

***DEAR  
YOUNG  
SINGLE  
CHRISTIAN***

*by  
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*Who is wise?  
Let him understand these things.  
Who is prudent?  
Let him know them.*

*For the ways of the Lord are right;  
the righteous walk in them,  
but transgressors stumble in them.*

*Hosea 14:9*

## PREFACE

About five years ago I wrote you a Letter. I hadn't met all of you, of course, but I knew quite a few of you—including my own four children, who were dear, young, Christian, and (at that time) single. I also knew a lot of their friends.

I actually started thinking about the ideas I put in my Letter back in the early 1970's. Then one Sunday in 1997, as I was listening to a youth pastor's sermon, I suddenly became aware that a majority of the people in the church I was attending were single. Most of them were in their 20's and 30's, and some were even in their 40s.

This startled me. You see, when I was young almost *everyone* was married by their mid-20's. The few stragglers that made it alone into their 30's were pretty unusual. These days, if you marry much before 25, you'll probably catch some comments about being too young.

Because I had been watching these things for a long time, I realized right away that what had changed was not so much young people but our world itself. I also figured out pretty quickly that most folks my age didn't really understand why you weren't getting married as easily as we did.

The reason I wrote my Letter was because I believed God had given me some insights into what had happened and what could be done about it. I then passed my Letter around to all the "Dear Young Single Christians" I could find. Eventually I put it on the web, along with some questions readers were asking and my answers to those questions.

Even if you don't end up agreeing with my perspective on things, I believe you will benefit from at least being exposed to a point of view that is very rarely taught these days, even in most churches. But my prayer is that the ideas you read about in these pages will not only challenge you, but will also give you hope, and will encourage you to turn to God and His Word for clarity and sanity as you make your way in our very upside-down world.

Diane Woerner  
*September 2009*

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## Introduction

Even though this book is written for those who are young and single, the rest of you are more than welcome to join us. The issues of sexuality and marriage affect all of us, no matter what stage of life we are in.

I will cover a number of subjects which I believe weave together to form two pictures. One is a picture of the brokenness of our times. The other is a picture of God's plan for our sexuality, which is a key part of what I am calling His Grand Design. As you will see, all of us end up being tugged in two directions—toward the enticing deceptions of our fallen world, but also toward the perfections God intended us to live in when He created us.

When I wrote my original Letter, I purposely left a lot unsaid, or at least unexplained. My goal was to stir up a conversation, to encourage both my readers and myself to search more deeply into the mysteries of God and His plan for us as men and women. (I'm putting that Letter first in this book so you'll be able to start where we did.) Since then I've learned a lot, especially from the young people who have been graciously honest with me about their questions and challenges. I've been able to identify several clear patterns in the confusion, and I've tried to build my chapters on some of the most important places where I believe God's truth can move us past our brokenness.

As a starting point (after the Letter) I explain some of the changes which have taken place in our society since the time I was your age, because I truly believe these are the primary reasons why you are still single. I then take a look at what the Bible has to say specifically about singleness. I also describe masculinity and femininity in more detail, since these qualities are central to God's assignments for each of us. The last chapter in the first section addresses the important question of suffering. It's hard to accept what God is doing in our lives until we come to terms with the suffering He permits us to experience.

The next two sections contain practical questions—four questions women have asked me and four questions asked by men. By all means I intend all of them to be read by everyone, since the answers require the involvement of both sexes. The final four chapters step back from the details of our lives to look at the larger scope of what is at stake in the battle for sexual wholeness. They examine some of modern society's strongest points of disagreement, including the matter of gender roles, hierarchy, and the significance of sexuality itself.

In some ways the topics I'm covering will be things you've thought about for a long time. But I can almost guarantee there will be certain aspects of what I say which will surprise and possibly even disturb you. My desire is for you to be able to understand the whole picture of reality as I see it, not because I expect you to automatically agree with all of it, but because a lot of my viewpoint has been lost in our modern world—and I believe you will benefit from having another perspective to consider.

For this reason, I'm going to ask you to keep going even if you come across things you can't quite buy into. I cover a lot of ground, and a difficult idea may become clearer in a later chapter. It's also possible I may be wrong here and there, and I certainly don't want that to stop you. Ultimately you need to search out truth for yourself, in the pages of your Bible and in your conversations with God.

I should mention one other thing. As you begin to learn about this concept I'm calling God's Grand Design, you may become frustrated by the fact that it seems pretty much out of reach in the realities of your own life. In particular, I will talk about how I believe God designed nearly all of us

to be married, because marriage is such an important part of His creation picture. If you are single, that could sound critical or discouraging.

What you need to realize is that God has revealed to us, through creation and through His Word, much of what perfection really looks like. We of course live in the very imperfect place of our fallen world. As I see it, there are two ways to deal with the pain that this separation between “How It Should Be” and “How It Is” can bring us.

The first solution is to modify the “How It Should Be” part. In other words, we can begin to lower the standards of what is best. In my mind, that is what happens when we decide that because marriages are harder to do these days, it’s okay to start telling ourselves that singleness is normal and equally wonderful. This brings the “bar” down to our level, and it makes things easier.

The other solution is more difficult, but I personally believe it is God’s way. As He reveals His perfect design, not only through what we see and read, but also through the longings inside us, we become more and more aware of the brokenness and what it has cost. This can be a very painful process, but it is precisely this pain that will drive us to search for God’s answers and God’s hope.

You see, God desires for us to reach for Him with everything in us. Rather than turning our eyes away from His perfection and becoming satisfied with something far less, He calls us to faith—to a willingness to endure pain because we wish to please Him, and because we believe He loves us and has the wisdom and ability to give us His best.

I also am convinced that His design for marriage may be more reachable than you think, which is why I’ve written this book. You see, much of the fallenness of our world is actually based on lies and deceptions. Lies can be broken simply by knowing and believing and acting upon truth. While we as individuals can’t change the whole culture, we can certainly change our own views and priorities and choices.

So rather than feeling depressed or guilty or angry because of where you are in life, bravely raise your eyes toward God. Let the picture of His perfect plan become your inspiration to seek Him, to discover His goodness and His love and His power. If He truly is your Lord, give the details of your circumstances fully to Him, and give Him permission to make you into a wonderful piece of His Grand Design.

## **THE LETTER**

### ***Dear Young Single Christian...***

You want to please God. You want to make a success of your life. And you want to be married. Well, at least part of you does. Marriage is probably the most mixed message you've ever gotten.

Childhood fairytales promise you it's the gateway to "happily ever after." Every girl dreams about her wedding day, when a swirl of flowers, lace, candles and cameras will join together to honor her beauty. Guys, once they get past the girls-are-yuk stage, think not about the wedding day, but about the wedding night.

For all of you, it's a dream that never quite goes away. But it certainly doesn't last long as a fairytale. Not these days. You've seen too many real-life marriages.

I wish I could write this letter to each of you personally. I wish I could address your unique experiences and hopes and questions and fears. But I've found over the years that although the details are different for each young single Christian I've met, there's a lot the same as well.

I know you're aware that our world is very messed up. Some of you have come out of the secular community into the Christian community. Some of you have "always" been a Christian, but still you know a whole lot about the places and people and activities that exist outside the church doors. And it's definitely tough to put together a set of workable standards based on what you hear and see on both sides of those doors.

The one thing I'm sure you've been told, over and over, is that Christians don't have sex until they're married. What else we're allowed to do when we're single is far less clear. Can we hold hands? Can we kiss? Can we date? Are we only supposed to think about God and not the opposite sex? And what's all this about guarding our hearts? Is it really WONDERFUL to be single?

What I want to offer you isn't just one more set of answers to these questions. And I'm certainly not going to tell you all the ways to find joy in your singlehood. There are plenty of other folks who write about that.

Instead, I'd like to paint two pictures. One I will call "How It Should Be." The other one I'll call "How It Is." While I might not get every detail right, I think it will be pretty close. When I get done, I hope you will look at these two pictures and be able to choose which one you want to live in. From what I can tell, there are many young single Christians who have no idea that life can be looked at in more than one way.

We're going to start with the "How It Is" picture. A lot of aspects of this picture are things you've been raised with, and therefore they might be pretty hard to detect on your own. In addition, some of these things won't look bad to you at all. Please be patient and keep reading. What I'm trying to show you won't be simply a minor adjustment to your view of life. For many of you, it may turn things pretty much upside down.

When we get to the "How It Should Be" picture, we're going to run into a different problem. You see, I'm going to be using words you've heard all your life, and you will think you already know what they mean. Take time to consider whether my definitions are the same as yours, or how they might be different.

Even more importantly, I'm probably going to bring up some ideas that you've already rejected for one reason or another. When that happens, please stop and think carefully about your reasons for rejecting them. This will be tremendously valuable when it comes time to choose between the pictures.

I have one other thing to say before we get started. You notice I'm calling you a "young single Christian." Not a young Christian single, or a single Christian young person. Your most important identity is that you belong to Christ, that you have accepted His gift of salvation and are fully committed to living in the kingdom where He is Lord.

If this is not true about you, then you're going to have a very hard time with my letter. You see, "How It Should Be" could also be titled "How He Has Made It."

We live in a society that uses the word "should" in a lot of ways. For example, "should" is what works best. Or "should" is what benefits the most people. Or "should" is what makes me happiest. But we Christians must use "should" based on the desires of our Creator. The beautiful thing is that if we start with His desires, we'll end up with all the rest: what works best, what benefits the most people, and what makes us happiest.

But it won't happen easily, and it certainly won't be painless. It usually takes a really tough process to bring us to the place where we're willing to put His desires before ours, in the down-to-earth details of our life. Especially with something as personal as marriage.

## **How It Is - Part One**

I'd like to look first at a series of ideas I'm going to call "cultural assumptions." These not only shape our day-to-day lives, but they also strongly affect what we consider to be normal and right. I'll begin by describing a typical modern childhood. Certain pieces might not exactly fit your experience, but I suspect a number of them will.

### *1. Someone else will take care of it.*

The modern world is a very busy place. Children come along and are immediately swept into the craziness of schedules and commitments. Whether they're put into day care or carried about in a series of strollers and shopping carts, kids get used to having the details of their lives handed to them with a kind of bustling urgency.

Later in school, they find that someone else has a pretty well-defined idea of what they need to learn and do. Learning means filling in the blanks and turning in the homework. Good behavior means the absence of bad behavior, based on a long list of don'ts. Of course, lots of kids rebel against the system. But whether they rebel or obey, the system defines their idea of how things work.

Underneath this ordinary-looking life a cultural assumption develops, the conviction that someone else is in charge. Someone else knows not only where I should go and what I should do, but also how the problems are going to be worked out. If I just do my assigned tasks, that's all that's required of me. If something breaks, it's their job to fix it.

### *2. Nothing lasts.*

It's probably hard for most of you to imagine life without styrofoam plates and plastic forks. But that's how it used to be—honest! Of course, our old dinnerware used to break or wear out and had to be replaced, but it usually took years instead of one meal.

Today's child comes to expect newness around every bend. New toys, new clothes, new activities, new entertainment. He learns there's really no need to hang on to anything old. But all too often, children find themselves in a world of throw-away places and people as well. The roots they would naturally put down in a certain community are pulled up, in some cases more than once. Bonds to individuals, even to members of their own family, are all too often painfully severed.

The result is a child who learns to commit only to himself. Hopefully there are some things in his life that remain stable, some people who don't disappear. But even then, the child learns to hold these

lightly. Who knows when they too will go?

3. *I can have it my way.*

Another characteristic of modern society is its unending parade of choices. Today's dinner buffets and ice cream parlors are a challenge even to those of us who know what we like. Most children are given lots of opportunities to choose, even at an early age. What kind of toy do you want? Who do you want to dress up like on Halloween? What cartoon would you like to watch?

What this communicates is that the child can achieve happiness simply by a) deciding what he likes, and b) choosing it. The older child then moves from costumes and cartoons to clothing and hairstyles, and then to companions and lifestyles. The sadnesses of life can indeed be erased—as long as I can have it my way.

4. *I deserve a break today.*

Most of our existence can be divided into two components: work and play. Nothing wrong with that, except we've switched something. Used to be, play was something we occasionally did so we could do a better job with our work. Today, work is something we do so we can earn enough money to play.

One of the first memories of a modern child's life is being plunked into an automatic swing in front of a video. These hours are only the headwaters of a mighty stream of entertainment, not only at home, or in theaters, but also in school and even in church.

Over the thousands of hours we spend being entertained, we develop a profound addiction to feelings. Some of the feelings may seem harmless, like laughter or surprise. Others are more sinister, such as shock or terror. I call it an addiction because we find ourselves continually needing to have more, and in more intense doses.

But of greater significance is the subtle but persistent message that the unreality of the entertainment world is more reliable, and has more value, than the feelings and experiences of the real world. A cartoon character becomes a more consistent friend to a child than his own father. We find more comfort in a happily-ended love story or a winning baseball team than in the real relationships of our lives.

## **How It Is - Part Two**

I now want to take these “cultural assumptions” and go a little deeper into the dynamics of today's world. But first I should note that your generation didn't exactly volunteer for life this way. These are the messages our generation gave yours (and which for the most part we now live by ourselves).

Okay. What are some results of the assumptions I've described?

1. *We tend to think only about things that are up-close-and-personal, and not about the bigger (and tougher) parts of life.*

While this is a fine arrangement for a young child, it's bad for teenagers and even worse for adults. Because we're used to having someone else (parents, teachers, church leaders, or some branch of government) handle the hard things, we aren't trained to embrace responsibility ourselves. We don't automatically count costs; we don't think about long-range consequences; we don't look at the impact our actions might have on others.

2. *We spend a lot of energy trying to fix the things we don't like.*

Because we believe that nothing is really permanent, and because we also are taught that choices bring happiness, we tend to expend a lot of energy on all sorts of “makeovers.” If we don’t like how we look, we redo our hair or buy new clothes or start a workout program. If our friends are mean or boring, we either try to improve them or we trade them in. If our job or our house or our town or our church no longer suits us, well then, we move.

*3. When we run into something we can’t fix, we look for something to take our mind off our frustration.*

When you were quite young and were acting up, did your mother force you to deal with your bad attitude? Or was her first line of defense some kind of distraction (here, play with this toy, how about a cracker, let’s come inside where you won’t have to fight with Tommy, etc.)? It’s an easy way around a problem, of course, but it’s also just that. A way around. Nothing’s really any better.

Years later, many of us deal with pain or anger or boredom or loneliness in much the same way—we turn to our entertainments or other indulgences.

*4. Our entertainments bring us to a very distorted view of the real world.*

This is really a huge subject, so I’m only going to make a few points. First, we can pick our entertainment. If we like romance, or adventure, or sports, or violence, or fantasy—we can have it our way, in any flavor we choose. Life isn’t like that. Second, if we get into something we don’t like, we can switch it off. In video games, if we die, we simply go back to where the danger started and try a new approach. Life isn’t like that. And finally, we can avoid facing ourselves. We can identify with a fictional person; we can be part of the team; we can embrace a fantasy lover. But it isn’t really us who solves the mystery or wins the game or deserves the love.

There are two primary consequences of this distortion. First, it consistently draws our attention away from the far less predictable and controllable reality around us. The more we live in the land of make-believe, the less we are interested in the tough job of survival in a boring or uncaring or frightening or defeating society. Our “breaks” become reversed. We take a break from play to do our work, but even then our minds often linger in our playworlds.

The second effect of the distortion comes when we decide (or are forced) to engage the life of the living. What happens here is that our standards for what we can expect have gone completely off-course. We begin to see life either as a joke, or as a set-up for a joke. We begin to think of violence as normal and not permanently damaging. And heaven knows the jumbled up views we’ve been given about sex.

### **How It Is - Part Three**

Okay. Hopefully all this is making some sense to you. I’m attempting to show you some things about your life that may seem as natural to you as air and water, but which in fact are choices your culture has made for you. Now let’s go a little farther.

Most folks in my generation were raised assuming we’d be married by, say, our mid-twenties. I’m not entirely sure how we came to that conclusion, but somehow we believed it and most of us did get married. Our biggest concern was finding the right person and staying pure until he or she showed up. A woman who didn’t marry was called a spinster or an old maid, and was lumped together with another ill-fated group, the divorcees. I don’t remember a group called “singles.”

As you may know, society turned a major corner in the 60’s and 70’s, after which marriage was no longer a given in many people’s lives. Certainly the idea of being permanently married to one

person was cast aside—I suppose with some relief on the part of those who discovered it didn't really bring the advertised level of joy.

As best I can tell, the church was pretty clueless about what was going on outside their doors during those years. They continued to preach the purity message with faithful consistency, although they gradually relaxed on the matter of divorce, particularly when it became a more frequent event in the lives of their own families.

It wasn't until the 90's that I began to notice the huge population of singles who were filling church pews. These young people were smart and attractive and committed Christians, and (it seemed to me) very marriageable. But they weren't getting married. Something was broken somewhere.

I started paying attention to the pastoral advice that was being directed their way. Now, along with the "stay pure" message, I heard some new refrains. "Guard your heart." That meant, bottom line, don't fall in love. You might get hurt. "Seek God, not a mate." That meant pour yourself into ministry (and often, here's a list of places where we need workers).

But most disturbing was the message that singleness was a perfectly lovely state of affairs and there was something wrong if you weren't happy with it. Funny thing, though—the ones who were saying that the loudest were already married.

And you, dear young single Christian, have had to do the best you could with this very confusing situation. Some of you have worked very hard to do things "right." You've prayed and served and guarded your heart and trusted God. And waited. And waited. And then waited some more.

Or, you might have cheated a bit, here and there. Or maybe you've cheated a lot. You've gotten into some relationships that weren't really righteous. Or you've let yourself sink into some counterfeit world (romance novels, pornography)—but always with a promise to yourself that this is only for a little while, only to help you last out the waiting.

And, you've talked amongst yourselves. You keep trying to figure out what's gone wrong. You probably know some guys and girls who *have* found each other and are now (more or less) happily married. You wonder what they did. You wonder if God was more pleased with them. You wonder if it will ever be your turn.

But then (I'm betting) there's part of you that's rather relieved you're still single. At least this way you put off the risk and the pain and the weightiness of that kind of responsibility for a little while longer. You've made it okay for a few years (or a lot of years), and maybe this is God's best for you after all.

## **How It Should Be - Part One**

When you became a Christian, you may not have been told you were entering a world which in many ways is upside-down from the world of non-believers. Sadly enough, the outside world has pushed its way through the church doors so forcefully that often it's hard to remember which side of those doors you're on.

But if you've read the Bible much, you may have noticed a very strange pattern. Jesus continually reverses things in a way that makes very little sense. For example:

Love your enemies (Matthew 5:44)

He who would be a leader must be a servant (Matthew 20:25-28)

If you want to be rich, give everything away (Matthew 19:21)

Rejoice when you suffer (John 16:33)

Rejoice when people reject you (Matthew 5:11,12)

If you want to be first, you must be last (Mark 9:35)

If you want to live, you must die (Luke 17:33, John 12:24,25)

Isaiah writes, “‘My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 55:8). Paul puts it another way: “The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Corinthians 3:19). And you know, there’s really only one way we can buy into that kind of thinking. We have to accept, in spite of our common sense, that God knows more about truth than we do.

The biggest place where this matters, I believe, is in our perspective on what life is for. Most of the voices in our world (along with a strong voice inside our own minds and hearts) tell us to seek after our own happiness, to take care of ourselves, to do what we can to put together the best possible life. Even the church sometimes sends us the message that God’s agenda is to make us healthy, wealthy, and problem-free. We see Him as our divine assistant in this great effort to make everything turn out right in our lives.

