

GOD'S DESIGN FOR MARRIAGE

Dr. Alexander Kurian

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What Is Marriage?

Marriage is a Divine Institution

Marriage was not devised by man. It is not of human origin. It was instituted by God. God designed marriage as the foundational element of all human society. After the creation of Adam, God found that the solitude of Adam was not a good thing. "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen.2:18). "Not good" means not advantageous, not functional, not in keeping with the plan. Adam had a need for a companion in life to fulfill God's purpose in his life. Only God in His love and wisdom could meet this need. God said, "I will make him a helper suitable for him" (Gen.2:18). "Helper" does not mean someone inferior, but someone who is a counterpart who can complete him. "Helper" is not a demeaning term. It is used of God in the Old Testament. God is our "helper" (Psa.33:20; 70:5; 115:9; 121:1-2).

God, who found that Adam was lonely, created Eve and brought her to Adam (Gen.2:21-22). It was God who took the initiative to find a wife for Adam. Thus God performed the first marriage. He sanctified and blessed the first home and the first family. Jesus referred to the first marriage as God joining Adam and Eve. Listen to the words of Jesus in Matt.19:6: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." So it is not man, but God who established marriage.

Since marriage is not of human origin, we do not have the right to make our own rules and regulations concerning marriage. Man always tries to make his own rules to serve his sinful and selfish agenda to desecrate the sanctity of the marriage covenant. Sinful humanity is in rebellion against God's laws and rules. God as the establisher of marriage has laid out His rules and regulations concerning marriage. He has revealed His will about marriage in the pages of the Holy Bible. We must therefore study and abide by the Biblical principles for marriage.

Marriage is a One-flesh Union

Marriage is not only a divinely ordained union, it is also a "one flesh" union. "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh (Gen.2:24). The Bible clearly states that "he shall cleave to his wife," *not wives*. The biblical concept of marriage is monogamy (only one partner in life). This is the most important verse in the Bible on marriage. The ultimate goal of marriage is clearly spelled out in

Gen.2:24 – **oneness**; two people becoming one person. This verse is quoted four times in the New Testament, by the Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul (Matt.19:5; Mark 10:7-8, 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph.5:31). Jesus further added that “consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh.”

The term “**one flesh**” is a basic concept in an understanding of the Christian view of marriage. It means the personal relationship of one man and one woman in unity and harmony resulting in total oneness and togetherness in life. They are two persons, but together they are as one. It is the fusion of two persons without the loss of individual personality. They become one in body, soul and spirit. Each person, body, soul, and spirit is to be joined to the other that they become one in these areas. This oneness leads to **total marriage**. In a total marriage of oneness, there is the union of two bodies (sexual relationship in marriage), union of two souls (mental, emotional, social oneness), and spiritual oneness (in faith and in serving God). God wanted Adam and Eve to live in constant recognition of their need for each other, and together their dependence on God who joined them in marriage.

A husband and wife have to have the oneness and unity in all areas of their married life. They have to carefully protect that oneness at all costs and they should not allow anything or anyone, including their own family, to destroy that oneness. Several factors that can hinder or even destroy the oneness lurk all around us. Preoccupation with one’s career, extramarital affairs, interference of family and friends, involvement in too many activities, lack of quality time for one another, lack of communication, ambition for material prosperity and wealth, can all threaten the oneness factor. We live in a corrupt world and in every society, the door is wide open for promiscuity and perversion. We have to be extra vigilant to protect the purity, sanctity and faithfulness in marriage.

Commitment and **contentment** are the core values in married life. We find these principles clearly laid out in **Hebrews 13:4-6**. We have to give honor to marriage and remain faithful to one another in marriage. God will surely judge people who are immoral and those who commit adultery (Heb.13:4). Be committed to your marriage covenant. Heb.13:5-6 reminds us to find our contentment in the Lord – being at peace with what we have as well as with our position in life. “Let your character be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “ I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you” (Heb.13:5).

