

MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship. For the Christian a marriage commitment is to God as well as to the spouse, and should be entered into only between a man and a woman who share a common faith. Mutual love, honor, respect, and responsibility are the fabric of this relationship, which is to reflect the love, sanctity, closeness, and permanence of the relationship between Christ and His church. Regarding divorce, Jesus taught that the person who divorces a spouse, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery. Although some family relationships may fall short of the ideal, a man and a woman who fully commit themselves to each other in Christ through marriage may achieve loving unity through the guidance of the Spirit and the nurture of the church. God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity. Increasing family closeness is one of the earmarks of the final gospel message. Parents are to bring up their children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words they are to teach them that Christ is a loving, tender, and caring guide who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God which embraces both single and married persons. (Gen. 2:18-25; Exod. 20:12; Deut. 6:5-9; Prov. 22:6; Mal. 4:5, 6; Matt. 5:31, 32; 19:3-9, 12; Mark 10:11, 12; John 2:1-11; 1 Cor. 7:7, 10, 11; 2 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:21-33; 6:1-4.)

WHERE DID MARRIAGE COME FROM?

In the beginning of time, God created a beautiful world and filled it with all kinds of animals. After He had created all other living things, God created the first man, Adam.

As Adam worked with God to name all the animals, he saw that each animal had a mate. Every animal species could start a family and begin to populate the earth. But when Adam looked to find his mate, he came up empty.

“For Adam there was not found a helper comparable to him” (Genesis 2:20).

God intended it to begin this way so Adam could feel for himself the desire for a partner. God helped him recognize the need for companionship and said,

“It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Genesis 2:18).

To make the first woman, God took a bone from Adam’s side. God put him in a “*deep sleep,*” removed 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).

It’s interesting that God didn’t take a bone from Adam’s foot. Nor did He take a piece of Adam’s skull. Instead, God took a rib from Adam’s side, symbolizing the equality and care they were to show for each other. God made men and women to be equal partners in the experience of life, walking side by side. We find our gender identity in God’s plan for men and women to be “*heirs together of the grace of life*” (1 Peter 3:7).

Then, with Adam and Eve as the first example of a couple, God defined marriage:

“A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

God ordained the very first union. Even before there was any trace of sin or sadness, He blessed marriage. And He continued to do so throughout the entire Bible.

GOD’S PLAN FOR MARRIAGE

God’s plan for marriage is a union of a man and a woman in a committed, lifelong partnership.

“What God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mark 10:9).

When we share marriage vows, God sees those as binding for a lifetime.

This reserves the sacredness of intimacy for a lifelong commitment. He designed us to enjoy it within the protection of a marriage covenant.

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled” (Hebrews 13:4).

He loves to see people in happy marriages, and He longs to guide each couple in their marriage as well.

God also uses a happy marriage as a symbol of how much He loves us:

“As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isaiah 62:5).

The Apostle Paul affirms this idea:

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her. ... Let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Ephesians 5:25, 33).

This respectful relationship filled with love and understanding is God’s ideal for marriage.

“Beloved, let us love one another,” writes the apostle John. *“Love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).* To truly love another human being, we learn what love really is through Jesus Christ.

Difficulties along the way are inevitable. But that’s why the Bible spends much time describing what unconditional love is like:

“Love suffers long and is kind ... Love does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

This kind of unconditional love can smooth the way for a strong, long-lasting relationship and healthy marriage.

Think of your relationship to God and to your spouse like a triangle. You and your spouse are each at a point of the triangle. God is at the top point of the triangle. The closer you get to God, the closer you will also be to one another.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH UNBELIEVERS

The Bible encourages Christians to marry those who share their love of Jesus Christ. Beliefs set the foundation for so much of our life, it makes sense to share the journey with another who shares your beliefs.

In a marriage, it is vital for both parties to agree on issues close to their heart. Spouses should encourage each other in their relationship with Jesus. Just as the prophet Amos articulates, *“Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3).*

Even before preparing for marriage, it's important to resolve this question. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14).

For a happy marriage, it is important to find someone who shares your religious values. For believers, it is vital that they marry someone who has chosen to put Jesus Christ first in their life.

When a couple doesn't share deeply held beliefs, marriage is significantly harder. As each person becomes more sure of their ideas, a rift can develop between them. And the last thing anyone wants is to set their marriage up for failure.

However, if you are already in a marriage with an unbeliever, what should you do? Scripture offers this to consider:

“If any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband. For the unbelieving husband is made holy by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy by her husband. ... But if the unbelieving partner leaves, let him leave” (1 Corinthians 7:13-15).

One thing to note in the above verses: Paul is not necessarily saying that the unbelieving gets a “ticket to heaven” just from being wed to a believer. He's also not saying that a spouse will surely become converted just from being married to a believer, or even from noticing how it affects them positively. There is never a guarantee on anything that involves the human free will.

While a believing spouse will surely be praying for their partner's spiritual wellbeing, the point being made here is that the duty to marriage remains sacred, and as long as the spouse remains faithful, the two should keep working together on a love-based relationship.

However, if the unbelieving spouse is not willing to work on the marriage and chooses to leave, the believing spouse is not held at fault for the breaking up of the marriage.

If you're struggling, or unsure about what to do in your marriage with someone whose beliefs differ from yours, or if you're considering marriage to someone who believes differently, first take your situation to God in prayer. There are also options for counseling and guidance.

WHAT ABOUT DIVORCE?

Divorce isn't something anyone wants, especially God. It was never in His plan for marriage. But in living in a sinful world, sometimes divorce is a reality even if we don't want it to be. Divorce is painful and hard. It severs a relationship that was intended to last for a lifetime.

