

## **Lasting Romance**

### **By David Feddes**

Want to know the difference between a dating relationship and a marriage relationship? According to one author, in a dating relationship, whenever the couple uses a car, the man races around to open the door for his date, and if there happens to be a mud puddle by her door, he whips off his coat and lays it down over the puddle so his precious girlfriend won't get wet. In a marriage relationship, on the other hand, the wife opens her own door, and if there's a puddle there, the husband yells, "Jump, honey! I think you can make it."

In every marriage, there's a move from starry-eyed romance to tough-minded realism. And that's not all bad. Romance needs to become realistic in order to have any staying power. It's one thing to spend a few hours together on weekends, looking your best, acting your best, having fun and whispering sweet nothings. It's quite another to be together every day, when your hair's a mess and you've got bad breath, when you've got to deal with paying bills and raising children and fixing flat tires and unplugging the sewer system. That's when you find out the meaning of real love.

Romance is like lighting a fire. When you light a fire, it's good to start out with paper or some other material that lights easily and makes a big flame right away. That's a good way to start, but you need more than that if you want to keep the fire going, because the material that lights the most easily also burns out the most quickly. Along with the paper, you need some good, substantial pieces of wood—some logs. The main reason you light the paper in the first place is so that the logs will start burning. Once that happens, you have a delightful fire that will last long after the paper has burned itself out. It's when the paper first flares up that the fire burns the fastest, but it's when the wood is burning that you have the best fire, the warmest and the one that lasts the longest.

That's the way it is with romance. In the early stages, it may blaze brightly in the form of physical attraction as you fall head over heels for each other, but you experience the most powerful and lasting romance when that initial excitement kindles a more substantial and enduring kind of love—married love. The excitement of first love and the thrills of the honeymoon are wonderful, but they don't mean much in the long run unless they ignite a flame of faithful love that keeps burning steady and warm long after the novelty has burned out.

Oh, it's all very nice if someone loves you based on what you're like when you're together on dates, but it's even better if someone gets to know the real you, walks with you through the day in and day out of everyday life, and keeps right on loving you. That kind of love might not have the exciting novelty of a dating relationship, but it's deeper and more real and more satisfying. You don't have to impress anybody; you just belong together, you do things together, you love each other, enjoy each other, and see each other almost as a part of yourself.

When infatuation becomes commitment, when romance becomes realistic, when passion becomes permanent, you find the flame of love burning in the everyday realities of life and in the depths of your personalities, connecting you to each other with an unbreakable bond. Dating and romance find fulfillment in a joyful and yet realistic marriage relationship. Not every marriage develops that way, of course, and there are a variety of reasons for that, but at it's best, marriage is still among the greatest joys in life. In a good marriage you enjoy a unity and an intimacy that you can't find anywhere else, and your love becomes more powerful and more precious than anything else on earth.

## **Romance and Religion**

The ultimate in romance occurs when your husband or wife is the second most important person in your life. That may sound strange, but the best marriage is one where husband and wife—much as they love one another—put each other second and put Jesus first. Loving Jesus most of all doesn't mean you love each other any less than you otherwise would. If anything, you love each other more, because the love of Jesus greatly increases your capacity for love, both to receive love and to give love. Jesus takes you beyond the limits of ordinary human love, and you understand glorious and mysterious things about your marriage that can't be known apart from Christ.

The Bible teaches that true romance and true religion go together. In Ephesians 5, the Bible says concerning marriage, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church." According to the Bible, God designed the marriage union to be an expression of the church's union with Christ. When we realize that, it makes for great marriages, and it also makes for a richer experience awareness of the church's relationship to Jesus. Religion and romance belong together. Let's look first at why romance belongs in your religion, and then we'll see why religion belongs in your romance.

The Bible shows that true religion is, at its heart and essence, a romantic relationship. Genuine religion is much more than a stern set of rules that you follow, or a group of solemn rituals that you perform, or a collection of beliefs that you memorize. These things may all be very good and helpful if the church keeps them in their proper place, but at the very heart of true religion is love. The church isn't just the group that knows the facts and follows the rules; the church is nothing less than the bride of Jesus Christ!

Jesus calls his church, and he calls each of its members, to enjoy a loving and intimate and permanent relationship with him—to be his bride. We're united to him, like a wife to her husband. Unlike marriage, of course, our union with Jesus isn't sexual, but in other ways it very real and very romantic: there's excitement, there's mystery, there's love, there's devotion, and there's a willingness to sacrifice for each other. Jesus loved us so much he died for us, and he's dedicated himself to making us his perfect bride. How can we not love him in return? That's the romance of authentic religion!

There are many reasons why you should belong to Jesus Christ—too many to count—but the most important reason is this: love. Jesus deserves your love, and you need his love. Without it, you'll be lost forever, and with it—well, you've got it all. A living, loving relationship to the God of the universe is what life is all about, and so if you don't yet belong to Jesus, you shouldn't rest until you trust in him and put your life in his hands. You don't just need a little religion; you need a living, loving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. You need to be a part of his body, his bride, the church, and once you are, you need to enjoy the romance of being in love with Jesus.

