

Truth for Today

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Be Prepared: Preparation for Marriage

The Bible is not shy about romance and the energy involved in a man winning the love of a woman. The Song of Solomon is one of the greatest love poems written and illustrates this. The sense of value which courtship develops is so important to preparing for marriage. It is during this time that two people begin to love and understand each other. We not only see those things which are attractive, but also discover things, in the person we love, which need our help and support. The quality of the relationship, which exists prior to marriage, will determine the quality of the marriage itself.

It is interesting that the Bible begins with a marriage - that of Adam and Eve. Adam, the very first man to get married, gives us a great insight into the events leading up to his marriage. Adam's courtship was unusual, to say the least, but it is instructive. Why did God not create man and woman at the same time? Adam was prepared for marriage by his relationship with God and the fulfilment of the responsibilities God gave him.

Whenever we think about couples getting married, we tend to concentrate upon them knowing each other well enough to have the confidence to take the greatest act of faith two people ever demonstrate towards each another. But, as Christians, before we enter into such a relationship, it is vital to have a right relationship with God. Adam knew God as Creator, Friend and Guide. God had given Adam responsibility and authority in Eden. It was only after he had experienced this stable relationship with God that he entered into the unique relationship he had with his wife, Eve. Knowing God's love and direction in his own life prepared him for his relationship with his wife. It was both a marriage made in heaven and on earth. The woman whom God brought to Adam was right for him and he for her.

Whenever I have the opportunity to discuss marriage with young people, I emphasise the need to have a right relationship with God first. If that relationship is right, it will enable all other relationships to be right. God's love for me helps me to love others. Being in God's family teaches us about family relationships and how to behave in them. Christ's love for the church teaches me how to love my wife. Christ's self sacrifice teaches me how to give myself to my wife. Christ's forgiveness teaches me how to forgive and be forgiven. The Holy Spirit empowers us to bring love, joy and peace and the other characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit into the relationships we have.

But there are very practical issues in regard to preparation for marriage. The basis of our attraction to one another is complex. We are body, soul and spirit. In looking for a future husband or wife we are looking for someone we can communicate with physically, psychologically and spiritually. This takes time - time to get to know each other and time to learn to love one another. All of us have imperfections. Some of us having striking imperfections! Love has to do with valuing qualities and being able to overcome weaknesses. We need to complement one another. The only way we will be able to do this is by spending time getting to know each other. This investment before we marry is vital to the success of our marriage.

Sometimes relationships do not lead to marriage. When both people realise this and the relationship is ended amicably and with grace, the feelings, and dignity, of both parties are protected and they can eventually move on. But often one party is deeply hurt. It is so important to be honest in our relationships and far better to end a relationship before marriage than to suffer the greater pain of a broken marriage.

Equally, Christians should never use their attractiveness as men or women to play with the feelings and emotions of others. Some Christians who have used a relationship as a convenience until a better one emerges have done untold harm and spiritual damage to the lives of fellow Christians. Such behaviour is a disgrace. Timothy is reminded of the behaviour of Christian young men in 1 Timothy 5:1-2, "Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger as sisters, with all purity." Purity is an important Christian virtue especially in relationships between men and women. We should always respect others and never pretend to commitments we have no intention of keeping.

Pastoral care is vital in situations where ending a relationship has caused deep anxiety and distress. However, even at such painful times we should not allow ourselves to be overcome by self-pity and bitterness. We have to come to terms with what has happened and move on. God sometimes allows such circumstances. We can learn from them and become stronger by having passed through such experiences.

There are also some issues which we need to consider in regard to being attractive to the opposite sex. We are not all blessed with natural beauty. But we can thank God that we are all capable of having an inner beauty. In our dress and attitudes, we should not invite unwanted attention or put ourselves in situations of moral danger. On the other hand, attractiveness is important. Young Christian men sometimes bemoan their inability to attract young Christian women when it is obvious to all that a little more attention to dress and personal hygiene would make a remarkable difference! I am reminded of Lord Soper preaching at Hyde Park Corner. He was extolling Christianity when a unkempt and dirty looking man shouted out, "Christianity has been around for 2,000 years and look at the state of the world". Soper replied, "Soap has been around for a lot longer and look at the state of your neck!" Perhaps he could have been more gracious but the logic is indisputable.

Today we hear a lot about marriage breakdown. It is even more disturbing that more and more Christian marriages are failing. In the Gospels, the Lord Jesus told the parable of the wise and foolish builders. One built his house on sand - a poor foundation! When the storm came it collapsed. The other builder founded his house on a rock and it withstood the storm. Marriage is like a building. It needs the right foundation and the right preparation.

Matthew Henry comments so beautifully on the creation of Eve. He writes, "The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected by him, and near his heart to be loved by him". Adam and Eve became one flesh. As well as describing the sexual union they would enjoy it also reminds us of the unity which should characterise every aspect of married life. In the course of time, as with many things, man changed God's model of marriage. Men often had several wives. King Solomon had hundreds. Women were also owned as property and abused. It is only when we come to Christianity that God's model is reaffirmed - a life-long union between one man and one woman. Paul in outlining the qualifications of a bishop in 1 Timothy 3:2 writes, "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife."

