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FANTASY

THE REALITY OF MARRIAGE

FANTASY BY BETTY CHURCHILL • CHAPTER EXCERPT

Fantasy is a collection of insights from several contributing writers, about all the stuff women talk about and some they don't, but should. Sex, dating, relationships, the "m" word (not marriage, the other one), but, of course, we talk about marriage, too, as well as the beautiful people, the need to be in control and how God, Jesus and the Spirit fit into it all.

Like its male counterpart, Flesh, Fantasy is divided into three sections: small group discussion material, topical articles, and a month of daily devotionals.

Partial List of Topics: Masturbation, How Far is Too Far, The Role of Fathers, Confession-Forgiveness, Community, Filling of the Spirit, Cosmetic Surgery, Worship, Singleness, Faith, Homosexuality, Why Wait?, Body/Self Image, and Pornography.

Contributions by Henry Cloud and Shellie R. Warren



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What Bride Magazine Doesn't Tell You

By Paula Keels

Does anyone *really* know what they're getting into when they get married? Is it really all about that ever-evasive kind of being "in love" that causes Tom Cruise to jump up and down on Oprah's couch for the love of Katie? Is it possible to find that one soul mate, the one you've felt like you've known your whole life? Can we end up like that old couple that's still holding hands at seventy-five as they walk through the park?

I don't think there is any other topic that occupies our thoughts as a whole more than relationships. Who is with whom? Who broke up with whom? Who is interested in me? How do I get rid of

who I'm with? How do I make this work? Our society has turned such age-old questions into a multimillion dollar business in the form of advice books, therapists, gossip magazines, Jerry Springer-type shows, Dr. Phil, and so on. We are, as a nation, obsessed with relationships. If we took a poll, most of us would probably say that we just want to be married and live happily ever after. Judging from our divorce rate, we aren't good at that.

When I married fifteen years ago, I thought I had an advantage. My husband and I are both committed believers in Christ. We both have a personal relationship with the architect of marriage itself. We thought we knew what it was all about. Looking back, I don't think we had a clue. The divorce rate for believers is no lower than that of unbelievers. In fact, in some cases it's higher, according to a recent George Barna poll. I don't know one married person, even the most happily married, who has not at some point in her relationship been surprised, shocked, or even disappointed in all that the institution encompasses. It would seem society is obsessed with something it doesn't understand, and both believers and nonbelievers in Christ are equally confused.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE ICING

Like most women, I long to have the closest, most intimate marriage possible. That's much harder than you might think. The only thing my husband and I had right when we said our vows was that we loved each other very much and that divorce was never an option. Interestingly, it is not the conferences or books on marriage or conversations with wise people that have helped me understand and improve my marriage. The most helpful thing to me has been a year-long, in-depth Bible study on the book of Revelation (warning—do not read this book without a "road map"; it can be freaky). I think that to truly understand the purpose of marriage, you have to understand the bigger picture—the purpose of life.

There is not enough space in this article, or even in this book, to examine Revelation or the meaning of life. But let me sum it up by saying that life is not about me—or you, for that matter. It's all about Him—God, I mean—His glory, His honor, His purpose. My marriage (any marriage) is not about being in love, sharing my life, experiencing fulfillment, ending loneliness, having children, or having all my needs met, etc., contrary to popular belief. It's about bringing honor and glory to God. That doesn't sound very romantic, does it? Not exactly the chick flick plot line. And yet romance and joy and love and passion and children and

security and on and on are all elements of my marriage. But they are not the purpose of it.

It's somewhat ironic that the very things that most people pursue, the things they believe will satisfy them—happiness, romance, security—are actually not the end in and of themselves. When one pursues intimacy with God as the goal, those things are the byproducts, the bonus, the icing on the cake. One of the many paradoxes of the Christian life is this: by not pursuing selfish gain, you have your needs and desires met.

METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING...

