

God's Intent for Marriage

Marriage between a man and woman is one thing, but does God have even a bigger marriage plan?

by Robert Berendt

Almighty God designed mankind with the potential of becoming members of His family and co-heirs of all that He possesses (Romans 8:17). In order for humans to grow toward that awesome objective, God planned a physical life for them. That life was intended to teach the great lessons of His way and for people to learn to love all that God represents. This is the reason God gave His laws and offers saving grace through the sacrifice of His son Jesus Christ, and in this design He planned for human relationships on this earth. He also knew that humans were vulnerable to the evils of Satan. The impact of Satan has a great deal to do with the difficulty mankind has in identifying and following God's way of life.

Mankind has failed miserably, and the consequences of these failures are seen in damaged and ruined lives. God works within this framework so that all might be saved. Since God's work con-

tinues in an imperfect world and with imperfect people, He has selected a small number to be His obedient followers, to teach and exemplify God's ways to others and to prepare the way for Christ's return. To these chosen few, He has given a glimpse into the great secrets of life. One of these great secrets, the concept of marriage and family, reveals a clear insight into His work and plan. People all around the world marry, but few understand the deep meaning of the union that is so natural.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:29-33 that husbands ought to love their wives as Christ loves, nourishes, and cherishes the church. "For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones," Paul states. He goes on to say that this is a great mystery. We understand that



the church becomes the bride of Christ with the final goal of being composed of spirit, just as God is a spirit being. 1 Corinthians 15:38, 44, 49 reveals that God gives a completely new body to His resurrected children. We will become like Him.

The marriage of the Church to Christ will be a complete union resulting in total oneness. This is what Jesus prayed about in John 17:21 when He asked that humans may be one with Him as He is one with the Father. There is no closer union that can be conceived of than this. This goal and message of tremendous importance is reflected in the design God gave men and women that gives them the potential for a complementary and harmonious relationship.

Marriage is to be a union of man and woman, which teaches the many lessons God means for mankind to realize. Our flaws, faults, phobias, and many other human weaknesses cause us great distress in this life, and marriage often reflects that distress. But God intends that

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we learn the needed lessons and strive to live within His guidance. When humans love God and keep His commandments, they are strengthened and thus able to overcome the areas of life that are contrary to God. Living within the marriage covenant is a vital part of this understanding. I hasten to add that being married is not a requirement for salvation, and it is clear that not all people can marry.

Genesis 1:26-28 tells us that God made both man and woman in His image. He created them both with the same potential: to become His children. In Galatians 3:28, Paul points out that there is no male or female in the ultimate oneness with God. Marriage in human terms is temporary and ends at the death of one of the partners (1 Corinthians 7:39). However, the lessons learned are for an eternity.

As One

When God created Eve, He took a rib from Adam's side (Genesis 2:21-23). One lesson we can draw from that is that in marriage, man and woman are to be so close to each other as to be one. Since the possibility for eternal life did exist (the tree of life), God gave Adam and Eve some instructions. Adam and Eve were to appreciate that ultimately mankind can have eternal life with God. In verse 24, the offer of oneness was intended for all future married couples. In the future, all marriages were to reflect the closest relationship two humans could have. They were to be as though they were one flesh—just as ultimately we will have bodies composed of spirit, as Jesus possesses now.

God started the first marriage and the first couple by creating Eve out of the flesh of Adam. They truly were one flesh. Since that time, the lesson is not quite as dramatic, but is just as meaningful. In marriage, the body of the man and body of the woman do become one, especially with the procreation of a child born out of the union. The act of procreation is part of this learning process and of the oneness between man and woman.

God's plan is that humans learn the greater spiritual lessons of life. We learn them with His help. We may falter and fall from time to time, but our objective is to constantly grow in overcoming all that is within us that is contrary to what God plans. When man and woman become husband and wife, they enter into a godly union that can bring great joy, contentment, and happiness, and at the same time allows for the development of Godly qualities and character as we act out the future that God designed. There is pain, discomfort, and stress associated with human relationships and marriage is not devoid of problems.

