

CHRISTADELPHIAN BIBLE POSTAL COURSE

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Date: _____

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**LESSON 33 • PROBLEMS IN MARRIAGE**

Reading: Matthew 19

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

But it is not always possible to attain that ideal. Problems occur and this lesson looks at some of the most common ones. If you have other difficulties, you might want to correspond with your Tutor to obtain individual guidance.

Marriage to an unbeliever

Believers should marry believers (2 Corinthians 6:14). But what about those who are already married when they come to know the purpose of God. Should they separate, or should they stay with their unbelieving partner?

This was a common problem in the first century. As the gospel was preached and people came to hear and believe it, they were baptised into the saving name of Jesus. But often their families remained unbelievers and there was a division formed within the family. What should they do: break up and go their separate ways, or stay together and work their problems out?

The New Testament advice shows how important married life is in the sight of God. When we marry, we become responsible for others. It would be foolish to abandon those we love when there is some prospect of making the marriage work. Instead we should practise our beliefs in the family. So, the Bible tells us to stay together if we possibly can, and by our Christ-like behaviour we can show to our partner just how wonderful the love of God is, in Jesus Christ:

"Wives, be in subjection to your own husbands (even if they are not believers); that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation (behaviour) of the wives; while they behold your chaste conversation (pure behaviour) coupled with fear (the fear of God)."

(1 Peter 3:1,2)

"The woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy. But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart."

(1 Corinthians 7:13-15)

These Scriptures teach that everything possible should be done to keep a marriage together

God will treat a marriage made before either partner came to understand the truth of the Bible, as a holy relationship, and the children will not be regarded unfavourably. The challenge is to try to spread Christian truth inside the family, by good personal example.

If problems in marriage do arise, they should be squarely faced, remembering that there is a responsibility under all circumstances to make the marriage work. This may mean accepting far from ideal conditions - but that is what Jesus did when he died so that we could have a hope of salvation. The Bible compares marriage to the relationship between Christ and the believers, and so his example should help us when difficulties arise. Divorce is too often seen as the easy way out. It should be remembered before taking such a final step that

God hates divorce (see Malachi 2:16)

Marriage between believers

God ordained marriage as a life-long relationship. Marriage promises are not made to be broken; they are made to be kept throughout life. When one member of the marriage dies, the remaining partner is free to marry again (Roman 7:2,3).

The only exception to the general rule that marriage between believers is for life occurs 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 merely issued a certificate, and the marriage was ended). His questioners wanted to know if Jesus thought the marriage was dissolved before God in this way.

The Lord Jesus referred his hearers to Genesis chapter 2 - the first ever marriage - and he reminded them of what was said: "What therefore God hath joined together", he said, "let not man put asunder" (Matthew 19:6). Notice that God regards marriage promises made before Him as binding vows. Asked further about the arrangements allowed in the days of Moses, Jesus added this important detail: God now allows divorce only where the marriage is broken by a sexual act outside the marriage:

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"Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (verse 9).

The marriage of Christian believers is, therefore, for life. But if one of them becomes a fornicator (has sex with someone else), the marriage is put under great strain. The marriage does not have to be considered as finished: the prophet Hosea had an unfaithful wife, but he went to great lengths to win her back to himself, because he loved her. Divorce should be regarded by Christians as a last resort. We must remember that 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. If because of the unfaithfulness of one partner, there is eventually divorce, every care should be taken to limit the harm done to other members of the family. The divorced member might not want to be married again; it is always possible for a couple to live separate lives, once a marriage has ended.

Polygamy

Some husbands - especially in Muslim lands - may have more than one wife when they receive the Christian gospel. What should they do - separate from their wives or carry on as they are?

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

Whenever other arrangements were made, they more often than not led to difficulty and unhappiness. Jesus made it quite clear that there is now only one acceptable way of living together: "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain (two) shall be one flesh" (Matthew 19:5).

