

# God's Design for Scriptural Romance

## Part 1: Rediscovering the Timeless Truths

by John W. Thompson

Several years ago a missionary related to our church how three ominous inroads from Western culture are destroying the morality of families in India — even families in Bible-believing churches. These pernicious intrusions are Western television, Western rock music, and Western dating and romance. We were familiar, of course, with the corrupting influences of Western television and rock music. These plagues of post-Christian culture are ruining many families in America too. But dating and romance? What could possibly be harmful in this?

Our missionary, a prominent Bible teacher and counselor in India, explained his startling observation from many years of marriage counseling. He noted that marriages in India which are begun through traditional betrothal (pursuing a relationship for marriage, not recreation) enjoy a *near zero* divorce rate. By contrast, marriages that are commenced through Western dating have the same divorce rate as America — over fifty percent! All other factors being the same, the “dating vs. betrothal” issue seems to have a dramatic impact on a marriage’s happiness, stability and longevity.

Such an observation strikes a responsive chord among a growing number of Christian families in America today. Not only homeschoolers but conservative believers of all sorts are rediscovering God’s timeless truths about romance through an assortment of new literature (I count over thirty books and tapes in my own collection). Yet if these virtues are to become uncompromised convictions, they must be personally investigated from their original source, the Bible. This, of course, is the nature of a conviction — it is a belief we are convinced is God-ordered and non-negotiable. Thus, the mission of my writing is not to entertain you (though I think you will find this study stimulating) but to lead you into scriptural truths which are vital for the preservation of your family.

### THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND DATING

Before we explore the specific passages in Scripture that deal with romance, let’s begin with the “big picture,” the issue of one’s life philosophy which will then undergird everything he or she believes and practices in life. The Bible teaches that your life philosophy is either man-centered or Christ-centered, either man-pleasing or Christ-pleasing (1 Th. 2:4; cf. Gal. 5:16ff). These are the only two options. And whatever life philosophy you truly embrace will show in your beliefs and in your behaviors.

Notice what the Apostle Paul reveals about this in Colossians 2:6-8. In verses 6-7, Paul exhorts the Colossians to walk out their Christian life in the same way that they put their faith into Christ, namely, through the instruction of the Word of God, producing an abundantly joyous, thankful life. But is this the typical fruit we encounter in modern dating? Is it possible that we have unwittingly been deceived by our culture and have departed from God's truth in this matter of romance, dating and finding a spouse?

Keep that possibility in mind as you read Paul's caution in verse 8: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." Beware, says Paul, here is a very real danger, the threat of being kidnapped away from truth and into the mental, emotional and spiritual bondage of error. By what conspiracy might you and I be captured into error? "Through philosophy and empty deception," answers Paul. The Greek word for philosophy means "a love of wisdom," and here it refers more specifically to the appeal of *worldly* wisdom. Further, we are warned that the world's teachings are "empty deception." That is, although they are made to look appealing, in reality they are barren, unfulfilling lies.

Well, how do these barren, unfulfilling lies of the world take us captive? By two means, declares Paul: "according to the traditions of men" and "according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." The "traditions of men" refer to worldly *practices*; "the elementary principles of the world" denote worldly *beliefs*. So, Paul is sternly warning Christians to beware and to avoid worldly practices and beliefs that would displace the practices and beliefs of Christ through His Word.

What we are hearing in Paul's admonition is the necessity of Christian separation, "Come out from their midst and be separate," commands the Lord in 2 Corinthians 6:17, "and do not touch what is unclean." In order to have a joyous, meaningful and effective Christian life, says God, we must be a separated people — separated from the sinful *philosophy* of the world, which is propagated by the sinful *people* of the world, stimulated by the sinful *pleasures* and *places* of the world, and proliferated through the sinful *principles* and *practices* of the world.

