

**NO
MERE
MORTALS**

*Marriage for People
Who Will Live Forever*

**TOBY
SUMPTER**

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	i
CHAPTER 1: Marry in the Lord	1
CHAPTER 2: Rightly Ordered Love Life	2
CHAPTER 3: Taking Out the Garbage	3
CHAPTER 4: Covenant Asymmetry	4
CHAPTER 5: Submission in the Lord	5
CHAPTER 6: Don't Shipwreck the Headship	6
CHAPTER 7: Going into the Fire First	7
CHAPTER 8: Water of the Word	8
CHAPTER 9: Deeper Magic, Deeper Power	9
CHAPTER 10: How to Win a Man	10
CHAPTER 11: Whose Daughters You Are	11
CHAPTER 12: Dwelling with Knowledge	12
CHAPTER 13: Honoring the Weaker Vessel	13
CHAPTER 14: Babies, Birth Control, and Barrenness	14
CHAPTER 15: How Far Is Too Far?	15
CHAPTER 16: What Do You Think About...?	16
CHAPTER 17: What the Bible says about Divorce	17
CHAPTER 18: A Theology of Weddings	18
CHAPTER 19: Sample Wedding Ceremony	19
CONCLUSION: Lord of Hosts	20

INTRODUCTION

So you are married. Congratulations. Cheers! Well done. Maybe you just got married and you're wanting to make sure the cement dries and the foundation is plumb. Or, maybe you've been married for many years now, and you're looking for some retooling, a refresher, a little brush up on what this whole marriage thing is. Or maybe your marriage is in trouble, and you're looking for help. Or maybe you aren't quite married yet—you're just engaged and looking to start off your new life together on the right path. No matter which of these you are, this book begins with our only hope for a Christian marriage: Jesus Christ, and then walks through some of the most important principles for building a strong foundation and walking together with your spouse in the Lord.

If you aren't even engaged yet, feel free to read this book, but just be prepared for the fact that I'm not covering a whole bunch of stuff about dating and courtship and how to know if he's the one or she's the one and how to maneuver through the various minefields of relationships. This book assumes that you put a ring on it—or at the very least that you've made up your mind and agreed to take the plunge.

True confessions: the basic shape of this book has grown out of many years of premarital counseling. The material here has been significantly expanded for the entire marriage gambit, but if my language occasionally slips into premarital counseling mode, now you know why.

So whether you have been married for a while, or just married, or even just got engaged, I hope what follows is a helpful summary of some of the most basic biblical principles for Christian marriage, applied to our modern day. But before we get down to brass tacks, let me sketch you something of a biblical picture of marriage.

In recent decades, we have essentially reduced marriage to a permanent roommate situation with sexual benefits. Our assumptions about the purpose and mission of the family make the biblical commands seem obtuse or oppressive. As my friend Pastor Chris Wiley points out, when it comes to discussing the leadership of the man and the submission of the woman, it can sound like the Bible is insisting that the man controls the TV remote, since for many people what we're going to watch seems like the biggest decision that needs to be made in the home.

But the Biblical picture of the family is something far more glorious, far more dangerous, something far more like a nuclear reactor. If moderns balk at the Old Testament's death penalty for adultery (Lev. 20:10) or the death penalty for a rebellious son (Dt. 21:18-21), this is not because we are highly evolved and enlightened moderns, but rather because we have such a low view of marriage and family. The Bible has such severe penalties for the destruction of a home because of the resulting destructive fallout. The Bible says that God hates divorce because of how it covers one's garment with violence (Mal. 2:16), and we nod naively, still thinking that the Old Testament penalties seem sort of harsh and barbaric. But for the last fifty years,

the sexual revolution has run every single play from pornography to homosexuality to now, even the beginnings of full blown pederasty, and the price for that perversion party has been the blood of over 60 million babies and counting. And we think God was kind of harsh and barbaric? No, we are the harsh and barbaric ones.

Even the most ardent defender of second amendment rights has to have had second thoughts on the question of whether every private citizen ought to have access to nukes. I mean, the usual claim is that the citizenry ought to have the means to resist tyrannical governments. And, well, if the government has nukes, shouldn't the citizens? But the stakes are extremely high, and an accident would have far reaching consequences. And suddenly, the most dyed in the wool libertarian wonders if there ought to be at least some barbed wire around that catastrophe waiting to happen. But God has placed His image in man, and every human being bears the imprint of the eternal, infinite, sovereign God. There is nothing in all the world quite so powerful as people. And therefore, the place where people are *made* is basically a nuclear reactor, and the stakes are way higher than we realize. We are making people who will live forever, people with souls that will grow into the greatest horrors or most glorious beings. And those people will go on to build and invent and create and love and fight and dance and make more people. We are either in the process of setting off reactions that will do great good or great harm.

