

God's Design for Scriptural Romance

Part 3: Preparing Your Children for Biblical Betrothal

by John W. Thompson

The story is told of a famous traveling juggler who retired from his career and invested his entire life savings in a huge diamond. On the ship back to his homeland, where he intended to live out his remaining days, several fellow passengers recognized the well-known performer as he strolled on the upper deck and urged him to give one final, dazzling show. Enticed by the praise of men, the juggler removed two balls from one pocket and his immense diamond from the other. Beginning to juggle them together in the most spectacular fashion, he tossed the objects higher and higher into the air as the crowd roared with acclaim. Suddenly, the great ship heaved to one side, the juggler lost his balance, and the precious, sparkling diamond fell into the deep, black sea where it was lost forever.

Like that priceless diamond, our children are our own irreplaceable treasures. Yet many parents today are carelessly juggling them for the praise of men, yielding to the enticing counsel of friends and relatives to "lighten up" in their child training. But when the ship of life lurches, as it always does, these parents will lose their precious children forever in the dark sea of depravity. You think it can't happen in your family, but Dads and Moms, you must keep a firm grasp if you are to preserve your children from the temptations of the world. And probably the greatest snare will be the attraction of romance, where passion rather than principle reigns supreme!

In our two prior articles on this subject, we sought first to establish the abiding Scriptural principles for betrothal, then to evaluate whether dating was consistent with those principles. Effectively dealing with the dating dilemma, however, is only half the equation, the "put off" of Ephesians 4:22-24. The other half, the "put on," is the substance of our remaining questions. If not dating, then how do we prepare our children for biblical betrothal? And, when the time comes, how do we practice betrothal step-by-step?

COURTSHIP vs. BETROTHAL

Preparing our children for biblical betrothal begins with an accurate understanding of what it is. Until our present century, children knew what betrothal was because they grew up in homes and churches that practiced it. They found security in the process of betrothal and eagerly looked forward to it as a great blessing. But today, regrettably, it is an enigma that requires explanation, illustration and sometimes even persuasion with our children.

Let's explore together what betrothal is, and what it is not.

In our past two articles, we have used the terms "courtship" and "betrothal" almost synonymously to refer to the biblical process of pursuing a man-woman relationship under the careful and caring oversight of parents and for the sole purpose of marriage, not recreation. But in addition to this general use, the words "courtship" and "betrothal" also have specific, technical meanings that distinguish them from each other. Indeed they are two separate and sequential stages in the fourfold process that leads to marriage, a process comprised of friendship, courtship, betrothal and wedding. Friendship (a cordial relationship of mutual esteem) and wedding (the ceremony joining a man and woman in marriage) are well understood by all. But what is the distinction between courtship and betrothal? We'll be devoting entire, detailed articles to each of these topics in upcoming months, so please bear with me as we look at them only superficially now.

Like the word "trinity," the term "courtship" is not found in the Bible, but the idea surely is. In brief, courtship is the process of investigating (i.e., getting to know) a person with marriage in mind. It is the time period, after spiritual and vocational preparation for marriage has been completed, for evaluating a suitor's inward character, values, interests, beliefs, practices and life purpose to ensure that a godly match occurs. The term "courtship" is derived from the words court and ship. "Court" means a trial of law for evaluating evidence; and "ship" refers to boundaries (such as in the word township, meaning boundaries of a town). So, the term "courtship" may be used to speak of the boundaries, or proper approach, for evaluating evidence of a person's true character, just as in a court of law. We see this investigative process in several scriptural marriages (Isaac and Rebekah - Gen. 24) as well as in various scriptural principles, such as 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good."

Betrothal, on the other hand, refers to the stage that comes after a positively concluded courtship investigation. Betrothal may be defined as a binding commitment to marry, sought by a young man, agreed to by a young woman, approved and supervised by the fathers of both, and attested by a bridal provision (bride price/dowry) and by witnesses and/or a document. In Scripture, the terms "betrothal," "engagement" and "espousal" come from the same Hebrew and Greek words meaning, basically, "a promise to marry." But this is a far more secure promise than our modern engagement such that in Bible days it required a decree of divorcement to annul it. So strong was the betrothal commitment that in Scripture the couple is already referred to as husband and wife, the parents are called in-laws, and a woman whose betrothed spouse dies is designated a widow!