But the Bible tells us God “works in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). His pleasure. His purposes. Not necessarily ours. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Ephesians 2:10).

I have found in my reading of scripture that God seems to have three specific goals for our time on earth.

- He wants us first to find Him, and then to get to know Him very well.
- He wants to work in us, by His Spirit, until our character becomes like that of His Son Jesus.
- He wants us to be a real-life expression of Jesus, especially to people who don’t know Him yet.

Okay, let’s hold this picture next to the “How It Is” way of life. What’s the big difference?

You’re right! It’s not about us any more. It’s not about our choices or our coping mechanisms or our efforts to fix up life to fit our preferences. It isn’t about our finding a way out of our loneliness or pain. It’s about our obedience to Him.

That, and one other thing. It’s about us discovering His unlimited faithfulness and wisdom and love and mercy and joy and peace, even when our lives are not perfect. It’s not a bad deal.

So. Am I saying, in this roundabout way, that you need to be satisfied being single?

Satisfied, yes. Single, no. Here’s where we’re going to run into one of those things you’ve heard before and probably had some trouble with. *I’m almost positive God wants you to be married—and quite possibly sooner than later.*

## **How It Should Be - Part Two**

We’ve generally been taught to look at marriage with regard to what it will bring us. We think about how it will meet our needs, bring us pleasure, give us an identity, earn us acceptance from others, and so on. It also offers a context in which we can serve our spouse, our children, and humanity in general. But let’s turn things upside down for a moment, and consider how our marriage might benefit God, how it might fit into His pleasure and purposes.

In the Bible, Paul wrote something that gives a starting point. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31-32). We aren’t of course going to unravel the whole “great mystery,” but I think we can take from these verses the idea that human marriage, and the relationship between Jesus and His church, have something important in

common. After all, scripture even calls the church “the bride of Christ” (Revelation 21:2).

[Before I forget, I need to remind you of something important. The reason things are so messed up in our world isn’t just because you and I are confused or self-centered. It’s also because we have an Enemy who hates Jesus and hates everything that brings glory to Him. I happen to believe our Enemy particularly hates healthy marriages. So as we continue to sort through the questions, watch for places to ask, “Is this God’s point of view, or is it the Enemy’s?”]

All right. Now let’s look at that connection between a man-woman marriage and a Christ-church marriage. I believe the most important treasure that’s buried in this mystery is the similarity between the roles that men and Christ play, and between the roles that women and the church play, in these relationships.

Christ and men play the masculine role.

The church and women play the feminine role.

You know, at this point in my letter I truly WISH I could hush for a moment and let you respond. I wish I could find out what you think those words “masculine” and “feminine” mean. I wonder if they bring up clear and good thoughts, or if they bring up cloudy and painful ones. It matters so very much. Let me tell you why.

*I believe the reason so many people aren’t married these days, and the reason so many marriages are falling apart, is because we no longer understand masculinity and femininity from God’s point of view.*

I suppose this is where some of you will part ways with me. Some of you simply won’t accept the idea that God has a certain definition of manhood that’s right for all men, and an equally specific definition of womanhood that’s right for all women. If that describes you, you might as well stop reading. But if you’re in the place where you’re willing to reconsider whatever is necessary to get past the stalemate you seem to be in—well then—let’s go!

### **How It Should Be - Part Three**

Maybe I should start by telling you that I’ve been mulling over the nature of masculinity and femininity for more than thirty years. While I still don’t have it all figured out, I believe I’m getting close. However, to spell out everything I’ve learned would turn this letter into a book, and I’ve decided not to do that quite yet.

Instead, I’m giving you the fundamentals as I see them, along with some cautions and clues, and then I’m going to send you off on your own search: into scripture, into conversation with others, and into your own spirit as you ask God to show you His truth.

Probably the most important starting point will be your own humility, a willingness to accept where you’ve been wrong, the courage to risk rejection or ridicule from others, and a deliberate decision to embrace God’s definition of your sexuality as you discover what that is. The only way this can happen is by getting things really right with Him. That’s step one.

Second, you need to be willing to think past some of the things you’ve probably been told. The particular deception that comes to mind is the one that says the only way men and women can be given the same value is to let them do all the same things.

I know that logic sounds convincing. But once you’ve truly experienced the love of God, you’ll understand that our deepest value comes from His love and acceptance of us, not from what we accomplish or even from what we give. Therefore, there isn’t one kind of work or one kind of role that’s worth more than another. What makes a life worthwhile (or said a better way, what pleases God) is whether we’ve lived in obedience to His assignments.

There’s one other thing to keep in mind. You have inside you two competing forces. One part of

you is going to be really drawn to authentic manhood or womanhood. The other part of you is going to fight it. In biblical language, we're made in the image of God, but at the same time we're fallen and cursed. So each of us has two jobs. We have to tear down our unholy nature, and we have to fan the flames of our holy nature. Neither one is easy.

Okay. Here are some clues about what I've learned.

Masculinity is absolutely amazing! Men are made to be bold and adventuresome and creative and heroic. They envision grand things and then build them. They work hard and long and get dirty and even get hurt and still keep on going. They protect weaker beings. They aren't afraid to ask hard questions, and stick with it until they find the answers. They challenge each other.

Femininity is absolutely amazing! Women are made to be lovely and gentle and creative and sensitive to those around them. They take disorder and make it orderly, then add a touch of beauty. They patiently do things that are necessary for the health and happiness of others, sometimes over and over and over. They laugh and sing. They encourage. They comfort.

My favorite word for masculinity is "strong." My favorite word for femininity is "soft." These words aren't, however, opposites. The opposite of strong is weak. The opposite of soft is hard. Thus, while men can also be soft (in a masculine way), the problem today is that men are becoming weak. And while women can be strong (in a feminine way), they are instead becoming hard.

If you remember the story of the fall, God's curse on Adam was that he'd have to work a lot harder to make a living. God's curse on Eve was that she'd want to control her husband (that's what the phrase "desire for" means in Genesis 3:16), but he would rule over her.

And so we've lived unhappily ever after with these reversed instincts. Men avoid responsibility and women take over. Or men become harsh and demanding, and women back away. Or women try to reform men and men back away. This is all pretty familiar stuff to most of us.

From the world's perspective, the problem lies in the idea that men and women have different natures and roles. Eliminate these limitations and you eliminate the struggle. I've watched folks attempt to apply this solution for several decades, and things are just getting worse. No one's any happier—not men, not women, not children. In fact, manhood and womanhood are starting to disappear. You grew up watching the same thing.

So, to you who are brave and willing, I'd like to challenge you to head in the other direction. Let's take back the territory. Let's once again become fully men and fully women, the way God designed us to be.

## **How He Has Made It**

It really shouldn't be surprising to learn that the changes men need to make are different from the ones women need to make. I would sum it up this way:

Women need to become more feminine—and more content.

Men need to become more masculine—and more discontent.

Men, remember, are given the role that parallels that of Jesus. God has set things up so when Christian men (as a group) are living as they should, the world will more clearly see who Jesus is in relationship to His church.

Jesus came to earth to fix our brokenness. Of course, He did what no human can do when He gave His life for our sins. However, He left a lot of work undone, choosing instead to accomplish those things through the men who would follow Him. What are these "undone" things men are called to complete? Here are some I have seen:

- Protecting the weak

- Providing for the needy
- Opposing injustice
- Giving leadership and direction when things are in turmoil
- Clarifying truth in a confused and deceived world

Think for a moment how difficult this is, given our “cultural assumptions.” So many young men walk through life these days assuming someone else is going to fix the messes. So many young men spend large amounts of time, money and energy pursuing their whims or being entertained.

But it’s interesting to note that woven into their entertainment is a memory of manhood as God created it. Video games test their reflexes under pressure, football games require disciplined strength, extreme sports prove their courage. Men haven’t altogether lost their souls, but they all too frequently forfeit them on the fruitless altars of false gods.

Women, meanwhile, are taking one of two wrong paths. Either they’re following the men into the maze of make-believe (only for women, the games are often different). Or in some ways more damaging, they’re stepping out into the real world and taking up the slack. After all, we women are fixers. No matter what it costs.

And when we’re doing this, we fail to become what God actually desires, that is, a picture of the church in relationship to Christ. We (the church) are created to follow Jesus, to trust Him, to gratefully receive His gifts, and to bring Him glory through our own purity and righteousness. A woman is called to submit to the leadership of her husband, to help him accomplish the vision God has placed in him, and to become complete and beautiful in a way that brings him honor.

We’ll probably never put things fully right again, at least on a societal level. But each of you, as a young single Christian, can choose to seek God’s redemption of your own masculinity or femininity.

For men, as I said, it boils down to discontentment with how things are. It’s discovering and following your call, changing the world in the specific ways God chooses for you. For women, it boils down to contentment with how things are. It’s learning peace and patience and trust and joy in a world that’s not even close to perfect. For both of us, it requires deep and authentic faith, daily nurtured by fellowship, scripture study and prayer.

And—I truly believe—as young single men and women begin to walk in these assignments, something surprising will happen. Strong men will be drawn to soft women, and soft women will be drawn to strong men.

When that happens, God’s beautiful design for the sexes will once again flower, as each man walks steadfastly toward kingdom glory, with a woman beside him. She won’t be out in front, taking over for him where he is less able or less inclined to go. She won’t be behind him, complaining or manipulating.

Instead, she’ll be beside him, assisting and encouraging and (maybe most of all) admiring him. For just as the church is called to adore Christ, so a woman is called to adore a man. She receives his protection and provision with gratitude, she enjoys his companionship, but above all she is drawn into his vision—as the man himself delights in the provision and companionship and vision of Christ.

Please think it over. Which picture do you choose?

With love and prayers,  
Diane

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. *For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.* For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of

Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.” (Romans 8:18-22)

# **BEGINNINGS**

## **1 - Why Am I Still Single?**

Long ago, in a far-away place called Eden, a man and woman broke the universe. And broke history. And broke themselves. And broke us.

Not completely, of course. We still have part of our heavenly nature that wasn't destroyed. We still know instinctively that we are made for perfect things, and we still desire them. One of those perfect things is marriage. If you no longer knew that, you wouldn't be asking this question.

Up until modern times, when someone remained single much past the age when they could be married, it was usually because of some pretty clear reasons. Perhaps there was a war, and there weren't enough men available for all the women to marry. Perhaps the single person had something wrong with them, either physically or mentally or socially.

But that's not exactly the situation now, is it? There are plenty of men to go around. While a few people still have personal problems that might explain their singleness, most of them don't, not really. Instead, something very drastic has occurred, and it has taken place in my lifetime.

Doesn't it seem strange, when so many young men and young women actually WANT to be married, that it's just not happening? We old folks tend to blame you, to talk about your selfishness, your pickiness, your irresponsibility. Well, I suppose some of that's true. But we were also selfish and picky and irresponsible and it didn't stop us from getting married. What's different now?

The underlying key to this mystery is that we have an Enemy who hates God, and therefore hates the people God has created. Our Enemy knows that if he can destroy marriages, he can destroy communities, and then nations, and then entire civilizations. During the thousands of years of human history, the Enemy has used many different strategies for this destructive agenda.

Some of his strategies are fairly obvious. You see, even when people do get married, their marriage can be a disaster. Husbands can abuse wives. Wives can treat husbands like dirt. Adultery has always been a particularly effective means to drag down healthy marriages.

A fully destroyed marriage is called a divorce. In Bible times, divorce was allowed for adultery and possibly for desertion. When I was young, it was also permitted when one of the spouses could be proven to be physically dangerous to the other, or was otherwise behaving badly in very serious ways.

But a huge shift came in the early 1970's. "No fault" divorces became legal for pretty much any reason a couple could come up with. They would simply decide (or at least one of them would decide) they weren't happy being married, and they would part ways. Of course, the process still gets rather messy, and often a lot of people get hurt.

Can you see how nicely that fits into our Enemy's schemes? As you know, a large percentage of your generation can be numbered among divorce casualties. You watched, and lived, the pain. Thus I believe modern divorce is one of the primary reasons you're still single. Marriage is scary, because it all too often falls apart. Better to be alone than to risk going through that much suffering.

What are some other reasons you aren't getting married? Well, marriage can be expensive. In the olden days when I was young, most men supported their families and most women took care of the homes. Our families (which were usually larger than today's families) could actually make it on one man's salary. Now, you can't. It is partly because of taxes and insurance costs and such, but it also has to do with our lifestyles, especially our expensive entertainments and our habit of almost always eating out. We don't do these things deliberately to destroy families (or to keep them from being formed), but they certainly don't help.

So now that all of us, men and women alike, are cast into the role of wage-earners, marriage becomes more optional. Rather than a wife simply supporting her husband in his role as provider, she becomes the co-provider. And if you think about it, this new model doesn't require marriage at all. If both men and women are providers, they can provide for themselves.

But the most powerful forces that are silencing wedding bells these days are neither legal nor economic. They are mental, emotional, and spiritual. And most of them can be traced to that astonishing period of time, the 1960's and 70's, when western culture was turned upside down.

Without making this a major history lesson, let me mention a few things that were dramatically different in American society during those decades. For the first time, we were fighting a war (in Vietnam) that didn't motivate us to pull together as a country. Rebellion on campuses and riots in the cities were perceived by many as healthy and necessary to correct social problems. We could also feel this rebellion in the music, in the clothing, and in other cultural expressions of the time. (Not that your generation, looking back, would be able to see it that way. To you, it would all seem rather bland.)

Education changed too. I remember the old model, where the teacher was the authority and students received his or her wisdom with generally respectful acceptance. But while I was in college (late 60's, early 70's), something changed. In certain classes, we students began to be given a new place of honor. Professors somehow shifted from being the source of truth and knowledge to being simply moderators who would facilitate the exchange of *our* thoughts and opinions. It also no longer mattered what a book's author meant to say—the only thing that mattered was what it meant to *me*.

What this reflected, of course, was the arrival of relativity as an acceptable philosophical perspective. It was a major victory for the Enemy. You see, if he could strike a deathblow to the idea of absolutes, of things that are permanent, he could turn words like “God” and “truth” and “morality” into mush.

However, the most significant event in those days, at least regarding your current state of singleness, came in 1963, when a woman named Betty Friedan published a little 75-cent paperback called *The Feminine Mystique*. The front cover carried this description: “. . . the wisest, sanest, soundest, most understanding and compassionate treatment of contemporary American woman's greatest problem.”

I personally heard of it for the first time when I was spending the night at a girlfriend's house. Her mother was reading the book and was very excited about it. I believe it was only a year or so later when she and my friend's father divorced, an event far less common in those days than it is today.

Of course, this little book was not in itself entirely to blame. It was more like a match that ignited a very flammable pile of tinder. At that time, a lot of things were coming together at once. The women of those days, like my friend's mother, had married right after the chaos of World War II and had gladly settled down to raise their families. The men, now that the war was behind them, were busy making lots of money. They well remembered the Depression of the 1930's, and certainly didn't want their children to go through what they had endured.

It really looked like a wonderful arrangement, and for quite a few years it was. But there were some important forces in place that began to threaten our tranquility. For one thing, technology was on the rise, and much of it focused on developing labor-saving devices, particularly for the home. While this seemed to be a very good thing, what actually happened was that women ended up with more and more free time on their hands (something *their* mothers never had). It began to make them restless.

Another factor was the reality that many of these women had once worked outside the home themselves, during the war years when the men were overseas. They hadn't exactly forgotten the feelings of accomplishment and independence that came with earning those paychecks.

And then there was another little book, this time a 25-cent one published during the war, called *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* by Benjamin Spock. It sold 50 million copies (at the time, the only book selling better was the Bible). In those days, people believed that science was going to solve everyone's problems and that scientists were fully to be trusted. So mothers bought, and bought into, Dr. Spock's ideas almost without question.

What was he teaching? Basically, he shifted parenting from a parent-centered activity to a child-centered one. It sounded wonderful, and no doubt some of it was needed to counteract parental selfishness. But what it eventually removed were the strengths (and security) of parental discipline and control. (For example, my mother, who read the book, never insisted that we children eat foods we didn't like. To this day and to my detriment, I'm a picky eater.)

Do you see the pattern? Here again, our culture was eagerly moving away from the idea of traditions and authority to the idea of individual freedoms. But in families then, and later in the classrooms, what seemed better for the children and students actually deprived them of some indispensable foundations—like respect for those who are older and wiser, the ability to peacefully accept the word “no,” and the understanding that life doesn't really center on me.

Returning to *The Feminine Mystique*, what Friedan did was to give a name to the growing sense of unhappiness our mothers felt. Their lives weren't as wonderful as they had expected them to be, but until they read this book they never really saw it as more than just a personal problem. Friedan told them it wasn't just them. Women everywhere, she assured them, were victims of a very important “mystique,” that is, a belief that not only wasn't true, but was also very damaging.

What was her great revelation? She was persuaded (and persuaded her readers) that the problem lay in the idea that men and women had different roles, and different places to work, in human society. As she saw it, men had all the interesting jobs and all the prestige, while women were trapped at home, caring for babies and doing simple, unmeaningful labor. They would only become fully alive, she promised, when they would be permitted to enter into those activities that the men had been hoarding for themselves.

And so the women began to leave their homes, and often their husbands as well. Their children (who, thanks in part to Dr. Spock, were rather undisciplined and thus could be quite challenging) were turned over to the schools, and eventually even as infants to daycares, to be tended and raised.

Forty plus years later, we can look back and see just how effective her message was. You probably have never thought seriously about any view of social ordering except the one she promoted. But you also can see something she and the women who read her book couldn't foresee, which is how much her ideas would cost us all.

Back in that garden called Eden, Eve was tempted by a similarly attractive idea. “Then the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil’” (Genesis 3:4,5). It sounded so good. After all, what would be wrong with becoming like God? What would be wrong with knowing good and evil?

What was wrong was the shift from what *God* desired to what *Eve* desired. You see, God created us not just as a mass of individuals who could live any way we choose. God designed us, including our identities as men and women, to fit into a very specific plan. When we live according to His design, we will not only be satisfied and fulfilled ourselves, but more importantly we will be pleasing to Him and fruitful in His kingdom.

The brokenness that started with Adam and Eve truly shattered the beauty of God's creation, but the pieces are still lying around. Mrs. Friedan and Dr. Spock and countless others have tried new ways of arranging things, hoping to fix the problems. You and I know, however, that there is only one Person who knows the right way to put things back together again. And gratefully, His book still outsells all the others.

As I said in my Letter, I believe the reason you're single is primarily because you live in a time in history when our Enemy has powerfully blinded people to the basic nature of masculinity and femininity, so much so that our culture has reversed just about everything men and women were designed to do and to be.

However, God is stronger than our Enemy, and if His Spirit is alive in you, then deep inside you may be sensing a gentle but very real urge to return to His ways—either to soft, joy-bringing, home-making femininity, or to strong, load-bearing, world-changing masculinity. If you know what I'm talking about, and I pray that you do, then please keep reading!

## 2 - Is Singleness a Sin?

If you grew up as a believer, you have probably been taught (in church and elsewhere) that marriage is the right choice for only *some* of us, and that being single, or at least single for many years, is a completely normal part of God's plan for many people. As you may know, there are several passages in scripture that discuss this topic, and we'll look at those in a minute.

But first I'd like to take a little excursion in another direction. In the mid-1800's, the average age that young women began their periods was between 15 and 17 years old. By the mid-1900's, it had dropped to between 12 and 15. Today, quite a few girls are starting by the age of 10 or 11.