Now, if it's true that religion should be romantic, it's equally true that romance should be religious. The best marriage is where husband and wife see their relationship as an expression of Christ's relationship to the church. Even if we set the Bible aside for a moment and simply look at research studies, we see a strong relationship between religious commitment and healthy marriages. Researchers find that religiously committed people not only have much lower rates of divorce, but their level of satisfaction and enjoyment of marriage is higher. A marriage survey by the Gallup organization found that 75 percent of those who prayed with their spouses reported their marriages to be very happy, compared to only 57 percent of those who didn't pray together.

Also, those couples who attend worship together on a regular basis are more often happily married than those who don't. There are unhappy exceptions to this general rule, but more often than not, though, that's how it goes: couples with loving relationship to Christ also have a loving relationship to each other

### **The Ultimate Romance**

Researchers find a positive correlation between religious commitment and marital happiness, but the Bible goes far beyond that. The Bible shows that God intends the union of husband and wife to be nothing less than a visible, living demonstration of the union of Jesus with his church. Let me just read for you the marvelous words of Ephesians 5:21-33:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church--for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you must also love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Isn't it fascinating how this passage mingles religion with romance? The happiest marriage, the ultimate romance, is where husband and wife see their relationship as an expression of Christ's relationship to the church. Notice that this passage isn't about women's rights or men's rights. It's about authentic Christian marriage. There's nothing at all in Ephesians 5 about the rights of the wife or the husband. When you start talking about marriage in terms of rights, you're losing the religion from your marriage, and you're losing the romance as well.

Self-sacrifice and submitting to each other—that's the essence of true romance. Just think about it. What's more romantic than two people who love each other so much that they're willing to do almost anything for each other? This seems to come almost naturally when two people first fall in love, but all too often, as time passes, the self-sacrifice gives way to self-centeredness, and the romance slowly disappears.

Maybe you've heard about the seven stages of the marriage cold. Someone has described it this way. During the first year of marriage, if the wife even sniffs a little, her husband says, "Oh my precious darling! I'm so worried about you. You'd better see a doctor right now, my dove. Maybe a few days in the hospital will help you get over that awful cold." In the second year, he says, "Honey, I don't like the sound of that cough. I want you to go to bed right now, sweetheart, and I'll take care of everything." In year three, the man says, "Maybe you'd better lie down for a while, hon." Year four: "Look dear, after you feed the kids and get the dishes washed, you'd better hit the sack." Year five: "Get yourself a few aspirin." Year six: "Are you ever gonna stop barking? Can't you gargle or do something?" And in year seven he says, "For Pete's sake! Will you stop sneezing? You want me to get pneumonia or what?"

Sound familiar? Well, as we saw earlier, there's got to be some healthy realism as a marriage develops, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be concerned about your spouse's welfare and think only about yourself. The ultimate romance is where husband and wife are concerned about each other, where they're willing to do almost anything for each other, and the way to keep this kind of romance alive is to keep the spirit of self-sacrifice alive. That's why belonging to Jesus is so helpful to marriage. When both husband and wife take their cue from the relationship of Jesus to his church, they have a resource to minimize their selfishness, to maximize the romantic spirit of self-sacrifice, and to enjoy a love that is passionate and permanent.

### **Passion and Permanence**

Marriage without passion is tragic. The Bible says that "the earth trembles" over "an unloved woman who is married" (Proverbs 30:23). But that doesn't mean that passion without marriage is the way to go. The Bible warns against being sexual lovers outside marriage: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4). God plainly doesn't like to see marriage without love or lovers without marriage. God's design is married lovers. The most romantic love belongs in the context of marriage

The healthiest romance happens when a man and woman see their relationship as an expression of Christ's relationship to the church. Such love is passionate, and it is permanent. Does Jesus have a only halfhearted interest in his people. No, his love is passionate. Jesus loves his church passionately enough to die for her. Does Jesus love church with fiery passion one moment and then dump her the next? No, his love is permanent. And his love is the model for ours. When romance is religious, when the love between a man and woman is modeled on Jesus' love for his church, our love must be passionate and permanent.

Don't ever separate passion from permanence. Love without marriage can be passionate but not permanent. Marriage without love may be permanent but not passionate. But married love based on Christ's love is both passionate and permanent. This means that single people must save their greatest passion and intimacy for marriage, and it also means that married people shouldn't settle for a dwindling passion in their relationship.

One tragic tendency of our time is to emphasize passion at the expense of permanence. When two people fall in love, why should they go to the altar, when they can go to the back seat instead? Why should they make lifelong promises when they can simply indulge their passions for the moment? In the movies, sex without marriage, passion without permanence, looks like a great love story. In real life it's usually just a lust story.

