

# *Dating: Making the Right Choice*

by Mary & Jonathan Barrett

Pastors

South England Conference, British Union

Trans-European Division

Why God? Why should we involve God in our dating, in our choice of a marriage partner? Why should we turn to Christian principles to help us find the man or woman of our dreams when we have so many writers and movies constantly serving up pointers about the perfect relationship? Go to any video store and you will uncover a wealth of advice on making the right choice when dating.

- Kate Hudson tells us *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. Supposedly all you have to do is to reverse the procedure and you will find a guy or a girl in ten days.
- In *Runaway Bride*, Julia Roberts teaches you that as soon as you know which way you like your eggs cooked for breakfast, you will know whom to marry.
- Watch *What Women Want* and Mel Gibson reveals that if you want to develop a relationship with someone, it is best if you don't want to know about everything that is going on in their minds.
- You could live a lie like J. Lo in *Maid in Manhattan*. Pretend to be something that you are not and you will have someone fall in love with you. And not only that, he will be rich, handsome and powerful.
- From *My Best Friend's Wedding* you learn that if you are going to fall in love with your best friend, you'd better make that decision quickly before someone else comes along.
- In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* you learn that all you have to do is remove your spectacles, visit the hairdresser and shop at the right fashion store. As soon as Mr. Right sees the new you, he will fall head over heels in love with you.

With all this advice around us, why should we listen to God's principles? Because God is interested in our happiness. He longs for your happiness as no one else does. He wants you to be happy in your dating and ultimately in your choice of a marriage partner.

## **Seeking God's Guidance in Partner Selection**

It was God, not man, who said in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good that the man should be alone." That says something profound about how interested God is in our need of someone to share our lives with. The original word for "not good" actually means "not good, this aloneness of man." God was saying it was not good for Adam to feel alone, isolated, as if something was missing or incomplete in his life. So God did something about it. A deep sleep, an operation on Adam that left no scars, and Adam was no longer alone. His companion was created from his rib (Genesis 2:21-22). Adam never

had to seek out Eve; God custom-built her for him. God was the one who brought them together. Just as God was interested enough in Adam's aloneness to do something about it, God is interested in taking an active part in providing you with the companion with whom you long to share your life.

Another Bible account tells us that God is interested in our choice of marriage partner. The Genesis 24 story of a long-distance courtship may be one of the most romantic stories in the Bible. Hollywood could have made a movie out of it. The story begins with Abraham, who was determined to find a bride for his son Isaac. In those days, it was the responsibility of a father to find a suitable partner for his son or daughter. Picture the scene: Abraham, old and frail, sends his trusted servant to find a bride for Isaac. The servant travels in the heat of the day, at times, stumbling in the searing hot sand that gives way beneath his feet. In the bitter cold of the night, he shivers, trying to sleep under a blanket woven with wool. His only companions are ten camels, loaded with supplies for the journey and treasures for the wife to be. For one month he travelled to the distant land of Haran to search for the perfect wife for his master's son.

Finally, arriving in the town, he plunks himself down by the side of the village well. Tired and weary, looking at the multitude of women of all ages and sizes strolling around that town, perhaps he wondered, "How do I make the right choice?" Maybe that is what motivated him to do something you will never find in a Hollywood movie—he talked to God. He asked God to lead him to the perfect wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:14). What we love about this story is that God was so eager to answer the prayer that, as soon as the servant said "Amen," the beautiful Rebekah appeared.

That's an amazing God isn't it? A simple request: "God lead me to find the right partner" and God was there immediately. God really is interested in our happiness.

Rebekah did indeed become Isaac's wife. In the custom of a good old love story the Bible says, "She became his wife, and he loved her."

This is the first recorded prayer for God to guide in selecting a marriage partner. We believe that just as God provided a wife for Adam and a wife for Isaac, He is longing to answer our requests that He guide us to the right partner to share our lives.

Now if you turn the pages of the Bible you will find there is no particular section that carries a checklist of the do's and don'ts in making a right choice when dating. However, God does say, "I will guide you in every aspect of your life." "I [the Lord] will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you" (Psalm 32:8, AMP). Elsewhere He promises to give wisdom in making choices. "If any of you is deficient in wisdom, let him ask of the giving God (who gives) to everyone liberally and ungrudgingly . . . and it will be given him" (James 1:5 AMP).