It is in the determination to accept the decrees of God and to work on the oneness that God intended that we humans begin to climb the ladder of oneness with God and with Jesus Christ. Marriage is a union that is to last a lifetime. Children grow up and leave the home, but the parents—the husband and wife—remain in that union as long as they live. They are to be true to one another and cleave to one another. The permanency of the institution reflects the permanency of the marriage of Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:22-29 outlines the best way for husbands and wives to live in harmony. Men and women have differences that God created. God demands respect and decency in the relationship. He strongly cushions the relationship with instructions about behavior. Jesus Christ (husband) is the leader and protector. The church (wife) is to willingly subject herself to her husband without being forced. Thus we can see that the relationship is loving and caring and not the kind of bullying and oppression that some associate with marriage. Husbands are to love their wives as they love their own bodies. Obviously, there is no thought of abuse or tyranny in these words. No person is perfect, so it is obvious that forgiveness and growing together will be needed. The determination to act in a loving manner and respect one another forgives a multitude of flaws and allows humans to experience the lessons God has planned for them. It is the responsi-

bility of the church to teach, instruct, and guide people to become more Christlike. As this ability grows in a couple, their marriage will grow ever more toward the oneness that is possible. It is important to remember that human marriage is only temporary and is a little window that peeks out to the greater marriage that will last for eternity.

Christians are to do all that is in their power to ensure the success of the marriage. There are usually times of great hardship and stress. We may have to use

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all the power and strength we have to do the right things. That, too, is a positive experience. We live in an age where the thrust of society seems to be to avoid pain and suffering of any kind. Basically, we are told that if you are not happy in a relationship, get out. The emphasis is on “me” and “my happiness.” In actual life, most people who try to run from complications, trials, and difficulties just manage to exchange one set of troubles for another set.

We are to tackle our problems with all of our might and brain power through the power of the Holy Spirit, in prayer, looking to Jesus Christ for His strength. We are to assess, discuss, and strive to understand, and then move toward solutions to our problems of life—without abandoning the marriage. It is a most horrendous thought that a mother or father would destroy the family in order to remove stress from themselves. It is much better for us, in every way to learn to put “our happiness” in places other than the very front of our agendas in life. It is character building for us to consider the happiness of others. Mates and children should come first.

God always blesses those who strive to follow His ways. Making a determined effort to enhance and continue to improve a marriage will build bet-

ter character in us, be a blessing to all around us and, in the end, be a blessing to ourselves. You cannot “outgive” God. He says it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). When we give of ourselves to our mates and families in complete love, we will usually receive that back again and more from our families. If not while living in this life, then God will reward us in the life to come.

I cannot close without acknowledging that we all have flaws. Nobody has a mate that is flawless, and if anyone should think they have such a mate, or are such a mate, they are deceiving themselves. It is OK to have flaws—welcome to the human race. It is not OK to expect others to suffer because of our flaws. We need to examine ourselves and see what we can give or add to the marriage to make it better. How can we please our husband or wife? On the other hand, there are some flaws that are so demeaning and damaging to a mate that the only way to survive is to flee. I do not countenance abuse—physical, emotional, or other serious dangers—as something that anyone should be “forced” to live with. Sometimes it is simply not possible.

Sometimes people who have huge flaws refuse to change. There may be no solution except to move away and not

live with that person. 1 Corinthians 7:11 allows for a way out in an extreme case. It is not the intent of God though, and I’ve tried to focus on that in this article. God wants us to work on our flaws so that both partners can become fully mature Christians and much better people. Marriage is a gift from God to help us reach a higher potential. God gives us good gifts—we are the ones who may not recognize the gift. We might make the tragic mistake of allowing the sway of society to alter our thinking or to resist the correction and help God gives. It boils down to our choice and our ability to choose.

Along the road to oneness with God, we are to run with endurance and resist sin even to the loss of our lives (Hebrews 12:1-4, Matthew 10:38-39). There are great spiritual lessons in living as God instructs. We have the choice to accept those lessons and live full, productive, and happy lives, or we can succumb to the weaknesses we have and fail in this quest. Success is the result of understanding and believing, then doing the right thing in God’s sight.

For more information on marriage and the deep meaning it holds for Christians, order the free booklet *Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension*.

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Love Don’t Come Easy

It is often easy to say the words “I love you,” but actual love is not that easy. It takes more than saying the words; it takes action.

by Scott Delamater

A popular 1967 Beatles song was titled “All You Need is Love.” The lyrics were “All you need is love... it’s easy.” It is easy when our love is simply an expression of what we want to do. But when our love is a true expression of love, real outgoing concern—the kind of love that Christ prayed we would have for each other—that takes effort. It goes against our natural tendencies of protecting and nurturing self to put God and

others above our own needs, yet it is exactly this kind of love that God expects from us.

Love: a nature, not an idea

There are many types of love, and many definitions or ideas about love, but love must be defined by its source. We are told in 1 John 4:8 who that source is; “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

“...love summarizes and epitomizes the ultimate nature of God,” says Don

Hooser in a *Good News* article entitled “Love: the Ground from Which Spiritual Fruit Springs.” You can’t understand love apart from God. God defines and reveals the concept by His words and actions. We don’t learn about God because we know what love is; we learn about love because we know who God is. Love isn’t some human contrived concept we idealize; love is a nature that we must take on.

