

# *Building a Stronger Marriage in Tough Times*

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The first face Adam saw was the face of God. Adam was created by God for fellowship with God, a personal relationship. The primacy of this relationship with God has always remained as far as God is concerned. God's plan, however, included other relationships for man. As God joined the first man and woman together, He created the family with the deepest human relationship of all—marriage—at its center (Gen. 2:18-24).

But with the Fall came tragedy for human relationships—both toward God and toward each other. Angry that he was excluded from the plan of creation, Satan set forth his strategic plan for marriage and the family. His instructions for his demons must have been, “We must break up every marriage that we can. If we do not succeed in this, we must make it as unhappy as we can. If this fails, we must destroy its Christian witness.” Satan has been very successful in his scheme. He entered the home of Adam and Eve and caused them to sin. Their perfect relationship with God was broken. The only perfect marriage that ever existed was marred.

The pages of the Bible record the deterioration of the relationship between husband and wife. Polygamy (multiple wives), adultery and divorce resulted. God has a plan to restore the broken relationship between man and Himself. God also knows that husbands and wives could only have a perfect relationship with each other if they both have a perfect relationship with Him, their Creator.

## **God's Plan Centers on a Cross**

God's cross-centered plan was made before the creation of the world (1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Through the power of the cross of Christ we can be made new persons (2 Cor. 5:17). As we reflect on the power of the cross we see that God intends for the cross to:

- Reveal to our dull senses the unfathomable love of God (John 3:16).
- Enlarge our capacity to love as the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts (Rom. 5:5).
- Crucify selfishness in our hearts (John 13:34; Gal. 2:20; Titus 2:14). The major cause of marital discord is selfishness. Without selfishness, marriage would be blissful.
- Provide a model of submission and self-sacrifice for husbands and wives (Eph. 5:25). Jesus provides the perfect pattern for husbands in the way He loves the church.

## **God's Marriage Design**

God's design for marriage and the family is clearly stated in His Word. He plans for marriage to be a bond of love that nothing but death can break (Mark 10:6 - 9). Yet modern marriages are broken for the most trivial reasons. Even among Christians there is divorce frenzy. Too little effort is

given by some to keep the marriage intact and the vows unbroken. God's ideal for marriage, however, has remained unchanged. Christ reaffirmed marriage (Matt. 19: 4-6). "I hate divorce," God says in Mal. 2:14-16.

God's principles for marriage include *leaving, cleaving, and becoming one flesh* (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6). When God joins a couple they are no longer two. They become one. Henceforward their motto should be "*Togetherness.*" It should be "Each for the other and both for the Lord."

God's creation design for marriage afforded couples the power of procreation, the ability to produce children to people the earth (Gen. 1:28; Mal. 2:14, 15). The Psalmist makes it clear that children born to couples are really God's children (Psa. 127:3). Because of the broken relationship between man and God and because of the less than perfect marriages that are contracted, our children are not perfect either. The earliest example was Cain, who murdered his brother Abel out of jealousy. David, Solomon, and Absalom further illustrate the influence of sin upon the family. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons certainly were not without family problems. Not only were there conflicts between husbands and wives, but between parents and children, and between children as well.

Yet God wants to save our children. His plan for marriage is that each home will be a mission station reflecting to the world the love of Christ (Eph. 5:25-28; Phil. 1:9-11). Children will see the love of Christ in their parents. Neighbors will see the love of Christ in our homes. In the love chapter, 1 Cor. 13:4-8, we have a clear description of how love behaves. Love can be cultivated. It grows by exercise. We get better with practice. Christ's love for us is unconditional, expressive, sacrificial, forgiving, and eternal.

### **Our Struggle against Dark Powers**

Ephesians 6:11 calls us to take our stand "against the devil's schemes." "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12). We must never forget who is responsible for marital misery—Satan. We must place the blame squarely in his lap. He began in Eden and continues to wage a fierce war against the home. He knows the powerful, positive influence of a well-ordered family and he is against it. He knows the devastating, negative influence of an ill-regulated family and he is for it. He knows that a rotten home is the most effective way to ruin a person for time and eternity.

Satan's methods are varied. He encourages incompatible persons to marry. He hurries the inexperienced into marriage. He sponsors marriages with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14; Judges 14:3). He inspires quarrels and fights. He brings outside pressures to rest on marriage—work, over-commitment of time, and alien sexual attractions. He promotes selfishness, the patron demon of marriage.

True and lasting happiness in marriage and family can only be realized by following God's plan. When God's model for Christian marriage and family is followed, happiness results. This is stated in Eph. 5:21-23; 6:1-4. Husbands and wives do well to read this together regularly, prayerfully, and submissively.

## Important “Rules for the Road” of the Marital Journey

**Rule 1: Husbands and wives are to be subject to one another (Eph. 5:21).** Mutual submission, i.e., submission to one another, as Paul describes it here is the only safe starting point for marriage. There is to be no master-slave relationship, no boss-servant relationship in this closest human relationship.