## THE FRUIT OF DATING

The philosophy of the world is commonly known as humanism; and it views man and his desires as supreme. Some of the practices of this philosophy are clearly wrong, such as abortion, homosexuality and adultery. The world practices these sins because they view man and his desires as supreme, and most Christians recognize these sins as clearly wrong. Yet, other practices of the philosophy of humanism are not *clearly* wrong but are *subtly* wrong. They are just as wrong because they are rooted in "man and his desires" being supreme, but their wrongness is not so obvious. Could it be that one of these

subtly wrong practices of humanism is recreational romance (dating)? Jesus declared that you will know a tree (whether it's good or bad) by its fruit (Luk.6:44). As we asked earlier, What is the typical fruit we encounter in modern dating? Several interviews with parents revealed these "fruits" from their teen dating experience:

1. Self-centeredness
2. Macho pride
3. Improper thoughts
4. Sensual focus
5. Immorality
6. Promiscuity
7. Fear
8. Distrust
9. Covetousness
10. Jealousy
11. Insecurity
12. Heartache
13. Bitterness
14. Revenge
15. Violence
16. Depression
17. Thoughts of suicide
18. Tensions among youth
19. Independent spirit
20. Hindered spiritual growth
21. Strained relationship with parents
22. Feeling of being used

This last fruit of the dating game — a feeling of being used — is more than just a feeling, it's a fact. When you date, you become used merchandise, used at least emotionally and often physically, from one romantic entanglement to the next. This fact can be graphically illustrated by passing around a piece of unwrapped chewing gum from person to person until it has become very grimy, possibly dropped and trampled on, maybe even chewed. *Now, who wants it?* Anyone with mature thinking will quickly reject this chewing gum as undesirable, defiled merchandise. Young children, of course, will happily eat this dirty gum because they don't know any better, which is why God gave them parents. Likewise, God gave your children parents to guide them in this serious area of pre-marital relationships — so they don't become like used chewing gum or pawed over merchandise on the bargain table.

Yuk, this dating game looks pretty rotten. That's right, God intends for rotten fruit — the corruption we reap from "sowing to the flesh" (Gal.6:8) — to drive us back to His Word for divine direction. We are to use Scripture as a mirror, James says, for carefully evaluating what needs to be changed in our life (Jam. 1:23-25). What, then, has God revealed about His philosophy of romance? And how do we unearth His life-changing principles?

## EVALUATING THE RELEVANT PASSAGES

The study of any topic in Scripture begins with locating the relevant passages by using such tools as an exhaustive concordance, a topical Bible, a Bible encyclopedia, cross-references and a good thesaurus (the new computer versions of these tools are even more effective). A narrow search of our topic would look up such key words and phrases as betrothal, engagement, wedding, marry, covenant, bride, groom, take a wife, give a daughter, etc. A broader study would include words like dowry, protect, touch, kiss, caress, embrace, defraud, virgin and so on. Once located, these Bible passages must not be merely read but must be deeply probed by asking *Who? What? When? Where? Why?* and *How?* in a dozen different ways. The answers to these six crucial questions will enable us to define and describe “God’s Design for Scriptural Romance.”

But we must be sure to frame the questions in light of our topic. For example, *Who?* might ask about the role of father, mother, son and daughter. *What?* might inquire about the outcome of the relationship. *When?* might probe the proper time for romantic emotions or touching. *Where?* might investigate whether romance should be public or private. *Why?* might question the reason something is done — is it normative or cultural? *How?* might explore the way a courtship, betrothal and wedding is carried out.

My own study following the above method uncovered over sixty relevant passages (not counting duplicates and immaterial references). Several of these were extensive, others were sketchy. But even some of the brief ones yielded highly crucial information. In this series of articles, we’ll be making reference to many of these Scriptures, so let me list them for your firsthand study.

### SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIPS TO STUDY:

Gen. 2:18-25 Adam & Eve  
Gen. 6:1-5 Sons of God & Daughters of Men  
Gen. 21:21 Ishmael & Wife  
Gen. 24:1-67 Isaac & Rebekah  
25:20; 26:8  
Gen. 26:34-35 Esau & Judith, Basemath  
Gen. 28:1-9 Jacob & Leah, Rachel  
29:1-30  
Gen. 34:1-31 Shechem & Dinah  
Gen. 38:6 Er & Tamar  
Gen. 41:45 Joseph & Asenath  
Exod. 2:16-22 Moses & Zipporah  
Josh. 15:16f Othniel & Achsah  
Jdg. 14:1-20 Samson & Philistine, Delilah  
15:1-6; 16:1-31  
Ruth. 2-4 Boaz & Ruth