(Scientists are puzzling over this trend, and are speculating that it may have something to do with our modern diet, or perhaps pollutants like discarded hormones in the water or the air. I personally suspect that the more powerful source of this rapid development, for both boys and girls, is the ever-increasing sexual stimulation—through television and advertising and the clothing we wear—that is bombarding even very young children.)

From the other side of things, it has been proven possible in many cultures to raise children in such a way that they are mature enough for most adult responsibilities, including marriage, by their late teens. Even in our society, young men are considered fully able to go to war when they are 18.

Although I realize there are lots of variables involved, I think it is arguable that God may have intended for us to move from the time of our sexual maturing into marriage itself in a matter of a few months or perhaps a few years. Not, as is often true today, after a few decades. If this is actually so, then it may be that the reason God has not exactly given us a clear plan for singleness in scripture is because it really isn't His plan at all.

The two men who specifically discuss singleness in the Bible are Jesus and Paul. We'll take Paul first. In 1 Corinthians 7 he writes:

Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: it is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.... But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment. For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: it is good for them if they remain even as I am; but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion (verses 1-2,6-9).

At first it sounds like singleness is an acceptable part of God's design, doesn't it? But let's be honest. Which "gift from God" do you have? Self-control—or sexual passion? (Most folks I've met seem to have been standing in that second line when gifts were being handed out.)

A little later in that chapter, Paul adds another comment.

I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you (26-28).

Here we discover a very important factor—the reality of "present distress." In a perfect world, everyone would be obedient to God, everyone would be raised by a godly father and mother, everyone would be healthy and kind and good. It's also probable that everyone would find the perfect

person to marry, and everyone would have wonderful children. That's how God designed His creation to work.

Instead, we have a world of "trouble" and "distress." Life, as we've said, is very broken. So not only will a lot of people *not* marry, those who do marry are often setting themselves up for ongoing misery. But in spite of Paul's wish to "spare" us, the avoidance of pain is NOT exactly why we were put on earth. We were put here to be part of God's revealed glory in the middle of the pain. Paul himself knew that better than anyone.

In Jesus' longest recorded discussion on marriage (see Matthew 19:2-12), He is also dealing with brokenness. In this case, the subject under consideration is the damage that comes from divorce and adultery. His disciples then raise a logical question: "If marriage is that hard, why get married at all?"

But instead of taking advantage of a perfectly good opportunity to elaborate on the spiritual value of marriage, Jesus gives them a really *strange* answer.

For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it. (verse 12)

Oh my. What's *that* about?

While I can't read His mind, I think Jesus is referring to the same thing Paul discussed. Our world not only isn't right, it's so very wrong that sometimes drastic measures are required. Underlying this message, however, is an interesting point. In Jesus' view, it seems, singleness is best managed by those who are essentially "unsexed" (a eunuch is a castrated man).

Let's back up a few verses, and we'll see what He bases His point on.

And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, '*For this reason* a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'?" (verses 4 and 5, emphasis added).

In other words, *our sexuality is the very reason we are to marry*. God only made males and females back then, and—in spite of our culture's best efforts to add to the list—that's all He's making today. If my reading of scripture is correct, then God made you male or female (complete with sexual passions) specifically so you could become a husband or a wife.

What this all brings us to is something important. Singleness is not, in itself, a sin. However, I believe *singleness is part of the brokenness sin has caused*. It misses God's perfect plan.

Before we move on, I want to mention one other thing Paul wrote. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9, he is defending his position of authority as an apostle. At one point (in verse 4) he asks, "Do we [referring to himself and Barnabas, his traveling companion] have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?" A few verses later he adds, "If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ."

It seems to me that Paul, while glorying in the unhindered spread of the gospel, still understood that his singleness (along with other hardships) required grace-filled endurance. He didn't see it as natural or wonderful.

So let's think about some of the ways that sin works to produce singleness. Almost always, I would say, your singleness has its basis in the sins of someone other than yourself. There's Adam and Eve for starters. We've mentioned too that you might be reluctant to marry because of the pain

you've experienced due to your parents' failed marriage, or the damages you've seen in other marriages. Or you may personally have encountered so much hurt or rejection that you've shut down your hope of ever receiving a godly person's love. It's also sadly possible that you have deep scars left over from childhood sexual abuse.

On the other hand, your singleness may be partly the result of the sin in your own life. Our sins seem to take many forms, but they can pretty much be boiled down to a few basic spiritual flaws. For example, there's pride. Are you single because you haven't found someone good enough for you? Are you single because you want to prove to the world (or someone) that you can make it on your own?

Another thing that might reinforce our acceptance of singleness is our propensity to be self-centered. After all, when we're single we can spend our own money, set our own schedule, live where we want, do what we want, and so forth. Marriage and parenting take almost all these freedoms away from us—or at least they should!

And then there's fear. Did you know that fear can be a sin? Not that many of us would deliberately choose to be afraid—but when we become overly self-protective, it's usually because we don't believe God is wise enough, or good enough, or strong enough, or loving enough, to take care of us. We may be single because we simply don't trust anyone but ourselves.

One other sin needs to be mentioned, and that's impatience. A young woman may have tried believing God for a husband for years, and nothing has happened. So she finally decides she can either be miserable, or she can just get on with life. God knows she wouldn't turn a good man down, but it just makes it easier to feel God's love and acceptance when she quits hoping and decides that singleness is His will for her all along.

I believe there's a fine line to be drawn here. The difference between hopeful trust and what might be called "settled singleness" may seem pretty small, but actually it's huge. When a woman makes the decision to stop defining herself as a prospective wife, she enters very risky territory. It's one thing to be a "woman in waiting," preparing oneself faithfully for a husband who might never arrive. It's another to deliberately craft one's self-concept and life as a "solo" flight.

From the outside, the two choices may look similar. You live each day doing the best you can to take care of yourself, to minister to others, to worship God. But inside something important shifts. What happens is you begin to wall off that painful inner place in which you've hidden loneliness, the desire for romance, the longing for children—things God Himself built into you.

And when a woman rejects her innermost nature, something irreplaceable is lost. A piece of God's picture of womanhood is now missing from His world. A decision has been made that God can't be trusted, that the pain can't be endured, that hope isn't justified, that the plan needs to be rewritten. Whenever this happens, the brokenness has won.

Thus each woman who belongs to God has a choice—you as a "virgin," me as a wife, someone else as a widow. We can fully embrace our femininity in the state we're in (and trust me, it's not always easy after marriage either), or we can let the Enemy lure us out of temporary pain into a far greater emptiness. It's that simple, and that significant.

For men, the challenge is much different. Masculinity requires a man to compete and conquer. Finding a wife is a battle that must be fought—against your own fears and selfishness and discouragements, against the brokenness of your culture, against the spiritual hardness of so many of the women you meet. For far too long men have been tricked into waiting. And waiting. And waiting.

We'll be talking more about this later in the book. But for now, consider this thought. If you truly believe God designed you for marriage, then it is a sin to say that, for you, singleness is an equally acceptable option.

God does appoint some people to celibacy because there are callings and ministries in this sin-damaged world that require that kind of sacrifice. There are also seasons of singleness that take place simply because we're all so very broken, and we need to be brought back to emotional and spiritual health.

And yes, for a few, that season will last a lifetime. God in His mercy gives us grace for the trial-laden path He prepares for each of us. But it is SO important that we do not choose our own path, for His grace is not guaranteed along those roadways.

So, dear friend, let us suppose that God has indeed designed you for marriage. It's definitely in your heart. It may even be on your to-do list! But what do you do next? For starters, let's become more familiar with His amazing ideas that we call masculinity and femininity.

### 3 - How Can I Become More Masculine/Feminine?

Let's start with a story. I've seen this, and I'll bet you have as well. Put-together Christian guy meets put-together Christian girl. By put-together, I mean they're smart, attractive, committed to Jesus, and at least have a pretty good idea about what they want in life. They become good friends. They enjoy doing things together and talking about their thoughts, and they even challenge each other to grow in Christ. Everyone around them starts smiling, because this looks like the Real Thing.

But one day everything falls apart. Either the guy suddenly finds another girl, or the girl suddenly finds another guy. They start getting super-serious. Sometimes they even get married.

This turn of events is really a mystery, not only to the left-behind person, but also to his or her friends. You see, the new love interest isn't anywhere near as put-together as the original one. But what this new person does have is what I call "counterfeit" masculinity or femininity. They *seem* to be strong or soft.

If it's a guy, his counterfeit strength usually takes the shape of aggressiveness. He likes making decisions, he likes making things happen, he may like being the center of attention. People around them are amazed that this sweet Christian girl will put up with such an assertive, self-focused individual. If it's a girl, her counterfeit softness often shows itself in helplessness or neediness. The "clueless blonde" is (as you know) surprisingly attractive to men.

These counterfeit forms of sexual attraction are a strong evidence of the need we each have to join ourselves to a truly masculine or feminine partner. While we might convince ourselves that we're rationally able to choose someone based on their intelligence or social skills or even their Christian commitment, something in us often overrides our minds and draws us elsewhere.

Along with these counterfeits, strength and softness also take on another deceptive form. I call it "artificial" strength and softness. This one's a lot easier to explain. It's simply done with appearances.

Thus, an artificially strong man is one with big muscles. He might also be a man who has impressive abilities, or a grand-sounding voice. Sometimes he communicates strength through the truck he drives or the money he spends.

An artificially soft woman? Well, let's just say she likes to show her curves. And bat her eyes. And grab his arm....

And so we compromise what our minds (and our friends) tell us is right, for this strange sense of completeness we find with someone who at least seems to be what we're looking for.

Perhaps a good way to communicate what I mean by true strength and true softness is by explaining *why* women need strong men and *why* men need soft women, or (said the other way) why women are not attracted to weak men, or men to hard women.

A man and a woman each has a deep need, way down in the center of their being, that in some real way affects nearly everything they do, every choice they make, every relationship they enter, and every fear they have.

A man's deep need is for significance.

A woman's deep need is for security.

Interestingly enough, we aren't born really understanding each other's need. Most men (especially single men) aren't all that concerned whether they live in a mansion or a trailer, whether the back-door lock works or is broken, or even whether they know where the next dollar is coming from. Things like this really matter to a woman.

What does matter to a man is whether he can prove his worth, both to the other men around him and to the women in his life. He wants his accomplishments to be noticed and appreciated. He needs to feel sufficient—to know he is man enough for the tasks that are required of him. Women find these

things far less important (although this might not be entirely evident in our present culture, where females are continually taught to think like men).

So what kind of strength does a woman really want her man to have? There's nothing wrong with decisiveness, there's nothing wrong with muscles. Those are great—if they aren't counterfeit or artificial. But the bottom line for a woman is her need to feel protected and cared for. Decisiveness and muscles that are only used to benefit the man are worthless to her. A frail and gentle man who nevertheless stands tall in his spirit and carries the tough loads of life will bring her a far greater peace and joy than an outwardly “strong” man whom she can't trust.

Meanwhile, the man is looking for someone who needs him and who will accept and appreciate what he actually has to give her. In this sense, softness is possible for any woman, even one whose curves aren't perfect—or who is unusually brilliant or capable.

But that is often the tricky part. Should a woman pretend to be needy? Should a man pretend to be tall and tough? How do we authentically become the men and women God desires us to be?

The interesting thing about strength and softness is that they're already in us. When we were born male or female, God put the capacity for masculinity and femininity into our very being. However (as we've said) our Enemy has worked very hard—and I might say quite successfully—to block the expression of our holy sexual natures.

In a perfect world, men would be mighty and women would admire and honor them. Women would trust their men, and men would sacrifice anything for the safety and happiness of their women and children.

In our upsidedown world, men are self-seeking or lazy and women scorn or ignore them. Women, being impatient and demanding, have decided they'd rather take care of themselves. Both women and men hurt each other, trampling on those deepest needs, until we end up with our present crop of weak men and hard women.

If it's any encouragement, I think simply knowing what's going on can make a difference. Too many voices have told you all the wrong things. Truth can indeed set us free, at least free to head in a better direction.

But the larger solution is more than a process of retraining our habits. Nor can it be done by any kind of pretending. Instead, my Christian friend, you and I will only find our redeemed and healthy natures as we grow closer to God.

Think about it. The reason most men see themselves as weak is because they've gone through life dealing with a lot of failure and rejection. Even where they've succeeded, those wins aren't enough to replace the nagging sense of inadequacy. Gotta make more money, gotta beat more competitors, gotta prove myself one more time....

Only when a man truly finds God will he be able to know the Father who accepts and approves of him—and who values him completely. Of course, God is also a Dad who doesn't put up with any nonsense or whining or wimping out. God “calls out” men who will be real men, and then gives them real strength to do mighty (and eternally significant) deeds.

We women need to find God in a different way. We must discover Him to be our protector and provider. But what often slows that down is our wrong notion of what we need to be protected from, and what we need to have provided. We females certainly have an overabundance of ideas about how things SHOULD BE.

But (trust me) God has eternal patience, and has been known to wait a *long* time until we get over ourselves! When, somehow at last, we settle down and let go of our long lists, then we can discover the truest Husband that ever existed. We'll gradually learn to submit to His ideas of what should be, even if it involves pain or the lack of things we thought we couldn't live without. As we begin to

relax in His strong arms, we become softer. It just happens. And, my dear sister, nothing else is quite so beautiful!

To pull this all together, let's look at how scripture portrays healthy manhood and womanhood. The larger revelation—which is ultimately the point of this whole discussion—comes when we see the strength of Christ in relationship to the “softness” (i.e. trusting adoration) of His bride, the church.

However, the Bible also provides some detailed descriptions of men and women who are living the way God designed them to live. For a picture of godly masculinity, I've chosen 1 Timothy 3:2-7.

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

This is the list of qualifications Paul gave Timothy for a man who desires to be an elder in the church. As you know, these are not things that come from the fallen nature of man. They are instead Christ's strength and selflessness and purity alive within a human frame. And these are the very characteristics that bring security to a woman. When a man is walking closely enough to God to become like Him, it becomes easy for his wife to respond to him as she does to God—with gratitude, adoration, obedience, and trust.

Our godly-woman picture is 1 Peter 3:1-6.

Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.

Here is a woman who is submissive, chaste, and reverent. She is far less concerned with her outer beauty than she is with the condition of her heart, in which God is creating a gentle and quiet spirit. And (miracle of miracles) she realizes it's no longer her job to fix her husband! This all comes, not from her natural inclinations, but from her experience of the faithfulness of God. Because she trusts in God, Peter tells us, she is able to obey and honor her husband, just like Sarah did Abraham.

Strength and softness. When one of them increases, so can the other. And what freedom it brings! We're no longer competing. We no longer have to manipulate. We no longer have to struggle to be what God didn't make us to be. Instead, we will see the gradual unfolding of something so powerful that those who watch will be amazed—a man and a woman filled with God's Spirit, deeply in love, proving through their lives that there IS a way out of all the confusion and loneliness and pain.

## 4 - Why Does God Let Us Suffer?

If you've ever been in love, you know it can bring more astonishing joy, and more excruciating pain, than anything you've ever experienced. In the good moments, you're so fully alive and so close to the one you love that it's easy to believe heaven is just one little step away. But when the relationship gets into trouble, or worse, if it dies altogether, your aching heart feels crushed beyond repair. Why can't God just make this whole love business a little easier on us?

There are many ways people interpret and cope with the pains life brings. Some people see suffering as the work of our Enemy, part of the evil that came when creation fell. From this perspective, the work of God and the work of His people should be focused on removing suffering—in our lives and in the lives of others.

Let's apply this point of view to being single. Your loneliness is definitely painful, and the solution would naturally be marriage. So you do what you can to find yourself a mate. But along the way you run into other pains—competition, misunderstandings, rejection, and (maybe most of all) the need to face and deal with your own flaws.

Some of you keep pushing through these new pains. But others of you step back, and gradually decide it's not worth it, at least not right now. There are other solutions to loneliness, maybe not quite as good, but they're something you can get used to.

You may not realize this, but the Bible has a very different perspective on suffering. Instead of seeing suffering as evil and something to be fought against, the writers of the Bible call it good.

- James says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials . . ." (James 1:2)
- Paul says, "We also glory in tribulations . . ." (Romans 5:3)
- Peter says, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you...but rejoice . . ." (I Peter 4:12)
- Jesus says, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you . . . rejoice and be exceedingly glad . . ." (Matthew 5:11,12)

Of course, if you read the full texts, you will see that none of these men are saying we should find suffering pleasurable in itself, or that we should try to bring it on ourselves. What they are saying is that suffering produces great benefits, benefits that can really come no other way.

I've counseled with a lot of people who are in pain, and I've discovered that the most common reason they're struggling with their pain is because they're too close to it. In other words, it has become the only thing that really matters to them at that moment, and they have lost sight of the bigger picture. But if we truly want to understand our lives, we need to learn to look at ourselves, and all the details of our existence (including our relationships), through the eyes of God.

As I've already explained, God does not see your singleness as a good thing. Nevertheless He can definitely bring good things out of it, and He does. In the same way, He does not see suffering as a good thing in itself, but He understands the rich treasures that are to be gained in the middle of it, treasures that come in no other way.

One day of course your singleness, like all other sufferings, WILL be over. You may be married here in this life (which, incidentally, will start a whole new round of sufferings of a different sort). Or you may step alone into eternity, where you'll meet the Husband who will make all earthly marriages seem quite insignificant.

Paul said it well in Romans 8:18. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." This life is such a small thing,

and even the worst of its hardships are so very temporary. Nevertheless, our pains are real enough to us now, and God wants us to discover how they can be transformed from something destructive into the stepping stones of grace.

If you recall from reading my Letter, I identified three primary purposes for our existence on earth—three things that God desires to accomplish in us.

- He wants us first to find Him, and then to get to know Him very well.
- He wants to work in us, by His Spirit, until our character becomes like that of His Son Jesus.
- He wants us to be a real-life expression of Jesus, especially to people who don't know Him yet.

What I've also come to understand is that *suffering is always necessary for each of these goals to be accomplished.*

Let's think about how we find God. For those of us raised in a Christian setting, we first learn about Him through our families or in church or through reading the Bible. But "learning about" and "knowing" are not the same thing. I can learn about the apostle Peter. I'll never really know him until I get to heaven.

What it takes to know God is not something we can entirely understand. It involves the very supernatural working of His Spirit, the person of the Trinity who dwells with us on earth. But the process begins with profound, soul-wrenching pain. You see, we must come to realize, deep in our beings, that God is perfect, that we are lost and helpless, and that our evil choices have brought unthinkable suffering on His pure and sinless Son.

Only when we come face to face with the truth of our nastiness do we ever reach out for His goodness. Only when we get a taste of the hell we deserve do we begin to comprehend the redemption He offers. If everything in our life were pain-free, we simply would never get that desperate.

But even after we come to know Jesus as our savior, there is so much more to learn about Him. For example, we need to experience Him as our provider and protector. But how can we discover His provision unless we are in some kind of poverty? How can we know His protection except in the context of danger? How can we know about His ability to comfort or heal, unless we're undergoing some kind of suffering?

From our human view, we might just prefer to avoid the sufferings. But our view, quite frankly, is not what matters. Jeremiah 9:23,24 gives us God's preference, and it *does* matter.

Thus says the Lord:

"Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,  
Let not the mighty man glory in his might,  
Nor let the rich man glory in his riches;  
But let him who glories glory in this,  
That *he understands and knows Me*,  
That I am the Lord, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth,  
For in these I delight," says the Lord.