God's nature, codified

In 1 John 5:3 we read, "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome." The word "keep" means to attend to carefully, take care of, guard, observe, preserve. Note how in Matthew 5:21-30 Jesus Christ clarifies "keeping" the commandments given in Exodus 20:13-14 "You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery." Jesus Christ "magnified" the law. He moved the definitions beyond simply the constraints of physical activity into the mind and heart. Logically, if love defines God's nature and the commandments define love, God's commandments define His nature.

What commandments?

A man well versed in scriptural law, who was trying to test Jesus, asked Him which was the great [most important] commandment in the law. Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:36-37). This is the answer the lawyer probably expected, since Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, a passage known as the Shema (after the first Hebrew word in it), which had become the Jewish confession of faith that was recited twice daily by the pious. But Jesus then went beyond what was specifically asked saying, "And the second is

like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). This was not a "new" commandment, since Jesus was quoting Leviticus 19:18. But it seems the Jews had not coupled it with Deuteronomy 6:5 as another "great" commandment. Jesus raised "love your neighbor" to a much higher level of importance (GN).

In John 15:13, we read, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." Notice here that the "greater love" is primarily directed toward man. Do you find it easier to get angry or upset with man, or with God? Do you find it easier to admire God or man? It is perhaps "harder" to show love toward flawed people, especially those that have or will hurt you; but again, God sets the example; "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

It is usually easier to feel lovingly toward God than toward man. God does no wrong and loved us first (1 John 4:19). Because we are so driven by feeling, it can be easier to act on love toward God. When the Bible speaks of love, note that love has more to do with what we do than what we think or feel. For example, consider the Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12, usually paraphrased as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The examples

Consider the love of the Father. Imagine that your child or dearest loved one came and told you they needed to help someone. But you knew that the people they were going to help would treat him miserably, and torture and kill him. Would you allow it? The thought of losing a child is horrifying. Yet God allowed all this for the sake of the very type of people that would kill His Son, because He loves us so dearly.

Consider the love of Jesus Christ. Imagine that you are offered two opportunities:

1. All of the finest things in life, a good home in a quiet beautiful town, plus unlimited wealth and power to carry out whatever you desire.
2. Spending the remainder of your life taking care of people in a tribal village in an impoverished country hostile toward you where they'd probably beat and kill you.

Jesus Christ gave up everything He had going for Him to save us because He loves us so dearly. It is God's nature to show an abundance of love toward indifferent, flawed, or even hostile individuals. We need to take on that nature daily. "Don't forget every day to pray, 'Father... more than anything... help us to grow in Your love so that we do not fail'" (GN).

Love must be sustained

For those of us who have received God's Spirit, "God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 5:5, NIV). We begin with a little love, but God helps us to keep growing until we have a lot of love. In fact, the previous verses outline the step-by-step growth process made possible by God's love and Spirit (verses 1-5).

By His Spirit, God offers us a continual supply of His limitless love. He continually fills our wells so that we have plenty to give to other thirsty people. Christ's example of love and sacrifice was so profound that the promise of salvation that flowed through Him would flow through those who believed in Him (John 7:38).

God will keep His love flowing into us as long as it keeps flowing out from us. It must flow back to God—a grateful, reciprocal, responsive love for God—and it must flow out in love and service to other people. "The more you give it away, the more you will have. And the more you love others, the more you will be loved" (GN).

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Wedding Dress

Our choice of spiritual clothing determines if we will be invited to the most important wedding of all time.

by Katherine Rowland

I recently attended a beautiful wedding. Everything about it was lovely, including the attire of those who were attending. Men were decked out in suits or shirts and ties; ladies fluttered in dresses of every color and design. It was evident that all who attended had put a little extra gloss on their usual wear because this was a special occasion. Our clothing—and our attitudes—reflected our understanding that this was something that doesn't happen every day.

I was thinking of this when I read Matthew 22:11-14: "But when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen."

As Christians, we have been called to clothe ourselves carefully. The clothing that Christ is concerned about is not our physical clothing, but rather our spiritual clothing. He who clothes the lilies of the field will clothe our bodies

(Matthew 6:28-30). If we plan to attend the grandest wedding that will ever occur (Revelation 19:7), we must take note of the invitation and dress accordingly.

The clothing God wants us to put on

How does one dress for the marriage supper of the Lamb? How should the bride of Christ array herself? Revelation 19:6-8 says, "And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, 'Alleluia! For the LORD God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.' And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints."

Here we have a big hint: the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And in Colossians 3:12-14, we can read further instructions as to how we ought to dress: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against



someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (New International Version, emphasis added).