The good news of the gospel is that the All-Powerful, All-Sufficient God has come into this world in the person of His Son in order to set off another nuclear reaction, a reaction of blessing that is in the process of commandeering all of our familial reactions and filling this world with God's life and light.

Too often we misunderstand the words of Jesus regarding the future of marriage. We hear Him say that we will not marry or be

given in marriage in heaven, and we think He was saying that we ought not think so highly of marriage. But that cannot be the case since the whole Bible ends in a marriage, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. So it's simply not true to say that there is no marriage in heaven. There is at least one marriage in heaven, the marriage of the Lamb, and sure, our earthly marriages are transfigured into something far more glorious. But the point is not at all that marriage is not such a big deal. Rather, the point is that our earthly problems will not be problems in heaven. And a great deal of the reason why is because our marriages are pointing to the Great Wedding, the Great Marriage.

Paul says this in Ephesians, and he says it's a great mystery. Now we need not buy into the Roman Catholic view that makes marriage a sacrament, but neither do we need to back away from Paul's language in the slightest. It really is a great mystery, a glorious mystery, a powerful mystery. From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah to Boaz and Ruth to Solomon and the Shulamite to Hosea and Gomer to Joseph and Mary, God has been revealing a great mystery, something glorious about the way the world is, about the way God Himself is, about Christ and the Church.

But getting marriage right has implications far beyond the home. The officers of the church are to be men who rule their own households well, fathers in the church (1 Tim. 3, Tit. 1, 1 Cor. 3). Civil magistrates are to be foster fathers and nursing mothers (Is. 49:23). Our English Old Testaments close with the promise of Malachi to "turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:6). Do we want our land blessed, our businesses blessed, our churches, and public squares blessed? Then we need to get marriage right, which is to say we need to get family right. Christ

died on the cross to take the curse of sin and death, in order to turn the hearts of fathers and sons, in order to heal families, in order that a sinful man (an immortal soul) and a sinful woman (an immortal soul) might make vows in a church before witnesses (immortal souls, all), in full assurance that God's blessing rests upon them and will follow them all the days of their life (and forever).

CHAPTER 1

MARRY IN THE LORD

WHAT is your testimony?

Tell your story of how you came to know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. If you grew up in a Christian family or in the Church, tell that story. Were there particular moments in your life growing up where you have experienced God's grace in your life? Where you came to understand more fully what it meant to be a child of God? Were there particular seasons of growth or repentance or doubt or rebellion? If you grew up outside the faith, tell how the Lord drew you to Himself.

Go ahead, I'll wait. Take turns. Tell your story out loud.

After sharing your testimonies, take turns answering one more question: If someone asked you *why* you are a Christian, what would you say? How would you summarize the good news of Jesus in one or two sentences? What does it mean that you are a follower of Jesus?

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-10. Notice the final couple of verses where Paul summarizes his testimony: “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:8-10).

Whether you have known Jesus all of your life or only more recently experienced the grace of God, His grace is never in vain. It’s never impotent or weak or futile. His grace is powerful. Sometimes His grace can seem more amazing to us, like when God saves someone like Paul on his way to Damascus breathing threats against the followers of Jesus, absolutely convinced that they are enemies of God, and then BAM! God knocks them down and radically changes them. Maybe you or someone you know was in high-handed rebellion, addicted to drugs or alcohol, sexually promiscuous, or suicidal or just full of plain old vanilla devil-pride, and God saved them. Those are glorious stories, glorious testimonies of God’s grace.

But there are no boring stories of grace. When God grips us as young children and preserves us from some of the most ugly manifestations of sin in the world, that too is God’s amazing grace. A true and humble gratitude may say we have a “boring testimony” in the sense that we’ve never gone through a period of prolonged rebellion, joined a biker gang, robbed a bank, or partied like pagans. Because of our parents’ faithfulness and God’s grace, our testimony can seem gloriously boring. And thank God for those testimonies.