The amazing thing about God's view is that it is truly best for us as well. You see, those who reject human love relationships because they just might be (well, because they ARE) painful, miss the joys and fulfillments that are only to be found in marriage and family. But glorious as these things

are, they are only a faint shadow of the incomparably rich fullness that is found in a spiritual relationship with the One who made us for Himself.

The second place where suffering brings about God's agenda for our lives has to do with the changing of our character. This one is pretty obvious, if you've ever watched a horse being broken or a child being raised. Because of our inherent rebelliousness, laziness, stubbornness, selfishness, and all those other ungodlike "nesses" we tend to want to hang on to, the process of sanctification simply has to hurt.

But God in His love and wisdom devises a personal training program for each of us, what I like to call a "custom-crafted crucible." He makes things miserable for us in specific aspects of our lives, not because He wants to destroy us, but because He wants to destroy that which actually is *not* us. Hebrews 12:10,11 puts it this way:

[God chastens] us for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

And finally, suffering is the necessary context for the spread of God's kingdom on this earth. To see how this works, let's go to one of my favorite suffering passages, Luke 22:31,32.

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

It is always important to realize that Satan is real, and he really desires to destroy us. Nevertheless, he can do nothing to us without first getting God's permission. In this case, while Jesus *did* permit Peter's trials, He also prayed for his faith to stand strong in the middle of them.

If you know the story in Luke, you will know that it seems Jesus' prayer was not answered. When Peter was challenged by a servant girl and others in a Jerusalem courtyard, he became afraid and denied three times that he was Jesus' follower.

We can only imagine the anguish Peter felt when he realized he had failed his Lord (the scriptures say he "wept bitterly"). But what Peter did not know was that this was a necessary step for the building of true faith. You see, none of us learn to draw upon God's strength until we come face to face with our own weakness. Peter not only discovered his personal helplessness, but he also experienced Christ's willingness to forgive and restore. God later filled Peter with the Holy Spirit, after which he became fearless of even the cruelest Roman leaders.

God calls all of us to "strengthen our brethren," and the only way we can do this is to have received God's strength when we've needed it ourselves. In 2 Corinthians 1:4, Paul describes God as one "who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted."

Do you see? Unless we suffer, and unless those around us suffer, the kingdom of God does not expand. Perhaps if we still lived in Eden, this method might not have been necessary. But we don't, and it is.

One of the young men who read my Letter asked about a deep pain he was experiencing. After explaining to him some of the points I've just made, I wrote a conclusion which I believe will also be a good conclusion to this chapter. Here is his question followed by the final portion of my answer to him:

*The girl I thought I was going to marry recently left me, and it really hurts. Now I wonder if I was to blame. But even more, it makes me afraid to date anyone else. How can I know if someone can be trusted, that she won't leave—even after we're married?*

. . . I hope you can begin to see that, far from being evil, suffering is in fact a “narrow gate” through which we can come to know God most intimately (see Matthew 7:14). It draws us to Him, it makes us like Him, and it allows us to share His glory as we minister to others.

“All that may be true,” you say, “but how do I deal right now with the intense pain I’m feeling from losing this girl I loved? That bit about a broken heart isn’t just words in a song. It really *hurts!* I’ve tried crying, praying, hitting things, drowning the pain in something else—but it doesn’t go away. I want to find someone new right away, and at the same time I never want to love anyone again. What can I do?”

I want to say something to you that I pray you’ll be able to understand. It might not make sense to your mind, but please see if you can accept it in your spirit. There’s one more thing you may not have tried. I call it embracing your pain.

You see, in spite of the fact you feel like your heart is fractured into pieces, you’re actually still alive. Running from the pain hasn’t worked. Being angry at God—or at her—or at yourself—hasn’t made things better either. But what if the very pain you’re trying to escape holds the key to your healing?

You’ll probably admit that this specific hurt is one of the most intense things you’ve ever known. Even the feeling you had when you were passionately in love wasn’t quite as strong as this. That should be a clue that it has something to do with God.

So rather than running from it or fighting it, see if you can look for God in the middle of it. If you think about it, He has felt far more intense pain than you or I will ever experience. What if He decides to let your hurt stay a while longer? Can you trust Him to keep you alive and breathing and even functioning fairly well in the ordinary business of your life with the pain still there? Can you find peace in your spirit, even while your mind and body are in torment?

You can. I know, because I have.

And slowly, gradually, dear friend, something miraculous will happen. You will find that you begin to know God better. You’ll find yourself more certain than ever before that He’s real, that He loves you, and that it’s all going to work out. *How* exactly it’s going to work out matters less and less. It’s His problem now, not yours.

It might also help to realize that the pain you feel won’t last forever. This particular ache might even one day disappear after you are married. But as you know, some pains never go away, not while we’re here on earth. Nevertheless, the Bible promises us that in heaven, it will all be erased.

And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:4)

And so you have a choice. You can fight the pain through bitterness or anger. You can do a million things to shove it aside or drown it out. You can harden your heart and never let yourself be vulnerable again.

Or you can let the pain work deeply into your soul, breaking away the fake and selfish and foolish parts of you, and reach out to the God who loves and understands and accepts you, and who will restore you—in His time. And on the other side of this season of suffering you may very well find

yourself in a place of new joy that never would have been possible before you allowed God to work this costly change in you.

First, you will have a new freedom from fear. Pain will no longer be a dreaded enemy. Also, you'll have a new ability to trust—not other people, but God Himself. Nowhere does the Bible tell us to trust each other. God alone is faithful and reliable.

In addition, you'll find that because God is real to you, you no longer have to look to your friends, or your girlfriend, or your wife, to be your life-support system. Instead, you'll have more to give them, and in the giving you'll become far closer to them than was ever possible through your neediness.

Best of all, you'll begin to see God's purpose for taking you through everything that's happened. Life will change from a string of hardships to a supernatural adventure. You'll find great joy in watching His kingdom become more visible all the time, regardless of whether life is easy or tough.

Then finally, one glorious day, you'll get to hear those beautiful words, "Well done, My son." And that will be so *very* worth the pain.

## QUESTIONS WOMEN ASK

### 5 - Why Can't I Just Go After a Man?

You know, it seems like such a simple thing. A girl watches a guy for a while, decides she'd like to know him better, and after much thought (and even prayer?) approaches him respectfully and suggests they get together for coffee sometime. No big deal, she tells herself. I just want to be his friend.

He says sure, why not. So they meet for coffee, or perhaps for lunch. Lightning doesn't strike them dead. They have a good time, find out they have some things in common, and a new friendship appears to be born. Now what?

Well, since I'm making up this story, I guess I can take it any direction I like. Maybe next time *he* asks *her* out. Maybe when they see each other in class or at work, they send each other a special smile. Maybe, months down the road, he thanks her for taking that first step toward what has now become a serious relationship.

Or, maybe she waits and he never calls. Maybe when their paths cross he doesn't seem to remember their "date." Maybe he even starts avoiding her.

Lots of maybes. I'll bet all of them have come true in someone's life. But in our whatever-works-best culture, we sometimes forget that how it turns out isn't really the point at all. The point is always *what does God want?*

Even though our story is imaginary, real stories usually follow a predictable pattern. A girl realizes God is not in a hurry to draw a certain young man's attention to her, so she decides to take matters into her own hands. Maybe she senses another female on the prowl, giving her an added sense of urgency. Or perhaps she knows this guy is a little shy and doesn't usually take risks. And after all, it's *just* lunch or coffee—it's not like she's proposing or something.

Meanwhile the guy, who may be very used to females making decisions for him, doesn't notice anything strange about the suggestion. Even though he has no previous interest in this young woman, what harm does it do to share an hour over lunch or coffee?

From what you know already about masculinity and femininity, you may see some of the problems with this set-up. She's the initiator. She's the protector (making it easy on him). She might even be paying for their coffee! He's not only letting her lead, he's also not thinking about the fact that this "innocent" little meeting is still a part of courtship, the first step toward possible marriage. For him, it's just a pleasant time with a girl (and maybe a free meal).

Since this scenario probably still sounds pretty normal to you, let me help you put it into perspective. A century ago, a young man got on his horse or into his carriage and traveled to a young woman's house to court her. There was usually a father around, more or less visibly, to add a fear-factor to the mix. When I was young, a young man usually made phone calls to the woman who had caught his eye. It still took a certain amount of courage, but not as much.

But now, in our world of texting and Facebook and blogging, everybody's always talking and it doesn't really matter who says what to whom. Plus, people don't really date all that often any more—they just hang out. None of this is especially scary. Yet oddly enough, none of it is especially productive either, not with regard to building authentic romances that lead to marriage. Sometimes I think there was something *really right* about those old stories where the knight had to slay a dragon in order to win his lady.

The bottom line is this. Each time you, as a woman, take the initiative to make things a little easier for a guy (and easier on you!), you move a small step away from God's perfect plan for his strength and your softness. Plus, there's always a cost. Now you don't *know* God is absolutely in charge. Now you don't *know* the guy really wants you. Now you don't *know* you're worth that extra price of masculine courage.

Many years ago I found an interesting passage in Isaiah, the last two verses of chapter 50. It says this:

Who among you fears the Lord? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God. Look, all you who kindle a fire, who encircle yourselves with sparks: walk in the light of your fire and in the sparks you have kindled—this you shall have from My hand: you shall lie down in torment.

I call it “arranging our own blessings.” There are some situations where we just aren't willing to wait patiently for God to light up our darkness. What this scripture says is while God doesn't entirely abandon us when we “encircle ourselves with sparks,” He does see to it that we won't find *His* peace in these solutions of our own making.

Let me talk about something else for a moment. The reason you feel it's necessary to take life into your own hands—not only in the matter of finding a husband but also regarding other needs you have—may be largely the result of the less-than-perfect relationship you had with your own father.

Far too many young women in this world have passive or abusive fathers. They also may have seen their mothers take over the family leadership, often living in bitterness toward their husbands. Sometimes the family held together anyway, but (as I said earlier) for a too-large percentage of you it did not. In fact, it is not uncommon these days for a young girl not to know her father at all.

This was the first place you felt the brokenness. You see, your young femininity was designed by God to be nurtured in relationship with a masculine father, and modeled by a feminine mother. What you learned instead was that men could not be trusted—to provide for you, to lead you, and maybe most of all to protect you. In other words, the greatest pain in your life may have come from the very person with whom you should have felt the safest.

If there was a word to describe deep inner tears, I would use it here. This breaks my heart. It breaks my heart that manhood and womanhood have been so distorted in our world. It breaks my heart that it causes so many children to suffer. It breaks my heart that so many husbands and wives never know the deep joys of a godly marriage.

Most of all—and I mean this honestly—it breaks my heart that people no longer understand the wonderful masculine character of God, and therefore never really understand our true nature as His feminine church. We don't know how to follow His leadership. We don't know how to trust in His provision. We don't know how to relax in His protection.

And because of these lackings, we also don't know how to honor Him as He deserves to be honored. We talk a lot about worship, but all too often we tend to worship our ideas, or our experiences, instead of worshipping the Person God really is. If we really knew the real God, we'd realize He desires far more from us than just talking, or even singing. First and foremost, worship is a matter of *being*. Specifically, God desires us to become holy and complete as the result of our intimate relationship with Him.

This brings us back to the wonderful news of the gospel. God, through the sacrifice of Jesus, has paid the price for human brokenness to be reversed. We can't do it ourselves, but His Spirit in us can.

You see, the brokenness of the world we live in can never be repaired by dealing with it on a surface level. We can pass laws, and that helps some. We can sometimes persuade (or manipulate) the people around us to treat us better, and sometimes they do. But authentic, permanent healing only occurs in one place—inside me.

For this healing to take place, I must first understand my personal desperation. I must see my sin the way God sees it. That happens when God’s Spirit (through the words of His scriptures) supernaturally opens my eyes and gives me a glimpse of His holiness and purity.

As I begin to comprehend how corrupt I am in comparison to His standards, two temptations will immediately rise up in my mind. My first temptation will be to blame someone else. It’s not my fault. I was mistreated, abused, lied to. The second temptation is to promise myself I’ll try harder. I’ll never do that sin again.

I can go many, many years following one or both of these side paths—but my brokenness will remain. True healing will only come when I finally give up and admit to God (and to myself) that it has been my choice to hold on to my sinfulness. I must reach the point where I recognize my total helplessness apart from Him, and I must plead for Him to change me.

One of the first evidences that God’s grace is at work in me will be a new ability to forgive others. When I have finally grasped the reality of my own helplessness, I can also see the helplessness of people who have hurt me—including even my father. Remember what Jesus said as He hung on the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” My father, and your father, didn’t *really* know what they did.

It isn’t a matter of pretending there’s no hurt. It’s not a matter of shutting down the memories of everything in our past. Rather, as we begin to discover the loving presence and the consistent trustworthiness of God in our lives, it will fill up those little-girl needs that weren’t met, and the failures of our earthly fathers will gradually become less painful.

And one day you’ll be able to honestly pray a new prayer: “Lord God, I’m willing to be made willing to forgive my dad. Help me do what I can’t do by myself.” It doesn’t mean you have to trust your father, or admire him, or really even like him. What it does mean is you are acknowledging that your father has value simply because God made him a man and chose him to be your father—and God does not make mistakes.

In some cases, it may even open the doorway for God to begin creating a relationship that never existed before. God formed the first man Adam out of nothing but dust. We should never underestimate the power of God to rebuild a man who’s already alive.

Let’s return now to the matter of your finding a husband. If what I’m describing about manhood and womanhood is beginning to make sense—or more importantly, if it is beginning to feel right in your spirit—then you’re probably realizing that the best way you can encourage manhood in this world is to live out godly womanhood yourself.

To spell this out, if real manhood means being an initiator, there needs to be a responder. If real manhood means leadership, there needs to be someone who submits to that leadership. If real manhood means protection and provision, then there needs to be someone who receives these gratefully, even when the details of that protection or provision are not exactly perfect.

As I said earlier, the only way you can do this authentically is by nourishing your relationship with your heavenly Father. The more you learn how to trust His strength, the more you can become soft yourself. That softness is then lived out in your willingness to trust God to protect and provide for you through an imperfect human man.

Which brings me to a final word of caution. It’s very likely that reading through this book will give you some clearer ideas about what is attractive to a man. You’ll begin to understand that he

needs to feel important and in charge. He needs to know you appreciate what he does for you. He will definitely respond to your admiration of his manliness.

Please, please, don't get in the habit of *pretending* these things. Remember what I said about counterfeit and artificial femininity. They definitely have power—but I promise you, if you go that route, it will certainly come back to bite you after you're married.

Instead, you must look for places where expressions of gratitude or admiration can be real and honest. Even if there are only little bits of his manliness that are showing when you first meet him, you can choose to make it a point to encourage them.

This includes allowing him to make the decisions whenever possible. It also means affirming him when he does things that men should do, like working hard or handling money wisely or taking responsibility in a difficult situation—and especially when he seeks to hear and obey God.

On the other hand, it can also mean letting go of those situations where he fails. The more you spend time with a man (and especially after you marry one), the more his shortcomings will become very visible—and very annoying.

Here's where honesty has to work in the other direction. You see, your guy is only human. He can't be your god. In our strong inborn desire to find perfection in another person, we often build images of that person in our minds which we fool ourselves into believing are real. These turn into expectations, and expectations can be deadly.

So we must learn to be honest with ourselves and honest with the person we're dating. There's a certain wonderful part of romance that is rosier than life, and God made it that way. But if we cling to our "twitterpatations" and expect them to last forever, we'll begin to make demands that will gradually erode—and will eventually destroy—the truer, more permanent love that God desires to build between a man and a woman.

## 6 - How Should I Live While I Wait?

In the first five chapters of this book I've only been borrowing pieces from the answers to various questions on my original website. However, the next two chapters are going to be taken almost directly from what I wrote there. The first question I'm using was a response to something I had written earlier, which was this:

I want to say one other thing regarding ministry. In Genesis 2:15 we read, "Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it." It was only later, in verse 18, that God said, "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him."

In most instances, I believe, God gives assignments to the husband, and then calls the wife to walk beside him. Thus it seems wise for a single woman to think less about identifying her "calling" (in the sense of a particular ministry), and more about preparing to be a man's helper in whatever task or tasks God might give him.

Here's the question I was given, followed by my reply.

*I definitely identify with a single woman not worrying about finding her "calling," but rather preparing to be a man's helper in the tasks God will give him. How exactly do I do that, and what ministry should I pursue now—in case it's a while before he arrives?*

Many centuries ago, a man named Anselm of Canterbury wrote these words: "Oh, how miserable man's lot is when he has lost what he was made for!" The question of calling, for either a man or a woman, is really the question of God's purpose. Why did He make us? What are we supposed to be doing during our time on earth?

When God put Adam on this planet, He gave him two jobs: take care of the natural world, and multiply the human race. This was the man's first calling. But he couldn't do it alone, so God gave him Eve as a helper. Things were looking good.

But then Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and the plan fell apart in three specific ways (see Genesis 3). First, the natural world became filled with thorns and weeds, and thus was much harder to cultivate. Second, childbearing became painful. And third, the relationship between Adam and Eve was corrupted, where instead of being his assistant she would seek to control him, and instead of them together ruling over creation, he would have to spend his energies ruling over her!

So much for the first round of calling. Let's fast-forward to the New Testament, where we see a very different picture of calling. In Ephesians 4:1, Paul urges believers to "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called." What is that call? "That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may ... know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:16-19).

In case you're the sort that skims over verses, I'm going to review a few points.

- Point one—we're called to become strong through the Spirit
- Point two—we're called to let Christ live in us by faith, so we can know His love that passes knowledge
- Point three—we're called to be filled with the fullness of God

Hmm. I don't know about you, but I can't think of a more radical calling than that! Paul is essentially saying we are called to become very much like God. You'll notice, though, that there aren't any specific job descriptions attached to this calling. Doesn't God particularly care what we do with our lives?

The longer I ponder the mysteries of God, the more I think we tend to get these two versions of calling—being vs. doing—reversed. So often the emphasis of Christian teaching concerns the activities we're supposed to focus on. We wrestle with questions of career, of ministry, of service—wondering what it will take to really please God.

So, I'm going to let you in on a little secret I discovered somewhere on my own journey toward heaven. God is never pleased with what WE do. He's only pleased with what HE does—in us and through us! In other words, there's a real sense in which it doesn't matter so much *what* we're doing, but *how* and *why* we're doing it. He wants us to do whatever we do *in His strength* and *because of His love*.

However, this doesn't happen sitting on a stump with the sun beaming down. It happens as we walk through our ordinary business of cleaning house and earning money and caring for folks. In other words, we still have to get up and do *something*.

Several weeks ago our church had a little ceremony for all the graduating high school seniors. As the young men and women lined up across the front, I listened to their plans. With only a couple exceptions, all of them were headed toward college. Most of them also had a career they thought they might want to pursue. And everybody applauded.

But I've also talked with a lot of young women who are a few years beyond high school. Many of these women are pushing through college without much enthusiasm, wondering why they're even there. Some of them are doing fine in their studies. Some aren't. But something seems to be missing in the "career path" they've been promised is the right road to travel.

While there are probably a number of factors in the mix, I'd like to suggest that a major source of this unsettledness is because today's young woman is consistently being led away from her femininity. Anselm might say she's losing what she was "made for." I personally think she's having it stolen from her.

Not, however, without a fight. One thing I noticed in that group of high school seniors is most of the women were choosing "feminine" careers, in education, medicine, fashion design, psychology, and so forth. Their instinct toward nurturing, their fascination with relationships, their desire to mend the broken, their love of beauty—these kept bubbling up as the best way to make it in the career world they've been told is non-optional.