The truth of oneness also points to the intimacy and exclusiveness of the marriage relationship. Three specific and essential actions are required for this oneness to take place – **leaving, cleaving (joining)** and **becoming one**. This means, in marriage, one’s primary loyalty clearly shifts from parents to the spouse. All other relationships in life become secondary and the husband-wife relationship becomes primary. In marriage, a man is to leave his family, join his wife, unite with her, and establish a new home distinct from the parents. Not only the married couple, but their parents also have to understand this. When the children get married, the parents should allow them to realize and experience the leaving, cleaving and becoming one with their life-partner. This does not mean that the married couple has to abandon their parents. The

parents have to be respected and cared for. But the priority of their relationship and responsibility is shifted from parents to the spouse.

The very nature of the one flesh union teaches the **permanence** of the marriage relationship. It is an unbreakable union. They are no longer two, but one flesh. It is a life-long relationship. “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt.19:6; Mark 10:9). God instituted marriage and man has no authority to break it.

Marriage is Covenantal Companionship

God did not want Adam to be lonely, so he fashioned a companion (Eve) or a partner for him (Gen.2:18). One of the purposes of marriage is **companionship** that together as a team, the husband and wife fulfill their responsibilities and glorify God. Companionship involves closeness and intimacy. In a marriage relationship, the husband and wife should provide companionship to one another. Each of them was to live for the other, and both were to live for God.

The concept of marriage as companionship also appears in Mala.2:14: “The Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth.....she is your companion and your wife by covenant.” Prov.2:17 describes an adulterous woman as one who “forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.” A companion in marriage is one with whom one enters into a close union with a vow or **covenant commitment**. The husband and wife accept each other willingly and voluntarily and make a commitment to each other to fulfill their marital obligations. This covenantal relationship is for life, “until death do us part.” Marriage is a covenantal commitment between two persons to become each other’s loving companion for life (“marriage by covenant,” Mal.2:14).

Marriage is a Symbolic Union

The Apostle Paul compares the marriage union with the union of Christ and the church (Eph.5:32). He has pointed out that marriage is a beautiful picture of the church and its relationship to Christ (Eph.5:23-29). The marriage relationship points to a holy secret revealed in the Word of God – the sacred union between Christ and His church. Christ is the Bridegroom and the church is His Bride. Christian husbands and wives are called to reflect the love of Christ and the submission of the church to Christ’s loving and caring leadership. The sacred relationship between Christian husbands and wives is inextricably related to the sacred relationship between Christ and His church.

A Definition of Marriage

In the light of the fundamental and foundational truths about marriage, now we can attempt a definition of marriage. *Marriage is a covenantal companionship between a man and a woman in the will and plan of God, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, to fulfill God’s purpose in their life through oneness.*

Marriage is sustained by mutual commitment, contentment, love, companionship, caring, and fidelity. “Let marriage be held in honor among all and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (Heb.13:4). The preciousness of marriage has to be treasured at all cost (“honor” in Heb.13:4 literally means, “valuable,” “precious”). Heb.13:5 warns against covetousness and materialism. “Let your character be free from the love of money.” Along with the *commitment* in marriage covenant, we should also find *contentment* – being at peace with what we have. In Philippians 4:11-12 Paul also talks about contentment - “I have learnt to be content in whatever circumstances I am.....” (See 1 Tim 6:7-8 also). The pursuit of material prosperity and craving for wealth can destroy the marriage relationship. It can easily steal away our time from spiritual and family priorities. Our security is not found in material possessions, but in God who promised, I will never leave you, nor forsake you” (Heb.13:5).

Summary

1. Marriage is a divine institution.
2. Marriage is between a man and a woman.
3. Marriage is to be monogamous – only one partner in life.
4. Marriage is a “one flesh” union.
5. Marriage is a covenantal union.
6. Marriage is a lasting/permanent union.
7. Marriage is an intimate and exclusive union.
8. Marriage is a symbolic union.
9. It is an honorable/precious union

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Responsibilities of Husbands & Wives

Mutual Responsibilities

1. Forsake all others for the husband or wife (Gen.2:24; Matt.19:5-6; Eph.5:31).
2. Remain faithful (1 Cor.7:10-11).
3. Provide mutual sexual satisfaction (1 Cor.7:3-5).

