



FACING PROBLEMS IN MARRIAGE

Reading: Matthew 19

God's purpose for marriage

In the previous lesson we saw that God wants a believing husband and his believing wife to be spiritual partners, helping each other through to His kingdom, working together in His Name, and caring for each other in every part of life. This is the Divine ideal for marriage. It should reflect Christ's love for true believers and their desire to love and honour him. Their life together in Christ will show others what a blessing they enjoy, and so God will be glorified in all their ways.

**The Divine ideal in Christian marriage is for two believers
to live together to the glory of God**

However, it is not always easy to reach this ideal. Due to circumstances in life difficulties do occur, and this lesson looks at some common ones. Your tutor may be able to give you individual guidance on marriage problems.

One partner is converted after marriage

Baptized believers should marry baptized believers (2 Corinthians 6:14, 1 Corinthians 7:39). But what about those who are already married when they learn the Gospel? Should they separate, or should they stay with their unbelieving partner? This was a common problem in the days of the apostles, when the Gospel spread quickly and many people believed and were baptized but often their partners remained unbelievers. What were they advised to do: break up and go their separate ways, or stay together and work out their problems?

Paul encouraged believers in this situation to remain married:

"To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him" (1 Corinthians 7:12,13).

A married person has a responsibility to his (or her) partner and any children and, as a disciple of the Lord Jesus, should be more caring and considerate than ever. Every effort should be made to make the marriage work. However, if the unbelieving partner chooses to separate, the baptized partner must accept this:

"If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so ..." (1 Corinthians 7:13-15).

The apostle Peter wrote:

"Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives—when they see your respectful and pure conduct" (1 Peter 3:1,2).

Peter was thinking about a believing wife married to an unbelieving husband, but his advice is equally important for a believing husband married to an unbelieving wife. By remaining together the baptized believer's Christian living may eventually encourage the unbelieving partner to accept the Gospel.

Similarly, believers should not cut off other unbelieving members of their family, like parents or brothers and sisters. Believers have a real opportunity and responsibility to teach other family members and so spread the Christian truth.





**The Bible teaches that everything possible
should be done to keep a marriage together**

Infertility in one of the partners

Sadly, some married couples cannot have children. This may be due to some medical problem. The situation can be very distressing, but believers must accept that God is in control of their lives and knows what is best as He prepares them for His kingdom (Romans 8:28). In some countries a man is expected to divorce a wife who cannot bear him children, but the true believer must not do this as the Bible teaches that marriage is for life. The marriage has not failed if a couple cannot have children. God considers them to be man and wife and they should work together in His Name.

On the other hand, people are sometimes encouraged to have many children even though they cannot afford to feed and clothe them. It is a great responsibility to have children and bring them up properly. So, as in everything else in family life, the husband and wife should agree together on a planned family, taking into consideration their family circumstances.

Difficulties between husband and wife

Abigail is an Old Testament example of a faithful wife who had a difficult marriage. One of her servants described her husband, Nabal, in this way:

“... he is such a worthless man that one cannot speak to him” (1 Samuel 25:17).

Despite this Abigail was a lovely woman of great faith who tried to do good and stayed with her husband. Read 1 Samuel 25 to see how God blessed her.

Even when two Christians are married there can be great unhappiness. This is because we all have human nature and find it easy to sin, and so we can say and do unhelpful things, even to our husband or wife. We can be selfish and only see things our way. We can be critical of our partner, expecting a lot from them when we ourselves contribute very little to the marriage. It is always much easier to see another person's faults rather than our own (Matthew 7:1-5).

If a Christian marriage becomes less and less like the ideal of Christ and his church, the couple need to discuss their problems together and pray about them. A marriage can fail because one or both of the partners fail to put God in the centre of their lives. They therefore need to be honest with themselves and open with each other in their discussions, and forgive any wrongs. A baptized believer cannot expect God to forgive his own sins if he is not prepared to forgive his partner's failings. Disciples of Christ must put every effort into making their marriage work, as this is what God wants. Divorce is not an easy way out – it is hated by God. Paul wrote:

“... the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:10,11).

Unfaithfulness in marriage

The only exception to the rule that marriage between believers must always be for life may occur when one of the partners is sexually unfaithful. Jesus was once asked what he thought of the Jewish practice that had developed of granting easy divorce (the authorities simply issued a certificate and the marriage was ended). Jesus said,

“Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh ...” (Matthew 19:4-6).

Jesus was quoting from Genesis chapters 1 and 2, referring to the first ever marriage. He showed that God regards marriage as binding, for he added, **“What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate”**. Jesus said that divorce is forbidden: the only possible exception is when the marriage is broken by a sexual act outside marriage:





“And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Matthew 19: 9).

See also Matthew 5:32. The marriage of Christian believers is therefore for life.

