

Preparing
FOR YOUR
MARRIAGE

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Chapter 1

Preparing for Your Marriage

*He who finds a wife finds what is good
and receives favor from the LORD.*

—Proverbs 18:22, NIV

Before you say, “I do,” there comes a time of searching and dreaming about the one with whom you will spend your life. But how do we go about finding that special someone? Do we sit back and wait for them to walk into our life, or do we go out in search of them? Does it often seem as if you are looking for love in all the wrong places? Does Mr. or Ms. Right seem like an extinct species? Perhaps you have cried, you have prayed, and you have done everything you can think of to find your partner in life, and yet, the void is still unfilled.

Have you ever considered the possibility that perhaps you are going about this search for a mate all wrong? We invite you to suspend the search long enough to read this chapter because you may need to approach a few things differently from now on.

Looking for love

Are you currently looking for love? The paradox is that the grass is greener on the other side of the marital fence. While many singles are seeking a spouse, many who are married are seeking to be single again. Perhaps if we got the initial part of the process right, our marriages would last a lifetime. For many, desperation sets in, and they give up some of their dreams and aspirations and settle for anyone who comes along. A pastor friend of ours used to say that when a girl is about fourteen (some even younger than that), she starts to make a list of the qualities she would like her future spouse to have. He will be tall, dark, and handsome; someone with a good education; hair of this or that color; eyes of this or that color; from a good family; a spiritual man, serious, but with a good sense of humor; spontaneous, but a good planner; a good listener but also well-spoken; not necessarily rich, but definitely not dirt poor . . . , and the list goes on and on. But as the years go by and she finds herself still not married,

that list gets shorter and shorter. By the time she reaches the age of thirty-five or forty, desperation sets in, and her list has come down to just two items: warm and breathing!

While we may laugh at this exaggerated view of a young, unmarried woman, it is not too far-fetched. Through the years, we have met women who are so desperate to get married that they are willing to bend the rules, make compromises, abandon principles, ignore the red flags, and accept anyone, no matter how questionable, problematic, or even dangerous that decision may be. We have met them and talked with them before they said “I do,” and we have met many that have lived to regret that decision.

Not too long ago, we received a letter at our office. Since we are the Family Ministries directors and marriage and family professionals, one gentleman thought perhaps we could assist him in his search for a wife by playing the role of “matchmaker.” In his letter, he proceeded to share with us a list of what we were to search for. This is what the list contained: ruby red lips (yes, this was on there), long silken hair of gold, hourglass-shaped body, clear complexion, beautiful eyes, obedient to her husband, hard worker, gourmet cook, loves children, and a woman of faith. We must admit, it was hard for us to get past the first item on his list—ruby red lips! Yes, all these were on his list of “must haves.” Needless to say, we declined his request to assist him in finding such a woman and invited him to continue his own search. If he stuck to that list, there is no doubt that he is still searching!

Things to consider

Here are some of our thoughts and things we share as we speak with single adults:

Be Mr. or Ms. Right yourself. “Finding the right [person] is not going to change you into a better person than you already are. If you are lazy and self-centered, finding a generous, hardworking [mate] is not going to transform you. If you are a boring one-dimensional person, finding an intellectually challenging [mate] is not going to change who you are.”¹ You must be the best person first! Pray that God will reveal things to you that need changing, and commit to making those changes. “No man [or woman], no matter how right he [or she] is, is going to make you happy [if you are not already content]. You will only be happy in your new relationship if you are happy with yourself first. **Happiness comes from within.**”² Be healthy in all areas of your life—spiritually, physically, emotionally, socially, financially—before you seek to join your life with someone else.

Define what you are looking for in a spouse. What is important to you in a spouse? Define what that looks like, but be realistic. Some qualities to consider

may include common faith values, similar interests, financial health, emotional health, career goals, or family goals. What kind of person would draw you closer to Jesus and help you be ready for heaven? What you choose today will impact the rest of your life (and eternity), so choose wisely.

“Examine past mistakes in relationships. Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. Forgive yourself. Our heavenly Father opens His arms wide to welcome us back after we have made mistakes. We can change and grow and become new creatures in Christ Jesus.”³ It’s important to own and admit our past relationship mistakes so that they are not repeated in the future.