Responsibilities of Husband to Wife

1. Sacrificial love (Eph.5:25, 28, 33; Col.3:19).
2. Patience and understanding (Col.3:19; 1 Pet. 3:7).
3. Honor (1 Pet. 3:7).
4. Support and care (1 Tim.5:8; Eph.5:28-29).
5. Leadership (Eph.5:23; 1 Tim.3:4-5).

Responsibilities of Wife to Husband

1. Submission (Eph.5:22, 24; Col.3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1; Titus 2:5).
2. Respect (Eph.5:33; 1 Pet. 3:2, 5, 6).
3. Love of companionship (Titus 2:4).

Love & Submission in Marriage

Love in the context of marriage is always *agape love* which is sacrificial and self-giving. Paul describes this love as **sacrificial** (Eph.5:25), **purifying** (Eph.5:26-27), **caring** (Eph.5:28-30), and **unbreakable** (Eph.5:31). The motive for loving one's wife with agape love is Christ's love for His own bride, the church. A husband who realizes that his wife is truly "his own flesh" will treat her with love and care (Eph.5:29). A wife's love for her husband is referred to in Titus 2:4 (older women should "encourage the young women to love their husbands" or literally "to be husband-lovers"). The word for "love" here is different from the agape love. *Love* in Titus 2:4 refers to the love of friendly companionship in which you do things together. Both of these aspects of love are crucial to a healthy marriage.

Submission is a willing and voluntary attitude. It is not forced upon the wife. Submission is not slavish fear. It does not mean that the wife is inferior to the husband. The word *submission* means "to line up under;" voluntarily placing oneself under the leadership and authority of another. In marriage, the wife happily follows the loving leadership of her husband. Submission

is in the sense of supporting the husband in his leadership role. The **manner** or attitude of submission is to be “as to the Lord” (Eph.5:22). The wife’s **motive** for submitting to her husband is by recognizing the truth that he is the head in the family just “as Christ also is the head of the church” (Eph.5:23). A wife’s voluntary submission arises out of her own submission to Christ. Just as Christ is not inferior to the Father, but is the second Person in the Trinity, so wives are equal to their own husbands. Yet in a marriage relationship, though they are equal, a husband and wife have different roles.

In Christian marriage, there is no *competition* between husband and wife, but only *commitment, consideration* and *completeness*.

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The Unequal Yoke

“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness. Or what harmony Christ has with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols.....”(2 Cor. 6:14-16).

Do you see what these verses teach? The term “bound together” or “unequally yoked” comes from the word for yoking animals together as they plow a field. If you are a Christian you must marry another Christian. *God forbids an unequal yoke, the marriage of a believer and an unbeliever.* The yoke is a picture of marriage. The picture of two oxen pulling a plough together symbolizes a husband and a wife working together. The imagery of the “unequal yoke” is a reference to Deut. 22:10, “you shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.” The Israelites were forbidden to plow with an ox and an ass. One clean and another unclean animal would constitute an unbecoming association. Oxen and donkeys pulled differently. They cannot work together, because these two animals have two different natures. Paul draws a spiritual principle from this illustration. It is a mistake to hitch together a believer and an unbeliever in a close relationship like that of marriage. They cannot pull together in a unified direction. Believers and unbelievers have different worldviews, different goals, different beliefs, different methods, and different values.

Note the importance of words like *partnership, fellowship, harmony, common, and agreement.* Together these words describe close, intimate, interdependent, shared, and single-minded relationship as we find in a marriage relationship. This kind of “bound together” partnership is never possible in a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever.

Some believers find an excuse for marrying unbelievers under the pretext that such a relationship may bring the salvation of the unbelieving partner. But one must know that marriage is not intended as a method of evangelism. If that was God’s plan, He would have urged all believers to marry unbelievers and lead them to salvation. Our responsibility is to obey the clear commands of God and not to violate His revealed will in His Word.

In **1 Cor.7:39** we find Paul’s advice to the widows. “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.” Since death breaks the marriage relationship, a widow is free to remarry. But the guideline is clearly given by Paul, “only in the Lord.” She should marry only a Christian. The same principle is also applicable to a widower. In 1 Cor.7:39 also Paul prohibits the marriage between a believer and an unbeliever.