But properly speaking, God’s grace is never actually boring, never truly mundane, never weak. It’s always high octane. This is because nobody deserves God’s grace, and while God’s grace is truly,

wonderfully free, salvation is not free. Your salvation, my salvation was terribly expensive. Christ purchased us with His precious blood. “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19-20). No one comes to God with a minor debt or with a little sin problem. Everyone is dead in Adam, a lifeless corpse, enslaved to sin and death and Satan – whether you were three years old or thirteen years old or thirty years old. Every one of us owed a debt we could never pay. Every one of us had a *just* death sentence hanging over our heads. And every one of us was redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus: “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

No testimony should be boring because every testimony is about the most precious, most valuable thing in all the world: our Jesus, our Savior, our Redeemer, and His blood that washes us clean and grants us the gift of everlasting life.

So let me challenge you: if you aren’t used to telling your testimony, or if you gave a glib two sentence testimony (e.g. “My parents were Christians, and I grew up in the Church and that’s about it.”) stop here and try again. Think back on your life. Where have you experienced God’s grace? Have you witnessed answered prayer? Have you seen Him at work in reconciling broken relationships? Have you known His forgiveness? You *should* be able to tell stories of these things. And if you really can’t talk about God’s grace in your life, let me challenge you to seriously consider whether you really *are* a Christian.

It’s not enough to have Christian parents. It’s not enough to have been baptized. It’s not enough to grow up in the Church. Do you know Christ? Do you know that the Holy Spirit dwells in you?

One can be a Christian outwardly, formally, but not a true Christian inwardly (cf. Rom. 2:28-29). The Jews *did* have Abraham as their covenantal father, and they had the genealogical paperwork to prove it. But they actually had the devil as their real father (Jn. 8:44). Paul wrote the Corinthians – people he addresses as “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and said, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5).

A true Christian has not only been baptized on the outside and professed faith outwardly, but a true Christian has also had his heart washed clean by the blood of Christ and has been born again by the renewal of the Holy Spirit (Heb. 10:22, Tit. 3:5). This doesn’t mean that you had to have seen a miraculous vision or spoken in tongues or have some kind dramatic emotional experience. But there should be fruit in your life – the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Do you see evidence of the Spirit’s work in your life – convicting you of sin, conforming you to the image of Christ, causing you to grow in love for God and your neighbor more and more as the months and years go by?

This is actually an enormously important point to make at the beginning of book about marriage because the Bible is incredibly clear that Christians are only to marry other Christians, true believers in Christ. “You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly” (Deut. 7:3-4). And Paul makes a similar point in the New Covenant: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with law-

lessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14). And likewise, while a Christian should seek to preserve a marriage that already exists with a non-believer, if the non-believer departs, the Christian is not under bondage, and in this case or when a spouse dies, a Christian may remarry, but “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39).

In the early church, one of the slanders the pagans spread about the Christians was that they practiced incest – intermarrying between brothers and sisters. Of course this was not true at all, but the slander grew out of the Christian commitment to only marrying other Christians. Going all the way back to the Song of Songs, even Solomon referred to his spouse as his “sister” (Song 4:9-12, 5:1). If you would not marry an unbeliever, why would you date or court an unbeliever? If you would not marry an unbeliever why would you flirt with an unbeliever? Why would you keep up an overly friendly familiarity with an unbeliever if he/she is not even an option? Christians should be known for their commitment to marry only in the Lord, only in the family of God. I know I said this was a book for married people, not a book for people courting or dating, but I couldn’t help myself. Some things just need saying.

Now maybe you’re thinking this has all gotten pretty deep and introspective. Shouldn’t we be taking a compatibility test or something? Well, actually, that is sort of what we’re doing. The very first item on the list for compatibility for Christians is salvation in Christ. Non-Christians certainly can get married, and they really are married, since marriage is not just a thing for Christians. It’s a creational institution for the good of all humans and human society. But Christians are commanded to marry “in the Lord” because when a man or woman comes to know Jesus, so much of who we are is affected, changed, and transformed. Our priorities are completely different. What motivates us is different. We have a new set of desires, goals,

and in Jesus, we have been given a very specific *mission*. There are so many good things that are different about a man and a woman: different family backgrounds, different customs, different cultures, different tastes, interests, hobbies, preferences, not to mention the wonderful sexual differences between a man and a woman. To try to fit a man and a woman together who have a different reason, a different fundamental motivation for what they do – this is a recipe for disaster, disappointment, and heartbreak. And there are no shortage of stories of marital train wrecks documenting this sad reality.

Yes, you might have collected stamps before you were a Christian or loved skiing or been a pretty good singer, but even those skills or gifts or hobbies are re-oriented to Christ when you become a Christian. Before, they may have been distractions, idols, covers for insecurity, but in Jesus they become gifts to enjoy, gifts to share, and somehow, we pray, they become part of our sacrifice of praise, spiritual acts of worship of our Creator and Savior. And if this is true for hobbies and pastimes, how much more so does it effect our vocational, educational, and familial aspirations and dreams? How do you decide which job to take? How do you organize your finances? Do you value children? Are you committed to fruitfulness in the marriage bed? Do you share a biblical understanding of the role of husband and wife? Do you share standards of fidelity and purity? Is it ever acceptable to view pornography? How will you discipline your children? How will you educate them? Will your boys and girls be raised differently, according to their biological sex? Why? Does it matter?

In order to begin answering these questions, you must have a *standard*, a rule for life. This is why it is of the utmost importance that you marry someone who shares that foundational (re)orientation to Christ and His Word, someone who understands that Jesus is Lord

of every square inch of your life, someone who is just as committed as you are to taking up the cross of Christ and following Him in obedience wherever He leads. Christians are committed to obey whatever the Bible says about finances, children, sex, vocation, and everything else. In other words, a true Christian is someone who has surrendered in principle. Whatever the Bible says, that's what we are committed to.

The Apostle Paul describes what it's like to be a Christian this way: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Do you resonate with this? Do you know what Paul means?

Knowing the love of Christ goes all the way down into our deepest desires, our identities as men and women, as human beings made in God's image who are now being renewed into the image of Christ. We no longer live; now Christ lives in us. Now whatever we do, we do it *to the glory of God* (1 Cor. 10:31) – which is to say we are committed to obeying Christ. Given God's love, God's grace, God's goodness pouring over us, we want to live our lives as living sacrifices of praise. Why? Because He is worthy. He is our Lord, our Master, and we obey Him in everything because He saved us from sin, death, and Satan.

Our hearts burn within us with gratitude, with joy, with gladness, with relief. Our debts have all been paid. Our hearts are clean. And by the grace of God, we have been sent out into the world to fill it with His goodness and glory. He made the world and filled it with glory and goodness, and He has always intended for men and women made in His image to take those gifts and build upon them, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with garden-cities full of

good food and fine wine, creative technology and industry, inspiring arts and architecture, with excellent and sacrificial care for the weak, the sick, the elderly, the disabled, not to mention courageous service in politics, economics, education, zoology, and tourism.

The gift of Christian marriage is the gift of friendship and an enormous help in this mission of following Jesus. There is a biblical ordering in God's assignments to men and women respectively; they are oriented to one another and to their various vocations in different ways (more on that later). But there is also a foundational discipleship-mutuality in this. When two Christians marry, they are first of all brother and sister in Christ, and God knows exactly what He's doing. His ultimate goal for both of them is Christ-likeness, and marriage is one of the most objective places where we can speak with confidence about what God is up to. He is saying: you need this particular woman with all her quirks and peculiarities and gifts in order to grow up into the likeness and maturity of Christ. And *you* need this particular man with all of his unique quirks and peculiarities and gifts in order to grow up into the likeness and maturity of Jesus. By God's design, Christian marriage is one of the ordinary means of sanctification.

So you want a Christian marriage? We begin here. We begin with your testimony, with your story of God's grace, with your identity firmly fixed in Jesus Christ, with this shared commitment. You are not your own. You were bought with a price. You belong to Jesus. You have been born again to a new and living hope. You are on a mission of seeking glory and honor and immortality (Rom. 2:7). Jesus is Your Lord and Master. So this whole thing is not really about you. It's about Him. It's about His plan, His mission in this world. Most marital problems can be traced to problems here. Sometimes you thought your spouse was a Christian, sometimes one spouse be-

comes a Christian later in life, or sometimes very little time or effort has been spent explicitly anchoring your marriage in Christ. And one or both spouses are consciously or unconsciously pursuing their own mission, their own plans, and no wonder there's conflict. If you want your marriage to be blessed, it needs to line up with what Jesus is doing. You need His mission to be your mission. Therefore, His Word must shape everything about your plan. You want to live for Him *together*. Right?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Why are there not really any boring testimonies – even if you grew up in the faith?*
1. *What's the difference between someone who is a Christian outwardly and a true Christian who is also one inwardly?*
1. *What does the Bible say about Christians marrying non-Christians (Dt. 7:3-4, 2 Cor. 6:14, 1 Cor. 7:39)?*
1. *Why is it so important for husband and wife to have a shared standard for morality? And what is that standard for Christians?*
1. *How do Christians do everything to the glory of God? What does that actually mean practically – how do you know for sure you're doing it?*