula for frustration and conflict that most men work hard to avoid.

But rather than face their inadequacy and disappointment in not measuring up, men tend to hide their masculinity through avoidance or abuse.

Men who feel weak often *avoid* situations and relationships (especially with assertive women) where they fear exposure of their ineptness in leading. When threatened, these men tend to seek escape through some

form of diversion, busyness, addictive activity, or some area of felt competency. Men who practice hiding through avoidance won't risk failure in what matters most to them. They seek to protect their image at all costs.

Some men who are open in their anger use their strength to *abuse* and control physically weaker women. They dominate with physical intimidation, tongue-lashing, money control, or relentless put-downs and criticisms, which over time demean and dishonor the wife God has given to them.

But a man's avoidance or abuse, or a woman's concession or control, is not a solution. Time, love, and tenderness are needed to restore what has been deeply marred. And that's exactly what it will take for marriage to become what God intends it to be—a work of restoration in progress.

# THE RESTORATION OF ONENESS: What God Intends Marriage To Be

**R**emember the discarded oak table? In order for it to become useful again, it needed to be stripped, sanded, strengthened, and finished. When its beauty and strength were restored, it was enjoyable to see and to use. The same is true when it comes to restoring a marriage. Strength and beauty must both be restored. The writer of Proverbs reminds us:

*By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are filled with rare and beautiful treasures (Prov. 24:3-4).*

It is God's will that a marriage fill a home with "rare and beautiful treasures." But this kind of relationship doesn't just happen; it must be built. For a couple to enjoy the treasure of oneness, they must devote themselves to acquiring and applying wisdom, understanding, and knowledge about how they are *designed* to relate to each other and how they actually *do* relate to each other.

Husbands must learn what it means to care for and sacrificially love their wives. Wives must learn what it means to deeply respect and love their husbands. God's intention is to restore the strength of a man and the beauty of a woman through the mutually refining process of marriage (Prov. 27:17).

**The Context For Restoration: Restored Oneness.** When we get

married, it's easy for us to forget that the primary goal of our marriage is not our own personal fulfillment. The goal is to reflect God's love and wisdom. Fulfillment is the joyful byproduct of sharing in His goodness. Another analogy is helpful here.

***A braided relationship.*** I learned a long time ago how to braid my daughters' hair. I discovered that even though a braid looks like it is made of two strands, it is a hidden third strand that holds the other two together. It's a beautiful picture of a godly marriage.

Mature marriages reflect the glory of God when both spouses actively invite Christ to braid their individual love stories together with His larger love story of redemption. Their focus shifts from *me* to *we*, which recognizes God's story interwoven with

theirs. The braiding together of a man's strength and a woman's beauty with God's will results in a relationship that is stronger, more beautiful, and more glorifying to God than either of them ever could be separately.

The writer of Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 heralds the virtues of partnership and exposes the liabilities of aloneness. His summary of a healthy partnership is this: "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (v.12). One loving man and wife plus the living God make a healthy marriage that reveals rare and beautiful treasures.

***The mind of Christ.*** Many have expressed concern that too much or too little is made of Paul's teaching on mutual submission (Eph. 5:21) as the context for marriage. What is clear, however, is that the kind of mutual

submission a husband or wife owes any other brother or sister in Christ also applies to the marriage relationship. The words of the apostle Paul in Philippians 2:3-4 define the essence of all Christlike relationships:

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

When Christlike love permeates a marriage, husbands and wives honor and care for each other. Instead of looking out for self-interests, each spouse personally invests in and sacrifices for the best interests of the other. This is what leads to the enjoyment of the uniqueness of being male and female. "We have a choice: We can either

delight in diversity or destroy distinctions."<sup>5</sup>

**The Calling Of A Wife.** A wife is called by God to demonstrate her Christlike love for her husband by the healthy way she respects and submits to him.

**A wife's call is to respect** her husband (Eph. 5:33). A wife can respect her husband when she knows that God has given him a role and responsibility for which he will be held accountable. She respects him as an expression of her desire to honor the Lord. She gives weight to her husband's calling to protect and provide for her "just as Christ loved the church" (v.25) She doesn't take lightly this responsibility given to him by God.

It's important to understand, however, that if a wife truly honors her husband, she will help him remain true to his

commitments. While offering herself to God, she offers her husband an inner beauty that helps him enjoy the opportunity to nourish and cherish her (Eph. 5:29; 1 Pet. 3:4-6).

***A wife's call to submit*** to her husband is found in Ephesians 5:22, "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord." This submission is not about indulging the self-centered interests of her mate, but rather about helping him to be the kind of man and husband God intends him to be.

Unfortunately, too many men and women have a warped idea of submission. Some see it as a husband's right to call all the shots and the woman's duty to do whatever he tells her to do. Many abusive marriages are built on this hellish view of submission. It deadens the heart and soul of both partners and often

leads to violence. Nothing could be further from what God had in mind. A woman is never called to put up with abuse under the guise of submission. Instead, by living out her calling to respect her husband, she will hold him accountable for any abuse of his God-given strength.