God loves symbolism. The Bible is full of it. In his book *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas writes,

In fact, both the Old and New Testaments use marriage as a central analogy—the union between God and Israel (OT) and the union between Christ and his Church (NT). Understanding the depths of these analogies is crucial, as they will help us determine the very foundation on which a truly Christian marriage is based. If I believe the primary purpose of marriage is to model God's love for his church, I will enter this relationship and maintain it with an entirely new motivation, one hinted at by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: "So we make it our goal

to please Him." (2nd Cor. 5:9). More than seeing marriage as a mutual comfort, we must see it as a word picture of the most important news humans have ever received—that there is a divine relationship between God and his people.

We all long to love and be loved. We all experience desire and passion. We all want security and companionship. These desires are good and real and from the Lord. Where we go wrong is in expecting our mate to be the fulfillment of all of these things and more, instead of finding fulfillment in a relationship with a very real God. I speak from experience. I have spent several frustrated years expecting Jeff to meet all my needs (expecting him to meet some, I think, is fair). It is an incredible and unfair onus to place upon another imperfect person to meet all of my needs. I am the most in love, passionate, and content in my marriage when my relationship with God is rich.

With all of that in mind, in order to experience marriage as intended, we have to shift our paradigm on marriage from what our culture has taught us to what God has designed. We can start by examining our longings and emotions, and even the practical wants and needs for relationships, in light of God's design and intent for them. Hear carefully what I am saying so as not to get disillusioned. The romance and love and companionship that you have been dreaming of since you were a little girl (or the sex, for that matter) is completely available within God's design for marriage. It is just that most of us are looking to the wrong source. We think we have to have a husband to provide the emotional energy, right priorities, compassion, sacrifice, and wisdom required for those things to happen. Yes, you can have it all, as long as you find your all in Him. Anything else is counterfeit and ultimately unfulfilling. In other words, when both my husband and I are well connected in a healthy relationship with God—meaning we read the Bible with a teachable heart and spend time in humble prayer—God changes us and gives us His understanding, joy, and peace (Eph. 4). If we are both aligned with Him, then we are aligned with each other. It's really a three-way relationship in the purest sense.



WHAT IF GOD DESIGNED MARRIAGE TO MAKE US HOLY MORE THAN TO MAKE US HAPPY?

That's the subtitle of Gary Thomas's book. Not our idea of romance, once again. If life is all about God, knowing Him and make Him known, then it would make sense that part of what God has designed marriage for is to help us know Him better. Thomas writes, "We need to be called out of ourselves because, in truth, we are incomplete. God made us to find our fulfillment in Him—the Totally Other. Marriage shows us that we are not all there is; it calls us to give way to another, but also to find joy, happiness, and even ecstasy in another." Thomas's book explores how marriage teaches us to love, to respect others, to have a servant's heart, to persevere, and to forgive. It also exposes our sin, builds our character, and makes us aware of God's presence.

You may have experienced some of that from just having a roommate. Living with someone else tends to reveal "areas of growth," a.k.a. annoying weaknesses or—let's just call it what it is—sin. In the context of marriage, where you are committed to living with each other for life, there is a much higher motivation to push through those areas and help each other grow. You might be surprised how selfish you really are when it comes to stupid things that reveal your heart—like which side of the bed you normally sleep on or what temperature the thermostat should be set at. You might not realize your need for control until you have to include someone else in your decision-making process. You might not realize how angry you can be until someone you love as much as your husband really disappoints you. Frankly, it's painful to see yourself—the good, the bad, and the ugly—so clearly through the eyes of someone you love dearly. But someone knowing your every weakness, scar, and broken place, and still loving and accepting you, is a rich reflection of God's unconditional love for us.

A few years ago, my husband and I packed up our four small children and moved overseas for two years. My husband loves change. He thrives on it. I hate change, and suddenly I found almost everything in my life different. I missed things I never knew I appreciated, such as my super-capacity washing machine. (Try doing laundry for two adults, two preschoolers, one toddler, and a baby in a tiny European washer. Be prepared to take all week and then start all over again!) We learned a lot about ourselves and our marriage during those two years. We became acutely aware of some differences in our natures that we hadn't discovered in our previous years of marriage. Through some hard conversations and hard work, we learned to respect those differences and improved our relationships both with each other and with God.