*“Look in places where you would expect to find persons of value.”*⁴ Have you been looking for love in all the wrong places? “If you want a man of faith you will be more apt to find him in church than in a bar or club.”⁵ And we must add a comment about looking for love online. Yes, there may be those of you reading this book who know someone who truly found the love of their life online. But in today’s technology world, we are surrounded by too many tales of scam artists, people pretending to be someone they aren’t, people attempting to take your money, and worse. There is still no better way to develop a relationship than by spending quality time together, face to face.

Don’t expect perfection. Just like you, they will make mistakes. “Relax a little and stop being so picky. . . . If you are looking for [perfection] you should know that Jesus is not available for dates. Allow for human frailty. Look beyond physical attractiveness, and look for a strong God fearing man [or woman] with a good heart.”⁶ After all, let’s be honest, are you perfect?

Seek godly counsel. Surround yourself with people who will pray with and for you as you seek God’s will in a lifetime partner. Listen to godly counsel. Seek out the advice of matriarchs and patriarchs in your faith community. There are times when others see what we fail to see, so we must be open to the godly wisdom of others.

Does this person draw you closer to Jesus? What kind of person are you in the presence of this person? Do you compromise your spiritual beliefs? Does this person draw you closer to Jesus or push you further away from Him?

Remain prayerful and patient. “It may take time to discover the one God has for you. In His time, He will answer your prayer. Keep praying and know that He is looking out for your best interests.

Now that you have been reminded of the guidelines related to the search, how do you know when you have found Mr. or Ms. Right? When do you consider the search to be over?

Blinded by the light: Don’t believe in fairytales

Driving on a country road in the middle of the night and during certain times

of the year can be a treacherous experience. When deer are preparing for winter or during the mating season, they wander around looking for love or food and find themselves in the path of oncoming traffic. As they often stand in the middle of the road, you would think that the lights of a fast-approaching car would scare them, and they would run away. Instead, they stand there, looking straight at the vehicle, not realizing it's getting dangerously closer to them. They are "blinded by the light." Many unmarried people act much like the deer during mating season. They look for love in all the wrong places. They stand in the middle of the highway of life, and when they see a person they believe is Prince Charming or the girl of their dreams, they too are "blinded by the light."

Often, because of their personal circumstances or experiences, unmarried people come to believe in fairy tales they have heard, read in romance novels, or perhaps even seen again and again in movies or television shows. They have gotten the message so often and so many times that they have come to believe those stories as if they were true.

Someone who may be living at home and feel their freedom is limited may come to believe the fairy-tale myth that *love will be the answer to all the problems I have*. They say to themselves, "When I am married, I won't have to be accountable to anybody. I will be treated as an adult. I will do whatever I want." Those of us who have been married for some time know that the only thing that's true is that marriage is not the answer to all our problems but more of a reality check. Or, as someone stated, marriage is not the answer but a whole new set of questions.

Through the many years of working with couples, we have encountered several men who were consumers of pornography before marriage and who believed that marriage would be the answer or solution to their compulsion (addiction), only to find themselves married and still deeply involved with this destructive habit. In an article on the website For Your Marriage, Sam Meir shares his experience:

One week before our wedding, I walked into a convenience store telling myself it was the last time I would ever use porn. I had been using porn since junior high, but thought I wouldn't "need" it after getting married. After all, my bride Beth was gorgeous, smart, athletic, cared about her faith, and was my best friend.

Sadly, the first several years of our marriage were filled with heartache, loneliness, and broken trust due to my use of pornography. We reached out for help to multiple counselors . . . , but there were not many people who knew how to help us in the early 2000s.⁷

Thinking that getting married will give you freedom from your addiction

to pornography (or any other addiction) is like thinking that drinking milk will help you overcome your alcoholism. We will speak more on the topic of pornography in a later chapter.

The second fairy-tale myth is the belief that *divorce could never happen to me*. Whenever we work with a premarital couple, as part of their marriage preparation, we ask them to consider several questions. One of them is, “How long do you plan to stay married?”

With that same deer-in-the-headlights look on their face, they respond, “Forever.”

We then ask a second question, “Can you think of anything that might cause you to consider getting a divorce?”

Back to the deer-in-the-headlights look they go. Of course, no one gets married thinking of a time when they will get a divorce. While the ideal is that we will live together “until death do us part,” many believe the falsehood that “divorce could never happen to us.” Again, that is the ideal and the goal we should shoot for. However, divorce could happen to any of us if we become complacent in our relationship and are not intentional about keeping our relationship healthy and strong. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the Bible, renders Paul’s words to the church members at Corinth this way: “Don’t be so naive and self-confident. You’re not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else. Forget about self-confidence; it’s useless. Cultivate God-confidence” (1 Corinthians 10:12, *The Message*).