1 Sam. 18:17-29 David & Merab, Michal  
1 Sam. 25:39-42 David & Abigail  
2 Sam. 11:1-27 David & Bathsheba  
1Ki. 11:1-8 Solomon & Many Wives  
1Ki. 11:19 Hadad & Wife  
2 Chron. 24:1-3 Joash & Wives  
Est. 2:7-17 Ahasuerus & Esther  
Pro. 31 King Lemuel & Virtuous Wife  
Sol.1:1-3:11 Solomon & Shullamite Woman  
Hos. 2:19-20 God & Israel (Wife)  
Eze.16:8  
Matt. 1:18-25 Joseph & Mary  
Luk.1:27;2:5  
2 Cor. 11:2-3 Christ & Church (Wife)  
Eph.5:22-33  
Rev.19:7-9

## SIGNIFICANT CONCEPTS & WORDS TO STUDY

**Betrothal, Engagement** — Exod. 22:16-17; Deut. 22:23-29; 2 Sam. 3:14; Matt. 1:19f

**Covenants** — Gen. 21:27-31; 31:48ff; Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21-23; Josh. 9:18-20; Zech. 8:17; Mal. 3:5; Gal. 3:15

**Dowry/Bride Price** — Gen. 34:11-12; Exod. 22:16-17; 1 Sam. 18:25; 2 Sam. 3:14

**Patriarchal Protection** — Num. 30:3ff; Deut. 22:21; Ps. 36:7; 2 Cor. 11:2

**Father Giving Bride** — 1 Cor. 7:36-38; Lk. 20:34-35; Exod. 22:17

**Romantic Emotions/Touching** — Gen. 20:4,6; 26:8; Exod. 22:16f; Deut. 22:23f; Ruth. 2:9; S. of Sol.1-3; Matt. 5:28; Rom. 13:14; 1 Cor. 7:1; 1Thess. 4:6; 1 Tim. 5:1-2

**Wedding** — Ps. 45:13ff; S. of Sol. 3:6-11; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 22:2ff; 25:1ff; Jn. 14:2f; Rev. 19:7ff

Why is it that many people — even some Christians — don't earnestly want to know what the Bible says on certain subjects? It is because such an understanding would require a change in their lifestyle and comfort level. This is decidedly true for the topic we are presently studying, scriptural romance. Since most young people are so intertwined in emotional relationships with the opposite sex, there will be a strong motivation to latch onto one of the popular excuses to avoid submission to God's truth.

For example, non-Christians avoid God's truth simply by claiming "the Bible is not *inspired*" (cf. 2 Tim.3:16). Since it's not really God's revelation to guide His creatures, we need not obey it. Likewise, neo-evangelicals assert "the Bible is not *inerrant*" (cf. Matt. 5:18). It is full of mistakes by the faulty men God used to write it, so how do we know for sure what's true in it? With quite

a similar outcome, modern evangelicals argue “the Bible is not *relevant*” (cf. Matt. 28:19-20). Many of its truths are “culturally bound” and therefore not applicable to our present society, they claim.

In his enlightening book *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, Dr. Noel Weeks puts this last excuse in perspective: “Those who charge that the teaching of biblical authors was culturally bound generally make selective use [of it]. They find something in Scripture which challenges [their] contemporary ideas or institutions, and they try to find a way to set aside that element of Scripture” (pp. 79-80). The “descriptive vs. prescriptive” argument is often stretched beyond its intent. God’s unalterable truths are eternal, even though certain applications of them may change culturally. What, then, must we know in order to accurately extract God’s timeless truths about Scriptural romance, and then effectively apply these principles to our lives?

## **GOD’S FOUR TRUTH FORMS**

First, we must recognize the four forms of biblical truth by which God has communicated to us — *principle, precept, practice* and *prudence* — in a variety of literary styles (like narrative, poetry, prophecy, wise sayings, epistles). We might parallel these four truth forms to the four food groups in that our spiritual diet is not properly nourishing if we are missing any. Just as our *physical* health is dependent upon our eating regularly from each of the essential food groups, so also our *spiritual* health is dependent upon our feeding regularly from each of these four truth forms. To omit any from our spiritual diet will promote malformed and diseased spiritual lives.