The wisdom that God speaks of here is very different from our wisdom. Wisdom, as spoken of in the Bible, means seeing with discernment, being able to see below the surface of things. It also includes the ability to look at self, others and situations with a broader, more godly perspective. God will give us His wisdom and His guidance in dating if we ask for it.

## Wisdom in Longer Courtship

In matters relating to dating and partner selection wisdom is needed, but we don't always act wisely. As dating couples, we make mistakes that could be avoided. One mistake that is often made is the decision to marry too quickly.

That certainly wasn't the case with Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah: "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Genesis 29:20). That was a long courtship and the love between them was lasting.

**Study on long courtship.** One study we read found a strong correlation between long courtships and satisfying marriages and a strong correlation between short courtships and heartbreaking marriages. It is far better to be going out together and relating to each other for at least a year—preferably more, before you even consider marriage.

Without at least this much experience you just don't know each other well enough. Some couples decide to get married without having been through any kind of tragedy or really stressful event together. They just don't know each other in the broad range of life experience. They've never negotiated a compromise over some deeply held value. They've never resolved conflict with each other. They haven't worked out financial differences. They haven't walked in each other's relational or vocational worlds. Some have not worshipped together or served or prayed together enough to know if they are going to be spiritually compatible. So allow plenty of time for going out together and getting to really know each other before you think seriously about marriage.

By the way, you cannot speed up the process of getting to know each other by living together. Living together really is another subject, but all the studies we have seen indicate that couples who live together are much more likely to have a whole variety of problems. The divorce rate for such couples is as high as 75%.

Robert Moeller has observed that the concept of a trial marriage is a contradiction in terms, "By definition marriage is an exclusive, lifetime, permanent commitment. How can something temporary, non-binding and open-ended be considered a test of something that's just the opposite" (Strobel, 1997, p. 147). Spend time together, but live in your own place before you consider marriage.

## Things to Think About

**Your age.** Do you know what the best age is to get married? There is evidence to show, in western societies at least, that it is sometime after the age of 25. The ideal seems to be 28 or over. So, if anyone asks you why you are not married yet, just tell them you are waiting for the ideal age!

Psychological development experts say that until we reach the age of 25 we are still involved in sorting out what is going on inside of us. We are still involved in:

- *Identification work* – who am I?
- *Individuation work* – who am I separate from my parents? How do I really gain that independence from them and live my own life?

- *Core values work* – what do I believe? What is important to me in life? Do I have the courage to really hang on to what is important to me?
- *Competency work* – what am I good at? What kind of career am I going to develop?

Also at this time young adults are going through spiritual formation work. Until the age of 25, many of us are still questioning: Do I believe in God? Do I believe Jesus is who He said He was? Do I believe it enough to arrange my life around the truths about God?

Wisdom tells us that, with all that going on inside of us, it is rather complicated to make such an important decision as “whom shall I marry?” It has been said that marrying young is like shooting at a moving target from a spinning shooting platform. Obviously that is not a wise move.

The lowest divorce rates are for men and women who wait until they are 28 years old or older to marry. The highest divorce rates are amongst those who marry in their teenage years or early twenties. Bear that in mind when you feel in a rush to get married.

Someone once said that marriage is like twirling a baton, turning handstands or eating with chopsticks. It looks easy until you try it. So we would advise that you slow down and give yourself a chance to know what is important to you as an individual and what is important to you in a marriage partner before you enter marriage hastily.

**Don’t be too eager.** Another mistake people make is that one or both individuals are too eager to get married. It’s like they get marriage fever. It sweeps over them. Often they don’t really know why, they just get carried away. Maybe they think marriage will end their aloneness, or heal their brokenness or ensure their happiness, or guarantee blissfulness. Some people convince themselves that marriage will make all of the trouble and the travails and the deficits of their lives disappear. Usually, nothing could be further from the truth.

If you’re really unhappy as a single person, a walk down the wedding aisle probably won’t solve that problem. It will likely add to the problem. So, if you believe marriage will solve all your problems, think again. Don’t be over-eager.

**Think about your expectations.** When choosing a husband or wife, make sure that you take time out to discuss the expectations that you have of one another. Subconsciously we always think that we are going to live just like Mum and Dad and that things will happen just as they did at home. Listen to Jonathan and Mary’s story, as told by Mary:

“One of the things that caused controversy in our marriage in the early days was time. Jonathan comes from a family which is very time-oriented. I come from a family where time doesn’t bother us.