THE BRIDE

Marriage is more than this, though. It is also, as mentioned before, a powerful symbol (when done right) of Christ's love for believers, His bride. Revelation describes the new Jerusalem, inhabited by all the saints forever, as "the bride, the wife of the lamb" (21:9). Paul speaks of this relationship

Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the Church. (Ephesians 5:25-29)

Women, does this not sound romantic? Who doesn't want to be sacrificially loved, to be nourished and cherished, to have someone pour his life into helping make us holy and blameless? No man is capable of this without Jesus. God has not only designed this relationship; He has also provided the power through His Holy Spirit for it to be accomplished.

What is my role in this? My husband can be following Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to work in my life to make me holy, and it will never work unless I am subject to my own husband as to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22). Most of us have heard that the Bible says we need to submit to our husbands. That verse is certainly more palatable when we understand why. When marriage is rightly done, my husband is serving me, and I need to swallow my pride and allow him to do that, in order that I may know God better.

I confess that I hate to submit. I come from a long line of take-charge women. And I just know that I know that I know I am right, even when I am wrong. It is annoying when my husband doesn't agree with me. I can choose to insist on my way and cause discord to my whole family (cuz if momma ain't happy...) or I can submit to my husband (and dang it if he's not right a lot of the time) and in doing so allow God to work through my spouse to defeat and "untrain" my pride and selfishness.

AND THEN THERE'S THE "BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY" THING

Certainly with all stated above, a marriage without children is a complete and whole marriage, but doesn't it seem right that God ordained that new and vulnerable souls should enter into existence within the protection of a godly, biblical marriage—that they should grow up with the example of Christ and His love for them played out constantly between their mother and father? Aren't we glad that we are not in a Matrix, plugged in to some cold and uncaring machine that nourishes us and sustains us for its own selfish reasons? God's picture is so much better. How will my five children know unless I tell them? And how will they believe that it is true if my husband and I are not living it out daily in front of them?

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. (Deuteronomy 6:6-8)

For He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should teach them to their children; that the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them to their children, that they should put their confidence in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments. (Psalm 78:5-7)

That is quite a responsibility—overwhelming at times. So few parents are intentional about that. No wonder we are so screwed up. I had a friend growing up named Kris whose father was the pastor of our church. I was a little scared to go over to her house. Her mom spent most of her time locked in her bedroom and her dad in his study. He was gruff, joyless, and unkind. One time when I was out with Kris her old VW Beetle broke down and she called her dad for help. He came, griping and complaining the whole time that this was his day off and he didn't appreciate it being interrupted to come and help out his daughter. And what did he spend his time doing in that study? Reading the Bible and prepping sermons about God's love and compassion. People who think Christians are hypocritical probably came by that opinion honestly.

I'm a sinner. I mess up daily, sometimes hourly, in front of my children. I pray that God would continually reveal my mistakes to me so that I can make it right. I apologize all the time, although still not nearly enough. I want to be real in front of my children. I never want to present myself to them as something other than what I am, a woman who loves God and who is trying to know Him more and more and walk in His way and who is failing and repenting often. It is okay that they know life is messy. It is not okay if they see me accepting that messiness while making no effort to clean it up.

THE SEX

Finally, speaking of children, let's talk about sex.

When I was in freshman English at the University of Texas, I was assigned to a random partner to work on a paper. My partner's name was Aaron. He was good looking, wealthy, popular, and really smart. I mean really smart. He was at the University of Texas on a full-ride academic scholarship. So I was a little astonished when he asked me what my spiritual beliefs were, and when I replied that I was a Christian, he said, "I could never be a Christian. They believe in sex only for procreation. That's ridiculous."

You're right, Aaron, that does seem ridiculous. What surprised me was how such an educated and savvy guy acquired such a belief. He was Jewish, after all. We have the same God; two-thirds of our Bible is the same. Where did that come from? Unfortunately, I think it came from our own ranks. Historically, the church has been confused over this issue of sex and its intention. Certainly our society has made a huge mess of it. Perhaps the church has had a tendency to overreact in its defense of biblical virtue and move the line way back from where God placed it.