The marriage is put under great strain if one partner has sex with someone else, but the couple should work together to save it. We should be prepared to forgive the wrong our marriage partner has done against us if we want God to forgive us when we sin against Him. However, if an unfaithful partner cannot be won back, or the couple separate or there is a divorce, every care should be taken to limit the harm done to other members of the family.

Polygamy

Polygamy was sometimes practised in Bible times. King David had several wives. King Solomon had hundreds of wives and concubines. But the Divine ideal was always clear: God meant one man and one woman to live together as man and wife.

Polygamy caused difficulties and unhappiness in the families of several Old Testament people. The jealousy between Jacob’s two wives created problems in the family. Jesus made quite clear God’s intention from beginning:

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Matthew 19:5).

Nobody should therefore take more than one wife. However, some husbands may already have more than one wife when they learn the Gospel. What should they do – keep one wife and separate from the others, or continue as they are?

We have already learned that a baptized believer has a greater responsibility than ever to his (or her) family. Therefore, our advice is that anyone with several wives should still regard himself as responsible for them all. He should continue to be a good husband and a caring father to all his children. The Christadelphian Bible Mission advises that a baptized believer with more than one wife should not become an ‘elder’ of a Christadelphian ecclesia, because his situation does not follow the advice of the Lord Jesus. Paul says:

*“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, **the husband of one wife**, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach”* (1 Timothy 3:2).

Finding a husband or wife

We have learned that marriage is a very special and solemn gift from God; we have also considered some of the difficulties that arise in marriage. It is clear that the choice of a marriage partner should be a matter of earnest prayer. Abraham went to a great deal of effort to find a suitable wife for his son, Isaac, and we need to take the same care and preparation, keeping in mind God’s purpose for marriage and the symbol of Christ and his church.

True believers should only marry someone who shares the same faith. However, sometimes it is very difficult to find a suitable husband or wife. It is very natural to want a beautiful wife or a handsome husband, but what really matters is the spiritual quality of the person (Proverbs 31:30). God looks upon the heart, not on the outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7), and so should we. True marriage is a joining together of minds, and the couple should get to know each other thoroughly and form a clear understanding of what is really important to them before deciding to marry. This is the purpose of courtship. Some people who have rushed into marriage have spent many years regretting the decision they made, especially if they have married an unbeliever. The Bible very bluntly warns of the consequences of making the wrong choice (Proverbs 21:9,19).

The wedding ceremony

In Lesson 32 we learned that a believing couple should be joined together in the presence of God. Their marriage vows (promises) should be made before God as well as in front of human witnesses (family and friends). A simple wedding service is all that is necessary – the building used and the food provided need not be expensive. What is





important is that the couple seek God's blessing on their marriage and promise to live together before God for the rest of their lives. Marriage vows are serious and must not be taken lightly. Where the laws of the country provide for this, it is a good idea to register the marriage with the State and obtain a certificate, so that the marriage is properly recognised by all. This also emphasises the fact that marriage is for life.

Many people want to be married in a church but do not care about the beliefs of the person taking the service. Baptized believers will not want to go to another church to be married by someone who does not understand true Bible teaching.

Some couples believe that their wedding needs to be very expensive but cannot afford it and so they live together, intending to marry later. But often their marriage does not happen. Their children are then born outside marriage, with all the insecurity this involves.

Sometimes there is a high 'bride price' and it may take some time for a young man to save enough money to pay for the woman he loves. If the price is high, the man must wait until he has enough money. Until they marry, the partners should not have sexual intercourse. Of course, Christian parents will encourage the young couple to start their lives together in the Lord without too many difficulties like these.

Disciples of Christ should marry **before** living together. Sex before marriage is a sin. The Bible says: *"Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous"* (Hebrews 13:4).

A blessing from God

Christian marriage is a great blessing from God – one to be enjoyed together throughout a happy life. However, just because a husband and wife are both disciples of the Lord Jesus does not mean that their life together will be trouble free. Working through problems together in marriage will strengthen the bond and bring great happiness and contentment. Family life, when it is properly understood and lived, is a great joy, so much so that the return of Christ Jesus, when he comes to give immortality to true believers, is compared in Scripture to the start of Christian married life:

"Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb (Christ) has come, and his Bride (his church of true believers) has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7)

Summary

1. Believers who are already married when they learn the Gospel must try to remain with their unbelieving partners and show them the way of God.
2. For those who marry, the ideal is one man for one woman. If a man already has more than one wife when he is baptized, then he should continue to be a good husband to his wives and a caring father to all his children. He should not take any more wives.
3. Marriage should be legal and the vows (promises) made in God's presence. Marriage vows are serious and must not be taken lightly.

Verses to learn: Hebrews 13:4

Let marriage be held in honour among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

Passages to read: Genesis 24; Nehemiah 13:23-27; Psalm 128; 1 Timothy 2