When God created Eve, He created her from the rib of Adam, indicating that she was his equal, to stand by his side, close to his heart. She was not to rule over him. Neither was she to be trampled under his feet (See *Adventist Home*, p. 25). Pagan and Jewish societies had subordinated women. It was Christianity through the teaching of Christ that elevated women to the status God had originally designed.

Scripture teaches that in Christ we are all one (Gal. 3:28). Men and women are spiritually equal—100% equal—in Christ. They are equal in sharing God’s image as originally designed (Gen. 1:26, 27). In status, value, and worth as individuals they are equal. In freedom and independence they are equal. Why should marriage rob us of the equality we have in Him? When the rule of mutual submission is followed, when each is willing to have the attitude of honoring another above oneself (cf. Rom. 12:10), two fully independent individuals can live together harmoniously in marriage. Dependence and trust are mutual; responsibility, reliability and loyalty are reciprocal. Each is to put 100% into the marriage. They are equal in privileges, in self-surrender, in devotion. They are subject to one another (1 Cor. 7:4).

The Bible is as much against bossy husbands as it is against bossy wives. “Neither husband nor wife is to make a plea for rulership,” wrote Ellen White. “The Lord has laid down the principle that is to guide in this matter. The husband is to cherish his wife as Christ cherishes the church. And the wife is to respect and love her husband. Both are to cultivate the spirit of kindness, being determined never to grieve or injure the other (*Adventist Home*, p. 106).

**Rule 2: The husband is to submit to his wife—loving her (unconditionally) as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25).** Christ sacrificed Himself for His church (Eph. 5:28). The husband exercises his submission by loving his wife unselfishly (Eph. 5:28). The model for the husband’s love is Christ’s love for us. His love has no limit. It has no conditions.

*Conditional love is:*

- “I love you *when* . . .” (I’m in a good mood; you are in a good mood.)
- “I love you *if* . . .” (you cook, wash, give me money, clean the house, bear children, agree with me, etc.)
- “I love you *because of* . . .” (your looks, your figure, your position, your money, etc.)

*Unconditional love is:*

- “I love you unconditionally ” (as you are, in spite of).

To the extent that I place conditions on my love for you, to that extent I don’t really love you. Love with conditions is an exchange or a purchase, not a gift. True love must be a gift. It must be unconditional (1 Cor. 13:4-8). “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

*Unconditional love* has the following characteristics:

- A caring love. Some men do not show caring love but treat their wives as glorified housekeepers.
- A sharing love. Share more good than bad. Share hopes and dreams, fears and disappointments.
- A sacrificial love. No work is too hard, no sacrifice is too great to undertake for one's spouse. Sacrificial love puts their needs ahead of our own.
- An exclusive love. "Forsaking all others" is what we pledge.
- An unbreakable love. "Till death do us part" (Song of Sol. 8:6).
- A protecting love. Love covers a multitude of sins. No exposure of a spouse's faults is fostered.
- An unquenchable love. "Many waters cannot quench love" (Song of Sol. 8:7).
- A building love. It brings out the best; boosts self-esteem and self-fulfillment.
- A buttressing love. Spouses should be able to tell all their troubles to each other and know they will understand and be supportive.
- An affectionate and expressive love. If you love her, tell her so; call her "sweetheart," "darling," etc. Call him "lover-boy," "my honey," etc. Hug and kiss regularly.
- A patient, forgiving love (1 Cor. 13:4).
- An enduring love (Jer. 31:3). It holds up under test and pressure. A Christian marriage nurtures love.

Such love is not natural for the human heart, but God promises through the presence of His Spirit in us to bring such love to our hearts (Rom. 5:5). Let us pray, "Lord, give me such love."

**Rule 3: The wife is to submit to the loving husband's leadership, respecting him out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21, 22-24, 33).** Scripture refers to the husband as "head of the wife." What does this mean? The text goes on to say "as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body." Christ's sacrificial act as Savior head of the church defines what Paul means by the husband being "head" of the wife. "Head" does not mean his personal superiority or her inferiority. He is a servant-leader after the manner of Christ.

Christ elsewhere defined such servant-leadership in His discourse with His disciples, "Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:27, 28). Being "head" implies taking responsibility for leadership—leading, not driving, bossing or bullying, the wife and children in the ways of God. "I will lead on softly," Jacob told Esau, "according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure" (Gen. 33:14 KJV). The husband exercises his responsibility as head in the sacrificial manner of Christ. Submission on the wife's part means to respect and respond humbly, intelligently and cooperatively to the husband's loving, sacrificial leadership.