Understanding God's concept of marriage as a lifetime commitment of a man and a woman is an important aspect of preparing for marriage. Although this idea of marriage is often criticised it is interesting that, often when marriage does fail, people continue to look for this ideal relationship and often remarry. The desire for this God appointed relationship is still widespread. There is ample evidence of the success and blessing of marriages which last forty, fifty, sixty or more years or until "death us do part." Part of the preparation for marriage is understanding this commitment.

Christians should always approach marriage under God's direction. For example, God has told us quite clearly that Christians should not be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers". In terms of marriage this means not marrying someone who is not a Christian. In the East, oxen were the most common animals that were yoked together. For this to work effectively, animals had to be chosen which complemented each other. A bad yoke of oxen was when one pulled one way whilst the other resisted and wanted to go another way. It did not work. And it does not work in marriage. To go against the explicit commandment of God is to put one's Christian life in great difficulty. Love is a very powerful emotion and sometimes leads us to believe we know better than God. That is a great mistake, which has proved costly for many Christians who have entered into marriages with unbelievers. Of course, God, in His grace, is always able to overrule. But that should never be an excuse for disobedience.

Christian marriage should be prepared for by asking for God's guidance to be led to the right person with whom you will share your life. The relationships upon which a marriage is formed have to be completely open and based upon genuine love and trust. It is important to have proper help and guidance from spiritual and experienced Christian married couples as part of the preparation for marriage. It cannot be over emphasised how essential it is to approach marriage seriously and carefully. I should also say that if your relationship gets into serious difficulty, seek help sooner rather than later. If you are fundamentally unsure of a relationship do not submit to external pressures to enter the marriage relationship.

Today we live in a throw away world. We no longer try very hard to repair things. If our television or washing machine breaks down, or our car becomes too unreliable, what do we do? We change them. In today's world, it is often less expensive to change an appliance than to replace a part because labour charges are so high. We talk constantly about consumers. Consumers use up things then get replacements. This is reflected in our relationships. Relationships often only survive whilst things are going well. When difficulties arise, relationships are abandoned.

Can you support one another in times of difficulty? There are two dangers when it comes to supporting. One is that we do not appreciate the support that is needed. Because something is not a problem to me I can think it is not a problem to my future wife or husband. But life is not like that. We are all different and we need to be sensitive to the needs of the person we love. Equally, we can be independent and think we do not need support or help even when we get into difficulties. Instead of including the person we love and sharing our problems with them we isolate and

distance ourselves from them. We need to be sensitive and inclusive in our relationships and this should begin before we are married.

We can face enormous difficulties in our lives and we only survive them by the resources that come from our relationship with God and with one another. Trouble should not separate us but bring us nearer to God and nearer to each other. When we are faced by difficulties, how do we handle them? Do we bear them alone until they became unbearable? Do I fail to see and understand the physical, emotional or spiritual struggles of my future wife? Or do I personally take responsibility to understand and help her in such circumstances. Equally, a man needs the same response from his wife in times of stress and difficulty.

Communication is one of the key aspects of preparation for marriage. For many years my wife and I have organised and been involved in events for married couples and families. One exercise we sometimes use is to give each person a piece of paper and ask them to draw a personal graph of all the joyful and the traumatic things they have experienced during their married life. Afterwards we get couples to compare their results. It is often amusing but always informative and provides an awareness of what their feelings were during these experiences. I remember one couple doing this exercise. The wife had a normal graph showing all the ups and downs of her feelings during their years together. The husband's graph was a straight line! I often use it as an example of God's constant unchanging love in all our circumstances but it is not a helpful illustration of shared experiences in marriage!

To share we need to communicate. This means three things. Explaining, listening and learning. We need to explain to each other the things which encourage us, and the things which concern us. We also need to listen. Not only to the words that are being said but also to recognise the emotions which are often hard to express. Listening can be so beneficial. Think of the times when a friend simply listened to you. Afterwards the circumstances had not changed but you felt better simply because someone listened. God is the best listener there is. His ear is never closed to us and neither should we be to each other. Do not make the mistake my wife reminds me of when she says, "Gordon, you hear but you don't listen!" As well as explaining and listening, communication is about learning. In marriage, God wants us to learn from Him in all the experiences we pass through as man and wife. In this way we build up our relationship and we are better able to demonstrate His love and power in our marriages. This experience should begin before we are married.

In the Old Testament, if a man took a new wife he did not have to go out to war or be charged with any business but was free for one year to bring happiness to his wife (Deuteronomy 24:5). In other words, he had to concentrate on establishing a happy stable marriage. Once this was done, they entered fully into community life. This is very relevant to marriage today. On a practical level, think of the time you have leading up to your marriage and developing your communication with each other. Take time to discuss and share with each your thoughts for the future.

It is surprising how quickly a marriage can breakdown. This often has to do with couples carrying on as single people after they are married. Time is not given to developing the unity marriage needs to survive. There is also another, less common, problem which some couples fall into - self-absorption. Couples become so absorbed with each other that there is no place or time for anyone else. This approach can also stifle a marriage and create problems. A strong marriage is a balanced marriage. And the love by which it is formed should be an inclusive love flowing out to others in friendship, service, and even sacrifice. Within marriage, we should not forget the responsibility we have to serve God together. There will always be those, within and outside of our families, who need us. This behaviour needs to be developed in our relationship prior to marriage.

Today it is commonplace for young people to engage in sexual intercourse outside of the marriage relationship. Physical attraction is a powerful force especially when you are in love. The problems we encounter in today's world because of promiscuous sexual behaviour are enormous. God has given us a simple pattern - sexual intercourse is to be enjoyed only within the marriage relationship. Christians should avoid situations which make it easy to give way to the temptation to make love before marriage. Certainly pressure should not be placed on the person you love to make love because the wedding day is not that far away so what does it matter! People who truly love each other, truly respect each other. One of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control and it applies to every aspect of our lives.

A vital and exciting part of preparing for marriage is planning for a home. A home in the context of marriage is the place where others can see and benefit from the love which exists between two married people. We live in a world of broken relationships and consequently broken homes. The home is a place where love is expressed between husband and wife, parents and children, families and friends. When I was a young Christian, I was taught about the "family altar". An altar was built to meet with God. I was taught that in every Christian home there should be a time when the family takes the opportunity to pray and to read the Bible together. Preparing for each day in God's presence and reviewing it with Him at the end of the day is a good practice. Over the years, I have become more and more convinced that marriages and families are strengthened by this "time with God". If you don't pray and read the

Bible together before you marry, it is unlikely you will do it after you are married. But if you do, you become a real help and encouragement to one another and to those whom you invite into your home. The story of Aquila and Priscilla illustrates this in the way they were able as a married couple to help Apollos spiritually (see Acts 18:24). Later on in the New Testament, Paul reminds Timothy of the influence of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5). From childhood Timothy had known the Scriptures, which were able to make him wise unto salvation. Marriage is God's basis for family life and all the relationships it provides.

The Christian home is a vital aspect of the Christian testimony - the way we live, the way we love each other and our families, the way we provide. Paul said in 1 Timothy 5:8, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith." Our homes are the places where we demonstrate who we are and how God has touched our lives. I remember very well the first time I went into the home of my Bible class teacher. He and his wife were devoted to each other and to serving the Lord. My sisters and I were very excited about being invited out. The table had all sorts of savouries and cakes on it and all the plates and cutlery looked very special. But our hostess had forgotten to give me a knife for my side plate. When she noticed her mistake, she got one from the drawer and passed to me. In my ignorance of table manners and place settings, I said, "It's all right Mrs. Packer, I've already got a knife" I didn't realise you needed two! But Mrs. Packer said, "Well you can have this one as well for your cake". As a young child it impressed me how this gracious woman did not highlight my ignorance, which was what I was used to people doing, but simply took me as I was and helped me understand new things. I value the memories of the Mrs. Packers in my life who taught me so much about the gentleness and kindness I have seen in so many Christian homes.

I remember, a few years ago, speaking at the wedding of a young couple. The subject I chose was time. Time for God, time for each other, for children, for family, friends, others. Developing relationships takes time and effort. Paul reminded the Ephesians elders in Acts 20:28 to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock". In other words, they could only help the people in proportion to how they themselves knew God's help. Investment of time in God's presence is never wasted but as He pours His grace into our hearts so it will overflow to others. This process should begin as we prepare for marriage.

On our wedding day we stand before God, our family, friends and many other witnesses to promise a life long faithfulness. Take time to read the marriage vows. It is worth sitting down together and quietly and prayerfully going over the promises you are to make. For these promises to work properly we have to be prepared for sacrifice. I have to be prepared to sacrifice my interests for those of my wife. Equally she has to be prepared to respond. It is the most wonderful human experience to know that someone loves you so much that they are prepared to sacrifice for your good. The standard is Christ Himself. In the words of Ephesians 5:25, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her." Future husbands, take a moment to reflect on these words! It is striking that only once in the New Testament are wives encouraged to love their husbands and even then the verse is in relation to young wives at the start of their marriages in Titus 2:4. I think this is because women have a natural tendency to give themselves to others whereas men need encouragement to do this.

I am reminded of the Lord's words in Matthew 11:29-30, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." A good marriage is one in which there is a wife and husband whose lives are in complete harmony.

For an orchestra to be in harmony takes hours and hours of practice. It depends on the musical skills of the players who make up the orchestra and the appreciation they have of each other. But most of all, the harmony depends on the conductor. The performance depends on watching and acting upon the direction of the master musician. The experience, which begins in the practice rooms, ultimately leads to an unforgettable sound in the concert hall. In preparing for marriage it is vital that we value each other and at the same time learn from the One who loves above all others. In this way your marriage can become an unforgettable harmony.

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