Fairy tales often end with the words “and they lived happily forever after.” While the longer we’re married, the better it gets, it’s only in fairy tales that *wives never argue*. When two people from different backgrounds—with different personalities, likes, tastes, and preferences—get together, conflict is natural. People shudder at the thought that their Prince Charming or the girl of their dreams could possibly ever say or do anything that would hurt their feelings, but the reality is that we all have an inherited selfish nature that makes us want, at times, what is best for us, even if that makes the other person unhappy. We often tell couples that conflict in marriage is not bad. In fact, conflict is very natural and nothing to be feared. It is how we manage conflict that will determine a life of success or a lifetime of sorrow. (More about this later.)

One of the most common fairy-tale myths unmarried people believe is that *after they’re married, their spouse will change for the better*. When we’re dating, we often wear blinders. As they do for horses, blinders give us a sort of tunnel vision that keeps us from seeing everything. We have an idealistic view of our future spouse and of our relationship, and even when we notice something we don’t particularly like, we tend to ignore it, overlook it, or think to ourselves, *That (or rather, they) will change*.

One anecdote we heard from the late Pastor Charles D. Brooks provides a humorous depiction of the misconception of changing a spouse's character. Picture in your mind the scene: As the ceremony begins, you can see the participants. On the platform in front of the altar stands the pastor who will conduct the ceremony. To his left stands the groom, handsome, nervous, and excited. To the groom's right stands his best man and the rest of the groomsmen. To the pastor's right stands the bridesmaids. Perhaps in front of the bridesmaids and groomsmen stand the flower girl and the Bible boy. And there, at the back of the church, stands the bride, her hand on her father's arm, looking radiant. On this day, she looks gorgeous, particularly to her husband-to-be. As she stands there, at the back of the church, said Pastor Brooks, she notices three things in particular: The aisle, the altar, and her groom. As she proceeds, she's thinking, "Aisle, altar, him." Gradually, it sounds like, "I'll alter him."

We laugh every time we remember Pastor Brooks describing this scene. And yet, it is no laughing matter because often, that is exactly what people think about their spouse-to-be before they marry them: "I will change them." While it is true that marriage changes us—many of us for the better—our goal going into marriage should not be to try to change our life partner. Let the Holy Spirit be the one to make the appropriate changes.

There is another sad fairy-tale fiction that many believe: *our spiritual differences are not that important; we'll work it all out after we're married*. Yes, perhaps one of the biggest and most dangerous myths of all is to minimize spiritual differences or to try to ignore them altogether. Many have concluded that they will simply work out their spiritual differences after they are married. Spiritual differences can create some of the most difficult and heartbreaking problems of all. The most serious occurs when a believer marries a nonbeliever. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, renders the apostle Paul's words of warning to the members of the church at Corinth, "Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war. Is light best friends with dark?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Another common difficult situation exists when one partner was reared in one faith and the other was reared in another, which is known as an interfaith marriage. A Pew Research Center study on interfaith relationships found that "adults in religiously mixed marriages are, by and large, less religious than their counterparts who are married to spouses who share their faith. They attend religious services less often, pray less frequently, tend to be less likely to believe in God with absolute certainty and are less inclined to say religion is very important in their lives."⁸

The real problem begins when children come along and parents must make decisions about their upbringing. Will they be christened or dedicated? Will they

attend one church or another, or none? Will they be enrolled in a faith-based or public school? Whose parents' religious practices will be observed? Parents wake up and recognize the importance of these spiritual differences after their child is born, but it's too late . . . and you can't put them back. All spiritual differences should be reconciled before any wedding takes place!

Believing and accepting fairy-tale myths at face value leads many to make bad decisions. One myth many believe about marriage is that once you're married you won't feel lonely anymore. While marriage enhances human connection, and ideally adds to other family relationships and friendships, it will not completely remove loneliness. And many singles have testified that they don't feel alone. After all, the last person they talk to at night is Jesus, and the first person they seek in the morning is Jesus. He is the truest Companion. He is all we need. Nobody knows us individually as He does. And look at what He promises, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5, NIV). With Jesus in your life, you'll never be alone—whether married or single.