As demonstrated in our first article of this series, betrothal was God's pattern throughout Scripture and was the norm for all cultures before the twentieth century. Perversions of God's standard have included dating (such as Samson with Delilah), polygamy, and divorce, but these were always exceptions to the rule both in Scripture and history. Even modern Western culture practiced

betrothal until the 1920s, and it was in some measure embraced by Christian churches until the 1950s. For example, according to Jonathan Lindvall, in 1959 the Family Life Committee of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod reported that “almost half of the Missouri Synod families responding [to a survey] accepted betrothal as equal to marriage in the sight of God.” They further reported that “sixty-nine percent of the clergymen of the Missouri Synod regarded betrothal as binding as marriage.”

For three generations now, children have had virtually no knowledge or understanding of biblical courtship and betrothal. In times past, boys and girls observed godly romance in their home, church and community. It was the common experience of their brothers, sisters, cousins, friends and neighbors. They learned it practically by osmosis. But all that has changed. Now to offset the strong allurements of worldly dating, our children need deliberate and thorough training for courtship and betrothal. What are the necessary steps for such preparation? There are three: (1) example, (2) encouragement and (3) equipping.

YOUR CHILDREN’S EXAMPLE

First, your own marriage is your children’s example, or model, for how they will understand the five fundamental principles of scriptural romance: piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience [see Part 1, Issue 26]. As they observe your marriage, how will your children envision their own future relationship with a spouse? Ask yourself these questions:

Parents, does piety in your marriage-imitating Christ’s relationship with His bride, the church-give your children a healthy appetite for a godly marriage? Or does sinfulness between you and your spouse suppress their natural hunger for a life companion?

Fathers, through your vigilant care for your wife, are you giving your children a thirst for patriarchy-a husband who spiritually leads, morally protects and sacrificially provides for his bride? And wives, through your respectful submission to your husband, do your children eagerly look to their father for oversight? Or do your children witness self-centeredness by the husband and disrespect by the wife which tear down patriarchy?

Dads and Moms, through your faithfulness (purity) toward your mate, have you given your children a single eye of devotion to one spouse for a lifetime? Has your marriage given them a vision for loyalty and affection toward one partner for life? Or, do your children observe a cold heart within the home and a wandering eye outside it, an attitude of sensuality?

Fathers, are you exemplifying spiritual leadership in worship, prayer, teaching, witness and decision making in your family? Are you educating your sons to be well-trained vocationally and to avoid the slavery of debt? And is your daughter being prepared to be a helper in her husband’s life work through the development of her God-given talents? Or is slothfulness in your

own life begetting slothfulness in your children-the sins of the fathers being passed on to their children?

Finally, Dads and Moms, is your marriage one of confident patience mixed with diligence, “walking by faith, and not by sight”? Or are you often fretful, anxious and intolerant toward one another and toward your circumstances? In short, is your example teaching your children to be persistent or perfidious?

Be assured, parents, how you practice these Five Fundamental Principles in your own “romance” will significantly influence your children’s attitude toward biblical betrothal. But in addition to your marriage being their example or model, there is another way that your children are prepared for biblical betrothal.

YOUR CHILDREN’S ENCOURAGEMENT

Your relationship to your children is their encouragement, or motivation, to embrace biblical betrothal. Thankfully the Lord is “turning the hearts of fathers back to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal. 4:6; Lk. 1:17) for the most essential ingredient in child training is a mutual love between father and child. Why is this so? It is because a child who sincerely loves his father will be motivated to please him, obey him, and honor him. Jesus explained the motivating power of love when He declared, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). So, a child who truly loves his father will want to obey and honor his father in the principle of betrothal. A daughter will entrust her heart to her father, and so will a son. Moreover, a father who truly loves his children will want to prepare, protect, and provide a spouse for his children because his heart has been turned to them in righteousness.

