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Marriage Beyond Expectations

by Dr. Robert Parr
George has worked hard for more than three decades to provide for his family. While he had hoped for more time at home, his wife, Mary, assumed much of the day-to-day oversight of their four children in his absence.

Luke, their youngest child, was Mary's "baby." During his high school years she was critical of the girls he dated, even though they were all Christians. As Luke had always been sensitive to his mother's wishes, he never dated the same girl more than twice. When he brought Sharon home from college at Thanksgiving, Mary was distantly polite to her and the entire weekend was tense.

With his mother's disapproval so evident, Luke felt embarrassed as he asked his parents' approval to marry Sharon after graduation. George was supportive, but Mary was not. She had established a dependence on her son to compensate for a deteriorating marriage union. While neither Mary nor her husband would consider divorce, she had found in her son a confidant and sympathizer unavailable in her husband. Can George and Mary build a better marriage before their problems further threaten their son's relationships? What should they expect of their marriage?

Eric and Allison have two daughters, ages two and four. They live in a small, two-bedroom apartment, where Allison spends most of her time caring for the girls. One year ago, Allison discovered that Eric was unfaithful. Eric appeared to be truly sorry (she had never seen him cry before). He insisted it would never happen again and sought employment elsewhere since the other woman was a work associate. Eric's new job required that they sell their home and move to another town. They lost several thousand dollars on the sale of their home, and Eric's new job paid less than his previous one. Since most of Allison's income would go for child-care costs, she preferred to stay home with the girls.

Now Eric and Allison are separated from family and friends, and they have yet to find a church they like. Eric wants to buy another home, so he has taken on a second job. While he has given Allison no reason to doubt his faithfulness at this time, she still finds it difficult to trust him. Her social world is limited to preschoolers, and resentment toward rights, non-invasion of privacy, and lack of accountability are the order of the day.

It is little wonder that today's youth prefer to cohabit before establishing a legal marriage. The only reasons they hear for maintaining legal marriages are those tied to "traditional values." Those values suggest that we remain married for the sake of the children, for the sake of family reputation, and for the betterment of a dysfunctional society.

God's children are to sense a higher calling for maintaining their marriages. Marriage is to be much more than a microcosm of democracy—it is a reflection of the glory of God. Failure to see how our marriages can glorify God and honor His Son will result in our seeking mutual compatibility, social acceptance, a good cook, wage earner, entertainer, or convenient sex partner. That brings us back to living for ourselves rather than doing homage to the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Just as eating and drinking are not ends in themselves, so it is with marriage—"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The marriage union was established in the Garden of Eden, when God declared it was not good for Adam to be alone. The Lord then put Adam to sleep, removed one of his ribs, transformed it into the first woman, and presented her to Adam as his wife. Scripture describes this union as two people becoming "one flesh." No other human relationship brings two persons closer together than marriage. The trinitarian nature of God is such that the three persons of the Godhead are one God, and this plurality in unity is most clearly mirrored in marriage when two become one.

Latter twentieth century American culture offers Christians no help in answering these questions. On the individual level, we have been told that marriage exists for our personal satisfaction. If a marriage is "paying low dividends," then we tend to find personal reward elsewhere—whether in the children, employment, or another partner. On the societal level, our culture emphasizes principles of division rather than union. Individual
Testament prophet Hosea. The prophet is instructed by the Lord to take as his wife a harlot who will then bear children by her lovers (Hosea 1:2; 2:4-5). If ever a man should have given up on his marriage, it was Hosea. But God told Hosea to pursue his wife and express his love by purchasing her out of the slavery she had entered (3:1-3).

The sorry state of Hosea's marriage was to serve a far greater purpose. It became a platform from which he proclaimed the message of Israel's unfaithfulness to the God who had dealt with her so generously and compassionately. The sordid description which follows is that of a sinful, unfaithful people perverting the good gifts of their holy, loving God who revealed Himself as her husband. It concludes with God drawing His bride back to Himself in spite of her continued resistance.

Those of us who have been redeemed have been so wooed by our Heavenly Husband. Our own marriage takes on meaning within that context. My love for and faithfulness to my own partner is ultimately my response to the One who loves me more than anyone ever will. Maintaining and nurturing my marriage is one important way in which I worship and praise the God who made me for Himself.