Now, if you are already dating someone, we recommend you have a conversation with them and discuss these questions:

1. Do we share the same basic beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, salvation (including the meaning of justification, righteousness, and sanctification), sin, heaven, hell, the second coming of Jesus (what glorification is), God's judgment, the church, the law of God (including the Sabbath), and what happens after death?
2. How will we rear our children spiritually?
3. Will church attendance be a part of our lives? If so, which denomination and which church will we choose? How will we choose the church we'll attend?
4. Are we committed to being a godly couple from whom our children can learn spiritual values?

Once again, what is most important is to decide that all spiritual issues should be settled before the wedding, or there should be no wedding. *It really is that important.* At the same time, any engaged couple that is in tune spiritually should not take their spirituality for granted but instead should be spending time individually and together in prayer and in the study of God's Word to continue to grow in relationship with Jesus as an individual and as a couple.

Time is of the essence

Through the years, after talking with countless couples, we have heard some of the most fascinating stories. We recall several who have told us that the very first

time they saw or met their future spouse, they knew they would marry them. Some have told us that just a few months later, or even a few weeks later, they were married and have been married for many, many years. We know a couple who were friends in elementary school, dated as young people, got married soon after high school, and have been married for more than forty years. Many have known each other or have been together longer than they have been alone.

But we have also talked to couples that met and had a whirlwind romance and got married as soon as they could, only to find themselves in an incompatible relationship full of conflict, chaos, and calamity. Many have told us, “We wish we had not rushed into marriage.” For some, the rush came when they became sexually involved and found themselves expecting a baby. For others, it was a new job that would mean a change of location, a deployment, or the fear of losing that person. And for some, in our technologically connected society, it was a long-distance relationship that became untenable, the need to be married in order to secure the proper immigration documents, or the need to leave their own country, looking for better opportunities in life.

We recommend,⁹ as do many marriage and family counselors, a period of dating long enough to allow the future couple to truly get to know each other. As Shakespeare wrote in *King Henry VI*, “[A] hasty marriage seldom proveth well.”¹⁰ It takes time to know another person well enough to decide to spend your life with them. Listen to these wise words:

If you plan and work hard,
 you will have plenty;
 if you get in a hurry,
 you will end up poor (Proverbs 21:5, CEV).

Often, couples will spend much more time in the wedding preparations—choosing a venue, deciding on their wedding party, designing, addressing, and mailing the invitations, making arrangements with musicians and caterers, purchasing a wedding dress, renting the tuxedo, and other wedding-day details—than they spend preparing to live as a married couple. While the wedding ceremony is important, they fail to remember that an actual wedding ceremony is a one-day event, but a marriage is a lifetime. We wonder what would happen if couples would spend half as much time and energy planning for their lifetime together as they do in planning for the wedding ceremony. Take the time necessary to learn everything you can about the person with whom you plan to spend a lifetime.

Several areas should be seriously considered during this time together:

Residual emotional baggage. As we travel throughout the world, we have

concluded that it is better for each of us to have our own individual suitcases. It is not a good thing to try to put everything in one suitcase. We each pack the things that we need, the way we like, and we each may pack as much as we want. Trying to fit our things in his and her luggage is a formula for conflict because, after nearly forty years of marriage, we are still two different individuals. In the same way, we bring into our marriage our own emotional baggage that often does not fit neatly into the other person's life. A sufficient period of dating helps you examine each other's emotional baggage—the things we learned as we were growing up in our family of origin, the experiences of pain (sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse), any addictions, the places where we have lived, other relationships we might have had, and other issues. We can't ignore the baggage we bring into our current relationship, much less into our marriage, because it will have an effect, for good or for bad, for the rest of our lives.

Ask anyone who has been married for any length of time, and they will tell you that no matter how well they thought they knew their future spouse, there were still many surprises after they married. Ideally, it's beneficial to observe a potential marriage partner in as many situations before marriage as possible. Notice how the person reacts when angry, under stressful situations, and in difficult times. Learn about the other person's needs, likes, dislikes, quirks, habits, weaknesses, strengths, and annoyances and about what makes them happy. Ellen White's advice is very valuable:

Before giving her hand in marriage, every woman should inquire whether he with whom she is about to unite her destiny is worthy. What has been his past record? Is his life pure? Is the love which he expresses of a noble, elevated character, or is it a mere emotional fondness? Has he the traits of character that will make her happy? Can she find true peace and joy in his affection? Will she be allowed to preserve her individuality, or must her judgment and conscience be surrendered to the control of her husband? . . . Can she honor the Saviour's claims as supreme? Will body and soul, thoughts and purposes, be preserved pure and holy? These questions have a vital bearing upon the well-being of every woman who enters the marriage relation.¹¹

*The family of origin.*¹² Another area that needs exploration is the person's family of origin. It's critically important that you spend time getting to know the other person's family. Perhaps you have made the mistake of thinking the other person's extended family doesn't matter. The fact is, we don't marry one person; we marry, or join ourselves to, the entire family. You must meet the potential in-laws and

other family members and spend time getting to know them. Observe how they interact with each other. An old adage fits very well here: “An apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Your future spouse grew up in this family, so you need to know who they are and what they believe.