Nobody can therefore take more than one wife after he has been baptised into Christ. What of those who have several already? Our advice is that anyone with several wives should still regard himself as responsible for them all, and should continue to be a good husband and father to all his dependants. Christians do not abandon their responsibilities when they are baptised, they take even more care for their dependants. The Christadelphian Bible Mission advises that because a polygamous marriage does not fully uphold the Christian ideals such a brother should not become an "elder" of a Christadelphian ecclesia.

The Marriage Ceremony

Problems have occurred about a costly marriage ceremony at a time when the young couple cannot afford the cost. That is why people in some countries live together out- side marriage, intending to marry when they can afford it, but often never getting around to it. In the meantime their children are born outside marriage, with all the insecurity that involves. What should a believer do?

He or she should marry before living together. Sex before marriage is a sin. The Bible says: "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4).

All that is needed is a simple marriage ceremony with some of our family and friends, and in the presence of the Marriage Officer. There need be nothing expensive about the food provided; make it clear that you think the occasion more important than the feasting. Nor does it matter where the ceremony takes place. Anywhere large enough to contain those attending will do, but avoid going to a church to be married by someone who does not understand true Bible teaching. Marriage vows, made in front of witnesses, mean that the couple will live together before God for the rest of their lives. Do not mix this Christian celebration with other marriage rites which have a pagan origin: a Christian should leave behind pagan things. If possible have the marriage registered by the State authorities, and obtain marriage documents.

Sometimes there are problems with a high bride price, and it may take some time for a young man to save enough money to pay this for the girl of his choice. If he is marrying someone from a Christian family, they will not, of course, want to charge a high price, but will encourage the young couple to start their lives together without too many difficulties. But if the price is high, there is nothing for it but for the suitor to wait until he has the necessary money. In the meantime, both partners should keep themselves pure for the time when they can marry.

Finding a good husband or wife

The most difficult problem is likely to be that of finding a good Christian husband or wife, especially if there are only a few other believers living nearby. The first thing to remember is that the spiritual quality of the future partner matters most; much more than looks or riches. God looks upon the heart, not on the outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7), and so should we.

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Whenever possible we should marry people of the same faith, sharing the same beliefs

But there may be no-one, or no-one suitable. In that case the choice of a husband or wife should be made a matter of earnest prayer. Abraham went to a great deal of trouble to find a wife for his son Isaac, and we may need to take the same care and preparation.

If there is no-one who is already a baptized believer, you must do what you possibly can to find a godly husband or wife. In some countries it is possible for young people to meet before marriage; in that case there is every opportunity to discuss religious beliefs and to explain Bible teaching. After baptism, you could then marry. But in countries where such meetings are not allowed, or where there are arranged marriages, try to choose a girl from a good-living family and try to teach her true Bible teaching after you are married. But before you marry, make sure she is well behaved, that she believes in Jesus Christ, and be sure to pray about the 'decision that has to be made and to discuss it with other believers if you can.

Christian marriage is not all problems which have to be solved, though this lesson has considered some common difficulties. It is, rather, a great blessing from God - one to be enjoyed together throughout a happy life. Properly understood and lived, family life has a very high potential; so much so that the Second Coming of Jesus to earth, when he comes to set up God's kingdom on earth, is likened in Scripture to the start of Christian married life:

"Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

Summary

1. The ideal is life-long marriage between a believing man and a believing woman. Seek a Christian partner.
2. If we are already married when we are converted, we must remain with our partners and try to show them the way of God.
3. Marriage vows are serious and must not be taken lightly. If after all efforts a marriage fails, then advice from elders or tutors should be sought.
4. For those who marry, one man, one woman is the ideal. If a man already has more than one wife when he is converted, then he must remain faithful and a husband to them. He must not take any more wives.
5. Marry legally and before God, even if you can afford only a simple ceremony.

Chapters to read: Genesis 24; Matthew 5:31,32; Psalm 128; 1 Timothy 2

Learn by heart: Hebrews 13:4

"Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge."