

God's Plan for a Happy & Fulfilled Marriage

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Today, I want to speak to you about God's plan for a happy and fulfilled marriage. It is a topic that is especially dear to me because God has blessed Marie and me with such a marriage that is now in its forty-third year. Not only us, but all of the elders. Scott and Sherry have been married for forty-five years, Bruce and Nita for forty-one years, and Doug and Cindy for thirty-five years. Our new rabbi Aaron and his wife Brooke have been married for only five years, but they're young and have some catching up to do.

But Marie's and my marriage was not peaches and cream when it began in 1974, largely because, for its first two years I was not a believer, and Marie was (what I would describe as) a nominal believer. The point is, that neither of us knew much about God's Word.

I have to confess that without Marie knowing it, her treatment of me in those days was far godlier than my treatment of her. I was entirely wrapped up in myself, and in what every thing and every one meant to me. You have no doubt heard the saying "He thinks everything revolves around himself?" Well, that's the way I viewed the world and everyone in the world, Marie included. Now don't get me wrong; I did have very strong feelings for Marie and I dutifully embraced my obligations to her, but marriage to me was mainly a matter of my personal gratification. Marie provided me with companionship, physical affection, domestic help, social acceptability, and even extra income since Marie was full-time employed. In hindsight, Marie was a saint to put up with me.

It's a little off-topic, but I'll give you a small idea of how little regard I had for Marie's feelings prior to our marrying. I met Marie at a party, and later called to ask her if she wanted to go out on a date with me. I didn't think to ask her what kind of date she would enjoy; I just assumed that it would be one that I would enjoy. So, she dressed up for the date the way that most women did in those days, and when she answered her front door wearing a dress and heels, she encountered a virtual woodsman wearing hiking boots and a very large machete strapped to my waist. "Why are you dressed like that," I asked her? "We're going hiking! Change your clothes!" Well, she did change her clothes instead of slamming the door and calling the police which is what she should have done, because I later learned that she was in fear all during the time of the hike. It seems that just that week a knife-wielding crazy-man had attacked several women in Montgomery County and was still at large, and Marie thought that I was that man. She was sure that she would never return from the "hike" on which I was taking her.

That was before we were married, and it was amazing that our relationship got any further. But we did marry, and my self-serving presumptiveness continued even to the planning of our honeymoon. Now most of you who are married, probably recall discussing and planning for your honeymoon which no doubt involved spending a weekend or a week at a resort or some other beautiful and relaxing place. Not me! I didn't ask Marie – I told her how we would spend our honeymoon. We would motorcycle down the coast of Florida from Fort Lauderdale to Key West and back, staying at mostly fleabag motels along the route. But how would we get to Fort

Lauderdale with our motorcycle? I had that figured out too. We would dismantle it, put the parts of the motorcycle in suit cases along with a thermos of gasoline, and check the suitcases on Amtrak. And you know what? Marie went along with it. We took the train from Washington to Fort Lauderdale, opened the suitcases, assembled the motorcycle on the train platform, poured the gasoline into the fuel tank, checked the suitcases at the Fort Lauderdale train station, and off we went on our motorcycle honeymoon. And we returned home the same way in reverse.

Well, it was fun telling you about it, but it has its serious side, which was that in those days, from my perspective, everything had to be about me and for me, and that included Marie. As far as I was concerned, she was there for me, and that created discord and several fights because I was beset with macho pride, and had a volatile temper. Then, one day in 1976, two years into our marriage, I had a supernatural visitation from the Holy Spirit, and right then and there I knew that God existed; before that, I did not.