### **PRINCIPLE**

*Principle* is the first truth form and is defined as a fundamental, primary or general truth or reason by which God has ordered His creation. Speaking of the “elementary principles of the oracles of God,” Hebrews 5:12 suggests that God’s principles stand behind all the precepts, practices and prudence which make up His oracles, or revelation. Our responsibility, of course, is to discover and apply them. That’s relatively easy when the principle is directly stated as the justification for a command or practice and is introduced by such words as “for, since or because” (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Other times, however, the principle is only implied and must be unearthed through biblical research and spiritual reasoning. For example, the requirement in 1 Timothy 5:19 for “two or three witnesses” implies the underlying principle of impartiality (see verse 21) as taught in Matthew 18:16 (and ultimately Exodus 20:16). Because biblical principles are an expression of the very character of God (who is Truth), all principles are by nature applicable to all cultures. Don’t let that last statement escape you: as an expression of the very character of God, all principles are by nature applicable to all cultures. Sounds like the Bible is very relevant after all!

## **PRECEPT**

A second truth form is *precept*, a direct command of God which is rooted in principle, such as “pray at all times” (Eph. 6:18). To uncover the underlying principle behind a command, simply ask the question “Why?” Why are you to pray at all times? Because you are in a dependent, loving relationship with God — that is the intrinsic principle. And unless there is clear evidence to the contrary (see below), you should normally assume that a biblical command is applicable to you and your culture. “The conclusion, when all has been heard is: fear God and keep His commandments [precepts], because this applies to every person” (Eccl. 12:13).

## **PRACTICE**

The third truth form, *practice*, is a biblically defined implementation or exercise of a principle. Many Christians wrongly assume that the practices in Scripture are generally “culturally bound,” yet Paul declares just the opposite when he explains, “[Timothy] will remind you of my ways [practices] which are in Christ [principles], just as I teach everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17; cf. Phil. 3:17; 4:9). Old Testament scholar Dr. Richard Pratt, in his interpretational guide titled *He Gave Us Stories*, puts it this way: “In many cases a sharp distinction between form [practice] and meaning [principle] cannot be justified. The New Testament does not merely insist that believers affirm abstract theological principles; it also requires us to follow forms and structures in the church. In many cases the forms and the principles are largely inseparable. We do not need to contextualize the biblical teaching; we need to teach and explain the requirements of Scripture” (p. 373). Thus, we should usually understand that a biblical practice is relevant to all cultures unless there are sound reasons to the contrary.

## **PRUDENCE**

*Prudence* is the fourth and final truth form by which God has communicated to us in His Word. It is the wise personal application of a principle. Does this make prudence optional? No, Solomon tells us that to rashly ignore prudence is sin: “He who sins against me [Wisdom] injures himself; all those who hate me love death” (Prov. 8:36). Once you have concluded that a particular path would be prudent, to do otherwise would be sinful since the motive could only be to please self rather than Christ.

## **INTERPRETING CULTURALLY RELATED SCRIPTURE**

In addition to embracing all four forms of biblical truth, we must next understand how to interpret “culturally related” truth, if we are to unearth God’s essential elements about scriptural romance. But did you know that ALL Scripture is “culturally related” because it was written to a specific people and culture? However, that does NOT mean all Scripture is “culturally

bound.” Indeed, some precepts and practices are exclusive to a culture, while others are normative for all time. How do we know which is which? To determine if it is cultural, we must ask whether the precept or practice is ...

- 1) Chronologically limited?** E.g., a mode of transportation, such as donkey power, changes as civilizations progress.
- 2) Theologically limited?** E.g., Old Testament animal sacrifices were fulfilled by Christ at Calvary (Matt. 5:17).
- 3) Culturally limited?** E.g., the “holy kiss” (same gender on the cheek) was a custom of greeting like our handshake.
- 4) Historically limited?** E.g., urging singleness “in view of the present distress” (1 Cor. 7:26) is confined to times of adversity.
- 5) Personally limited?** E.g., Paul making tents rather than accepting financial support for his ministry is described as a personal preference (1 Cor. 9:12).

Likewise, there are some ways to evaluate if a precept or practice is transcultural (i.e., normative for all time). For example, ask if it is ...