The New Testament addresses husbands and wives separately in three passages: Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Peter 3:1-7. Each passage is couched in the context of glorifying God, so that partners will see the ultimate purpose for their marriage. Paul prefaces his instruction to wives and husbands in Ephesians 5:21 with the counsel to “...be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” Much attention has been given to the principle of mutual submission in this verse, but very little attention to the fear of Christ. The awe, homage, and worship which is to characterize our response to Christ serves as the motivation and rationale for us to relate to our partners as instructed in verses 22-33.

Paul precedes his admonition to wives and husbands in Colossians 3 with the principle, “And whatever you do in deed or word, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (v. 17). Christ's name represents His character, reputation, dignity, work and power—in other words, the Son of God in all His glory. That glorious name is to be preeminent in its influence upon how husbands and wives interact with one another.

Peter challenges Christians to continue in obedience in spite of false accusations, so that unbelievers will glorify God in the day of the Lord (2:12). He addresses believers as citizens (2:13-17), as servants (2:18-25), and as marriage partners (3:1-7).

What does it mean to glorify God? It means to make Him look good. God's purpose in all He does is to glorify Himself. The seraphim (Isaiah 6:3) and the elders (Revelation 4:11) continually praise Him in heaven. He is worthy to be sought earnestly and praised enthusiastically. God made us to live in Him, and we are misfits until we take our place in Him, “for in Him we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:28).

The God of glory is our Great Benefactor—“Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17). What God requires is for our good as well as His glory, so His will is “good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2) and His “Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). This God Who is greater than we could ever imagine and “is able to do exceedingly abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20) has wedded His people to Himself as His bride.

A remarkable statement of the Lord's delight in His wife is recorded in Isaiah 62:5 where we read, “And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you.” John Piper comments in The Pleasures of God: "When God does good to His people...it is like a bridegroom showering affection to his bride. We can't sustain a honeymoon level of intensity and affection...But God says His joy over His people is like a bridegroom over a bride. He is talking about honeymoon intensity and honeymoon pleasures and honeymoon energy and excitement and..."
enthusiasm and enjoyment...with God the honeymoon never ends” (pp. 194-195).

God Can Be Glorified In Our Marriages

Returning to George and Mary, Eric and Allison, how might they glorify God in their marriages? They must begin by spending time together.

Renewed courting and weekends away together may help refresh and revitalize their marriages. But there is more. They need fellowship and activity which will equip and enable them to glorify God in their marriages. It may begin as they memorize Scripture and read books together.

George and Mary should assume a ministry they can carry out together. In many instances this can be done through their local church. It is possible that when a couple like Eric and Allison visit their church, George and Mary could be just what this young family needs while far away from their own loved ones. George and Mary may even find that talking with the younger couple will help them feel free to discuss their own marriage.

Eric’s desire to purchase a home is understandable, but maintaining his marriage is more important. He may not listen to Allison’s suggestion that he give up the second job to spend time with her and the girls, but if George were to befriend him and make the same suggestion (even as something he wishes he had done), it may carry more weight with Eric. George and Mary might volunteer to care for the girls occasionally so Eric and Allison could fellowship with other young couples in the church. Helping to salvage a young couple will do more for George and Mary than shuffling the contents of their investment portfolio in preparation for retirement.

Eric and Allison are vulnerable, and their marriage must be built on something other than the past or a nice house. Local church involvement is critical in making a marriage one that glorifies God. A new town and a scaled-down lifestyle can provide opportunity to enjoy the important things of life, such as communication with one’s partner and time with one’s children. An hour or two may be available to the couple after the children are in bed. Time in the Word together and prayer, rather than surrendering to the TV, can result in life-long benefits to the marriage which will redound to the glory of God.

Dr. Robert Parr is associate professor of sociology at Cedarville College. He was honored as Faculty Member of the Year for 1993 and teaches the popular Marriage and the Family course. Dr. Parr holds the B.R.E. and the M.R.E. from Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, the M.A. from Michigan State University, and the M.S.W. and the Ph.D. from The Ohio State University. He and his wife, Katherine, have three grown children.

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