

Faithful God, Faithful Families

We live in a country with one of the highest divorce rates, where around 20 000 marriages end in divorce each year. I think that if we interviewed Christian couples that reached 20+ years and asked them how they got past the 5, 10, 15 year mark when most marriages end, I think as believers they would all immediately say it was the Lord, His empowerment, prayer. But as we dug deeper into the human responsibility involved, I think we would hear things like this: “You learn to forgive. You make the best of bad situations and choose to make it work. You fight for your marriage. You give up your rights for the sake of the marriage, for the children.” And when we hear such things we're not hearing the language of self-centredness, not the language of “be yourself, express yourself, be true to yourself, love yourself, make sure you are caring for you” which is the language of most people today under the age of 40. We are hearing the old language of loyalty, the old language of self-denying faithfulness. We are hearing the old biblical language of covenants.

Marriage is a covenant, and when we make a covenant, we bind ourselves to keep the covenant at our own cost, even if it becomes difficult for us, even if it becomes inconvenient, uncomfortable, painful. This is unthinkable to my self-centred generation, but when you come under covenant, you keep it even when you are losing, and not gaining, because what the covenant means is bigger and more important than my personal happiness at a particular moment.

Marriage is not a contract, it is a covenant. A contract is a legal agreement that protects each party from the other's selfishness. Covenants are vows we submit to. Covenants counteract our sinful tendency to bail at the first hurdle, to give up when it gets tough, to seek instant gratification. Covenants chasten us, they discipline our selfish natures, they bind us and bring order to the chaos of unrestrained selfishness. Remove covenants and all you have left is selfish people trying to negotiate the best deal for themselves with other selfish people, and ready to abandon the whole thing the moment it doesn't go their way.

Covenant faithfulness to another is really something spiritual. And so, it is really only possible when the people who covenant with each other, have also covenanted with a faithful God. People who know the faithfulness of God, who are in a solemn, permanent relationship with God, flesh that out into binding, permanent covenant unions with others.

Indeed, we go further: marriage and its faithfulness is a human picture of a spiritual and ultimate reality, that God Himself marries a people, and remains faithful to them. Marriage, according to Paul, is a living analogy of Christ loving the church and being in union with us, and we with Him.

Our marriages reflect much of what we believe about Christ and the church. When we begin to dishonour God, irreverence Him, give Him leftovers, doubt His love, one of the symptoms will be trouble in our marriages.

That had happened to Israel in Malachi's day. After having returned from exile in Babylon, having rebuilt the Temple, and rebuilt the city of Jerusalem, a deep spiritual malaise had come over the priests and the people. Spiritual apathy, spiritual lethargy showed up in their unbelief that God loved them, in their defective worship, in their hypocritical leaders. But what we see in this passage is that it showed up in their marriage practices.

Israel had betrayed God in who they married, and in how they married. They married unbiblically, and they divorced unbiblically. The way God sees this is that it is rooted in treachery. Five times in this passage you will find the words 'deal treacherously'. Israel had become what so many in our world are now: oath-breakers, people who have no loyalty, no covenant faithfulness binding them.

What this passage is going to show us is how God's loyalty to us, and our loyalty to God is fleshed out in who we marry, and in how we remain married. If we love and honour the faithful God who weds us in the Gospel, then there are two ways we could betray Him in family life, in dating, courtship and marriage.

I. The Betrayal of Marrying Unbelievers

*10 Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we **deal treacherously** with one another By profaning the covenant of the fathers?*

*11 Judah has **dealt treacherously**, And an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, For Judah has profaned The LORD'S holy institution which He loves: He has married the daughter of a foreign god. 12 May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob The man who does this, being awake and aware, Yet who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!*

Malachi speaks to his people and says, "Aren't we one nation, one family under God? Didn't God call our father Abraham and make us a nation by covenant with Abraham and then with Moses?" When God called Israel out of Egypt, He essentially performed a wedding ceremony at Mount Sinai, which Israel agreed to. And at the very centre of this marriage to God was radical monotheism, loving Yahweh and Yahweh alone, with all the heart, soul and might.

And one of the ways God called for this kind of loyalty to Him was that He commanded that Israel not intermarry with the surrounding pagan nations. This was commanded in Exodus 34:16, in Deuteronomy 7:3-4, where God forbids intermarriage with the other nations. This had nothing to do with race or ethnicity, and everything to do with idolatry. When God gives the command, He explains that if Israel were to marry the inhabitants of the land, they would turn their hearts away from God and towards foreign gods. It had nothing to do with race, for if a foreigner converted, Israelites could marry them. Ruth was an Edomite, but because she made Naomi's God her God, Boaz, an Israelite, was allowed to marry her. But to marry pagans was not only to compromise and to open your heart to false gods, it was in some way to deny God's exclusiveness. If Yahweh is the only God, how can you marry a worshipper of Baal and raise children? You've said by your action that Yahweh is not the only God. You've betrayed God.