Consider this bit of history:

In the second century, Clement of Alexandria, one of our church fathers, taught that only procreative sex was allowable and only during twelve hours of the twenty-four (at night). By the Middle Ages, preposterous as it now seems, the Church forbade sex forty days before the important festival of Christmas, forty days before and eight days after the more important festival of Easter, eight days

after Pentecost, the eves of feast days, on Sundays in honor of the resurrection, on Wednesdays to call to mind the beginning of Lent, Fridays in memory of the crucifixion, during pregnancy and thirty days after birth (forty if the child is female), during menstruation, and five days before Communion! This all adds up to 252 excluded days, not counting feast days. If there were thirty feast days (a guess that may, in fact, be on the conservative side), there would have been eighty-three remaining days in the year when (provided, of course, that the woman did not happen to be menstruating or pregnant or in a postnatal period, and provided that they intended procreation) couples could with the permission of the Church have indulged in (but not enjoyed) sexual intercourse! (from *Oliver's Conjugal Spirituality*, as quoted in *Sacred Marriage*).

I'm pretty sure that's far from what God intended.

God's idea of sex is yet another symbol of the deepest, most intimate type of connection—two becoming one—physically, spiritually, and emotionally. When done right, it is truly the most intimate connection humanly possible. It's just a taste of the intimacy he longs to have with each of us. We, too, long to be known that intimately.

There are clearly defined parameters for sex in the Bible. In a nutshell, sex is to take place only within a marriage between a man and a woman. Not before the marriage, and not within a marriage but with a different partner, and never man with man or woman with woman or solo. But within those biblical parameters (and remember God sets parameters to protect and to preserve), sex is intended for pleasure. Consider for a moment God's design of the female body. He purposefully made woman with a clitoris, which has one function, and that is sexual pleasure. Author Betsy Ricucci says, "Within the context of covenant love and mutual service, no amount of passion is excessive. Scripture says our sexual intimacy should be exhilarating (Proverbs 5:19). Believe it or not, we glorify God by cultivating a sexual desire for our husbands and by welcoming their sexual desire for us."

I attended a marriage conference recently where the speaker said that physical union between a man and wife is a symbol of oneness between Christ and the believer. He went so far as to say (and the whole room squirmed) that orgasm may be God's way of saying, "If you think this is good, wait until you are in my presence eternally in heaven—I am so much more pleasurable." What if that's true? I used to think God intended that sex be within marriage only to protect us from STDs and unwanted pregnancies and unhealthy emotional entanglements, etc. But what if the bigger picture is that He wants to protect us from such a cheap, unfulfilling counterfeit of the real thing so that when we experience it in the right context we can understand Him more and have just a taste of His glory?

But sex isn't just a physical and spiritual connection; it is an emotional one as well. And while pleasurable, it isn't always initiated just for pleasure. Sometimes it's about comfort, oneness, and strengthening an emotional bond. I recently woke up in the middle of the night with my head spinning, full of details and tasks I needed to complete and couldn't find the time to do. I was just anxious. I prayed. I got a drink of water. I tried for three hours to go back to sleep and not toss and turn and disturb my husband. But I felt like the Lord was telling me to seek comfort in my spouse. So I woke him, and the oneness (not passion) that ensued brought calmness to my anxious mind. I went back to sleep with a peaceful heart. That kind of deep, emotional connection happens only in the context of a committed, trusting marriage. I am completely comfortable with my husband in bed. I don't have to hide parts of my body (those stretch marks and "altered" abs are the results of five babies we made together, after all) or my emotions or any part of me.

DESIRES NOT TOO STRONG BUT TOO WEAK

C. S. Lewis sums all of this up best by saying, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. ... We are far too easily pleased. ... Our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak."

Women, don't be too easily pleased. Don't settle for a counterfeit (i.e., marriage as an end in itself). Know Him as fully as you can, whether single or married. Experience His riches for you. You are worth it. As a wife, as a mom, as a single person, strive to know Him and make Him known. "If we embrace—not just accept, but actively embrace—these two missions, we will have a full life, a rich life, a meaningful life, and a successful life. The irony is, we will probably also have a happy marriage (if married), but that will come as a blessed by-product of putting everything else in order" (Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*).

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