In Jonathan’s family, when his mother said lunch was at 12:30 p.m., lunch was at 12:30 p.m! In fact, I remember going to their home and watching as the family got ready for lunch. It was like watching a military operation, carried out with military precision. By 12:25 p.m., all serving dishes were placed on an immaculately laid table; by 12:26 p.m., serviettes were shaken and placed on laps; by 12:27 p.m., all lids were removed from the casserole dishes; by

12:28 p.m., all plates were served; by 12:29 p.m. all cutlery was poised for action and by 12:30 p.m., all were taking their first mouthful. It came as a shock to me, when we were first married, that Jonathan would sit at the table at 12:30 p.m. expecting lunch to be ready, and it was an even bigger shock to him to discover that it wasn't!"

It is a good idea to talk about things like that before you are married. While you are dating, look at other people's marriages and say, "You know the Browns. Well, I wouldn't like that kind of marriage. I wouldn't want all that travelling. I wouldn't want to have all the busyness. But the Smiths, yes. Now that is the kind of marriage that I would want. They still have fun together; they seem to enjoy one another's company."

Consider how you are going to resolve your differences and develop the skills for this before marriage. A humorous story illustrates what is too often the case: A lawyer and a psychologist were making small talk at a party. The lawyer said, "You and your wife get along very well. Do you ever have differences of opinion?" "Definitely," said the psychologist. "Very often, but we get over them quickly." "How do you do that?" asked the lawyer. "Simple," said the psychologist. "I never tell her about them." If you are not honest about dealing with your differences before you are married, you will be struggling with this for a long time in marriage.

Look around; find some good marriages and find out what makes them tick! Talk about the expectations you have of one another as a part of your dating.

### **Three Essentials in Choosing the Right Partner**

We've spoken of some mistakes people make. Let's turn to the positive and think about three essentials to consider in choosing the right partner.

**Spiritual compatibility.** The Bible clearly teaches the principle of being equally matched. "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3). Paul writes to Christians, "Don't become partners with those who reject God. It is important that you connect with someone who feels the same way you do about God" (2 Corinthians 6:14, TM).

When Christian singles hear this biblical teaching, sometimes they don't like it. Why? Well, for one thing, it shrinks the playing field. It reduces the number of possible marriage candidates. Their reaction may be, "Hang on, was God having a bad day? I happen to like this person who's not a Christian, and how come I can't marry them?" However, if you reflect on it thoughtfully, you can begin to understand the reasoning behind it.

Research suggests that marriages tend to be more satisfying among those who share deep commonalities. What is deeper than a person's spirituality? What goes deeper into a person's heart and core identification than their love for God and their sense of God's love for them? They respond to it; they open up their heart and say, "This changes everything. Christ loves me. He's forgiven my sin. I'm going to live in heaven with Him." You start to live that way in your life.

If you and your partner don't share a mutual love for bungee jumping, shopping in Harrods or collecting rare butterflies, that's one thing. But it's another thing when God is at the very centre of your life and pleasing Him, walking with Him, honouring and serving and proclaiming His goodness

and love is foundational to who you are. When that cannot be shared with your life partner, it is going to be hard.

We have known many church people who married outside the faith. We always sense an ache in the heart of the partner who is the believer. There is spiritual loneliness that their non-believing partner can never understand. There are obvious practical difficulties too; the one who doesn't share your love for God will not understand why you want to give your time and your money to God. But more than that, they just won't be able to understand your heart, what makes you the way you are. The spiritual separation can result in emotional separation since the emotional life and spiritual life are so closely linked.

**Character compatibility.** This question of character compatibility is vitally important—do you really relate well with each other? Do you like one another? Can you trust one another? If you are not compatible in character, marriage between you will likely be troubled.

If one partner is honest and the other one is not completely honest—that can spell problems. If one partner is responsible with commitments and the other one isn't, that can cause tensions. If one is wise about money and the other one is foolish, that can cause a serious rift in a relationship. If one is serious about sexual fidelity and the other one is not, the very life of your relationship will be in jeopardy.

These are not minor matters, but huge ones that can break up your marriage. Character compatibility determines whether trust can be built in a marriage. You really can't afford to compromise on this.

**Emotional health compatibility.** This is the mutual understanding of each other's backgrounds that leads to confidence that your future together will not be threatened by secrets and complications from the past.