The term *submission* in the context of marriage literally means that a wife is to voluntarily align herself under the loving protection and provision God built into a husband's role. Such submission relates to a woman's original calling to be a "suitable helper" for her husband. There is something about a woman's having been made to complete what was lacking in a man that is reflected in God's call for a unique kind of submission in marriage. Submission in no way diminishes a woman's

value, spiritual equality, or place of honor in the relationship.

In the Garden of Eden, submission was safe. Since the fall, however, willful submission to a sinful man has become an act of vulnerability for a woman. It directly cuts against the grain of her curse (Gen. 3:16). Instead of doing what self-protection would dictate—working hard to control her husband so that she doesn't experience the pain of his failure to love—she puts her hope for security in God (1 Pet. 3:5), not in her husband, remembering that one purpose of her submission is “so that no one will malign the word of God” (Ti. 2:5).

**The Calling Of A Husband.** Prior to my son's going out on his first date, we talked about his responsibility to the one who was going out with him. The word I impressed

on him was *honor*. If he honored his date, he would give her reason to feel safe and protected by his strength, and he would grow stronger because of her trust.

While such honor is foundational to the relationship between a man and a woman, God requires more of a husband. According to the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, a husband's distinct role and responsibility is to love his wife the way Christ loves the church. This is how he submits his own will to God—to care for her and to protect her.

***Christlike love (Eph. 5:25).*** Paul told husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” By this clear and direct statement, we learn more of what Jesus taught about leadership. The Lord who

sacrificially died for the church gave His disciples a profound pattern for leadership when He said:

*The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves (Lk. 22:25-26).*

When this principle of servant leadership is applied to the marriage relationship, it helps us see that husbands are not called to rule over their wives but to lead by the way they love. And how did Christ love the church? He patiently cared for her—even to the point of dying for her.

A man is called to use his strength to provide a safe relationship in which a woman will not face the fear

of abuse or abandonment. As a husband gives his wife reason to feel secure and deeply loved, her true beauty will be enhanced. She will feel more trusting, and they will feel close.

***Nourishing and cherishing love (Eph. 5:28-29).*** It's natural for a man to love himself. He doesn't need to be taught. But loving his wife the way he loves himself is uncommon for most husbands.

Every woman longs to feel nourished and cherished by her man. To *nourish* means that he provides her with what she needs to flourish as a woman. He wants her to grow strong, so he feeds her hunger for communication, attention, time, and touch. A husband should take the initiative to provide a relational and spiritual greenhouse environment that consistently encourages

his wife to engage in acts of love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24) as she lives out her call to reflect beauty and tenderness in nurturing relationships.

To *cherish* means that a husband treats his wife in ways that make her feel highly valued and deeply loved. Actions and words that take her best interests and desires into account make a woman feel cherished. Knowing that she's not only heard but also listened to communicates to a wife that she's significant in her man's life. His appreciative comments not only praise her in private but honor her in public. By taking the initiative to courageously draw out her inner feminine beauty, a man provides his wife with a taste of the very first marriage.

## A Taste Of Eden And Of Heaven

**I**n a healthy marriage, oneness is expressed in emotional, spiritual, and sexual intimacy that allows a couple to enjoy a little taste of what Adam and Eve enjoyed prior to the fall. The bills, the kids, the struggles, and all the other "stuff" of life don't seem to matter so much when lovers shut out the world and focus on their private celebration of love. A fragrance of heaven is in the air.

A marriage in which both partners are mutually stimulating each other to love and good deeds is a relationship that is passionate, inviting, and a testimony to the existence of God in this world. Not only does it give a taste of the Garden of Eden to the couple, it also provides a

glimpse of heaven to those who see the life and love of Christ lived out through them.

First, though, we must have our own assurance of a relationship with Him. Nothing is more destructive in a marriage than when partners try to find in each other the love, forgiveness, and fulfillment that can be found only in God.

Please don't miss the personal implications. If you know that you have failed to live up to the love of God but have no assurance that God has forgiven you, there is hope. Christ is the source of life that you need. Once you discover that He died in your place for your sins and rose from the dead to prove it, what remains is for you to personally trust Him as your Savior (Jn. 3:16; Eph. 2:8-9). With His life in you, you will have the spiritual life and sustaining relationship necessary

to grow in the love and respect required to build a vibrant marriage.

The sustaining love of God frees a husband and wife to truly become one in Christ. And in that kind of a loving marriage, both man and woman can more fully reflect His likeness together than either could do alone. Joyful fulfillment in marriage comes through a sense of completion with a companion who has become your closest friend and ally in fulfilling your calling to glorify God together. And that is what God intended marriage to be.

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