

Marriage and the Family

How Mother, Father, and Children May Shine Forth the Goodness of God

Married people, on average, live two years longer than their unmarried counterparts. This longevity benefit seems to stem from the better health habits of married people, who tend to eat better, exercise more, and smoke and drink less. But there are caveats. The health benefit seems to apply to relatively happy marriages. Extreme unhappiness in marriage may have the reverse effect, making people in such marriages even less healthy than single people.¹

Many chalk marriage difficulties up to compatibility. “We’re just too different!” say those in continual conflict. Fortunately, the relational principles of the Word, plus the power of the love of God, who is “poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who is given to us” (Romans 5:5), can radically heal and transform marriages. Differences can become bridges to greater understanding and love. Because the Designer of marriage is also the Sustainer of marriage, this institution is still alive and well and living on planet earth.

Let us consider the definition, meaning, purpose, and permanence of marriage.

The Definition of Marriage

Before we can fully appreciate marriage, we need to know what it is. God introduces us to it in Genesis, where, after Adam names the animals, God anesthetizes Adam:

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. Genesis 2:21-22.

After God introduces his two humans, Adam exclaims: “This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!” (vs. 23). Then he calls her “woman” because she was taken out of him, the man. The writer of Genesis then says these profound, defining words: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (vs. 24). This “leave and cleave” verse defines marriage as a breaking away and a joining together.

Breaking away from our previous families, and the family unit of which we have always been a part, we join together with a partner to form a new family unit, becoming “one flesh” in sexual intimacy, but also in the sharing of life.

Let’s fast forward to another ancient marriage: We’re told that after the process of Abraham’s servant finding a wife for his master’s son, “Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent; and he took Rebekah and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Genesis 24:67). The beginning of a new family, marked by physical intimacy

¹ <https://ifstudies.org/blog/does-marriage-really-make-us-healthier-and-happier>

between husband and wife, and the focusing of affections upon that new person, is the essence of marriage.

The Meaning of Marriage

Just before quoting the “leave and cleave” passage above, Paul said this about marriage:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. Ephesians 5:25-31

Notice that in this passage, husbands’ love for their wives serves as a metaphor for Christ’s love for the church. Notice that the husband nourishes, serves, and cherishes his wife, treating her as his own flesh. Her flourishing is his flourishing. This is servant leadership in a nutshell. In turn, the wife submits to her husband, an act of trust based on demonstrated sacrificial love.

Married sex is a beautiful thing. It metaphorizes the intimate union God desires with His church. Loving sex between a married man and woman is healthy and lifegiving; it cooperates with physiology and can produce children. In contrast, other forms of sex can harm the body and do not produce children. In this way, even nature tells us what the Bible consistently affirms—that holy sexuality is between a married man and woman.

The Purpose of Marriage

God made human beings in His “image” (Genesis 1:27). This word in Hebrew, *tselem*, means “representative figure.” Due to the exigencies of the great controversy, God made humans as representative figures, “a stage play for the universe, for angels and for men” (1 Corinthians 4:9, Peshitta translation). And He made us “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). It is through the blending of male and female that this planet-wide witness takes place; and the primary context in which male and female blend is marriage. Marriage answers to a divine plan to shine God’s love into the universe.

It is from this divine calling to shine God’s love that we learn love. While it is true that marriage can be challenging for selfish human hearts, it is ultimately designed to bring us greater happiness and flourishing.

Children often come as the fruit of the marriage union. In fact, all married couples are called to “be fruitful and multiply” according to the first command in the Bible (Genesis 1:28). Now, not all couples will have biological children; but God expects us to share our wealth, including

relational wealth, and childless couples may do that with non-biological “children” through mentorship, discipleship, and counseling.

It is through teaching and example that parents have an opportunity to shape children for the kingdom of God. God says of His laws, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:5-9). Research shows that parents who both teach spiritual principles and exemplify them have the greatest likelihood of imparting those values to their children.

God also calls parents to balance discipline and affection. Children raised by parents who engage in what is called authoritative parenting, which features high levels of both traits, have a greater likelihood of embracing the values of the parent. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, or discipline without affection, tends toward poorer outcomes, as does permissive parenting which is characterized by affection without discipline. In short, in our parenting God calls us to reflect the justice and mercy, the grace and law, that balance His great character of love.

The Permanence of Marriage

Due to the solemnity of its meaning and purpose, marriage should be entered into with a sense of its permanence. More and more, the attitude is, “We’ll stay together while the good feelings last.” This conditionality doesn’t reflect the spirit of marriage as God designed it.

Humans are wired to grow in the context of secure bonds, but creating such bonds requires commitment. This is why God designed marriage to be covenantal rather than contractual. A contract is transactional and quid pro quo. It says, “I will love you as long as you love me.” This creates an impossible-to-break withholding pattern, doesn’t it? If I wait for you to love me before I love you, and if you do the same, we’ll both wait forever. To create stability in a relationship, one person or both must be fully committed, and say, in effect, “I will love you at any cost to myself.” This is what God did in sending His Son in accord with the “eternal counsel of peace” (See Zechariah 6:13), and what He has designed marriage to do. The permanence and commitment of marriage helps marriages better fulfill their purpose of shining out the character of God.