The Bible does describe a reason for divorce: infidelity.

If a spouse chooses to have an affair, and betrays the most intimate of trusts, God understands why divorce becomes an option. And He allows it in that case.

"Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery" (Matthew 19:9).

Yet even in this situation, God doesn't *demand* divorce. If a couple is willing to work through the pain of this type of betrayal, there may still be hope for the marriage. If both parties are open to making a new start, God delights to see healing.

When we do all we can to keep our families together, God rejoices. A Christian family therapist can provide family counseling to work through issues. A counselor can provide tools families can use to bring healing and hope.

BUT WHAT ABOUT SITUATIONS OF ABUSE?

While God hates divorce, He *never* sanctions abuse. His heart of love breaks when there is pain and abuse in the family.

To preserve mental and physical health, it is important that both partners give each other room to grow. To keep the stability of the family structure, both partners must commit to kindness and love. And if that's not happening and one partner is experiencing abuse, they have a right to seek protection and safety.

It makes God angry when people use their strength or position to hurt others. His hatred of divorce should NEVER serve as permission to stay in an abusive marriage.

We live in an imperfect world, where people can seem just fine on the outside but turn selfish and angry behind closed doors. You have a right to protect yourself and your children from an abusive spouse or relationship.

Christian family therapy, or a dedicated Christian counselor, may help to determine the best course of action. If leaving is the best option, make sure to find support and help right away so you and your family can be safe. There are several resources that can help you in such a case.

Regardless of the decisions of your past, God invites you to come to Him with open arms. He loves you and longs to restore you to wholeness. We serve a God of forgiveness and

compassion. He says, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you”* (Jeremiah 31:3).

WHAT IF MY SITUATION ISN'T GOD'S IDEAL?

God is the great restorer. He has promised:

“Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; neither be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and will not remember the reproach of your widowhood anymore. For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is His name; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth” (Isaiah 54:4, 5).

Your relationship status does not affect your standing with God.

Even if you find yourself broken and alone, feeling unwanted, there is hope! God loves you more than any person on earth ever could. And He desires your happiness.

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Are you struggling to occupy the role of both parents to your children? God has promised to be there for you. He offers to be *“a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows”* (Psalms 68:5, NKJV).

Are you reeling from abandonment and the betrayal of trust? God will never betray you.

“For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:4,5).

Do you feel cut off from your family? God promises that He will be your family. He will help you to find a community of faith to strengthen you and be a family for you.

“God sets the solitary in families,” (Psalm 68:6).

No matter your situation or your struggle, God is the ultimate Friend who will help you. As close as another person can be, God will come closer.

“There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

PARENTING WITH BIBLICAL GUIDANCE

In many instances throughout the Bible, God expressed His deep love for children.

“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones,” Jesus said. *“For I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 18:10).

He also has strong words for anyone who refuses to recognize the priceless value of children, or the influence we can have on them.

“...but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6).

If you have the privilege of being involved in the life of a child, you have a special opportunity to share God’s love and introduce them to Jesus.

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it (Proverbs 22:6).

By gentle discipline, or “disciple-ing”, of a child’s heart you can help them to have a lifelong relationship with Jesus.

The early years of life are so important. Children will grow and flourish in an atmosphere of love and kindness.

Just as God loves us, so we are to love the children in our care.

The ways we interact with our children is what helps them shape their norms and worldviews. The Bible cautions parents to be aware of how they communicate with their children.

“Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (Colossians 3:21).

Depending on our words and actions, we can encourage children toward obedience, or stir up anger and resentment in their hearts. When we ask something of them, and then do something opposite ourselves, they see our double standard. God has given us a responsibility to train our children to know and love Him. However, we are not to use our power inappropriately.

We are a picture of God to our children. Their understanding of God’s love will be greatly influenced by how we relate to them.

When we are patient and kind, they see that they have a heavenly Father whose love is infinite.

When we love them regardless of their attitudes or mistakes, they know they have a heavenly Father who is ready to forgive them and to help them grow.

When we carefully train them and give them reasonable boundaries to keep them safe, they see that their Heavenly Father gives rules because He wants their very best.

Our job is to provide a picture of God and His love to our children.

Yes, this does sound like a monumental task. But God has all the grace and strength to help you remain patient and gentle as you work with children.

We want to encourage children to become all that God has planned for them to be. By our examples, we want to show them the benefits of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

God's desire for family life is that we diligently teach the next generation about Him. And in doing so, we also learn more about Him. You will find, as you teach your children, that you also become the student.

Watching their growing faith will give you a desire to trust God more fully. You will be inspired to study the Bible more deeply so you can answer your child's questions. God often works through young, innocent hearts!

"Let the little children come to Me," Jesus said, "and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14).

THE BENEFITS OF FAMILY WORSHIP

Family worship, or devotions, can be an important part of family life. It is a time set aside each day to honor God, and can be a happy time of togetherness. Singing songs, reading Bible stories, and sharing about the blessings God gave you during the day can be the highlights of this special worship time.

As your family studies God's word together, you will build family closeness. Children can look forward to these special moments of family togetherness.

"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 6:7).

No matter your age, relationship status, or family structure, God loves you. Unconditionally. Completely. Without reservation.

Seventh-day Adventist Christians love to support families in their faith experience. While today's families come in many shapes and sizes, God's love brings connection and happiness. We welcome everyone to rejoice to celebrate life's milestones together. By following God's plan for families, we can experience the joy and fulfillment they bring.