So, eventually, armed with a degree (and often chained to a debt), the woman makes her way into the "real" world to do the best she can. Possibly along the way she's added the MRS degree to her MA. But whether she has or not, most of the time she's on her own track, and it's a track that makes it very difficult to follow her heart—which I believe wants to lead her home.

Okay. Hit the pause button. Let's take a minute to check out the young men in that church line-up. They too had college and career plans. They, like the young women, knew very well that everyone expected them to have a well-defined future as one of their graduation requirements. Sooo, they came up with something, maybe based on the dreams of one their parents.

I've talked with the guys too, two years or four years or seven years down the college road. Many of them have switched majors (even colleges) more than once. They often are working jobs on the side that they find more interesting than their studies. Nearly all of them have hobbies that are MUCH more interesting than school. But still they know, all too well, that sooner or later the "real" world will jump up in front of them, and they'll have to engage in the battle as a *grownup*.

Please don't get me wrong. Stepping from youth to adulthood has never been easy, for anyone, anywhere, anywhen. What is wrong with our world, though, is that there seems to be a devious conspiracy that significantly hinders us from preparing to do those things we really are "made for."

Now press the play button again. Let's think about how we are called to life's tasks *specifically as men and women*, and further, how young people should prepare themselves to step into those roles. As we've discussed earlier in these writings, men are called to be protectors, providers, defenders of truth, builders and explorers and doers of brave and mighty deeds. Women are called to be helpers, nurturers, creators of beauty and order and comfort and pleasantness.

I'm going to tell you a secret. It's something you might not hear anyone else say, but I know it's true. The best place for a man to do his masculine work is primarily out in the world. The best place for a woman to do her feminine work is primarily in the home.

Remember our needs for significance and security? The world is where a man can shine. The home is where a woman feels safe. (It's also, by the way, the place where children can safely grow up, something that's missing all too often these days.) Of course, there are no guarantees. But you don't fix something that's broken by breaking it a different way.

What do I mean by that? Well, back in the 60's when the women's liberation movement began, wives at home were stressed and bored. So they picked up a book called *The Feminine Mystique*, and many of them left home because they were told men had the real life, and they could have it too. Forty years later, you're living in the world they dreamed of. You can see what they couldn't. Not only is a man's "real life" not very satisfying for a woman, but his world has become even less fulfilling for him, now that he's having to share so much of it with her.

So, I am offering you Anselm's solution to your "miserable lot." Remember what you were made for. Men need to be men doing a man's job in a man's world. Women need to be women doing a woman's job in a woman's world—which God says is in her home (see Titus 2:4,5). It doesn't mean she has to stay there 24/7. But it's where her heart belongs.

As you know, though, we've "come a long way baby," and it will probably take a while to find our way back. I'm not suggesting you women immediately drop out of school or quit your jobs, unless God clearly makes that an option. But I am saying you can start taking steps in the homeward direction—especially those of you who are young enough to adjust your plans.

In part, these steps are practical ones. You won't be able to do them all, especially if you're really busy, but consider adding one or two over the next several months. Some of them, of course, may be already well in place—things you've learned at home, at school, or perhaps in connection with your job.

For example, start (or continue) developing domestic skills, such as cooking, cleaning, decorating, sewing (or at least mending!). Learn what you can about health, diet, gardening, bookkeeping—whatever might benefit your family. Become a smart shopper. If you're still in college, take a variety of classes and learn as much as you can. Someday you may decide to homeschool your children, plus you never can tell what knowledge might help you contribute to your husband's life-work.

But the greater transition will have to take place in your spirit. You've been trained by your culture to think in masculine ways, and you are inclined by your fallen nature to want to control your life. God is asking you instead to trust Him with it, and one day, Him-in-your-husband. It's one of the toughest things a woman ever has to do.

For men, the challenge is different, although equally tough. You see, if women go back home, then the weight of providing for a family falls directly on your shoulders. These days, that's no small thing. Not only do most of us have debts, we've also grown used to a lifestyle that can be enormously expensive.

In your situation as well, the transition includes some practical steps. First, be sure you're in (or heading toward) a career that can turn your best skills and interests into a good income. Consider taking a money management class (or reading some books) to help you get out of debt and stay there. Learn how to repair things. Get in shape physically. Learn to work hard, to manage your time, to make wise, tough decisions. You're a man, and manhood is sweaty.

But manhood is also spiritual, and you will need to find and lean on God more than you ever have before. He is the one who "gives you power to get wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18), and He is the one who will give you wisdom to one day lead your family. But this isn't done by magic or osmosis. It comes from knowing His Word and His voice, and walking in obedience to what He tells you.

There's one other thing I need to talk about, and that's the matter of special callings. I've discussed the call of Adam and Eve, and also the call to Christian maturity. But what if God *has* prepared something more specific for you to do?

This may sound obvious, but I'm not sure it is. Calls are the responsibility of the caller, not the callee. In other words, if we're consistently listening for God's voice, that's all we have to do. There seems to be a tendency today to demand that young people figure out their call, and that there's something wrong if they don't "hear" it. What's more, many of us have been told to expect the call to be some kind of special mission.

But from what I can tell in scripture, not everyone got one of those. The ones who did were never looking for it, and frequently it required something pretty dramatic from God to convince them they were supposed to do this unusual thing.

What often happened next (when someone did receive a call) was one of two things. Either they ran from it (Jonah), or they tried to make it happen (Moses, Abraham). As you know if you've read these Bible stories, the result in all cases was disaster. Only later, when God was through preparing them, did the calls become reality.

If you *do* receive an authentic call from God concerning some special assignment, the wiser course of action is Mary's: ponder it in your heart (Luke 2:19). It might affect some of your decisions, here and there, but mainly God wants you to develop a willingness to do whatever He asks of you. Remember, it's *His* actions that ultimately please Him—not ours. Our part is simply to grow in His strength and rest in His love.

For those of us who don't have "special mission" callings, God still has definite works He's created for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). As we mature spiritually, it's likely these will begin to grow clearer in our minds, as we contemplate our giftings, our circumstances, and the things that tug on our hearts.

But He is the one who will bring them to pass. A grapevine is created to bear ripe grapes, but only after a long season of growing and pruning. We need to be much more at peace with this. Our single concern, as branches, is to make certain we're securely attached to the vine (see John 15).

So *my call* to you today is to ponder these things in your heart. Continue to look beyond the deceptions of our culture to discover the beauty of your femininity or masculinity as God designed it. Women, begin to see yourselves as heading home. Men, begin to think about shouldering the weight of manhood, as leaders and providers and warriors for truth.

I realize what I've written here goes drastically against much of what you've been taught, and even may still believe. I don't want you to think I'm condemning women who have jobs outside the home, or men who haven't been able to land a solid career. Ultimately these matters are between you and God.

But I feel as deeply as anything I've ever felt that God's truth for us has been almost completely buried in the debris of modern secularism. It's my prayerful desire that what I write will begin to stir new life in your spirit, new understanding in your mind, and a new settledness in your heart.

## 7 - What Does God Think About Beauty?

This question probably challenged me as much as any I received. Here's how my friend worded it, followed by my answer.

*If I'm not to be concerned with beauty as the world defines it, how much should I care about clothes and looking attractive? Is it wrong to feel butterflies when a man tells me I'm beautiful?*

It seems that each of your questions is driving me deeper into the mysteries of God. I think if we can find God's perspective on beauty, we will have uncovered a major key to the healing He desires us to have. One thing I'm sure of. Women are designed to be beautiful, and men are designed to appreciate their beauty. God, being our designer, must have had a good reason for making us this way. We also know that our Enemy has put a LOT of effort into wrecking His plan, which is another clue that beauty is very significant.

I'm going to start with an idea that might surprise you, but stay with me and I think you'll understand why I believe it's true. *Beauty gives us value.* In fact, I'll go so far as to say that a woman's beauty is one of the most important aspects of her existence. And I'm not just talking about a beautiful attitude or beautiful deeds. I'm talking about how she looks.

Okay, turn off those alarm bells and put down the red flags. It's entirely possible that all you've ever encountered is the Enemy's abuse of God's plan. Our world is obsessed with what I described earlier as counterfeit or artificial beauty, so much so that many of us have never spent much time with the real thing.

I don't think any of us would deny that God is in the beauty business. Roses, sunsets, kittens, jewels, galaxies, peacock feathers, rainbows—the list goes on forever. Should it surprise us that the grand finale of creation, a woman, was His most beautiful work of all?

What exactly makes a woman beautiful? Well, part of it is color: her hair, her eyes, her lips, her complexion. Part of it is texture: the smoothness of her skin, the shimmering flow of her hair, the glow of her eyes. Part of it is shape. Part of it is sound, her voice. Part of it is her warmth and grace and softness. And part of it is simply mystery.

I want you to listen very carefully to the next thing I have to say (and I'm talking both to you women and to you men). *All women have some beauty. No woman is entirely beautiful. We each, guys and girls, can choose to think about what is beautiful or we can choose to think about what isn't.*

Sounds easy enough, but it's one of the primary ways our Enemy gets us off-track. If you're a female, I can almost guarantee that the first thing you see when you look in your mirror is whatever you're NOT pleased with. Something is wrong with your hair, your skin, your face, your figure—and you turn away discouraged. You begin to plan a way to fix it (new makeup, a diet, new clothes, even surgery). But guess what? Many dollars and hours and aches later, you will STILL be able to find something wrong in that mirror. Maybe you need a new mirror?

No, my dear, what you need is to stop listening to a lie. The lie is that in order to be beautiful, and thus valuable, you have to be perfect. Even the closest-to-perfect woman you can think of is victim to that lie. In fact, women who are born with greater beauty are often the most in bondage to the lie. The rest of us figure out we have other ways to be valuable, but some of those poor souls never get it.

And of course the guys don't always help. They (being guys) are drawn to the high-beauty women and tend to ignore the lesser-beauty ones. But frequently the gorgeous women turn out to be the most insecure of all, and the least able to respond to a man's love.

The solution to this is actually quite simple, at least in theory. Learn to look for and be grateful for (and enjoy!) the places where God HAS made you beautiful—and don't worry all that much about the rest. I promise you, the beautiful places are really there. Guys, look for those places as well. There's even a verse about this. "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, *whatever things are lovely*, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things" (Philippians 4:8).

Unfortunately, our preoccupation with not being perfect is only one layer of our brokenness. There's another aspect of this matter of beauty that can be even more damaging. It involves beauty's role in the interaction between masculinity and femininity.

If you noticed, a lot of what I described in the above "beauty list" is directly connected to a woman's femininity. Her softness, her gracefulness, and yes, the profound promise of sexual pleasure inherent in her face and figure—these can't (and shouldn't) be separated from the woman's attractiveness to a man. But what God intends for good, the Enemy has used for great devastation.

God designed sexual intimacy to be the life-long spiritual communion of two persons, one male, one female. Radiating out from this center are other circles of interaction, including social, emotional and physical. In our typical upsidedownness, we have put the physical at the center, and have lopped off part (or sometimes all) of the other ways of relating.

Cough, cough! Yes, I hear you, guy reader. You're thinking I'm getting strange now. What on earth is especially spiritual about sex? More to the point, what isn't physical about it?

Well, I didn't say it *wasn't* physical, did I? I just said that shouldn't be the center.

I probably need to explain what I mean by spiritual. While it's quite possible there are some things I'll miss, or misunderstand, hopefully what I have to say will help you begin to sort between sexual brokenness and sexual health.

I believe God gave us our sexual nature, including the prospect of marriage, for at least three reasons. First, it gives us value as an individual. Second, it provides a context for giving. And third, it meets some of our deepest human needs. When these three functions are fully operating as God intends, then (in my definition) you have a spiritually healthy sexual relationship.

I think these things will be easier to understand, however, if we examine the viewpoint that puts the physical part at the center. After all, we're much more familiar with sex-gone-wrong than we are with sex-done-right.

Let's start with the matter of our value as an individual. I hope you know that you are SO much more than just a body. You're a unique person, with feelings and dreams and creative ideas and the capacity to give and receive love. When sexuality centers on the physical, *none of these really have to matter*. Your body is either attractive or it isn't. You are able to perform sexually, or you aren't. That's about it. What's more, if your beauty or your ability to perform go away for some reason (age comes to mind), then at that point your value disappears with it.

If however what ties a man and woman together is their spiritual appreciation for each other as chosen objects of affection and commitment, then the physical is just a wonderful bonus!

Number two. The only way two people can interact is if they decide to give each other some time and attention. Guys and girls mysteriously find enormous amounts of time for each other when they want to. Sexual socializing is fun! But it's also potent stuff. Oh so quickly we figure out that our sexuality gives us power. Particularly if sex is all about bodies, we set ourselves up to be manipulative—and manipulated.

God however calls us to voluntary, self-giving love. It's not about power, either yours over someone else, or theirs over you. In 1 Corinthians 7:4 God specifically tells husbands and wives that their bodies belong to each other, not to themselves. If your body isn't even yours, it certainly can't

be used as a tool for manipulation.

I'm going through this rather quickly; hopefully it's making some sense. However, I want to slow down with the third point, because this is where the whole business of beauty becomes most important.

Before I talk about a sexual relationship meeting human needs, I should remind you that our most urgent and deepest needs can only be met by God, through Christ's redemption and the indwelling of His Spirit. For those who never marry, or for those whose marriages fall short of God's design, there is more than enough grace available to live a satisfying and productive life.

But I also believe that marriage (this thing I'm calling "spiritually-centered sexual communion") has the potential for amazing, God-created rewards. The specific human needs that beauty plays an important part in are the same needs I've brought up before: a woman's need for security, and a man's need for significance.

A girl's earliest memories almost inevitably include the reactions of people to her beauty (or lack of it). As she grows, she observes the world clearly sorting between the beautiful and the not-so-beautiful. She watches her father's eyes, and notices his appreciation for physical attractiveness. She herself instinctively loves beauty: clothes, flowers, jewelry, the decorations in her room, certain dolls. Something inside her wants to be a princess.

Our culture understands this desire far too well. Not only do fashion companies reap millions of dollars as the result of our messed up mirrors, they also feed our insecurities by continually redefining what beauty is. But because the physical stays at the center of our minds, most forms of beauty are being swallowed up by specifically sexual beauty. Even very young girls are learning to be sexy, long before they should be.

The problem with all this is that the very place where a woman is created to find her security, specifically the protective care of a man, is being destroyed. When sexuality (the draw of her beauty on the man who desires it) is reduced to physical terms alone, it becomes almost inevitable that depersonalization and manipulation will make healthy and permanent sexual relationships difficult, if not impossible.

What happens is that both men and women begin to see the female body as a commodity, to be prettied up and fought over and then used up and thrown aside. In this kind of world, a woman loses her faith in a man's protection (or in many cases, never even believes in it in the first place). Her only remaining option is to protect herself, a course of action that may in fact have been taught to her by her own mother.

This self-protection usually takes one of two forms. Some women choose to reject men altogether, through hardened feminism or lesbianism. But others spend everything they have trying to compete for whatever male attention they can get. I guess they're hoping against hope they'll come upon a man who just might be different—who just might be safe.

But sadly enough, the men are also victims of the brokenness. Most of them have grown up with even less idea of what makes them valuable. Their world worships a few categories of men, primarily sports heroes, music performers, and movie stars. The average kid, who isn't talented enough to compete very long in these arenas, is left to find some way to amuse himself. And one of the most amusing things around is all those sexy girls.

And so, he joins in the game. But one thing that happens early on, from his side, is that the girls aren't much more reliable than the guys. Not that some of them don't want commitment. But in their desperation to satisfy their own neediness, they are generally pretty clueless about his. A few good rounds of high-demands, followed (or even preceded) by rejection, and the guy too gives up on the prospects of authentic love.

Of course, I'm oversimplifying things here. But I think you can recognize the pattern, even if

some of the details don't quite match your experience. What I'm not sure of, though, is whether you've ever really thought through God's designed place for physical beauty in the "man and woman" drama.

Rather than being the sum total of what a woman is, and rather than being a manipulative weapon in her self-protective arsenal, God gives each woman a real measure of physical feminine beauty as a gift to carefully prepare for her husband. Part of it is "public beauty," something everyone else can enjoy too. Part is private, meant only for him.

If men *really* understood the treasure God planned for them to enjoy, they would see women not as playthings or conquests, but as individuals, each bearing a fragile gift, a gift that can only be given, never snatched or demanded, a gift intended for one man alone.

Listen carefully. Part of that gift is the breathtaking joy of sexual intimacy, free of guilt or shame. But there's another part as well. You see, while a man indeed has a tremendous desire and need for physical sex, that by itself is not enough. Buried in each man's spirit is that other even deeper need, the continual yearning for significance.

Some of that significance can be earned in the rough and tumble world of masculine competitions and achievements. But one of the most important accomplishments available to a man is the wooing and winning of a beautiful woman—a woman who chooses him above all others as the man she will give herself to.

That victory, however, will be empty if what he has won is a hardened, self-protecting beauty—no matter how stunning she may appear on their wedding day.

You see, while each man marries a woman who already has a certain amount of beauty, God assigns him the job of enhancing and nourishing that beauty. That's what "husband" literally means. He's a caretaker, like a gardener or a shepherd. God has some amazing rewards in store for a husband, based specifically on how well he takes care of his wife.

I won't take time here to spell out everything this involves. But I want to point out that a wise husband and a cooperative wife can together create a beauty in her that goes far beyond surface features. As she lives securely in the garden of his protection and provision and patient love, her natural youthful beauty will begin to be replaced with a more mature kind of beauty, rising out of a calm and gentle spirit, radiating through her eyes and smile and gracious deeds. And it's this beauty that will bring a godly man great joy, a deep sense of worth, and a place of honor among other men.

You see, as always, our relationships are designed to be the reflection of God's relationship with us. God's idea of beauty goes far beyond our imaginings. It's a manifestation of His glory—poured into His creation, paid for by His sacrificial love—that results in our beauty, for His pleasure and for ours as well.

So yes, be thrilled when a man tells you you're beautiful. But understand that your beauty is sacred, something God has entrusted to you for the purpose of bringing honor to one very special man, and through him bringing glory to the God who made you both.

## 8 -Why Can't I Lead in the Church?

From the earliest days of the Christian church (and for centuries before that in the Jewish world) up until about a hundred years ago, this question would have seemed very strange. Of course church leaders should only be men.

To many people today, this question also seems very strange. Of course women should be leaders in the church.

Few issues have divided modern congregations and even denominations more than this one. And although it may seem a little unrelated to why so many people are single today, I think there's a real connection.

Consider what takes place when a woman stands up to preach, or teaches men in a Sunday School class, or takes a position of authority as a member of the church's governing team (as an elder or trustee), or even leads the worship service. I'm going to assume, of course, that this woman is devout in her faith and is otherwise able to fulfill these roles.

In the modern view, the church stands to gain significantly from her contributions. Women see things differently than men do, women can be strong in their ability to articulate biblical truths, women are sensitive to the needs of others and can be motivated by great compassion. Women also work hard and get things done. Moreover, some women are very talented, and surely God gave them these talents to be used in His church.

And then there's the matter of calling. A woman may be sincerely convinced that God has appointed her for the work she is doing in the church. Other people around her agree, and testify to having benefited from her teachings or other expressions of leadership.

This perspective is so persuasively conclusive in today's way of thinking that it takes more than just a few scripture verses to even begin to challenge it. In the final count, it requires us to understand and embrace the larger picture of God's created design for men and women, something we'll be looking at more extensively in the final chapters of this book.

But for now, let's start with one very relevant point. It's God church, not ours, and He can set it up any way He chooses. This means among other things that He may not be concerned with maximum efficiency as we might define it.