In the movie *Titanic*, for example, after Jack fornicates with seventeen-year-old Rose, he's willing to die for her. In real life, when a young man fornicates with a seventeen-year-old girl he's just met, he doesn't die for her; he dumps her. On the real ship *Titanic*, it was not fornicators who died for girls they hooked up with the night before. It was husbands who died so that their wives and children might live. In the movies unmarried passion is marvelous and exciting. In the real world, unmarried passion leaves a trail of burned out lovers, broken hearts, nasty diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and a damaged capacity ever to enjoy the permanent passion of marriage. So if you're single, don't fall for the lie that sex before marriage is okay. Don't seek passion apart from permanence.

By the same token, if you're married, don't settle for permanence without passion. God doesn't merely say, "Husbands, stick with your wives." He says, "Husbands, *love* your wives." The Bible tells us to cleave to each other and stick with each other, but not just because we feel

stuck with each other. We must love each other with the passion of the Bible's great love poem, the Song of Songs, which says, "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death... It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away (8:6-7).

Does this mean that married people must always burn with the same excitement and delight in each other as when they first met? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that the fire should always be there, and no in the sense that the fire may later burn in a different way than it did when it was first lit. The flame becomes more steady and constant—but it still stays hot!

## **Head and Body**

In Ephesians 5, the passage we read earlier, the Bible teaches that marriage is like Jesus' relationship to the church, and that, in turn, is like the relationship of the head to the body. This means, first of all, that husband and wife are a unit; they are no longer autonomous and independent individuals. The head and the body need each other. Sometimes a husband will refer to his wife as "my better half." There's a lot of truth in that. Your spouse isn't simply a person whom you happen to live with; she's your better half. The two become one flesh. This oneness is celebrated and enjoyed in a wonderful way through sexual union, but it's also a vital part of every dimension of married life. You're united physically, and at the same time your social and emotional and spiritual lives are united and intertwined. Just as Jesus has bound himself to his church, and just as a head is connected to a body, so husband and wife are united to each other.

If you're competing with your husband or wife to see who has the most rights, it's like competing with yourself, and you'll end up hurting yourself. Christian marriage is based on cooperation, not competition. It's based on unity and submitting to each other, not on individual rights—that's what makes it so rewarding and so romantic.

Where husband and wife are both Christians, God wants their relationship to be a living demonstration of the relationship of Jesus and his church. He calls wives to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Jesus, or as the body submits to the direction of the head. A Christian wife will do whatever she can to honor and support and please her husband. She submits, not because her husband is better or smarter or more important than she is—no, she submits to him "as to the Lord," "out of reverence for Christ." She respects her husband, and she wants the way she relates to him to reflect the way the church relates to Jesus. A Christian woman shouldn't get married unless she's marrying a Christian man she's willing to submit to. Otherwise, she's going to miss out on the joy of the ultimate romance.

And if you think that's a tall order for the wife, look at what Christian marriage means for the husband. If you're a married man and you're a Christian, God calls you to love your wife the way Jesus loves his church. And how does Jesus love his church? Well, he was willing to do whatever he had to, even lay down his own life, in order to make her his holy and radiant bride. So if you're a Christian man, you shouldn't marry any woman unless she's a fellow Christian and you're willing even to die for her.

If you're a married man, you're the head of your wife; you have God-given authority in your marriage, but it is the authority of sacrificial love. Your love for your wife is to reflect the love of Jesus for his church. As the head of the church, Jesus became a servant and washed his disciples' dirty feet; so if you really want to show that you're the head of your wife, help her wash the dishes and mop the floor. As the head of the church, Jesus sacrificed his life for that church. So if you want to prove your headship, you won't go around insisting that you're the

boss. Instead, you'll give up whatever you have to in order to build up your wife and make her a truly radiant woman.

You say your wife isn't perfect? Well, if your relationship to Jesus depended on being perfect, where would you be? Your calling as the head of your marriage is to take the lead in forgiving and serving and helping your wife to become everything God meant her to be. That's how the head of the church treats his bride, and that's how you should treat yours. If you want your wife to be more romantic and radiant, then love her the way Jesus loves the church. You think your wife needs to change? Well, don't try to bully or force her into being what you want her to be; instead, love her into being what God wants her to be. A head does what's best for the body; Christ does what's best for his church; and any Christian husband will seek what's best for his wife, no matter what it costs him.

### **Growing Intimacy**

When, as husband and wife, you live according to this pattern, it not only helps your marriage, but it also deepens your relationship to Christ. The way you relate to your spouse can have a definite effect on how you relate to Christ. According to 1 Peter 3:7, tension in marriage can hinder your prayers and hurt your intimacy with Jesus. But the opposite is also true. Loving intimacy in your marriage can help your prayers and deepen your intimacy with Jesus.

Here's why: One of the most romantic things about marriage is not that you're "perfect for each other," as we sometimes say, but that you're both imperfect, and you love each other anyway. You come to know each other very well, you discover flaws in each other and you even hurt each other—yet you keep on loving and forgiving and serving each other, and in the process, you help each other to improve and grow. And in that unconditional loving and forgiving and nurturing of each other, you develop a deeper and more vivid experience of the unconditional love of Jesus. Your faith becomes more romantic, and your romance becomes more faithful.