The occasion of the Holy Spirit's visitation occurred was while I was being witnessed to by a Montgomery County police officer, Bud Nowland, who described himself as a born-again Baptist, and whom I later learned had become a pastor. As a result of the Spirit's impact on me and Officer Bud's ministry, I was brought to the place of realizing that there was a God, but I still did not know who "Jesus" was. Of course, Bud spoke of "Jesus" – not "Yeshua." But immediately afterwards, I had a profound urge to know who this Jesus was and, for a week and a half, I spent hours reading the Gospels from a New Testament that I had been given by the Gideons on a college campus, and that I had squirreled away in my dresser drawer. The Bible-reading wasn't convincing me, but a week and a half into it, I had a second supernatural visitation, and suddenly and completely without logic, I believed that Yeshua was exactly who the little New Testament I was reading said he was.

I did not immediately tell Marie about my first encounter with the Holy Spirit because I thought she would ridicule me. But she noticed that a change had come over me, and she liked the change because I began to show a softness and concern for her in a way that she had not previously experienced. At the time, I didn't know that it was happening, but I know now that the change in me was the Holy Spirit and that which is promised in 2 Corinthians 5:17:

"Therefore, if anyone is united with the Messiah, he is a new creation- the old has passed [away]; look, what has come is fresh and new!"

I continued to change in several ways, but the bottom line of all the changes was that I began catering less to myself, and more to the needs of others, including Marie. As you might imagine, it had a profound effect on the quality and *shalom* of my marriage, and I have since learned that turning away from one's self and devoting one's self to one's wife or husband means everything.

It should not surprise us because Scripture is replete with commandments and exhortations to love one another by serving others before ourselves; here are just a few:

Luke 10:27b: *"You are to love ADONAI your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your understanding; and your neighbor as yourself."*

Mark 8:34: “Then Yeshua called the crowd and his talmidim to him and told them, “If anyone wants to come after me, let him say ‘No’ to himself, take up his execution-stake, and keep following me.”

Romans 12:10: “Love each other devotedly and with brotherly love; and set examples for each other in showing respect.”

Ephesians 5:22-25: “Wives should submit to their husbands as they do to the Lord; because the husband is head of the wife, just as the Messiah, as head of the Messianic Community, is himself the one who keeps the body safe. Just as the Messianic Community submits to the Messiah, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. As for husbands, love your wives, just as the Messiah loved the Messianic Community, indeed, gave himself up on its behalf,”

1John 3:16: “The way that we have come to know love is through his having laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers! [and in this case our wives]”

Now, why am I giving this testimony to a room filled with believers? It is because I have come to find out that not all believers who are married or will be married have incorporated God’s plan for a happy and fulfilled marriage into their lives. So foundational is marriage in God’s eyes that He even refers to His relationship with His people as a marriage, and Him as our husband. We read in Jeremiah 31: 31b(32b):

“I took them by their hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt; because they, for their part, violated my covenant, even though I, for my part, was a husband to them,” says ADONAI”

And in Isaiah 54:5a we read:

“For your husband is your Maker, ADONAI-Tzva’ot is his name. The Holy One of Isra’el is your Redeemer.”

And we read Paul’s address to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 11:2:

I would like you to bear with me in a little foolishness- please do bear with me! For I am jealous for you with God's kind of jealousy; since I promised to present you as a pure virgin in marriage to your one husband, the Messiah;

God intended marriage for mankind right from the beginning. He created Adam in His own image, and later He separated Adam’s maleness from his femaleness, giving him Eve (a woman), as his helper. But despite having Eve alongside him Adam was incomplete, and so God directed that a man should marry a woman, thereby returning the two to something like their original condition of being in one flesh. Stated another way, man is incomplete without woman, and woman is incomplete without man. Husbands and wives (because they are male and female) complement each other, and together they are in God’s image. And since part of God’s image is that He is a creator, God provided the means and the commandment by which a man and his wife

could bring new life into the world (creation if you will) – not by speaking it into existence as God did, but through physically joining their seed. Here are Scriptures that document what I have just said:

Genesis 1:27-28a *“So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them. God blessed them: God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it.”*”

Genesis 2:18-24: *“ADONAI, God, said, “It isn't good that the person should be alone. I will make for him a companion suitable for helping him.” So from the ground ADONAI, God, formed every wild animal and every bird that flies in the air, and he brought them to the person to see what he would call them. Whatever the person would call each living creature, that was to be its name. So the person gave names to all the livestock, to the birds in the air and to every wild animal. But for Adam there was not found a companion suitable for helping him. Then God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the person; and while he was sleeping, he took one of his ribs and closed up the place from which he took it with flesh. The rib which ADONAI, God, had taken from the person, he made a woman-person; and he brought her to the man-person. The man-person said, “At last! This is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She is to be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” This is why a man is to leave his father and mother and stick with his wife, and they are to be one flesh.”*

Notice that according to Genesis, although the word “marriage” is not used, “marriage” under God consists of a man and woman covenanting to join together into one flesh. It is not merely living together, although living together is implied. It is not merely having sex together, although having sex together is also implied. Marriage is much deeper than either of those; it is returning to mankind’s original condition of Eve being part of Adam, and male and female being one flesh.

So, the most common order of things is for men and women to marry and have children, and their married children to have children, and so forth. But there is also a place for singleness in God’s master plan, for we read in Paul’s address in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35:

“What I want is for you to be free of concern. An unmarried man concerns himself with the Lord's affairs, with how to please the Lord; but the married man concerns himself with the world's affairs, with how to please his wife; and he finds himself split. Likewise the woman who is no longer married or the girl who has never been married concerns herself with the Lord's affairs, with how to be holy both physically and spiritually; but the married woman concerns herself with the world's affairs, with how to please her husband. I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to put restrictions on you- I am simply concerned that you live in a proper manner and serve the Lord with undivided devotion.”

Now married partners are a team, and in every team there are those that lead, and those that follow and help. A team that is leaderless accomplishes nothing, and a leader without anyone to

lead accomplishes nothing. Both are needed, and neither is more valuable than the other. And so it is with a team of married partners, for we read in 1 Corinthians 11:3:

“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is the Messiah, and the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of the Messiah is God.”

And also, Colossians 3:18-19:

Wives, subject yourselves to your husbands, as is appropriate in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and don't treat them harshly.

And Ephesians 5:22-23:

“Wives should submit to their husbands as they do to the Lord; because the husband is head of the wife, just as the Messiah, as head of the Messianic Community, is himself the one who keeps the body safe.”

So, the leader of the marriage team is the husband, and the helper and follower is the wife. This is consistent with Eve having been drawn out of Adam to be Adam's companion and helper and, if we try to reverse the husband's and wife's roles or remove the roles altogether, there is bound to be “trouble in River City.”¹

Now I began this message by revealing to you how focusing on myself – catering to my own needs and desires more than to Marie's – could have severely threatened our marriage. But God was gracious to reveal Himself to me at a time when I was not looking for Him, and He changed me from the way I was, to the way He wanted me to be (and the way I had to be) if my marriage to Marie was going to be happy and fulfilled.

Yes, God has a plan for His children to have happy and fulfilled marriages, and His plan consists of these three things:

1. Living in a biblically submitted life with our husband or wife and putting God first, and the other second.
2. Putting an end to focusing on our self, and instead turning our life toward loving and serving each other.
3. Willingly and joyfully embracing our male calling to lead or our female calling to help – whichever of these applies.

What is interesting and amazing about embracing God's plan for a happy and fulfilled marriage is that, while it seems that the “dying to self” that is required of us will be unpleasant and hard to do, the exact opposite is true. We were made for the roles that God intended for us, and so instead of being restricting, they are immensely releasing and fulfilling.

¹ “Ya Got Trouble” – “The Music Man,” Meredith Wilson, 1957.

I hope this message will be helpful to some of you, and I want to end it by sharing a poem that I wrote in 1997. Its title is "Marie:"

Marie, Marie, wife to me,
Without whose life I'd nowhere be.
Life...
Wife...
Selflessly...
Gift from God enduringly.

Marie, Marie, wife to me,
Devoted helpmate lovingly.
Love...
Dove...
Faithfully...
I thank God for you endlessly.