When Jesus returned to heaven after His resurrection, He left the gospel message in the hands of only a few believers, primarily a small group of men who were about to be hunted down and killed. It might have been a lot wiser to have chosen a time in history when the church could put down some roots without so much interruption, but God apparently wasn't thinking that way.

Christ also didn't pick the most talented or learned men, or the ones with the most power and influence, to be His disciples. This was consistent with God's pattern throughout the Bible. He usually found ordinary, humble, out-of-the-way folks—people through whom He could do His mighty works without any confusion as to who deserved the credit.

Consider a situation involving Moses and Aaron described in Numbers 16. God had called these brothers, sons of Hebrew slaves in Egypt, to take their nation out of bondage and into the land of promise. At one point during their journey through the wilderness, a group of men who were well-known (and probably very gifted) leaders among the people decided *they* were just as qualified to run things as Moses and Aaron.

If you remember the story, you'll recall that God was NOT pleased with this new idea.

And Moses said: "By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these works, for I have not done them of my own will. If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the Lord creates a

new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the Lord.”

Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all their goods. So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly (verses 28-33).

It was a violent, terrifying lesson, but it proved that God was to be feared. It also demonstrated that God’s way is the right way, regardless of whatever might seem reasonable to us.

Did God ever allow women to be leaders in scripture? The most often-noted woman leader in the Bible is Deborah, written about in Judges 4. She was supernaturally gifted as a prophetess, and the Israelites came to her for God’s determination when they had arguments. She also brought a word from God to the military leader, Barak, that he should do battle against the cruel king who had held the Israelites in bondage for twenty years.

It is important to see that Deborah was not actually a queen, or a military leader. She was a spokeswoman for God in a time when the Israelite leaders were pretty much beaten down. When Barak heard God’s instruction, he told Deborah he would not fight unless she went along. She agreed to go, but she also told Barak there would be no glory for him in the battle. Instead, the captain of the enemy army, a man named Sisera, would end up being killed by a woman.

Deborah prophesied truly about the miraculous victory the Israelites were about to win (the enemy had 900 iron chariots; the Israelites, it seems, were essentially unarmed). She was also accurate in foretelling Sisera’s death. But supernatural giftings are a very different matter from natural positions of authority. God did not follow Deborah’s successful “career” with the appointment of any more female judges.

Some people also believe a woman named Phoebe was a female leader in the early Christian church. In Romans 16:1,2, the only place she is mentioned, Paul writes this:

I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.

The Greek word for “servant,” *diakonos*, is also translated (in 1 Timothy 3) as “deacon,” a specific position in the early church. In nearly every other place this word is used in the New Testament, however, it merely refers to a servant or someone who ministers, rather than a church position. The word translated “business,” *pragma*, may be misleading as well, for it simply means things that are done.

It is far more likely that Phoebe gave her time (and possibly resources) to help the church in whatever manner was appropriate for a woman, than it is that she was given formal responsibilities. Nevertheless, on the slight chance that Phoebe did hold some kind of official “deacon” status, it is important to understand what that involved.

Acts 6 tells the story of the selection of the first group of deacons, all men, who were chosen because of their spiritual maturity. Their purpose was solely to take over the practical serving ministries (specifically feeding the widows) so the other apostles could apply themselves to teaching. There is no indication, either in Acts or in 1 Timothy, that these men were appointed to lead or to

teach. By contrast, the description of what was required for elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9) *does* include the ability to teach and to rule.

But of course the greatest evidence we have that God does not intend women to be teachers of men—or otherwise stand in authority over men—are these simple, blunt statements by Paul.

“Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.” (1 Corinthians 14:34)

“And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.” (1 Timothy 2:12)

If we had lots of scriptural examples that clearly contradicted these statements—or even a few—there might be some justification for us to think Paul didn’t mean them *quite* like they sound. But the fact is, we just don’t.

I believe the primary reason so many women have comfortably moved into church leadership in the past hundred years, and especially in recent decades, is because of that transition I explained back in chapter one. We no longer have a cultural comprehension of *any* authority, held either by individuals or by the Bible itself. The one exception would be authority based on power (law enforcement, employers, etc.), but otherwise we generally live as equals.

I doubt many Christians realize what has happened. But rarely is a pastor held in respect these days (at least in Protestant churches) simply because of his position. Respect comes instead when he can consistently “sell” himself to his congregation, through skillful, inspiring, or convicting sermons. And there always exists (depending on the denomination) the option of moving him out or moving out ourselves. The power actually lies with the people.

More subtle is our relationship with scripture. Most of us will still confess that the Bible is the divine word of God. Many of us will still describe it as inerrant, infallible, and even authoritative. But because we now engage literature in a new way, things have changed. Do you remember the difference? Until recently, books were read with the goal of understanding what the author had learned, receiving the knowledge or wisdom he or she was trying to communicate. Now the primary point of reading is to determine what the writing means to me.

It’s the consequence of our having become persuaded that there is no solid truth “out there.” Truth is now seen as being something inside the individual—and because there are lots of individuals, and because individuals go through changes, truth also has many faces. For this reason, modern writers can speak quite easily of new revelations, new insights into the Bible, that generations of believers before us have somehow missed.

When we hear something like this being said, however, we must ask if the source of this “new revelation” is solely the pages of the scripture, or did it start from somewhere outside the Bible? With regard to the question of female church leadership, it should be fairly clear that none of the arguments I listed at the beginning of this chapter—a woman’s right to lead based on her abilities, her energies, or even her sense of calling—have any solid support in the Bible.

Not that women did not receive callings in scripture. But their calls were usually either to relationships (such as Ruth or Esther) or to motherhood (Hannah, Elizabeth, and of course Mary). Some women, such as Anna, were called to a lifetime of prayer. Others were called to servant ministry (Phoebe, Lydia). A few were given prophetic assignments. But nowhere can we find an open invitation for women to walk into the positions of authority in the church that were explicitly assigned to men.

Several things result when we allow female authorities in the church. One immediate consequence that often takes place is that the woman, in this context, rises to a position of authority over her own husband. Not only does this potentially weaken his authority in their marriage, it also appears to sanction this reversal of roles in the minds of other women in the congregation.

Second, it removes church leadership from being what I call an “arena of male significance.” We need to remember that masculinity requires some context in which men can be men, can compete with other men, and can gain the honor God designed them to strive for. Moreover, when a man who is contemplating entering the ministry compares himself to some of today’s female teachers and pastors (who can be, as we said, stunningly gifted), there is a real possibility he may decide his lesser talents are not truly sufficient for the task.

But the primary reason men should be in church leadership is that they are specifically assigned to be Christ’s representatives to His body. In this role they are the shepherds or overseers who must teach His people and guard them from error, administer His provisions and sacraments, and model His authority. When these forms of service are performed by strongly masculine men, the church is given an accurate view of the nature of Christ Himself. When these services are also something a woman can do, there is a very real depletion of God’s self-revelation.

Does that mean the church will be deprived of something valuable if we effectively silence spiritually wise and gifted women in these ecclesiastical settings?

I think not. In forbidding women to take positions of authority in the church, Paul (and the Spirit who inspired him) did not eliminate all possible means of communication within the Christian community. God entrusted Anna with the good news of Jesus’ birth, and she immediately informed the believers in Jerusalem of His arrival (see Luke 2:36-38). After the Samaritan woman told the men in her town that she had met the Messiah at the well, they begged Him to visit with them, He agreed, and many also believed (see John 4:39-42). We women who have encountered Christ personally are not prohibited from sharing the glory of His gospel nor the power of His works in the ordinary contexts of our lives.

[I also (obviously) believe it is not wrong for women to write books. While the Bible is silent on this matter, I have come to see that there are at least three important differences between writing and speaking.

First, writings can be read and judged by others for their truthfulness, and corrected before they are published. A speaker may of course be censored as well—either on the spot or later—but it can be much more difficult, and in any event the wrong word has still been spoken and heard. Some women teachers speak of being “covered” when their husband (or other leader) has permitted them to teach, but what that covering actually *does* seems vague and unconvincing.

Second, writing carries no innate authority. Other than the scriptures themselves, all writing must be evaluated by the reader for its accuracy. (This is, by the way, different than saying the writing can mean whatever the reader wants it to mean.) If a book speaks something of value to the reader, it is still received and believed solely at the reader’s discretion. A book can just as easily be skimmed or set aside altogether.

But most significantly, there is no real relationship between the writer and his or her readers. They almost never meet or interact with each other, at least not on any extended basis. By contrast, when a person is a leader in the church, there is a clear responsibility placed by God on that person to lead well. Hebrews 13:17 speaks of leaders having to “give an account” for the wellbeing of the souls who are under them.

It is in conjunction with this appointed responsibility that the leader is also given authority—and honor. Although our present culture often disregards this, God intends a leader to be given unique respect specifically because of his position in the church. Paul instructed Timothy, “Let the elders

who rule will be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine,” and warned him “not [to] receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses” (1 Timothy 5:17,19). None of this kind of honor is given to a writer just because she writes.]

How then does all this connect to the singles situation? I believe the increasing normalcy of women pastors, teachers, and church leaders is part of the larger inversion of authority that is disrupting God’s plan for men and women in so many contexts of our lives. When men are placed under women’s leadership, not only in the church but also in the government, in the courtrooms, in the schools and hospitals and even the military, it may seem harmless or even beneficial.

It is vital for us to recognize that the real issue is not the competence of women. What is at stake, as feminists rightly perceive, is God’s order of things—which they have rejected. In a godless world, such as the one constructed by evolutionary theory, things like competence and competitive strength are central values. In God’s world, He is the centerpoint, and our wellbeing depends precisely on our conformity to His nature and His design.

Is everything thrown off course when one woman becomes queen or president? It depends. If a woman enters an arena normally occupied by men (as did Deborah), it can be viewed either of two ways. We can see this (as she did) as being a strange thing, a temporary exception which has been allowed because the men who should properly have been in her place were unusually weakened. Or we can see it as representing a new standard, as the first step toward women becoming equal participants in this particular vocation.

When I was young, almost all the school bus drivers were men. Today, the vast majority of school bus drivers are female. It isn’t that men have forgotten how to drive, or no longer need jobs. It’s because school bus driving is now perceived as being a woman’s job, and a man gains no professional honor in doing what women do.

Most women don’t understand this need for honor because they don’t feel it as strongly. Women take jobs for a different reason—they need the security of an income. They may also have a secondary motivation, such as wanting to give of themselves for the improvement of others. While it is possible that a woman has an awareness of the honor as well, it is rarely her primary incentive.

If God had set things up differently, then it might be best for everyone to do everything they can for the good of everyone. But He didn’t. Therefore, now that women are doing what He appointed men to do, the men are backing away. It’s not hard to see that the day will soon come (and in some contexts is already upon us) when the cost of abandoning God’s order will have reached the very foundations of our society—particularly the family. When this happens, I believe we will find ourselves missing, *really missing*, our men.

## QUESTIONS MEN ASK

### 9 - Do I Really Have to Get Married?

It has occurred to me that if you're a young man and you're reading this book, this is probably *not* the first question on your mind. I know many young men who honestly would love to be married but for all sorts of reasons still are not.

Then again, perhaps you were handed this book by some well-meaning friend who is not-so-secretly wondering why you're STILL single. Let me clarify something right up front. You certainly should not get married simply because I think it's a good idea—or even because your friend does.

When a man becomes a Christian and is filled with the Spirit of Christ, it resurrects a very good and noble part of him, which is the desire to obey and please his Lord. Men instinctively understand that there are standards and rules and challenges and accomplishments that have real value specifically because God has established them. They also know that their manhood is tested and proved against these sorts of measurements.

One of the reasons we can be pretty sure that marriage is included in God's standards for a man is because our Enemy has made it an especially high-ranking priority on the list of things he hates. Consider some of the rationalizations he puts in our minds that work to keep us from marrying.

1. "I'll get married...later." The funny thing about "later" is that it can take a *very* long time to get here. Meanwhile, we can become significantly set in our ways and comfortable with our freedoms. "Later" also encourages us to avoid thinking about the challenges marriage will bring, things that may need some serious preparation before we will be ready to take them on. If marriage is something you consistently file in the folder marked "Future," you may subconsciously be neglecting to prepare for marriage at all.

2. "I've got to find just the right one." We'll be addressing this subject in more detail in the next chapter, but the underlying trick in this mindset is the built-in fear that if you decide to marry a certain woman, you just might miss out on perfection around the next bend. Besides the arrogance this carries with it (I mean, do you *really* deserve perfection?), it can easily be a dishonest version of question one. Perfection, you see, exists only in the future. I promise you, it never shows up in real life.

3. "I've just never felt that spark." I understand. A choice as immense and life-changing as who you marry needs a pretty strong confirmation that she'll be someone you can get excited about, and stay excited about. You need to remember, though, that sparks only ignite something else which is much more flammable. They don't burn very long themselves. A guy who waits for sparks to fly often forgets that he needs to be building the bonfire first, preparing himself to be a man who is truly ready for marriage.

4. "The wrong choice, and I'm ruined." This is actually a legitimate concern, in the sense that our culture (compliments of our Enemy) has embraced a number of very anti-marriage ideas. A prime example which we mentioned earlier is the ease of no-fault divorces. Also, vows have given way in this world to "pre-nuptial agreements." These are the terms whereby we *may* (which too often turns into *will*) part ways. But if a man doesn't get something in writing, he risks financial obligations that can become overwhelming. Not that men are the only ones being abused in our culture, but financially they tend to have far more at risk than women do when marriages go bad.

Then of course there are those reasons for avoiding marriage that many guys won't readily admit to, but which are equally the accomplishments of our Enemy. First and foremost, too many men have done an end-run around God's built-in incentive for marriage, which is sex.

In some cases, men are simply promiscuous. They may sleep around, or they may have a live-in girlfriend—but in either case it makes it awfully easy to not take the risks, and take on the responsibilities, of marriage. In far more cases, at least with Christians, men channel their sexual impulses into some kind of involvement with pornography.

Besides the very real spiritual damage these alternate plans bring about, when a man's need for physical intimacy is satisfied by something other than a wife, the secondary incentives for marriage (for example, the desire to be a father) often aren't enough to motivate him.

The final item in our list of reasons why some men resist marriage is simply that they've never been called out of their childhood. No baby leaves the womb voluntarily, and no child becomes an adult without some external prodding. Too many young men have been raised by strong mothers and have passive (or absent) fathers. Moms love their boys, but moms can't make them into men. If the only males in a young man's life are his peers, chances are quite high that he'll settle into an extended childhood of gaming or other such pre-adult activities.

This is where I wish I was a man, so I could rightfully speak man-truths into your head, and man-challenges into your heart. What I can do, however, is point you to the Father of both of us, who is also our Lord and Master. Everything we have and everything we are belongs to Him. That includes our health, our possessions, our relationships, our time, and yes, our sexuality. The biggest lie our Enemy traps us into believing is that we have things we can spend and do and use—and waste—completely on our own.

So, what does God require of us? His original commission to Adam included two very adult responsibilities: "Be fruitful and multiply," and "have dominion...over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

But God did more than just issue commands. He truly loved and understood this first man He had fashioned. He knew that Adam would not be able to accomplish these assignments on his own, so God gave him a wife. This was the standard. In the unbroken world, men and women were to live in permanent pairs.

We also discussed earlier the observation Jesus made to His disciples: God made them male and female—and *for this reason* they should marry (Matthew 19:4,5). We have to remember too that Christ was single only while He was here on earth. Even Jesus will one day be a Bridegroom to His Bride.

And finally, we can see that marriage is the norm throughout all of scripture. Although not all Bible marriages were good ones, marriage is consistently assumed to be desirable. Proverbs 18:22 sums it up well: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord."

So, do you have to marry? I would say you have to live as though you *will be* married, until you are. If you recall our discussion in chapter two, some of us will reach the end of our days never having married, because of the brokenness of life. But unless God has truly gifted you with celibacy to fulfill a very unusual call, you should take this matter of marriage extremely seriously.

As I see it, you young men have been born into a time that requires a far greater measure of masculine strength and courage than those long-ago days when knights fought dragons. They just had to deal with regular dragons, the kind that died nicely when you plunged a sword into their hearts. The dragons these days are more plentiful, more elusive—and very stubborn about dying.

Let's look at a few of those dragons. The first one we were just talking about, which is the dragon that sounds like your own voice inside your head. It says things like "What's the hurry?" or "Let me finish a few more things I want to do first" or "I sure don't want to deal with the pain my dad went

through” or “There aren’t any girls who will have me, so I might as well learn how to make it on my own.”

The one thing all of these thoughts have in common is that they forget to bring God into the mix. If you truly have acknowledged that Jesus is the Lord of your life, then you are a servant, a steward of everything He’s given you. So, your life isn’t really yours to plan. Your time isn’t yours to use as you wish. Your energy and your money and your talents—they’re His as well.

But the wonderful part about Jesus’ Lordship is that He is ultimately responsible for our wellbeing—if we’ll just get off the throne—and His plans are far superior to ours. That means He won’t put us through any pain unless it’s really going to produce something much better than if we hadn’t gone through it. It also means He will provide all the resources we need to do the things He wants us to do.

Are you following this? If God actually wants you married, and if the “resource” it requires is specifically female, well then . . . .

The thing we must understand about receiving God’s resources is that He usually only provides them when we’re fully on-track with His assignments. Most of us are still operating in a blend of what He wants and what I want. That’s not responsible stewardship, and that’s not going to bring us into our Master’s favor.

Then there’s the dragon of our culture. It’s tremendously hard to be a man these days. Men are generally made fun of, rather than being honored. If someone is going to look stupid in a sitcom or a commercial, the vast majority of times it’s not a woman. In most of the popular children’s cartoons and movies, the kids are the smart ones, not the dads. Even in the church, far too many Father’s Day messages focus on what fathers need to do differently, rather than what they do right.

This means you’re going to have to swim upstream against a strong flood of bad ideas. Or better yet, get out of the river altogether. Instead of soaking your subconscious in the negative scenarios that television and movies consistently portray, you need to wrestle your mind away from the lies and turn it instead to truth, especially the truth of God’s Word. Only then will you begin to feel the firm ground of wisdom beneath your feet, allowing you to stand up as the man He created you to be.

The final dragon, however, is one that may in fact give you the greatest challenge. It comes in an interesting disguise—it looks like the woman you might want to marry.

Of course the woman herself is not really the dragon, any more than those voices in your head are really you. But most modern females have also bought into the lies about men—and about themselves. It isn’t primarily because they are unintelligent or selfish or arrogant; rather (in most cases) it’s because they’ve never been told the truth.

They’re also scared. I know—when you meet them they seem anything but scared. They’re outspoken, competent, on their own, getting things done, perhaps very successful in whatever career they’ve chosen. They’re usually very busy, and you get the sense that they probably don’t have much time for a man in their life.

But I’ve talked with them. Most of them, deep down, have learned not to trust anyone but themselves. They tried trusting someone, certainly, but that may have been when they were only three years old, and then the daddy they loved disappeared. Or it could have been a boyfriend in high school that turned out to say things he never meant. Or sometimes they’ve just watched too much of the brokenness, and made up their minds never to let it touch them.

To break through that fear, and that self-protective shield, will take more than your clever words, your charming smile, or even your good intentions. We’ll be discussing this more at length in chapter eleven.