God has forbidden the unequal yoke in marriage for at least three reasons:

1. A Believer and an unbeliever in a marriage relationship cannot fulfill the ultimate purpose of marriage – oneness; “the two shall become one flesh” (Gen.2:24). They can never enjoy the blessing of a total marriage as there cannot be spiritual oneness in such an alliance. There is always a spiritual wall between them. The unbeliever is dead in trespasses and sins (Eph.2:1). He is spiritually dead until He is made alive in regeneration by the Holy Spirit (Eph.2:1-5). Therefore, it is absolutely impossible for a believer and an unbeliever to attain the ultimate purpose of spiritual oneness in marriage.

2. The unequal yoke also can become a great threat to the spiritual life of the believer. In such a relationship, the believer may be tempted to sin and make spiritual compromises and eventually, his/her spiritual testimony will be lost. This is what happened to King Solomon who loved many foreign women, who turned his heart away from the Lord (1 Kings 11:1-3).

3. When a Christian marries an unbeliever, they will not be able to illustrate the symbolism of marriage – the sacred relationship between Christ and the church (Eph.5:22-33). In a mixed marriage between a believer and an unbeliever, there is no relevance for this symbolism of Christ and the church. God forbids an unequal yoke because the beautiful picture of the relationship between Christ and the church is lost in such a marriage.

What if a believer is already married to an unbeliever? Maybe both were unbelievers when they got married, and eventually the husband or wife is saved. Does that mean you should seek to separate or cut off your relationship from the unsaved partner? No. The command in 2 Cor.6:14 about unequal yoke warns against entering into such a relationship. But if that has already happened, then the principle of 1 Cor.7:13 has to be followed. “And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away.” Paul says that if your unsaved partner is willing to stay with you, you are to stay in that relationship and become a witness for Christ. Though it will not be easy, God can make the impossible possible.

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How to Find a Godly Mate

Scripture says a lot about marriage and the distinct roles and responsibilities of a husband and wife. But we find only one chapter in the entire Bible that deals directly with finding one's life-partner: **Genesis 24** (I would encourage you to read this chapter at least three times to understand and appreciate the principles involved). This is the longest chapter in the book of Genesis. Here we read about Abraham's search for his beloved son Isaac's wife. Since Abraham is old and weak, he commissions his most trusted servant (maybe Eliezer, Gen.15:2) to do it. From Genesis 24 we can learn some vital principles about finding a godly mate. These are trans-cultural and trans-generational principles binding on God's people living in any generation.

1. A person must be mature enough to get married to assume the responsibilities of married life. Isaac was forty years old when he got married (Gen.25:20). He was a responsible, accountable, mature young man. Since marriage is the single most important decision you make on earth apart from faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, it must be a wise and mature decision.

2. One must seek the counsel of godly parents and mentors. Throughout the Bible, children are admonished to listen to parental advice (Prov.6:21-23; 15:5; 23:22). Never underestimate their experience, counsel and wisdom. The parents want the best for their children. They can approach situations more objectively than impulsively. Abraham was a man of faith, and apparently his servant was as well. They were highly involved in the process of finding a suitable wife for Isaac. Along with the parents, other godly men and women can be of help in this process. Such significant others can be channels of blessing to you.

3. Do not limit God's ways. God's will is that His children should get married in accordance with His plan and purpose. Cultural practices should not take precedence over God's will and Word. God can lead a person directly to his life partner. God can also use others as matchmakers for you. Do not limit God; He can use any number of ways and means to lead you to the right person. The moment you say, it has to be the American way, Indian way, or African way, you are limiting God. It is poor spiritual perception and bad theology. Allow God to use others to minister to you even in the area of your marriage decision, if He is pleased to do so. Though ultimately it is your decision, trying to be the "boss" all alone can lead you to wrong decisions in life.

4. Maintain the essential spiritual separation. Abraham did not want a bride from the daughters of Canaanites for his Son. "But you shall go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac" (Gen.24:4). The race was not the issue here, but faith. The Canaanite people worshipped false gods. Abraham wanted a wife for Isaac from the people who knew the true God. The faith factor is of utmost priority in the marriage decision (2 Cor.6:14). For spiritual oneness and unity, doctrinal convictions are also important.

5. Saturate the whole process in prayer. Though Abraham and his servant carefully planned for the journey to find a wife for Isaac, from the beginning, the entire process was saturated in prayer (Gen.24:7, 12-14, 27). The danger of selfish, sinful and carnal decisions can be avoided if we bathe the whole process in prayer, totally depending on the Lord, and following His guidance. This is a matter that needs intense, specific and focused prayer. When we draw unto the Lord constantly in prayer, our relationship with Him becomes primary and we will have the mindset to please the Lord and to seek His will. Prayer also gives us an opportunity to submit to God's sovereign authority throughout the process.

6. Look for godly qualities. This will be a great blessing in married life. Rebekah's moral purity, godliness, and family values become so evident in this event. There was open communication in her family. They respected each other and listened to one another. Rebekah was hospitable, polite, hard-working, and showed respect for others (Gen.24:13, 14, 17-20, 24, 25, 28, 29, 57-60). Her spiritual character, godliness and values in life were clearly reflected in the way she talked, served and conducted herself. It was very convincing to the servant. The woman he sought must be one who trusted the God of Abraham and who had maintained sexual purity (Gen.24:16). Not only her spiritual and moral beauty, but even her physical beauty also is mentioned by the Holy Spirit (Gen.24:16). Beauty is a desirable thing, but it is not fundamental. The Isaac-Rebekah marriage story teaches us a vital principle on love and marriage - *Romantic love is never the basis for marriage; marriage is the basis for romantic love.*

7. Learn to wait for God's time. It seems Isaac was contemplating his future and waiting for the return of the servant with a favorable word. He was walking about in deep thought and prayer in the field, probably thinking about the servant's journey and its outcome (Gen.24:62). Maybe he was praying about his future spouse. He learned to trust in God and wait for His time. He was at the right place at the right time to meet the caravan. God has guided him and ordered his steps to go and meet Rebekah. Without even having seen her before, he married her and loved her. She brought joy and comfort to his life (Gen.24:67). Isaac bringing her to his mother Sarah's tent was a public act of recognizing her as the new matriarch of the clan. Their marriage was beautifully consummated. They were able to enjoy their intimacy to the fullest extent because of sexual purity before marriage. Rebekah was a virgin on her wedding day (Gen.24:16) and presumably, so was Isaac.

8. All those who were involved in this process were fully convinced that this marriage was in God's perfect will. No one doubted the providential hand of God in the Isaac-Rebekah marriage. "The thing comes from the Lord" (Gen.24:50). Though others were involved in the process of finding a wife for Isaac, finally it was the decision of Rebekah and Isaac (Gen.24:57-67). Nobody forced them for a decision or pushed them into this marriage. They were sure of God's will in this matter.

It is desirable and wise to find out all you can about the person whom you are going to marry. Due weight must be given to the most important factors for your future married life. This may include faith, calling, vision in life, education, career, finance, health etc. There must be open

and honest communication about these matters so that you can decide sensibly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. People who try to know each other through years of dating foolishly think that they can get to know all about their life-partner. But thousands of divorces that happen every day even after years of dating and friendship prove that such people are sadly mistaken. Romantic love and physical attraction to a person will not sustain a marriage. The Lord is the one who has to really help you to make a real assessment of the character of the person. Trust the Lord to enable you to know all that is necessary about any person.

After reading and studying Genesis 24, ask this question: “How did Isaac acquire his wife?” The answer will surprise you. This narrative is lovely as it stands, so dramatic, and romantic; at the same time, full of valuable lessons on God’s providential care and guidance in the life of all who will trust and wait for Him. Through prayer, Scripture, counsel and providential intervention, God will lead us to the right mate he has chosen for us. We will be able to recognize that person, most of all, by the godly character manifested in his or her life. Trust God and obey Him in the selection of a mate. God is not bound by culture. He is directly involved with His children in the selection of godly mates in any culture. The one who made and chose Eve for Adam, will guide our selection of mates today, if we allow Him. “Houses and wealth are inherited from parents, but a prudent wife is from the Lord” (Prov.19:14).

Remember, God has designed marriage to achieve the purposes God has for our lives.