When I dressed to attend the wedding, I checked my outfit carefully, applying all of my knowledge of special occasions, etiquette and the expectations of my friend, the bride. As Christians, we should be checking our spiritual outfits every day. Are we busy arraying ourselves in fine linen? Are we putting on the qualities of Christ? When that wedding comes, will our clothing be adequate?

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The Blessings of Abraham (Part 3 of 4) - Abraham's conflict between Isaac and Ishmael

Abraham had many choices to make in his life; he also faced challenges that you and I would never want to face.

by William Miller

Ishmael was 13 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. I remember quite a few things that happened to me when I was 13, but not something like this. Perhaps his ordeal was made easier because his dad and quite a few other mature males were circumcised that same day also (Genesis 17: 25-26).

Shortly after that separation ceremony, God explains to Abraham that he

and Sarah will have their own son. They probably were not in much of a mood for celebration. In fact, it seems, their response is the original expression of irony and sarcasm. God as prototypical writer does not miss a trick. Who laughed more, Abraham or Sarah (Genesis 17:17, Genesis 18:12-13)?

Though the Bible does not say exactly, we believe that the original Hebrew indicates this particular miracle occurred about one year later with Abraham and Sarah having their part to play

in the miracle. So, Sarah and Abraham have a son; all is well and the day is done. Sarah, however, did not enjoy the thought that Ishmael was looking to become the one inheritor of everything she and Abraham had accumulated. By this time, the promises had become sizeable and she and Abraham surely discussed the fullness of the incredible promises that lay seemingly forever on the horizon. The physical reality of two tents, two sons, but only one husband and patriarch caused her much concern.

Abraham's inner conflict

We don't see the conflict because God does not write a story like what we see today on television. The outcomes are much more important than the emotional seesaw that consumes our time and space before there is a resolution. God states clearly that which must occur before the next scene of His story. But understand, Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac were people like you and me—just like we are. All are actors upon the stage of history, able to choose individually within the parameters of our given lines or scripts and free to choose how we will react in a given situation.

How did Abraham react when the Eternal told him to go to the land of Moriah and offer Isaac for a burnt offering? Did God ever intend for Abraham to sacrifice his son? I would say no. It is inconsistent with God, with God's law, with what God wants us to do, and how God wants us to be.

Jesus Christ willingly allowed Himself to be executed by the Romans—capital punishment by the state and the Jewish leaders accepted transferable responsibility—because all this was within the written rules of God's immutable law. However, human sacrifice was never countenanced within God's law.

But right then, God wanted Abraham to make a choice. He wanted Abraham to ultimately choose Him, the Eternal, over even the most important physical thing or thought, desire, or design that Abraham had ever had. God wants us to make that same choice today.

Was this a test, a trial? You bet, but more than that, it was an archetypical example. What can we learn from Abraham? So much—as the first fruits of salvation we must understand the testing of Abraham, and we must submit to the same intensity even though we will each be tested in our own appropriate way. Our tests might be different, but they will also be very difficult.

What did Abraham think in detail? Perhaps he remembered Ishmael. He had loved him, watched him grow to become a capable young man of 13 and then apparently out of nowhere, came the voice of loving command telling him to heed the desire of Sarah his wife and send away Hagar and Ishmael. Why had God not accepted Ishmael and why sacrifice

Isaac? We don't know exactly, but it is eminently clear that Abraham obeyed.

A man of character

Abraham had character and knew he was not alone. He knew through experience that even though the meetings with God were few and far between, those encounters could occur at any time and usually portended another blessing.

This time the request was different.

Ever since Abram had journeyed away from Ur of the Chaldees, the voice had clearly distinguished between the pagan practices that were common in Babylon, and the fresh perspective that



Abram was given as he journeyed west and then south. Human sacrifice was not common in Babylon but neither was it unheard of. Abraham must have considered that something extraordinary was about to occur.

It took two days of slow travel before Abraham, Isaac and their servants reached the land of Moriah. Once again, the Bible is sparse in its description of the internal agony that must have gripped Abraham as he told his two servants that he and Isaac would go alone to offer the sacrifice (Genesis 22:5).

Let us also consider the viewpoint of Isaac. Isaac noticed that there was no sacrificial animal, but easily accepted his father's statement that God would provide.

We are not able to exactly understand this personal challenge to Abraham or to Isaac, but believing God's Word and understanding that these actions

were to become examples for all time is enough. Abraham and Isaac performed their functions well (Genesis 22:12). After Abraham's test, God extends the promises with renewed vigor (Genesis 22:17-18).