But it should be clear by now that you have a major challenge on your hands. Dragons on every side, and even on the inside. Most guys are dropping out of the fight. But I’m praying (and to be

honest, a lot of those young women are also praying) that at least a few of you will rise up to do battle, for their sake, for your sake, for our society's sake—but most of all for the glory of God. The world needs to be reminded that God is glorious, and there is a way in which men can demonstrate His glory more effectively than any other being in creation.

## 10 - What Should I Be Looking For?

While it's possible that you may be staring at a completely blank wall with regard to women, the chances are actually pretty high that you already have a certain girl in mind. Perhaps she's available, perhaps she isn't. Perhaps you're already dating her. Perhaps you used to date her, and something fell apart. Perhaps the two of you have never even officially met.

Assuming there is a Miss Prospect in the picture, let's consider what you know about her. She has inevitably attracted your attention somehow. Was it how she looks? Was it her energy, her enthusiasm for life, her gentleness, her kindness? Was it something she said? Was it her cleverness, her sense of humor? Was it her obvious commitment to God? Was it her dedication to her work, maybe in a field that matches your own area of calling?

Was it how she responds to you?

While I'm not trying to take all the fun—and all the mystery—out of romance, I believe it's wise to be a little cautious about the powers that are being wielded. If I might speak to you for a moment as a mother to a son, here's something I know to be true.

*Your choice of a wife is even more important than your choice of career. Your future identity will forever be impacted by who she is. She will enhance or limit everything of significance you do. She'll play a major role in determining the physical, emotional and spiritual health of your children. When times get hard, and they could get very hard, she'll either help you through or drag you down.*

I realize none of us can see accurately into our own future, much less that of someone else. But I would strongly encourage you to think through the things you DO know about any woman you consider to be a wife candidate in light of future possibilities. (To say it another way, the day will come when the most significant thing will *not* be the highlights in her hair or the moves she makes on the dance floor.)

By far the most important factor for anyone who is deciding whom to marry (besides, of course, choosing someone of the opposite sex who is not *already* married) is the nature of their relationship with God. The scriptures warn against "unequal yoking," which means joining ourselves (in this case permanently) to someone who does not have the nature of Christ alive in their spirit.

Here's the way Paul expressed it, in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'

If we have truly submitted our own lives, and thus our decisions, to the Lordship of Jesus, then it is easy to understand why a marriage of spiritual "unequals" would be a disaster. However, I should caution you that authentic spiritual life in another person is sometimes hard to discern. Consider these two scenarios.

Aggie has been a believer since she was very young. She prayed to receive Christ in a Sunday School class and has always lived a clean lifestyle. She knows her Bible verses very well, and sings on her church's praise team.

Maggie, on the other hand, was raised in a single-parent home and has struggled through life. She came to know Jesus in college after a student handed her a book that talked about the truth of God's

love. She is still uncomfortable with church, partly because she knows they don't approve of some of her habits she hasn't been able to break.

The question you must ask, if you happen to be interested in dating one of these young women, is not so much *where* she seems to be spiritually as it is *which way* is she heading? Even though Aggie knows the Christian walk-and-talk in her head, it is possible she may not actually have it in her heart. Maggie on the other hand is just learning and has a long way to go, but her desire to please God (even when she can't exactly please the church) may be very real.

I'm going to suggest four places where you can begin to evaluate the authenticity of a woman's faith.

1. *She should be getting to know God better.* She should definitely have an interest in some kind of Bible instruction, either through her own reading or through the teachings of others. Also watch to see how she responds to truth that is new to her. Is she willing to change, even if it's hard, or does she dig in her heels and resist?

2. *She should be open to increasing her femininity.* It's quite likely she has been raised in a world that has handed her a very wrong perspective on womanhood. If she resists becoming feminine, is it simply because of what she's been taught, or is there something stubborn inside her that finds it distasteful?

3. *She should be able (or at least learning) to respond properly to authority.* This is an extension of the above point. Does she seem willing to follow the existing leadership in her life (including that of her father if he's around) not only where she sees authentic spiritual strength and masculinity, but even with less than perfect leaders—because of her trust in God?

4. *When you're with her, you should find yourself becoming more of the man God has called you to be.* Another way to say this is, does she seem attracted to and appreciative of the true and good parts of you (rather than something counterfeit or artificial)? As you increasingly devote yourself to God and His ways, does this appear to bring her greater security and joy?

Once you are satisfied that this woman is your sister-in-Christ, then of course you should consider other aspects of who she is, especially those places where you can see that God has crafted her to be the right helper for you in the callings He has given you.

This brings up another matter. Some young men, and young women as well, are reluctant to marry until they can somehow be absolutely convinced that a certain individual is the precise person whom God has selected for them. They've been taught that she or he is out there somewhere, and they expect to receive some kind of divine witness when this woman or man finally shows up in their lives.

Looking at scripture, I think we will find mixed support for this idea. In some cases it seems that God was directly involved in the choice of a spouse. For example, when Abraham sent his servant to look for a wife for his son Isaac, the servant asked God to give him a specific sign to confirm the woman God had chosen. God did just as the servant asked (the story is in Genesis 24). Another instance of divine intervention took place in the life of Ruth, when God led her to glean grain in the field of Naomi's kinsman Boaz (Ruth 2).

However, consider the situation with David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). That was a case of everything done wrong! Certainly this was a wife who was chosen outside of God's will. Yet after David's authentic repentance, God so honored their marriage that their son Solomon eventually inherited his father's throne and became a part of the lineage of Jesus.

What we need to have, I think, is the ability to avoid either of two extremes. On the one hand, we dare not assume we have total freedom to marry anyone we choose, even any Christian we choose, without some input from God. As with any major life decision, we should expect to spend time in prayer, carefully seeking wisdom and the assurance that our decision does not go *against* God's will.

This process should also include counsel from other believers who love us. They can often see more clearly than we do the true nature of this person who has captured our heart. Then there is the fact that God chooses to direct the life of a single woman through the primary authority in her life, which is her father. To disregard the honor due that man (or another male relative if her father is not alive) is to reject the clear pattern of scripture.

But there is no reason to wait, as some seem to do, for handwriting on the wall or a voice from the clouds. This isn't to say that there aren't many, many stories of God supernaturally confirming to a couple that their marriage was specifically His will. What we must not do is use these stories to keep us forever in a waiting mode.

By the way, some of you who are reading this book may already be married. Perhaps you're wishing you had heard about all this earlier in your life, so you might have avoided the wrong choices you've made. I'd like to say something to you for a moment.

God specializes in making marriages work. Any marriage. Males and females are specifically designed to live in harmony with each other. Even though we're fallen, and even when the brokenness has done a lot of damage, our innate compatibility has not been completely lost.

If you and your spouse are both believers, God's grace is especially available to you to fight the brokenness together. We'll talk more about how good marriages work in chapter twelve. But if for some reason you are presently yoked with a person who does not know God, God still desires to make something beautiful of your life even through the pain.

If we only look at the wreckage we will inevitably become discouraged. If we, by the sheer force of our wills, look instead toward God, there will come not only a comfort, but also the courage to believe that He is able to bring beauty out of ashes, as He promised in Isaiah 61:3. The more we learn to trust His words, instead of what our eyes and our minds and even our hearts might tell us, the greater that beauty can become.

The world (and our Enemy who influences it) has convinced us that life should focus on ourselves. We must maximize our happiness. Even our service to others so often is little more than a way of making ourselves feel better, or at least less guilty.

But when the haze of this life is cleared from our eyes, we will understand that the only things which have real and eternal value are those things (and those words and those actions) which have brought about a greater expansion of the perfect kingdom of God.

So in your less-than-perfect marriage (or in your singlehood), while there can be much that makes you suffer personally, you must realize that God sees the pain as a precious opportunity to draw you closer to Himself, to show you His comforting love and miraculous power, and to make you more like His Son Jesus.

But how much better it is when two authentic believers are able to find one another, commit their lives to one another, and join together to accomplish those things God has prepared for them to do. You see, even when God does rebuild a relationship that was born of foolish decisions, it is rarely as effective as it would have been had the couple followed His ways from the beginning.

The final point I'd like to make concerning your search for your wife is that you may be running into problems as a result of your List. You know, the "I Must Have" and the "I Will

Never” set of terms you bring to your prayer-times with God. One thing I’ve learned about God is that He definitely prefers to set the rules and boundaries in any negotiations.

The first things that should probably come up for reconsideration are those items that describe what your ideal wife needs to look like, such as hair color, eye color, height, and weight. Yes, weight. Maybe your issue all along is that you don’t trust God to give you the ability to love someone who doesn’t match all the perfections of those women you’ve “met” at the beach—or on your computer screen.

If you’ve read chapter seven of this book, you know I’m aware that beauty is, and should be, very important to a man. But there are so many different components of a woman’s beauty, and also so many ways that superficial beauty can be deceptive, that it’s far better to trust God with that important aspect of who your wife will be.

After all, He doesn’t hate you. As a matter of fact, He loves you more than you love yourself. He also understands your masculine desires, both the ones He approves of and the ones He knows could damage your marriage. Spend some time being honest with Him, and with yourself. See if you can reach the place where you can let go of what you think you want, and trust Him even with something as personal as your sexual fulfillment.

There may be a number of other things on that List that really need to be prayed through as well. Do you have preferences regarding her tastes, her lifestyle, her goals, her background, or her personality?

I’m not actually saying you should throw everything out and marry the first Christian female who will have you. There are some kinds of incompatibilities that are truly significant. For example, if God has clearly called you to foreign missions, He probably does not intend for you to marry a woman who is physically unable to travel anywhere. If you have a compelling conviction that you’re to work in the inner city, you should be cautious if the woman you’re dating desires more than anything to raise a large family on a mountain homestead.

There are also cultural differences, or perhaps denominational differences, that need to be evaluated realistically with regard to the challenges they can bring. These are the times when it is so important to seek God’s wisdom and the counsel of people you trust. But we should never set the standard for evaluation as being that which is easiest or most comfortable. Remember, in spite of what the world endlessly tells us, marriage isn’t really about us. It’s about Him.

God gave Adam a wife because Adam had some assignments he could never accomplish on his own. You have essentially the same assignments—to work your garden, to father and raise a family, to subdue the unruly parts of this earth as God directs. And like Adam, you can’t do these things alone. You need a wife, perhaps more than you’ve even realized.

But as you learn to view your search through God’s eyes, and begin to walk according to His principles, you will find that He is able to provide you with the wisdom—and the courage—to seek out, to court, and (I pray) to win a truly wonderful woman to be your lover, your lifetime companion, and your co-worker in the kingdom.

## 11 - How Can I Win a Woman's Heart?

The young men I meet fall into three general categories. First there are those guys who (it appears) decide one day that they want to be married, go out and find themselves a fine young woman, and simply get married. They make it look easy.

Then there are those men who have decided they just don't want to be married, certainly at least not yet. Hopefully after they read this book there will be a lot fewer of them!

But there are far too many men who truly do want to be married, but who are having all kinds of trouble getting there. This is what is so mystifying to people in my generation. Here you have women who are longing to be married and men who want the same thing. They hang out together, they talk and text non-stop, they even have access to a whole world of singles through the magic of internet dating—and they're still, rather miserably, single. Whatever is the matter?

As you read earlier, I truly do not believe this helplessness started with you. It was our generation who taught young women to be independent, and encouraged the young men to back off and let them do anything they wanted to. Even in the church, it seemed like such a good thing for everyone to benefit fully from the talents and energies women could contribute. Nearly everyone in society, to some extent, thinks our culture has made some very important improvements when it comes to treating the sexes equally.

Very few people seem to have given much thought to what these shifts have cost us. But as I see it, young singles are among those who are paying most dearly for our decision to meddle with God's original plan. It may not appear to be all that serious an issue to you now, while you're young and making it okay—but the time will come when you realize that not only have you gone through life pretty much alone, you also don't have any children.

In the brokenness of our world, not having kids might not seem so bad. You certainly know enough horror stories of the pain parents go through with their kids (and for that matter, kids go through with their parents) that having children may seem like a wise thing to avoid.

But at the end of life, there is something that makes a lot of those tough relationships work themselves out. Almost without exception, people who have “made it” in the worlds of wealth or fame or whatever else was so important for so long, end up turning to their children and grandchildren for an assurance that their life has really mattered.

The bottom line is this: God has designed families in such a way that we are NOT free to move the pieces around any way we choose. Men are created to marry women, together they are designed to bear and raise children, and then the children are eventually supposed to care for their aging parents (at the same time bringing grandchildren for them to mentor and enjoy). We honestly don't need to come up with a better plan—we just need to fix the one we have!

With that in mind, let's get back to this business of how you can win the heart of a woman. While this section of the book is being addressed to the men, I'm pretty confident that you women are still reading as well. I truly hope so anyway. Because, you see, for a successful courtship to take place it's really best if BOTH of you are participating in the right way.

When I describe masculinity as strong and femininity as soft, that is actually only a partial way of explaining what they are. Masculinity and femininity must be understood to exist *specifically in relationship to each other*. In other words,

    Masculinity is the way a man behaves in the presence of femininity.

    Femininity is the way a woman behaves in the presence of masculinity.

It is so very important that you understand this. You see, with all the excitement about how women are finally being treated as equal to men, we've become quite resistant to admitting that God actually intended us to be “unequal” in certain very specific ways.

The dilemma isn't as difficult as we've been led to believe. What has happened is that we have been told to equate our *value as humans* with the *value of what we do*. This is a faulty assumption. An apple and an orange are both equally fruit, and they may be priced exactly the same at the store. But if we take the orange, slice it up, and put it into a pie, we'll be pretty disappointed with our dessert.

Men and women are equally valuable as human beings, and equally qualified to receive God's grace. But we're made differently, and we have different tasks assigned to us. More importantly, God has arranged it so that we do our assignments best when we team up with the opposite sex, as two teammates who do two different but interrelated things. After all, a quarterback is much more effective working with a wide receiver than he is with another quarterback. If you're pitching a baseball game, you probably won't do your best if you're facing another pitcher behind the plate.

If God designed us to work as a team when we're married, with our roles fitting together to accomplish things neither of us could do alone, then it should not be surprising that courtship is most effective when it operates on the same pattern.

While there may be other role combinations that can characterize healthy masculine/feminine interactions, I believe these four are especially important:

Initiator	Responder
Protector	Truster
Provider	Enjoyer, appreciator
Leader	Follower, helper

Even though these patterns of relating do not reach their full potential until after marriage, they should certainly influence the attitudes and actions of any man or woman who is considering (or preparing for) marriage. So for those of you men who would win a woman's heart, your success will definitely be affected by your determination to become as masculine as possible in these four ways.

For example, one of the first things a woman should discover when she is with you is that you desire to protect her. You need to understand that just because something doesn't frighten you, it still may unsettle her. A car that sounds like it's about to break down, walking through the wrong part of town, getting caught on the lake with a storm approaching—things that might be adventures to you may not look the same to her. If you can be calm and competent and caring in these situations, it will definitely leave a good impression.

I realize there are some women these days who seem to be geared for adventure, who appear to have even more courage than you do. While that may mean you can stay out on that lake a little longer, nonetheless God has given *you* the responsibility for protecting *her*. If you begin to treat her like one of the guys, or worse, if you let her protect you, you'll be depriving both of you of the opportunity for her softness (which may have been buried through years of wrong cultural training) to come to the surface.

But along with protection from outside threats, a woman also needs to feel safe from the threatening aspects of *you*. While she instinctively wants to trust you, that trust can so quickly be broken down by your anger, your lust, your rudeness, your dishonesty, or your carelessness.

Maybe I should say one thing more bluntly. *Sexual pressure from you is a sign of your weakness, not your strength*. She's not unaware of your sexual desires, but she will find security in knowing you have the strength to rule them. (That said, your challenge may also include being able to resist sexual pressure from *her*. Sadly, the brokenness these days can come from all sides.)

Next let's think about you-the-provider. Again our modern world has complicated things by making full-time wage-earners out of both men and women. While the goal you should be seeking is for you, the man, to become established as at least the primary (if not sole) family provider and as bearing the weight of the financial decisions, this is rarely an easy thing to accomplish.

Modern women have been taught (sometimes by true necessity) to find their security through being self-supporting and by making their own decisions. The transition into God's plan for the family is not something that will happen quickly. Women only let go of one source of security when they believe there's something solid to replace it. Thus during your courtship days, you should authentically demonstrate to her your ability to earn money, to budget carefully, and to live somewhere between excessive generosity and excessive frugality.

This connects with your third role, that of leader. The most fundamental component of leadership is the ability to make careful but confident decisions—and then to stick with them. To be sure, you should be paying close attention to her wisdom and input, especially in those decisions that directly affect her. Occasionally your decision can even be to let *her* make some of the decisions. But responsibility for the choices she makes will ultimately rest on your shoulders, especially after you are married.

Leadership also requires that you be headed somewhere, that you see life as something more than a playground. As a young man, you may not know exactly what you intend to do professionally, but the woman you date will be watching to see if you are learning as much as you can about real-life things, if you're willing to work long hard hours, and if you aren't afraid to try something challenging. Don't forget, she desires to marry someone she can follow and assist, which can't happen with a man who's sitting still and doing nothing.

Finally, godly leadership requires humility—what scripture calls meekness (Matthew 11:29 KJV). It's a word that has nothing to do with shame or fear or weakness. It shows itself in situations where you are wrongly accused and don't feel compelled to defend yourself, or where you do something generous or heroic and nobody notices and that's okay, or where you have a right to something and you let it go without complaining.

This kind of leadership only really happens when you are truly under submission to the ultimate Leader. The one thing you don't want to have happen after you're married is for your wife to make you her god. She and you both need to know that your strength and your authority come from being under His authority (see Luke 7:8,9). Her greatest security, and the greatest security of your children, will come when they know you are able to hear and willing to obey God.

I've saved you-as-initiator for last, for this is, I think, the key to answering the question of how to pursue. In the final count, a woman is won by love. You see, it's not enough to parade before her as a perfect leader and provider and protector. Will that attract her? It certainly should. But if things are done right, courtship is a matter of your choice and her response—not the other way around.

So it's up to you, Mr. Godly Man, to initiate the actual relationship. First John 4:19 tells us that "We love Him because He first loved us." That is your model, and it's also the source of the love you need to give her. She'll need to hear that you love her *because of* her beauty or grace or wisdom or kindness. She wants to be appreciated as a woman. She wants to know you value the things she has to offer.

But at a deeper level she'll need to know you also love her *in spite of* her failings or inadequacies. That's the other side of those vows, "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health." She desires from you the same security you have found in Christ, who loved and bought you when you had nothing the least bit lovable to offer Him.

This is one of the primary reasons why dating should never be seen as an end in itself. God never intended for us to play with love. Love is His precious treasure—in fact, it's His very nature. While there are many kinds of loves we can all experience, there is a very special love reserved for a man and woman in marriage. Some of this love spills into the courtship season, but this should entice us to move toward marriage itself, rather than tempting us to dawdle around in an irresponsible stage of never-quite-growing-up.

Young people today speak of having “DTR” talks (defining the relationship). If you can tell that you and a young woman are becoming more than mere friends, there had better be an understanding that you also consider each other to be potential marriage partners. That doesn’t mean you’re engaged. What it means is that you care enough about each other not to continue in what is truly a dead-end relationship.

I want to make a final comment with regard to your masculinity. You need to know that one of the characteristics that will most attract the kind of woman you should be looking for is spiritual courage. In a world of weakened and self-focused men, a young man who understands and accepts the call of God on his life will demonstrate it by his calm ability to stand true to the principles of scripture and to the challenges of living as an authentic Christian in a very ungodly world.

He will also see himself very clearly as a man on assignment. Here’s the list I put in my Letter of places where men need to step out, fearlessly and selflessly.