Does this mean that a marriage can never be ended? No. The Bible allows for divorce in the case of adultery (See Matthew 5:32). Although the theological community hotly debates it, some scholars also see a case for abuse and abandonment being grounds for divorce. In any case, it is always the choice of the person in the marriage to stay in the marriage, or not, according to how God leads the individual conscience. To pressure a person to stay in untenable or dangerous circumstances is coercive and unkind. Like the Sabbath, God made marriage for mankind, not mankind for marriage (See Mark 2:27).

An option that should more often be considered, which can save a marriage, is what is called structured separation. This approach entails four “C”s: Affirming a *commitment* to the marriage,

confronting the problems and explaining the *consequences* of them, and detailing the *conditions* upon which the couple may live together again. Sometimes the wake-up call of physical separation suffices to change the course of the offending individual. Professional, competent counselors play an essential role throughout such a process.

The Elijah Message

Elijah faced off with the Baal prophets at Mount Carmel. He requested that two bulls be laid on two altars, and that both the Baal prophets and Elijah pray to their gods to ignite the sacrifice. The Baal prophets shouted, danced, and cut themselves with swords and spears to persuade their gods to send fire, but none came. Then Elijah ordered that his altar be drenched with water, and that a surrounding trench be dug and filled with water. They did this three times, swamping Elijah's entire altar with water. Then Elijah prayed, "Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this people may know that You are the Lord God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again" (1 Kings 18:37). And the fire ignited.

Notice that the fire came when Elijah prayed for the "turning back" of hearts.

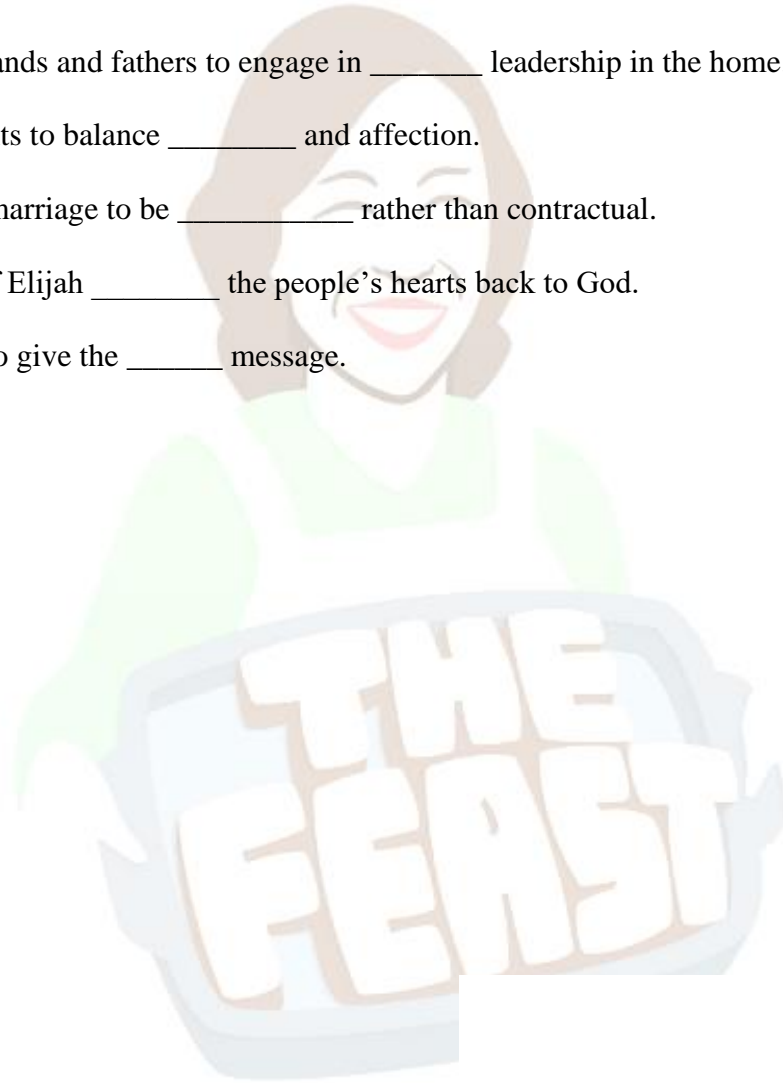
The prophet Malachi said, "I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Malachi 4:5-6). The earth withers under the effects of the breakdown of the family. God has given His people a message that, attended by the Spirit, will turn their hearts back to one another in love.

The Takeaway

God created the family unit to teach us how to love and be loved. The Edenic family unit of husband and wife with children has been time-tested and scientifically studied. It works! Through it, humanity flourishes. May we do all we can to preserve it in these desperate times.

Quiz

1. Married people, on average, live ___ years longer than their unmarried counterparts.
2. In this study, we considered the _____, _____, _____, and _____ of marriage.
3. When Adam saw Eve, he exclaimed, “This is now ___ of my ___ and ___ of my ___!” (Genesis 2:23).
4. God calls husbands and fathers to engage in _____ leadership in the home.
5. God calls parents to balance _____ and affection.
6. God designed marriage to be _____ rather than contractual.
7. The ministry of Elijah _____ the people’s hearts back to God.
8. We are called to give the _____ message.



- Answer Key**
1. Two
 2. Definition, meaning, purpose, permanence
 3. Bone, bone, flesh, flesh
 4. Servant
 5. Discipline
 6. Covenantal
 7. Turned
 8. Elijah