This is what Israel had done. Look at how strongly God puts it:

*Why do we **deal treacherously** with one another By **profaning** the covenant of the fathers? 11 Judah has **dealt treacherously**, And an **abomination** has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem, For Judah has **profaned** The LORD'S holy institution which He loves: He has married the daughter of a foreign god.*

By marrying unbelievers, God says Israel had betrayed God and one another, profaned the covenant, profaned marriage itself, and committed an abomination. From the Lord's point of view, to marry outside the covenant of Israel was to betray God and one another, make light of the covenant, and commit idolatry. A marriage is a union. A union with a Baal worshipper is to mix God and Baal, God and Ashtoreth, God and Molech. A marriage is a covenant, and to make a covenant with those whom God said Israel should destroy is treachery.

And here is how strongly God puts it in verse 12: *12 May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob The man who does this, being **awake and aware**¹, Yet who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!*

Being *awake and aware* is simply a Hebrew idiom for being alive. We would say, anyone who is alive and kicking. In other words, any Israelite who does this, and yet still keeps up religious appearances is to be cut off from Israel, excommunicated from the people of God. In fact, close to this time, both Ezra and Nehemiah deeply chastened the people for their intermarriage with unbelievers.

So I am amazed when I hear Christians speaking as if dating, courting and then marrying unbelievers is a light thing, an acceptable thing. As if somehow God no longer has a people that He covenants with, as if He is no longer Jealous for our wholehearted love, as if a union with an unbeliever is no longer a betrayal of God. I hear all kinds of pragmatic reasons why it is okay: “He is a nice guy, and I can win him to the Lord. He is a very moral person, and we've decided to agree to disagree on religion. All the Christian men are wimps and idiots, he is at least well-mannered and kind.” No, loyalty to God means we only date the people we could marry, and the only people believers could marry are other believers.

It's not about matching religions. It's about your loves. If you love what God loves and hate what God hates, then your marriage is to be an extension of that, where two become one, and together seek to love what God loves and hate what God hates. An unbeliever, in many respects will love what God hates, and hate what God loves, until he receives a new heart from God and is able to love God. It's not about checking the box 'Christian', it is about a union with someone else who ought to have the same devotion and desires that you do.

Believers who are faithful to the faithful God do not dabble with dating unbelievers. To do so is to say to God that He is not your first love, that companionship is your first love. To consider marrying an unbeliever is to say to God that family is your real god, and that He must come second to family.

Now this text does not say that unbelieving spouses will never get saved. First Peter 3 says it is possible for an unbelieving spouse to be converted. This text is also not saying that if you are married to an unbeliever you should divorce. 1 Corinthians 7 says that those who find themselves in a marriage with an unbeliever should not seek to get out. What it is saying is, when you are single, do not marry an unbeliever. 1 Cor 7:39 tells us to marry only in the Lord.

Let the principle of loyalty to God guide your dating and courting practices. God is my first love, and so anyone I will consider will love God even more than me! I am a new creature, light, a temple for the Holy Spirit, so how could I enter into union with someone who is still in the flesh, still in idolatry, still dead in sins. That's what the unequally yoked passage in 2 Corinthians means – how could you fuse, how can you unify two completely different natures? The idea is – I belong to God. My identity is in Him, so I can only join with someone who is also in Him. You who desire ministry – marry well. Your spouse's spiritual interest will in large part determine what kind of ministry you have.

But let me say something to you singles who have sought to obey this principle. You may be one who has found that by seeking to obey this principle, it has only seemed to prolong your singleness. The more devoted to God you get, the smaller the pool of possible spouses seems to get, and a real despair can set in. The more conservative your Christianity, the less and less likely it can seem that you will find someone. But let me remind you of what Israel said to God. They said, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” In other words, here we are in the desert: nothing grows, and no water. Is God going to give us a lavish feast here, in the barren desert? And the answer was, “Yes, God can furnish a table in the wilderness.” The lack of observable means to meet the need is not an obstacle to God. When the possibility of companionship seems like a wilderness, remember that God is not limited by what you and I observe. God is faithful to meet all the genuine needs of His people, and for most people, with a few exceptions, companionship is a need. Let God's faithfulness to you up to this point remind you to keep trusting Him without compromise.

But let me encourage you to not only seek to do something about your singleness, but to do something with your singleness. Serve others. Use your flexibility to be more useful to Christ in the

church. Begin to prepare by becoming the kind of wife or husband you should be in advance. In other words prepare not only to receive, but prepare to give. Spend much time with godly Christian families. Don't hole yourself up, but be with families and godly young adults in groups. Don't let the world shape your expectations of what to look for. Don't let the world shape your ideas of what to do to attract a mate – by dressing provocatively, by being flirtatious with everyone. Be godly, be friendly, be sincere, be visible.

And when you do date, keep it focused, pure, and preferably short.

And let me encourage the church at large to be sensitive and godly stewards of our young singles. Let us not abuse their singleness by imagining they need to work themselves to death in ministry or to babysit our children or to do every odd job. Let us not say insensitive things such as “What's pretty girl like you doing still single?”, or “Such a handsome fellow, and no one special in your life?” Let's encourage our singles to keep their eyes on Christ. Let's encourage purity. Let's exalt the beauty of marriage, without making the church feel like a couples-only church.

Loyalty to the God who saved you out of sin, means you marry within the new covenant. You marry only God-lovers.

But then there was a second way that Israel's disloyalty to God manifested.

II. The Betrayal of Divorcing Believers

13 And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the LORD with tears, With weeping and crying;

So He does not regard the offering anymore, Nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. 14 Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness Between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife by covenant.

15 But did He not make them one, Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. 16 "For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence," Says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously." (Mal 2:10-16)

Israel kept up religious appearances. They wept and cried before the Lord. But God was not going to hear it? Why not? Because all was not well at home. Like the man you see at church, and you ask him how he is doing, and he says, “Fine, praise the Lord. Glory hallelujah, never been better!”, but in the meantime he is cheating on his wife, and planning on divorcing her.

God does not want public worship if the family and private worship totally contradicts it. That's why He says in Matthew: *"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Mat 5:23-24).* That includes wives and husbands. That's why in 1 Peter 3:7 says, *“Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.*

But God says to Israel, I was the witness at your wedding ceremony. Your wife, your companion by covenant, you swore lifelong loyalty to her with Me as the one witnessing and ratifying that covenant you made. And three times, in verse 14, 15, and 16, God says that Israelites were dealing treacherously with their wives, they were betraying them. How were they betraying them? Verse 16: divorce. Of course, this was a society where only the husbands had the right to divorce, so the command is directed at the men. In our society where both have the ability, it applies to both.

God calls this a betrayal, a breaking of a solemn oath. He also says it covers one's garment with violence, which seems to mean, divorce is brutal, and inflicts pain and suffering. Now those of you

who have been through it can testify to that, and as you have found forgiveness and healing in Christ, this text is not there to burden you with pain. It is there to call existing covenants of marriage to remain faithful.

Divorce in Scripture is seemingly only sanctioned when the covenant has been destroyed through adultery or through desertion. In that case, a guilty party has violated the covenant and the innocent party has the option, not the obligation, but the option to divorce an unrepentant covenant-breaker.

But all other reasons fall short, and become forms of disloyalty to the other. The truth is, no one who divorces is deeply loyal and wakes up one day and announces he would like a divorce. A steady process of disloyalty in the heart begins and grows. It might begin with watching pornography, which is adultery of the heart. It might go on with a wandering eye, gazing too long upon another person. Many people fall into the trap of becoming a shoulder to cry on for someone of the opposite sex who is going through marital difficulties. But slowly but surely, loyalty is being eroded. The one-woman focus, the one-man focus is fading. Comparisons with others grows. Discontent with your spouse grows. And then there is finally a catalyst: the children are out the house, or someone loses his job, or there is another blow-up about the in-laws, or finances, or the children, or domestic roles, and it becomes the escape hatch.

But believers are supposed to be different. You see, for us, marriage is more than practical need-meeting, it fleshes out your union with God. It expresses it to others. It portrays the Gospel. And the question we need to ask is this, Does Christ divorce His people?

I remember a phone conversation I had with a man who was a teacher in a church. He was an ardent believer in the idea that Christians can lose their salvation. And one of the things he said to me is, God says that He is divorcing Israel. God does divorce.

So I pondered that, because it seems odd that God would say here that He hates divorce and yet practise it Himself. So I looked up those references. One is Jeremiah 3:8 *"Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also."*

But there it is clear that God is remaining faithful to His people. When the ten northern tribes would not repent of their idolatries, He sent them into exile, He brought the northern *kingdom* of Israel to an end. But did God forsake the Jewish *people*? Did He divorce Israel as a whole? Read Romans 9-11 for the answer. God kept saving Israelites by grace, and does so to this day.

The other Scripture is in Hosea.

"Bring charges against your mother, bring charges; For she is not My wife, nor am I her Husband! Let her put away her harlotries from her sight, And her adulteries from between her breasts; (Hos 2:2)"

Now if you know the sad tale of Hosea, God told this prophet to marry Gomer, an immoral woman. And once Hosea married her, she went right back into prostitution. Hosea has to fetch her off the slave-block and bring her home. Hosea does not divorce her. God speaks to Israel with emotion – you are not my wife, but He means this to express the state of her betrayal. Just read the rest of the book.

8 "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred."

9 I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, The Holy One in your midst; And I will not come with terror¹. (Hos 11:8-9)"

Or read Isaiah 54: *5 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. 6 For the LORD has called you Like a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, Like a youthful wife when you were refused," Says your God. 7 "For a mere moment I have forsaken you, But with great mercies I will gather you. 8 With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you," Says the LORD, your Redeemer. (Isa 54:5-8)

God did not divorce Israel, and He does not divorce New Testament believers either. Romans 8 describes that nothing can separate us from the love of God, and if someone wonders if Israel was separated from the love of God, Paul wrote Romans 9, 10, and 11.

In Ephesians 1, Paul tells us *13 In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who¹ is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Eph 1:13-14)* The word *guarantee* there is the Greek word *arrubon*, which actually referred to a down-payment, the installment that was the promise of the full amount later. God the Holy Spirit is the expensive engagement ring that Christ puts on us, that guarantees that we will arrive at the marriage supper of the Lamb. In chapter 4:30 Paul says we are sealed by Him until the day of redemption.

Someone says, yes, but what if we stop believing? What if we break faith? What if we are the spiritual adulterers? But then you haven't fully understand the faithfulness of God to you. If you are in a covenant relationship with the faithful God, then part of God's faithfulness to you is that He promises to keep you faithful. *24 Now to Him who is able to keep you¹ from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, (Jud 1:24)*

6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; (Phi 1:6)
4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1Pe 1:4-5)

Must you still believe? Yes. Must you fight for your faith? Yes. Must you endure to the end? Yes. Is eternal security passive and automatic? No. You and I are to cling to Christ with all our might all our lives. But rest in the fact that He is so loyal to You, that He will sustain your loyalty to him. That's the glory of God's faithfulness, isn't it?

13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself. (2Ti 2:13)

Why is this important? Because if God remains faithful even when we are unfaithful, that is the pattern for our marriages. If God says, nothing will break my covenant with you, not even you – then that is the pattern for our marriages. If God says, though you be like Gomer and go and play the harlot with the world, if you are truly one of Mine, I will get you back, and I will have you for Me alone.

Our theology on these matters is not inconsequential. We tend to flesh out in our unions what we think is true of our union with God. And if in fact God does divorce His people, then divorce is not something God should hate. Divorce should actually be a very useful analogy. Instead, God acts as if divorce ruins the picture, it ruins the analogy, it is a concession to the hardness of man's heart, not something in God's heart, it distorts what He is trying to teach man, which is that in Christ, we enter a permanent, unbreakable union with Christ founded on His grace, and His faithfulness, and only secondarily worked through our faith, and our faithfulness.

We say in our marriage vows, 'till death us do part'. What we mean is, nothing, not my action nor

yours will separate us. Not my being unhappy, not my feeling unsatisfied, not our having regular conflict, will separate us. I will be loyal to you with my eyes, with my mind, and with my body. The only thing that will end this covenant is when one of us is no longer living to keep remaining faithful. And when it comes to God, even that clause drops away, because God doesn't die, and our death only completes the union, it doesn't sever it.

Verse 15 tells us why. Verse 15 is extremely difficult and obscure in the Hebrew, and the English translations render it very differently. But it seems to mean this: The one God makes two into one in marriage. Both of those believers have His Spirit. So God is in union with each person in the marriage, and they are one flesh, and what is it supposed to bring about? Godly offspring.

The fruit of two people who belong to the faithful God, who remain faithful to each other, will be children who are faith-filled. Children who come to know this faithful God, because they have seen in their parents' relationship a picture of that covenant Gospel love.

We need to abandon a self-centred, feeling-based kind of Christianity which is as volatile as a person's moods on any given day. We need to soak ourselves in the deep covenant faithfulness of our God. His faithfulness to us, and our reciprocal faithfulness to Him is what should shape how we date, and how we marry.