It is important to distinguish between submissiveness and servility or subservience. As is true of all three pairs of social relationships addressed in Eph. 5:22- 6:9: wife-husband; child-parent; servant-master, the submission of the socially weaker member of each pair—wives, children, servants—is always qualified. For wives, Scripture dictates that their submission is "as to the Lord." This is not a submission that reinforces an existing social order, but the voluntary submission of a believing wife to her husband out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21). "Submit" does not mean being

piously silent, leaving all in the husband's hands. A wife is free to give her input in the family decisions as an equal partner. A wise wife who sees that her husband's judgment is wrong should, with all respect, tell him so. Where Christian standards and principles are in question, the wife should respectfully disagree with her husband and obey the higher authority—the Lord (Acts 5:29).

A woman may be her husband's superior in intellect or earning power and still be submissive. Don't always be correcting him. Help him to improve. Being submissive means:

- Being a helpmate not a hindrance. You are not in competition with each other.
- Being respectful, not rude, before children and others.
- Cheering him on. Give appreciation and encouragement.
- Helping him get ahead. You are on the same team. The virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 is a good example.
- Bringing out the best in him. Use phrases like, "You can do it;" "I like it when . . .;" "You make me so happy when . . ."
- Letting him lead. Don't be a back seat driver. Don't emasculate him.
- Loving him even when he make mistakes or does other things that stir anger in you makes you angry.

### **The Secret of Marital Happiness is Jesus**

Zacchaeus was rich but empty until Jesus came into his home and life (Luke 19:1-10). True marital happiness is God-given. Only where Jesus reigns can there be real joy and lasting happiness. We cannot succeed by ourselves.

**Marital storms.** Your marriage or family may be in the midst of a storm right now.

- Financial storms? Jesus is the answer (Phil. 4:19).
- Waning love? Ridicule? Tired? Disagreeable husband? Lazy? Jesus is the answer.
- Nagging wife? Bossy? Spendthrift? Jesus is the answer.
- Rebellious children? Sexually active? Drugs? Jesus is the answer.
- Infidelity? Seeing someone else? Jesus is the answer.
- Communication broken down? Hardly talk? Jesus is the answer.
- Hostility and violence? Abuse? Distressed? Depressed? Jesus is the answer.

In Mark 4:35-41 we read the dramatic story of the disciples of Jesus caught in a terrible storm. They made many futile attempts to control the situation. Salvation came when they cried to Jesus and He stilled the storm. It is for us to cry, "Master, the tempest is raging and we need your help." We need Jesus in our home and family. We need Him in the living room, dining room, kitchen and bedroom. We need Him in the morning, and we need Him in the night. "Come unto Me," He pleads, "and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Come troubled wife; come troubled husband; come troubled single person; come troubled parent; come troubled child. "I will give you rest," says Jesus. Jesus is—the Creator, the Savior, the Healer, the Compassionate One, the Wonderful Counselor, the God who provides, the God of power, the Wonderful Lover. He will give you rest—love, joy, peace, pardon, power, grace.

**Do you know Jesus?** A church worker in Berlin, after World War II, went up to a man on the street. "Young man, do you know Jesus?" he asked. "No," replied the young man after a pause, "Try the police station; they know everybody." Jesus says, "This is eternal life, that they may know You,

the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John. 17:3).

Jesus in the heart makes a big difference in our relationships. “Jesus in the home,” said Charles Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers, “puts the devil in the streets.”

**How to receive Jesus.** First, acknowledge you are a lost sinner without Him. Romans 3:23 states, “All have sinned.” “I guess I was born wrong,” a little mischievous boy confessed after repeatedly getting into trouble.

Second, believe in Jesus as Savior (Acts 16:31).

Third, confess your sins (1 John 1:9; Heb. 4:16); and confess Christ (Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9, 10). “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock,” Christ states. “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). You can do it now. You can leave here knowing that you are a child of God.

## Conclusion

I do not know much about Joshua’s wife and children. But one statement he made has opened a window so we can see into his home: Josh. 24:15 “. . . as for me and my house we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). This suggests that in this home there was a loving, leading, wise, God-fearing husband; a loving, respectful, supportive wife; loving, obedient children; family worship, where they talked about the goodness of God; children who were taught to obey parents and God early; parents who modeled the virtues; and a home with love expressed.

Let us, like Joshua, say today, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord” let us, as husbands and fathers, lead the way; let wives and mothers be supportive and helpful; let children submit and obey; let all be examples of Jesus Christ before the world.

## Group Discussion Questions

These discussions may be interspersed throughout the presentation or used at the end.

1. What has the cross of Christ to do with a happy marriage?
2. Why do you think God hates divorce so much? (Mal. 2:14-16)
3. What are some of the methods of Satan to produce marital misery and divorce?
4. What do you understand by mutual submission between husband and wife? (Eph.5:21)
5. How important is a knowledge of Christ in having a happy marriage and family?

## References

White, E. G. (1952). *The Adventist home*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.