Some fathers have chosen to formalize and symbolize the loving trust and commitment that exists between them and their children in regard to betrothal. They may do this through a verbal or written “covenant” expressing one another’s promise before God to follow biblical principles of courtship and betrothal and to avoid worldly dating and romance (see samples).

A signed covenant (see the link for a sample courtship covenant below), framed and hung somewhere in the home, can serve as a regular reminder of the solemn promises that were made. Yet some fathers have rightly observed in Scripture that a covenant was always ratified with a sign or symbol, such as the rainbow which affirmed God’s covenant with Noah never to flood the earth again. At the time of signing the covenant, they have given some sort of token to symbolize their agreement. The Courtship Connection (www.CourtshipConnection.com. Phone: 734-847-5210) offers a “Heart Necklace with Key” designed for this very purpose. This is a meaningful symbol of a daughter giving her dad the key to her heart until he gives it to her future spouse at the time of betrothal. The inscription on the heart is “He who holds the key can unlock my heart.”

With our own three daughters (who happen to prefer rings over necklaces) we chose three matching rings since in Scripture the ring was a sign of authority and protection (see Esther 8:2). And we termed them “covenant rings” to symbolize our mutual agreement that their hearts are under the authority and protection of their father until he betroths them to a young man. My wife and I made this a very special occasion by taking our daughters to a famous New England Inn for dinner, a real dress-up affair, though they were not told the reason. Since we seldom order dessert when we eat out (expensive, you know), they were perplexed when I told them that this event called for special feasting. When the waitress brought their desserts, each plate came with a small, gift-wrapped box (my pre-arrangement with the waitress, of course). We had taught the girls about betrothal for several years before. Now was the time to bring their training to its proper conclusion of a commitment.

We have said that to successfully prepare your children for betrothal, your marriage is their example and your relationship (to them) is their encouragement. But preparation will fail with only modeling and motivating, as important as these two components are. There is an essential third element which deals with the necessary method for implanting truth so it sticks.

YOUR CHILDREN’S EQUIPPING

Your ultimate equipping of them comes through training. What Christian parent is not thoroughly familiar with the classic child training passage: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6)? But what exactly is training? It certainly hinges upon modeling (through your marriage) and motivating (through a trusting relationship with your child), but training includes at least two further steps for embedding truth in our children’s hearts.

Based on the Old Testament word for “train” (Hebrew: chanak) in Proverbs 22:6, we understand that training involves “starting or beginning” our children early with right thinking and desires rather than allowing them to develop wrong ideas and passions. This Hebrew word was used for starting a building with a level foundation so that its walls would not later be crooked. In the home it spoke of beginning a toddler on nourishing foods in order to give him an appetite for what is healthy. So training our children for betrothal means teaching them young and giving them an appetite only for what is godly.

The world lies in the lap of the Wicked One who uses its attractions to tempt our flesh (and our children’s flesh) to sin. From many of the world’s ungodly influences, we can and should shelter our children. Whatever would tear down our training in betrothal must be avoided, such as friends or activities that encourage a dating spirit, and television, movies, videos, magazines, music, and novels that glorify Hollywood romance.

But what do you do about the influences you can’t control, such as billboards, romantic couples on the street, remarks by relatives, advertisements in stores,

etc.? When your children see these examples of Hollywood romance, they will be influenced by them unless you “interpret” them through the grid of Scripture, helping your children to always be evaluating their environment through a biblical world view. So if you notice your children observing these influences, don’t simply ignore it but “expose” the error by bringing it into the light of God’s Word (Eph. 5:11-13).

In addition to the Old Testament word for “train,” signifying the early development of a godly appetite, there is a New Testament word which adds the final component for inculcating truth in our children’s hearts. It is the Greek term *gymnazo* from which we get our English words “gymnastics” and “gymnasium” and is normally translated as “train, discipline and exercise.” So to equip our children for betrothal means first to whet their appetite through early instruction and then to *gymnazo* them. But how do we do that?