- 1) A departure from cultural practice?** E.g., for a woman “to learn anything” was contrary to first century culture (1 Cor. 14:35).
- 2) A Christian “tradition”?** These, such as women’s headcovering, we are instructed to “hold firmly to” (1 Cor. 11:2).
- 3) A creation ordinance?** Both Jesus and Paul pointed to God’s original design in creation for normative truths (Matt. 19:4-6; 1 Tim. 2:13-14).
- 4) An appeal to a timeless principle?** E.g., Christians have the wisdom to judge the future world (1 Cor. 6:1-3). How much more, then, matters of this life?
- 5) An appeal to a different culture?** E.g., Paul appeals to Israelite culture for the Corinthians to follow (1 Cor. 9:9).
- 6) Repeated in different cultures?** E.g., Betrothal is found in all cultures from Creation to Christ’s marriage to the church (2 Cor. 11:2).

## **BIBLICAL BETROTHAL IS TRANSCULTURAL**

A typical response to biblical betrothal says, “Wait, aren’t all the Scriptures about betrothal simply descriptive of Jewish culture and not really applicable to Christians today?” No, if you examine them more closely, that is not the case at all. By biblical betrothal we mean an approach to the man-woman relationship which involves a binding commitment to marry and careful oversight by parents (versus the freewheeling, recreational approach of dating). It is instructive that in Scripture there are *no positive examples of romantic relationships apart from betrothal*, whether Jewish or Gentile. Every scriptural example where the father (or another adult if the father was dead) initiated and oversaw the romantic relationship (such as Adam/Eve, Isaac/Rebecca, Joseph/Mary, etc.), the outcome was blessed by God. On the other hand, every example where the father did NOT initiate and oversee the relationship (such as Esau/wives, Shechem/Dinah, Samson/Delilah, etc.) the outcome was either mixed or disastrous! It is simply the sowing and reaping principle of Paul’s command to the young men to treat “the younger women as sisters, in all purity” (1 Tim. 5:2).



In Scripture I have observed at least five reasons why Bible-believing Christians ought to consider the betrothal approach to marriage as transcultural, that is, normative for all people in all cultures. See if this makes sense to you.

## **1) THE PRE-CULTURE CREATION MODEL**

In Matthew 19:4-6, Christ appeals to the pre-culture creation account of Genesis 1-2 as abiding justification for a biblical view of marriage (just as Paul does for male church leadership in 1 Timothy 2:13-14). By “pre-culture” I mean that cultural creeds and customs had not yet developed. In the Garden of Eden we are dealing with pristine conditions, the commencement of civilization untainted by mankind’s sin or ceremony. Following Christ’s example, Christian scholars throughout church history have likewise based marriage on what they call “the creation ordinance.” So, what exactly was this original prototype? The Father (God), through wise and loving oversight, brought together the bride (Eve) and the groom (Adam) for the sole purpose of marriage. God didn’t create a dozen men and a dozen women to play the dating game and then marry whomever they wished. Instead, He wanted Adam to be a “one-woman man” (1 Tim. 3:2) and Eve to be a “one-man woman” (1 Tim. 5:9). Prior to the fall, Adam and Eve were the ideal couple, the norm for marriage throughout time.

## **2) THE LAW WRITTEN IN THE HEART**

Biblical and historical evidence reveals that the creation model of betrothal became the practice not only for Israel but also for nearly every civilization in history until the twentieth century. Even prior to the origin of Israel and the Mosaic Law, the nations of the world embraced biblical betrothal. And Israel’s contemporaries, while rejecting much of the Mosaic code of conduct, nevertheless adopted biblical betrothal. Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and the many cultures since the time of Christ have likewise practiced betrothal. Why? The Apostle Paul relates in Romans 2:14-15 that “when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law ... they show the work of the Law written in their hearts.” History confirms that betrothal is not a cultural peculiarity but rather an instinctive principle written in the heart of all mankind.

## **3) AN AGELESS PRINCIPLE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

The Apostle Paul explains in Romans 15:4, written primarily to Gentile Christians, that “whatever was written in earlier times [the Old Testament] was written for our [New Testament believers] instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Whatever was written? Yes, the entire Old Testament continues to instruct us through its ageless principles including betrothal, a principle of self-denial about which Paul is exhorting in this very context (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:16). When everyone around us is yielding to fleshly dating, it is our own

“perseverance” (steadfastness) and “the encouragement of the Scriptures” (biblical examples of betrothal) that will give us hope, a confident expectation that God will provide for those who are faithful. About this verse, Donald Grey Barnhouse remarked in his inimitable commentary on Romans, that “between the lines of the former revelation are great eternal principles.”