The more differences between you and your spouse there are, the more important it is that you spend time with each other’s family. For example, we come from different racial backgrounds. Pam is Caucasian, born and raised in the state of Virginia, the oldest child of four siblings. Claudio is Hispanic, born and raised in Colombia, South America, the fifth child of six siblings. The three years that we spent dating helped us to get to know each other and each other’s families, to appreciate the differences, and also to be aware of possible challenges to our relationship. If you two are from very different cultural or racial backgrounds, it is even more important that you spend lots of time exploring, observing, and learning from each other and each other’s family.

Learn what it means to “leave” and “cleave.” As God joined the first couple, He reminded them of the pattern He set for marriage. We recall the Lord’s words, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24, KJV). But what do those two words (*leave* and *cleave*) really mean?

Leave—To *leave* means that your allegiance shifts from your parents to your spouse. It does not mean you abandon your parents or have nothing else to do with them. Instead, it means that you will first seek your spouse for wisdom, comfort, and support. One of the mistakes many young couples make is to try to maintain their relationship with their parents as if they were still single. They will consult first with their parents rather than with their spouse, or they will make decisions following their parents’ advice even if it’s in direct contradiction with their spouse’s opinion or wishes. In Claudio’s homeland, they refer to young grooms who fail to leave their parents as “unable to go from under their mother’s skirt.” They always want to be a momma’s boy first and husband second.

Leaving also means to cease the relationship of dependence from one’s parents. You can no longer go back to your parents for your every need, financially or otherwise. And as parents, even if we see our married children struggling a bit, we need to make sure we give them room to make their own decisions and come up with their own solutions instead of running to rescue them every time they seem about to fall or fail.

Cleave—The word *cleave* means to lean toward, to be joined, or to hold on to your partner. To cleave to your marriage partner means to choose your spouse above others, even yourself. You cleave, lean toward, join, or hold on to

your partner by meeting their needs, hearing their words, and understanding their feelings and desires.

A covenant marriage. Marriage is not just a piece of paper. Wedding vows are not just a declaration of present love but a mutually binding promise of future love. “You promise to be loving, faithful, and true to the other person in the future regardless of . . . internal feelings or external circumstances.”¹³ But what makes this covenant even more important is who is witnessing it. We make the covenant before the officiant (pastor, priest, justice of the peace, etc.) and before family and friends. But more important, we make it before God; and for God, those promises are very important and meant to be kept. “When you make a vow to GOD, your God, don’t put off keeping it; GOD, your God, expects you to keep it and if you don’t you’re guilty. . . . If you say you’re going to do something, do it. Keep the vow you willingly vowed to GOD, your God. You promised it, so do it” (Deuteronomy 23:21–23, *The Message*).

Who you will marry is one of the most important decisions you will make in your lifetime. Apart from accepting Jesus as your personal Savior, it is perhaps the most important. It is one that needs to be made with that understanding.

Conclusion

- Before seeking a spouse, be the person God wants you to be.
- Don’t expect perfection in your future spouse.
- Pray for guidance and wisdom from God.
- Rely on God’s Word—don’t believe the fairy tales and myths.
- Understand the importance of “leaving and cleaving.”
- Understand the permanence of a covenant relationship.

Reflection questions

1. So, do you have a list? No one goes on a hunt to find something without first knowing what it is they are seeking. What should be included that is not negotiable?
2. Which of the fairy tale myths mentioned have you seen, heard, or come to believe yourself?
3. If a person’s character is pretty much cemented by the age of six or seven, do you think you can change another person to fit your wishes or desires?
4. What does 2 Corinthians 6:14 mean to you?
5. What traits should you consider in your future mate? Are there any areas of concern in the person you are currently seeing? How do you think your future mate might answer this question about you?

6. How do we reconcile the command to “leave our parents” (see Genesis 2:24) with the command to “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12, NIV)?
7. What changes do we need to make in order to sever the cords of allegiance and dependence from our parents?
8. What changes do we need to make sure we “cleave” to one another?

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