Imagine this: it's Valentine's Day and the atmosphere in the restaurant is romantic and lovely. There are flowers, soft lights and a mutual attraction. The person across the table from you looks irresistible in the candle light. The reality is that person grew up in a fallible family with imperfect parents. They had less than ideal siblings and probably a few strange relatives. Most extended families have those! Further, you can bet that the heartthrob, into whose eyes you are gazing, didn't make it this far in life without facing some troubles and difficulties along the way. The question is: Do you know what kind of hits they took? Do you know how much damage was done to their emotional health? How are they handling that? Have they recovered? Are they growing strong at the moment, or are they sinking down? Is their life in balance or are they unsteady?

If you are going to buy a house, you will undoubtedly want a survey inspection and a report on its condition. What has happened to it over the years? Has there been flooding? Is the wood sound? Are the foundations good? Sometimes we think it would be good if potential mates carried such a survey so that the other partner could check out the full history. We think it's only fair to be able to look at the other's record—the trauma and the damage done, as well as the repairs and progress that have occurred. This is why premarriage guidance counsel is so important.

What has happened to someone is only half their story. The other half is how have they dealt with it! Are they open about their issues? Have they had help in coping with them? If they are open about issues, willing to talk and wanting to face them, then in marriage they will likely be able to deal with whatever issues may arise.

### **Mary's Decision: A Tale of Two Men**

So be wise; use these pointers as measuring posts in your relationships. Ask God to guide you, to help you make one of the most important decisions of your life. Making the final decision about a marriage partner may not always be easy. Let's hear a bit more of Jonathan and Mary's story:

Jonathan and I first met each other at church. He started to attend the church that I had been going to for three years. We just had enough time to realise that we liked one another, when Jonathan moved. He planned on studying for the ministry. Working away gave him the chance of earning money to finance college. I remained at home, living with my parents and four sisters.

We began to write to one another. That was the real beginning of our relationship. At first we wrote short notes, then letters, then longer letters. In the beginning the letters came every two weeks, then every week, then every other day. Our affection for one another got stronger with each piece of correspondence and so did the muscles of the men delivering our mail!

About four months after the letter writing began, Jonathan planned to come and see me. He was going to spend the weekend with me and my family. Our relationship had gone past the friendship stage, so we were really excited about seeing one another that weekend. So Jonathan caught a ride to my home.

Unbeknown to Jonathan, however, I had also been writing to Hans, a young man who lived in Holland. In all innocence, I just had written to encourage him and to be friendly. Evidently, as Hans read my letters, he had concluded I was the woman of his dreams. He decided to pay me a surprise visit. He hitchhiked all the way from Holland to my address in England to spend the weekend with me. Two hours after Jonathan got there, Hans arrived from Holland!

I spent the weekend with two men who were convinced that I was the woman of their dreams. That experience is forever etched in my memory and in Jonathan's too! At the end of the weekend, I knew two things—I had to stop writing letters and make a choice. Was it going to be Jonathan from England or Hans from Holland? Jonathan won, "Hans" down!

That choice was not difficult to make. Jonathan and I knew enough about one another to know that we both have similar values. It was also an easy decision to make because from the age of seventeen or eighteen I had been asking God to make clear to me when the time came who was the right person for me. I asked God to give me wisdom and guidance in making the right decision. Twenty-five years later, I can say, I believe God helped me to make the right choice!"

**Never Alone Whether Single or Married**

Some who are listening today have already taken that step into marriage and it is working out well for you. Praise God! For some, it may not have worked out so well and you have been through the pains of stressed relationships, separation or perhaps even a divorce. Others of you may have not married. To not marry may be by your choice or it may not.

We started this presentation by quoting Genesis, where we are told that God said it isn't good that a man or woman be alone. Having a married partner for life can and does bring a great deal of happiness. However, being single or coming to terms with a broken relationship doesn't mean that you have to live with "aleness." God will provide for you too—through special friendships, caring communities, and a relationship with Him. He longs for each of us to have a relationship with Him—whether we are single or married—so that we will hear Him say, "I will be here for you; you will never be alone."

Today we encourage you to cultivate that relationship with God in all aspects of your life, especially in dating!

**Reference**

Strobel, L. (1997). *God's outrageous claims: 13 discoveries that can revolutionize your life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.