Simply put, *gymnazo* refers to daily sustained exercise of mind and body-years of hard practice like a gymnast or other athlete. The writer of Hebrews explains: “But solid food is for the mature who, because of practice, have their senses trained (*gymnazo*) to discern between good and evil.” (Heb. 5:13f). Do you want your son or daughter to discern rightly between good and evil in the area of romance? Then you must exercise them in godly thinking about betrothal, which will then produce godly living. Study and discuss with them the principles and practices of betrothal until personal convictions are formed in both you and your children. A belief becomes a conviction when you are convinced from God’s Word-not from somebody else’s teaching, but from your own study of Scripture-that a particular practice is required of you, and that to do otherwise would be sin.

But training occurs at all times, either for good or for bad. If our children are not being trained in godliness, then they are being trained in ungodliness. In 2 Pet. 2:14, Peter speaks about persons whose hearts were “trained (*gymnazo*) in greed” because they were allowed to practice greed. Are we inadvertently training our children in worldly romance by allowing them to practice it in thought (movies, magazines, music, romance novels) or action (dating)? Instead, parents, we must exercise daily, sustained effort over years of hard practice, teaching them to say “yes” to God and “no” to self as they “discipline (again, *gymnazo*) themselves for the purpose of godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7; cf. Lk. 9:23).

ESSENTIAL TRAINING TOPICS

As we have already implied, training our children in betrothal begins with their thorough understanding of it from Scripture to the point of personal conviction. But there are several other, corollary topics which must also be studied and discussed if betrothal is to take root in our children’s hearts. Here is a list of some that we have found to be vital (and that we hope to write about in future articles):

- (1) The sufficiency and authority of Scripture for the entire Christian life;

- (2) The sovereignty, goodness, and wisdom of God as a trustworthy Father;
- (3) Pleasing Christ, not self, as our motivation in all we do;
- (4) Self-disciplined, not desire-driven, choices and actions;
- (5) Knowing the will of God based on Scripture, not feelings;
- (6) Biblical love (selflessness) vs. Hollywood love (lust);
- (7) The purposes, procedures (roles), and permanence of marriage;
- (8) Parent "shadowing," not peer grouping;
- (9) A multi-generational vision, not "It's my life";
- (10) Scriptural and practical qualifications for a godly husband or wife.

Does all this sound a bit overwhelming? Then let us recognize two fundamental facts that affect not only the topic of betrothal but really all of the Christian life. First, the bad news. With every new truth, most of us start off behind the proverbial "8" ball. That is, we have been doing it wrong all our life until we learn from God's Word what is right. So we have unbiblical thinking and ungodly habits from our past which must be discarded. To use the vernacular, we come into this with a lot of "baggage." And the older our children are, the more we have given them a lot of "baggage" to discard as well.

But God has some wonderfully good news for us too. God not only commands but also blesses our prompt obedience whenever we understand new truth. God's truth is like an umbrella of protection from serious harm. When we are standing out from under it, we are prone to be struck by lightning, baseball-size hail, meteor showers and whatever else the devil throws at us (through temptations, error, etc.) until we take cover under God's protective umbrella of truth. So no matter where we are in the path toward marriage, God wants us immediately to rush underneath His protective umbrella of truth, repent of unbiblical thinking and ungodly behavior, and begin practicing the principles of betrothal with our children. God sternly warns us, "To him who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin" (Jas. 4:17). Yet God also lovingly beckons us, "those who honor Me, I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30). Repentance is the path of protection, honor and rich blessing-both for us and for our children.

More Information About Courtship Covenants

Sample Courtship Covenant: A Covenant Between A Father And A Daughter

Why you might not want to engage in a courtship covenant

Things to focus on in a courtship relationship

John Thompson is the director of Family Shepherd Ministries and a Bible teacher at Walpole Christian Assembly in Walpole, New Hampshire. John welcomes your comments and contacts.

His address is 651-B Valley Road, Walpole, NH 03608.

Email: JohnThompson@consultant.com.