#### **4) APPLICATION TO A DIFFERENT CULTURE**

Again, the Apostle Paul advises predominantly Gentile Christians — indeed, “all who in every place call upon the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2) — to follow God’s normative principle of betrothal (i.e., patriarchal responsibility over marriage): “But if a man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry” (1 Cor. 7:36ff). Notice that even to Gentile believers Paul’s marital advice is grounded in the father’s biblical authority to “do what he wishes” in regard to his daughter, even if she is “of full age,” i.e., getting beyond marriageable age. Betrothal, then, is a practice which Paul considered to be “in Christ” and one that he taught “everywhere in every church,” to both Jewish and Gentile cultures (1 Cor. 4:17).

#### **5) CHRIST’S MARRIAGE TO THE CHURCH**

Perhaps the most compelling reason for recognizing betrothal as transcultural is our Lord’s use of this standard for His relationship with His own “multicultural” bride, the church. As the spiritual father of the Corinthians, Paul declares: “...for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2). Why would Christ choose betrothal if it were not God’s own prescription for pre-marital fidelity? Indeed, Paul suggests that its primary purpose is to “present you as a pure virgin.” Just as Christ doesn’t want us “dating around” in the spiritual realm because it leads to physical, mental and emotional impurity, so likewise in the natural realm.

### **How did Christ betroth Himself to His bride?**

Notice that it perfectly parallels the biblical betrothal model found in our relevant passages above. First, the Heavenly Father and Son together chose the bride (Eph. 1:4; Jn. 15:16). The Son was then sent to seek His bride (Lk. 19:10). During this time He was in continuous communication with and submission to His Father (Jn. 5:30). At the time of betrothal, Christ paid the greatest bride price in history, His own precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The bride (the church) has the choice to accept or reject the love for us through words, acts and gifts, and we grow to know and love Him more and more each day (Eph. 3:17-19). Christ’s love for His betrothed is a secure, permanent relationship, unlike “dating around” (Heb. 13:5; Rom. 8:37-39). During betrothal we cannot touch Him, but after He comes for us in marriage, we will (Jn. 14:2-3). After our processional to heaven, our marriage to Christ will be celebrated with a great wedding feast (Rev. 19:7-9).

# IDENTIFYING GOD'S PRINCIPLES FOR ROMANCE

From creation to Christ's second coming and covering a multitude of cultures, the Scriptures consistently present the betrothal model as normative, not cultural. Before sin, before Israel, before the Law, before Christ, before the church., God instituted betrothal. What, then, are the essential, unchanging principles which stand behind this universal practice as an expression of the very character of God? A careful inquiry (Who, What, When, Where, Why and How) of the sixty or so relevant passages reveals five fundamental principles of scriptural romance: piety, patriarchy, purity, preparedness and patience. Let's see from where these timeless truths originate.

## PIETY

In a sentence, piety is a general godliness or righteousness in attitudes and conduct which imitates Christ's relationship with His bride, the church. Piety is the character quality which undergirds and permeates the other four principles of scriptural romance. It is a pure devotion to please Christ rather than self in all our relationships, focusing on inward character rather than outward beauty. Apart from true piety, applying the other principles will be hypocritical at best. Illustrations of this quality abound among the godly couples in Scripture. Isaac, for example, was "meditating in the field" while he awaited his bride's arrival (Gen. 24:63). Joseph, in his relationship to Mary, is described as "a righteous man" (Matt. 1:19). "Jesus Christ the righteous" weds his bride, the church, after she is clothed in "the righteous acts of the saints" (Rev. 19:8). Other notable examples of piety in romance would include Jacob and Boaz.

## PATRIARCHY

If piety is the undergirding virtue, then patriarchy may be called the overarching principle since the father's leadership is definitive in scriptural romance. In brief, the father lovingly prepares, protects and provides a spouse with the cooperation of a son or approval of a daughter. Just as God perfectly "fashioned" Eve for Adam, the bride's father *prepares* his daughter to be a suitable helper through training in spiritual maturity, academics, fine arts, and life skills (Gen. 2:18,22). Like the biblical patriarchs, he *protects* his daughter physically, morally, and emotionally, keeping her under his roof until she marries and never releasing her to an unprotected situation (Ps. 36:7; Deut. 22:21; Num. 30:3ff; cf. Gen. 34:1ff). Indeed, he is "jealous for [her] with a godly jealousy" to protect her purity so that she is "betrothed to only one husband" (2 Cor. 11:2). With a relationship of deep trust and respect, the bride's father *provides* his daughter with a husband which she approves (Exod. 2:21; Jos. 15:17; 1 Sam. 18:27). The father initiates, investigates, oversees and chooses his daughter's husband, though she may humbly decline (Gen. 24:58; 1 Sam. 18:20; Jn. 3:36; 1 Cor. 7:36).

Correspondingly, a groom's father *prepares* his son to be a godly leader and a generous provider (Gen. 2:15-17; Prov. 1-7). *Protecting* a son is less stringent than protecting a daughter since he is less vulnerable. But it is still a moral concern, which is why Solomon candidly counseled his son regarding immoral women in Proverbs chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7. Finally, the groom's father *provides* a wife (Jer. 29:6), yet with the active participation of his son (Jn. 15:16). Adam's father "brought to the man" the woman who was fashioned for his need (Gen. 2:20-24), as did Abraham also and most other Old and New Testament fathers (Gen. 24:3; 38:6; Jdg. 12:8-9; 2 Ki. 14:9; Jn. 6:37). Historically, a Jewish father considered it his responsibility before God to train his son in a trade, to teach him the Law, and to bring him into wedlock. Because he was instructed not to forsake the instruction of his mother and father (Prov. 1:8; 4:1), a godly young man never married a wife without the oversight and blessing of his father. And all unblessed marriages in Scripture resulted in a mixed or disastrous result, such as Esau, Shechem and Samson.

The mother of the bride or groom is to support, not supplant her husband as patriarch, giving wise counsel to her husband and children as King Lemuel's mother did (Gen. 2:18; Prov. 31). But what if the father is physically absent from the family through death, desertion or divorce? Then the mother assumes his role of initiating and overseeing the betrothal process, just as Hagar got a bride for Ishmael (Gen. 21:21). By analogy, if the father is *spiritually* absent from the family, the mother may assume his betrothal duties if he does not disallow it (Acts 16:1; 2 Tim. 1:5; 1 Cor. 7:14).

## **PURITY**

Having summarized the concepts of piety and patriarchy, the third fundamental principle of scriptural romance is purity, which in the Scripture means no physical affection or romantic emotions prior to God's approval. In the choice of a mate, physical attraction clearly must be secondary to inner character and spiritual maturity. Seek "a woman of virtue" (Prov. 31:10ff; Ruth. 3:11) and a man of character (Ruth. 2:9,15f). Romantic touching — holding hands, hugging, kissing, etc. — are appropriate **ONLY** within marriage (Gen. 2:25; 26:8; Prov. 5:18f; 6:29; S. of Sol. 4-8; Matt. 1:24f; 2 Cor. 11:2; Heb. 13:4). It is "good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1; Gen. 20:4,6; 34:3; Ruth 2:9; 2 Sam. 11:1ff; etc.). God never intended any level of "limited" romantic touching prior to marriage. James describes this principle of the "slippery slope" in 1:14: "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." By God's design for procreation, one touch leads to the next. Consequently, in Scripture couples were generally in the company of their families or chaperoned (Gen. 2:22-24; S. of Sol.1-3 — by "the daughters of Jerusalem"). And when not chaperoned, moral disasters occurred, such as Shechem with Dinah, Samson with Delilah, and David with Bathsheba. "Lead me not into temptation," a plea to the Heavenly Father, should likewise be heard by earthly fathers (Matt. 6:13; 26:41). "Make no provision (opportunity) for the flesh in regard to its lusts," warns the Apostle Paul (Rom.13:14). Aloneness is an opportunity for

the flesh, even the aloneness of a public place away from one's family. "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12; cf. Prov. 28:26).

But *physical* morality isn't all that is included under the purity principle. God also requires *emotional* purity in our relationships. Unrestrained romantic emotions lead to mental impurity, "adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Consequently, romantic emotions (conveyed through romantic looks, acts, language and gifts) are appropriate ONLY after the betrothal covenant has been made (S. of Sol. 1-3). Otherwise, emotional fraud will likely occur (1 Thess. 4:6). Yet even during the betrothal period, all anticipation of marital affection is to remain pure and undiscussed between the couple (S. of Sol. 1:2; 2:6; 3:1), romantic language is to be moral and modest (1:10,15,16), and strict patience and self-control is to be a mutual commitment (2:7,15; 3:5).

## **PREPAREDNESS**

Preparedness, the fourth fundamental principle of scriptural romance, is a readiness for marriage both spiritually and vocationally. For example, before he was married, Adam was prepared both spiritually (he knew God's law) and vocationally (he knew horticulture) (Gen. 2:15-17). Likewise, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses — in fact, every godly father — first gave his son adequate training both spiritually and vocationally (to avoid slavery and debt) before he brought him into wedlock. In the scriptural examples, if a young man was not leading spiritually before marriage, there was little hope that he would lead spiritually after marriage. Similarly, a young man who had not saved up a bride price (three years' wages) was considered unprepared to support a wife and family. The bride price was a primary evidence of financial preparedness. Solomon enjoins, "Make it ready for yourself in the field (vocational preparation); afterwards, then, build your house (family)" (Prov. 24:27). The Hebrew concept of "house building" here refers to marriage and a family (cf. Prov. 14:1), a matter that must wait its turn until "afterwards," i.e., after vocational preparation. What is needed is not merely a job (which can easily be lost) but a well-trained, marketable skill.

A young woman before marriage should be spiritually prepared according to the pattern of Sarah, Mary and the Proverbs 31 woman (cf. also Tit. 2:3-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:11; 5:10). Vocationally, a young woman must develop her domestic skills to care for a home and children (Tit. 2:5). But this is only HALF the preparation. She is to be her husband's helper not only in "fruitfulness" but also in "dominion" (Gen. 1:28). So, the second half of her vocational preparation is to develop her God-given talents to the level of their endowment in anticipation of the husband for whom God has "fashioned" her (Gen. 2:18,22). Talent development in daughters is sometimes downplayed out of fear of encouraging an attitude of "careerism." Yet with proper heart instruction, it cultivates not careerism but a biblical "dominion helper," i.e., a wife who will truly strengthen her husband in his chosen life work. And it is best developed in the context of a family business where a daughter can train under her father as she will later serve under her husband.

## **PATIENCE**

The fifth fundamental principle of spiritual romance is patience, an attitude of trusting our sovereign God to accomplish His perfect plan in His perfect time through imperfect fathers. Isaac, you recall, remained under his father's authority and roof serving God and family until age forty when Abraham got him a wife (Gen. 24). And Paul's reference to a daughter "of full age" suggests no haste on the part of her father (1 Cor. 7:36f). On the other hand, a man is to "rejoice in the wife of [his] youth" (Prov. 5:18), not his old age. Thus, a father must be diligent in preparing his sons and daughters for marriage, then be *equally* diligent in providing a suitable, godly spouse. This requires careful praying, searching and investigating as a priority so that your sons and daughters will not lose confidence in their father. The rule of thumb is: "patience without procrastination."

A son or daughter should focus on actively serving God while maintaining a "deep sleep" emotionally until their father presents them with a potential spouse (Gen. 2:21f). They must not "arouse or awaken love" prematurely through their impatience (S. of Sol. 2:7). All Christians are called to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Some young people lower their standards because they get desperate, afraid they'll be spinsters for life. Yet your faith must be in a sovereign God who, since the fall of man, has used imperfect fathers (and mothers) to accomplish His perfect plan for mankind. He can use your father to bring you a spouse at just the right time — trust Him!

## **TAKING EVERY THOUGHT CAPTIVE**

As I asked before, let me ask again: "Is it possible that we have unwittingly been deceived by our culture and have departed from God's truth in this matter of romance, dating and finding a spouse?" After carefully examining God's Word, I hope we are well on the way to understanding our cultural conflict. Paul warned believers not to be "taken captive...according to the elementary principles of the world" (Col. 2:8), but rather to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). In the warfare of Christian living, it's either "take captive" or "be taken captive." There is no neutral ground this side of heaven. The battle we wage is a clash of ideas, but they are ideas with very practical ramifications. In our next article on this subject, we will begin exploring how to "put off" cultural dating and "put on" the five fundamental principles of biblical betrothal, explaining not only the WHY but also the HOW. These timeless truths will positively transform the relationships within your family, though the process may be challenging. But take heart, for the battle has already been won, and the booty is yours to claim!

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