When we think of Abraham, we usually consider all the incredible good things he did. He left civilization for a new distant home on the strength of a promise from an unknown God. He equipped and trained his men to the degree that they trusted Abram to pursue five kings and hassle them into submission and flight. He also impressed the king of Egypt with his possessions and entourage (which really must have been a gift from God) and then finally, to obediently journey to Moriah to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Abraham was like us

Do we ever consider that Abraham was human as we are and also like us?

Why did Abraham favor Isaac? He didn't. He favored Ishmael. At Genesis 17:18, we can begin to glimpse that favor, but consider that Ishmael had been Abraham's son for 13 years. Even if Sarah had treated Ishmael with contempt—she probably did considering Genesis 16:5-6—Abraham was strongly aware that Ishmael was his son.

When Abram became Abraham and Sarai became Sarah, greater promises were given. Why? These promises were given because God now knew Abraham was faithful (Genesis 22:12).

Abram/Abraham had an important part to play in the overall plan of God, but so do we. If we truly believe what we say we do, then each of God's first fruits is essential to complete the purpose and plan of God. Each part of the body of Christ is necessary to be complete—capable of fulfilling each function throughout Eternity.

The essential parts of the life of Abraham have been told in this series but not all the lessons. One last part to Abraham's life could be told. That part concerns all the lessons that the New Testament writers focused on to ensure that we, down through the ages, would not miss their importance.

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Ready For Marriage?

Many of us feel we are ready to go forward without really planning for what is to come, but marriage takes a lot of preparation.

by Lorelei Nettles

Just as most young girls do, at around age ten I dreamed of getting married. I tried on my mother's wedding dress at age twelve, found some fake flowers, and posed in front of her large bedroom mirror admiring myself.

At eighteen, I believed I was ready to marry. Unlike many girls who had dreams of a business career, I always wanted to be a wife. I had visions of the '50s family and all the perceived stability of that decade—surely influenced by the then-popular television series of the time.

I felt prepared, believing that being married would solve the problems of living in a broken and dysfunctional home. I had visions of a loving husband who would care for me, love me, and save me from it all. The fact that I wanted it to happen must certainly be enough to make it work.

Unfortunately, however, the boy whom I had set eyes on did not feel the same way about marriage; he eventually went another way with someone else. I was devastated, of course, but learned that just wanting it to be didn't always make it so.

Like the marriage between a man and woman, there will be a future marriage between the Church and Christ. The same principles apply to both, which is why Christ used the marriage analogy throughout his earthly ministry. As members of the Church, each of us must do his or her part to be prepared.

The unprepared virgins in Christ's parable acted quite the same way. They thought that wanting to be with the



bridegroom would be enough (Matthew 25). They rushed ahead without any preparation, much as I had, feeling that being ready was sufficient.

However, being ready is not the same as being prepared. Had I been prepared, I would have noticed that the boy was not as interested as I was. I would have spent time getting to know him, not trying to force the situation. My zeal for the end event, marriage, blinded me to what was right in front of me.

Matthew 25:1-5 talks about how half of the virgins did not take oil with them to meet the bridegroom. They were unprepared, and even when the bridegroom was delayed they did nothing more, deciding instead to sleep when the others slept.

They not only had the opportunity to come prepared in the first place, but also squandered their second chance to prepare. At every turn, they had unrealistic expectations. They thought wanting it was enough.

Matthew 25:6-12 goes on to show that they were unable to meet the bridegroom when he did arrive because they had no oil to light their lamps. They were in the dark, unable to see what they should have.

Instead they went (surely frantical-

ly) to buy oil, but discovered they were not recognized upon their return. They had fooled themselves into believing that wanting it would be enough.

Like me, these virgins were excited at the prospect, but fell short, left in the dark to what was really happening. They took it for granted that the bridegroom would love them, care for them, and save them from it all, even though they hadn't put any effort into the relationship. They hadn't tried to really know Him.

Like the virgins who needed to prepare for their wedding, Christians must prepare for that spiritual wedding. Christian preparation means taking the time to study the Bible and praying that our sins be forgiven—and then doing all we can to overcome those sins.

We must evaluate our lives daily to see where we are in our spiritual growth and make any necessary changes. Most importantly, we must take the focus off ourselves and direct it toward God and others, serving with love.

Matthew 25:13 warns us to always be prepared. If we are not, we could be left behind just as the five virgins were. Even though we believe, we may not be ready.

It's important that we don't just play dress up and wait for things to happen. We must prepare for the Bridegroom, taking advantage of the time before He arrives to understand what a bride should be and how she should act.

For more information request the free booklets: *Making Life Work* and *You Can Have Living Faith*.

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