- Protecting the weak
- Providing for the needy
- Opposing injustice
- Giving leadership and direction when things are in turmoil
- Clarifying truth in a confused and deceived world

I would add to this the desperate need our world has for fathers. We need men not only to be strong fathers in their own families, but also to act in a father role to the countless boys who have never experienced God’s masculinity in human form. Just as God challenged Job (in Job 38:3 and 49:7) to “brace himself like a man,” so godly older men today need to “call out” the young men, drawing them into the adult male world they instinctively long to be part of.

You see, manhood is only fully shaped in relationship with other strong men. This relationship includes teaching, competing, challenging, sometimes correcting, sometimes “atta-boying”—but above all modeling God’s personality in the nitty-gritties of life. When the only manhood a boy has known is harsh or irresponsible, he will never be able to understand (much less live out) the kind of masculinity that truly attracts and completes authentic femininity.

But if you as a young man before God can accept His challenge to brace yourself courageously to be and do whatever your Master commands, then one day you too will be strong enough to call other young men into godly manhood. Moreover, as you step boldly into those specific arenas to which you have been assigned, it becomes God’s responsibility to fully equip you for battle—including bringing into your life the right young woman, your “suitable helper,” just as He did for Adam so many years ago.

## 12 - How Can I Avoid a Bad Marriage?

Unfortunately, this question is far more necessary these days than we might wish. But before we begin to consider God's perspective, let's look at a few of the answers we've been offered by our culture.

The first way to avoid a bad marriage, we are told, is not to be married at all. Better to be safe than sorry. The second solution we're usually given is to be very, VERY careful to marry exactly the right person. We're also told that if we miss on the first try, we're entitled to scrap that one and try again. Or, we're advised to "test drive" a relationship by pretending to be married, before buying into anything long term.

Most Christians can see through this bad advice and realize that dishonoring God is precisely the wrong way to build a good marriage. But that doesn't mean most of us really understand what it *does* take to make marriage work as God intends.

I'm going to make a statement now which will probably surprise you. *I believe God has placed the ultimate success of a marriage almost entirely on the shoulders of the husband.* To the degree you have been given authority, you also carry responsibility for the wellbeing of both your wife and your children. While there is definitely a place where each of us is accountable directly to God for our personal spiritual health, in most other matters the Bible seems to indicate that the husband and father will answer for the way his family turns out.

This is good news and bad news for you men. If I'm right, then the good news is that you have far more power available from God than you probably realize to truly form a strong family. The tough news is that God expects you to find and use this power, and that He will not be pleased with less than your complete commitment to that task.

Let's look at some of the support I have found for this idea in scripture, beginning with the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Even though Eve ate the fruit first, it was only after Adam ate that their eyes were opened to good and evil. When God came looking for them after they had sinned, His call was only to Adam: "Adam, where are you?" When Adam passed the blame on to Eve God did not scold her, although she did receive a curse. Rather, He identified Adam as being responsible for the fall, a judgment that is echoed in the New Testament (see Romans 5:14, 1 Corinthians 15:22).

What's more, God specifically cursed Adam for "heeding the voice of his wife" before he ate of the fruit (Genesis 3:17). The word "heed" is not simply listening—it includes obedience as well. Paul tells us that unlike Eve, Adam was not deceived by the words of the serpent (1 Timothy 2:14), but made the decision to follow his wife's instruction to eat the fruit instead of obeying God.

This is not to say that a man should never listen to his wife. In fact, there are a number of instances in scripture where God chose to reveal things to a wife that He didn't reveal to the husband (for example, Pilate's wife in Matthew 27:19, or Samson's mother in Judges 13). But after he hears what his wife tells him, God holds the husband responsible for what he does with her counsel. He must determine God's will, taking into account the wisdom or insight his wife has offered him.

Two other scriptures that especially confirm the high authority carried by husbands and fathers are Paul's lists of qualifications for church leadership. In each case God judges the man's character by the character of his family, which would only be appropriate if the man actually held the power to mold their behaviors.

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in

submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?). (1 Timothy 3:2-5)

But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. (1 Timothy 3:10-13)

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you—if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. (Titus 1:5,6)

[I realize some people have suggested that “wives” in the deacon passage should actually be translated “women,” referring to female deacons. It would however be more characteristic of Paul to give an instruction to women following his instruction to men, as he does in Titus 2, rather than awkwardly interjecting it between two sentences that obviously apply to the men. But even if this sentence doesn’t refer to the deacon’s wife, she is nonetheless part of the “house” which he must rule well. It is also quite doubtful that any man’s children would be “submissive with all reverence” if their mother was out of control.]

You may have noticed that few if any church leaders ever fully reach this level of perfection. But unlike our modern tendency, the Bible doesn’t compromise its standards because they are difficult. In the same way, while your marriage will probably never be “blameless” either, having a point of reference to work toward is *much* better than wandering around without any clear idea of what is right.

I truly wish I could tell you that stepping into strong leadership comes automatically when you say, “I do”—but it doesn’t. There are two problems: you, and her.

Since I don’t know the exact wife you’ll be dealing with, I’m going to make some generalizations that may or may not apply in your situation. But the chances are pretty high that your wife-to-be will have been unconsciously shaped by feminism to at least some degree.

One of feminism’s most damaging effects is the pervasive cultural image we have been given of warrior women. They’re the tough corporate leaders in the movies, the smart detectives on the TV crime shows, and the fearless killers in your video games. You might even know some of these women personally in real life.

But consider this. In spite of Hollywood and Final Fantasy, the vast majority of us women are not really cut out for this kind of intensity. We might be permitted to join the fire department or Nascar or the Marines, but that doesn’t mean we’ll do well, at least not most of us. What in fact it means is that women are being enticed (and soon it may even be mandatory) to become like men. And to be honest, we’ll never be as good at being men as the men themselves are.

In other words, we’ve been tricked into joining a game we’re almost certain to lose. At the same time, we’ve had stolen from us those places of opportunity and identity in which we are actually very likely to be successful. When (back in the 60’s) our culture began to think of motherhood and homemaking as menial and unworthy, it turned directly against God’s perspective—and the view of almost all of history. But you may have noticed an interesting trend in recent years. Whenever those women who have been career-persons (because that’s what they were told they had to be) eventually return to their feminine callings, most of them are amazed at how right this new identity feels.

Which means, dear friend, that you can side-step much of the anguish if you (as a man) actually approach marriage with the idea that your wife will be most free, most productive, and most content in a home-centered environment. If for a few years she stays in the workplace until she has children,

then she should be encouraged to find a context where she's not doing what men do, but rather is using her abilities to do feminine things in feminine ways.

Even when she comes home, however, there will be other challenges with regard to your leadership. You see, she may also have been taught by her world that she should expect to have an equal vote in the marriage (especially if she is contributing to the family finances). But as with any group of two, that never really works. Sooner or later, someone has to decide who will decide. So either a third party (like God) decrees one person to be the decider, or else the two parties have to compete for that right.

The problem with that second option is that there is no real honor for a man when he competes with a woman. If he wins he loses, and if he loses he loses. After a few rounds, the husband far too often backs out of the arena and the family leadership position defaults to the wife. After all, there's a very good chance he grew up watching his mother be in charge. Turning the leadership over to his wife feels pretty normal, and a whole lot less of a hassle.

While it is definitely a challenge to do battle with these and other cultural lies that feminism has promoted, I will let you in on a little-known but very important secret. *The key to evaluating the success of a marriage is not the happiness of either the husband or the wife.* Rather, God judges our marriages by their conformity to His standards, including His design for masculinity and femininity. As Christ taught, we are to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33-34).

In other words, God truly desires a husband and wife to be deeply, gladly in love. But that kind of health comes to the extent that we are conformed to His image and submitted to His purposes. If we put our own joy before His, we will ultimately end up with neither.

While there are many aspects of our spiritual growth that contribute to our pleasing God, the one I'm focusing on is our willingness to fully embrace our masculinity and femininity. The good news is that these two characteristics are mutually reinforcing. In other words, the more masculine you become (in an authentic, godly way), the more feminine your wife will become as well.

It is vital however that the masculinity you seek is what God intends. There are a couple of popular perspectives on masculinity which I personally believe have built-in flaws. The first is the idea that a husband is to be a "servant leader." It is promoted, I suspect, because people perceive leadership to normally be self-serving, and they want to think of leadership as serving those who are being led. The problem lies in the use of the word "servant." In a real sense, "servant" and "leader" can be seen to be opposites. A servant takes orders from the master, not the other way around.

The example often pointed to in scripture is that of Christ washing the feet of His disciples (see John 13:3-17). It is true that He took on the role of a servant, humbling Himself to meet a basic need of the men who were His followers. However, we should notice that these men never asked Jesus to serve them (in fact Peter was quite resistant). As their leader, Christ understood that they needed to see humility modeled. But it was His decision, His initiative. Jesus never took orders from anyone but His Father.

Thus when we set our individual happiness, or even our mutual happiness, as our goal, it becomes altogether too easy for a husband to unconsciously become a servant to his wife's wishes, rather than focusing on the wishes of the Lord he truly serves. The service God most requires of a man in marriage is that he lead his wife and children into truth and holiness, which sometimes (well, in fact usually) will require some distinct unhappiness, since for all of us our flesh dies hard.

A second teaching on masculinity which has become quite prevalent encourages men to look within themselves for the things they most desire, and then to work to actualize these deeply felt longings. At one level this can be helpful, for it brings men to understand some very real aspects of

their manhood, things that are definite keys to understanding how God has created them. It also can draw them out of the haze of their childhood and their passivity.

The problems arise when these longings are given power to rule our energies and our choices. You see, both men and women instinctively grasp for at least some of what God designed us to become in our sexual natures. Men want to be saviors and women want to be rescued, men want to win a beautiful woman and women want to be sought for their beauty, and so forth.

However, what would seem like an easy-to-arrange solution usually collapses on itself. Why? Because this self-seeking focus can easily translate into the expectation that our spouse should fulfill our desires—which eventually produces a resentful disappointment when things go otherwise (and they will).

You see, no man is strong enough—in himself—to satisfy the deep need for security within a woman. No woman is beautiful enough, or responsive enough, to satisfy a man’s need for significance and honor. Again, when our happiness becomes the agenda, we miss God’s better way.

Almost without exception, the marriage books I have read and the seminars I have attended define God’s part as being our Healer and the Solver of our problems—as though *He* is standing by to help *us*. But suppose we turn things around, and begin to see ourselves as being designed to help Him. I’m not implying that God is needy, or that He lacks power in some way. Rather, from the very beginning God has given us the privilege of participating in the care of His creation. In other words, He is the Master Creator who calls us to be His willing and enthusiastic assistants.

Is that beginning to sound familiar? Exactly! We are to be His “suitable helpers,” just as Eve was created to join with Adam in his work. God initiates, we respond. In the process, God protects and provides for us, and we flourish under His loving care. As we grow in the beauties of our human potential, becoming conformed to the image of Christ, God is both pleased and glorified.

While this process can definitely take place within each of us as individuals, I also believe God desires married couples (as a team) to play a unique role. Specifically, marriages are designed to model the God/human relationship in a way that nothing else can. Think how well our Enemy understands this. No wonder he is doing everything in his power to demolish marriages—even before they are formed.

So back to our original question, “How can I avoid a bad marriage?” You, the man, are the “God character” in the model. You hold the power, the responsibility, the accountability. You must do your best to seek out a woman who understands your assignment and who realizes she has an opportunity to serve God by supporting you.

However, she will not be the *source* of your spiritual strength. What she will become is the *reflection* of your strength—or lack of it. The model will stand, or it will fall apart, based entirely on your ability to draw strength from God and to pass it on to her. You are her head, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:3, just as Christ is your head and the Father is His.

Your marriage will therefore be the result of your day-to-day choices concerning what you put into your spirit. To the extent you feed your spirit with the empty calories of worldly pleasures and entertainments—or worse, if you allow the poisons of immoral thoughts and images to enter your mind and heart—you will not remain strong enough to accomplish what God has called you to be and to do. While your wife can still draw strength directly from God (for we are all individuals in our relationship with Him), your marriage itself will never become what God desires, and eventually it will be emptied of all that you desire as well.

But if you can learn to stand against all the forces of our Enemy that yet reside in yourself, in the woman who will be (or is) your wife, and in the world where you live, then God will use you—along with other men who have also embraced these truths—to bring the reality of masculinity back into view for the multitudes of men who really have no idea what it looks like.

# THE GRAND DESIGN

## 13 - Why Did God Make Us So Different?

You may not have thought about this before, but there are different kinds of differences.

Some differences are based on things that exist as compared to their absence. Light exists and darkness is its absence. Heat exists and cold is its absence. Health is the standard, and sickness is its absence.

Then there are differences of degree. A certain tree may be short next to one tree and tall next to another. They're all trees. They may all be exactly the same kind of tree. They have the same substance, but different degrees of height. Differences of degree only happen through comparisons of similar things.

Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created all humans in His image, but that He also created them male and female. Men and women have the same substance, the same humanness, and the same God-likeness—but they have different sexual identities.

It is important to realize that maleness is not the absence of femaleness. Nor can a person be male next to one person and female next to another. We are each assigned our sex at conception. There is no such thing as a sexless person. In that rare instance when a person is born with distorted genitals, we view that as a deformity, not as a new kind of creation, and we choose to raise the child either as a boy or as a girl.

While our male or female identities are a permanent part of every cell in our beings, our masculinity or femininity is another matter. Some men are more masculine “by nature” than others. Also, even though there is much within a man that inclines him to be masculine, it's not guaranteed to stay put. We each have the option of gladly receiving our sexual identity and allowing our inborn masculinity or femininity to flourish, or we can resist it—often these days with the urgent promptings of our culture to do so.

Over the course of this book I have described masculinity and femininity in various ways. I first talked about the activities men do: they are builders, challengers, seekers of truth, heroes. I also talked about their attributes: their persistence, their courage, their love of adventure. I summed up these in the word “strength.” Women are creators of beauty, comforters, nurturers, joy-bringers. They are sensitive, intuitive, encouraging. I summed up their nature as “soft.”

But I also pointed out the interactive roles of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity initiates, femininity responds. Masculinity leads, femininity supports. Masculinity protects, femininity thrives in this safety and returns gratitude and adoration. These pairs of activity can be described by the word *complementary*. It's a word that means “mutually supplying each other's lacking.”

Consider, for example, a bow and arrow. In one sense, both are complete objects in themselves. But when we understand that their highest purpose is to become a weapon, then there is a real sense in which each of them is incomplete without the other. While a bow without an arrow could be used as a club, or an arrow by itself might be used as a spear, anyone who has seen an archer in action knows that these items are most deadly when they are used together as they were designed to be used, with each contributing its unique part to the assault.

When I compare this image to a marriage, it is possible to see either the man or the woman as the bow, and either one as the arrow. A woman can be the strong encourager, grateful receiver, and responsive lover that allows a man to step into the world confident in his manhood and motivated to do what is required both for the good of his family and for the benefit of God's kingdom. A man can

be the wise leader, careful protector, and consistent cherisher, creating a place of safety that allows his wife to become what she was created to be, which is peacefully beautiful and joyfully nourishing to her family and to others God brings into her life.

What does NOT work is for the bow to try to be an arrow, or the arrow to try to do the work of a bow. A man who becomes feminine in relationship to a woman weakens both of them, and removes their ability to join together to do what God has created them to do. Paul describes this process of complementarity using another image.

For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? (1 Corinthians 12:14-19)

In addition to being essential for true functionality, differences are also inherently a part of authentic beauty. A photo of nothing but green trees may be interesting enough, but it will not catch the eye like a photo which also contains a shimmering sky and bright crimson flowers. A trumpet solo may be impressive, but it is never as majestic alone as when it shares the stage with a complete symphony orchestra.

It seems to me we’ve been handed a lie. We have been told that we are being cheated unless we are free to play all the parts in the orchestra. In fact, we’re led to believe that unless we have a lead part, we will never be worth as much, or fulfilled as much, as those to whom the leads are given.

What we don’t think about is that unless the symphony is performed as it was written, the whole context in which we are participating loses its value. For in fact every orchestra needs some members who will play the dramatic flourishes and others who will play the steady rhythm notes. The beauty of the symphony rises out of the many differing notes and patterns and instrumental sounds merging together according to the plan of the composer.

When we decide instead that we are free to write our own solos and play our own notes and beats in whatever fashion we might be inclined, we are essentially saying that we believe no symphony has actually been written. If we’re truly on our own, then it’s up to us to decide how our instruments should be tuned and played. We’re free to switch parts, to drown out someone else’s part, or to stop playing altogether. We may even try to convince ourselves that the resulting chaos is actually beautiful.

But as believers in Christ, we know that a majestic symphony *has* been written, and all of us are designed to be players in it. When we humbly and willingly play the notes He gives us, as skillfully and accurately as we can, the beauty and brilliance of His composition will be revealed through us. Built into this composition, which I choose to call the Grand Design, are God’s intentions when He created us male and female.

Because our sexual identity permeates every fiber of our bodies, being a man or woman is not something we get to choose. Our masculinity or femininity is however another matter. Our Enemy has not only worked very hard to confuse us about what these qualities actually look like, he has also done everything he can to make us dissatisfied with our gender assignments. What has resulted are weak, effeminate men and hardened, controlling women. This part of the symphony has degenerated into dissonant noise.

Can we ever recover the beauty? I believe we can—at least in your life and in mine. There are two parts to the recovery process. One is to become as masculine or feminine as we ourselves can; the other is to step away from those things that aren't ours to do, so the other sex can more easily move into their roles.

While we've been talking throughout this book about how these changes can be accomplished, I'd like to mention a few more components of the process. In each case, the goal will be to accentuate the differences between men and women to enhance both the functionality and the beauty God has intended these differences to display.

One of the first places where we might make some adjustments is in our appearance. If we compare our society to other cultures throughout history, we will see that we have abandoned the clearly distinguishable styles of clothing for men and for women that most of them considered highly important. As women in our culture began to take on men's jobs, they also began to wear slacks and suit coats and other men's attire, as though to solidify their place in the world of men.

In time, of course, these choices lost their element of rebellion against the old order and began to be considered simply women's clothing. But perhaps we should now ponder our need to rebel in the other direction, moving away from our unisex culture. If so, then one expression of that rebellion for some of us women might be to consciously return to more distinctly feminine clothing styles.

While most men have not shown much interest in wearing women's garments, they have nonetheless wandered into our territory with regard to hairstyles, jewelry, and even beauty treatments. This reverses the process of who is to attract whom with their beauty—not to mention that it distracts a man from his proper masculine priorities.

We've already talked in chapter five about the shift that is needed with regard to who is to do the initiating in dating and courtship. But there are other man/woman interactions that take place throughout life, which used to be described as "chivalry" or simply "manners." When in earlier times a man held the door for a woman, or helped her put on her coat, or gave her his seat on the bus, it was not designed to be interpreted as an insult to her strength or abilities. Rather it was a gesture of honor, a recognition of the value of both her femininity and his masculinity.

We see this pattern also in the older dances, where the man began with a bow and the woman began with a curtsy. Even today in ballroom dancing, the man is the leader and the woman gracefully follows. Is it any accident that so many modern dances remove the roles, and men and women perform the various gyrations in generally identical fashion?

We need to consciously think about ways that womanhood and manhood can be brought back into our habits and lifestyles. For example, some of us might need to make some changes in our speaking habits. Coarse talk is never appropriate for women, nor for men in the presence of women.

Sometimes it's just a matter of honoring divisions of labor, particularly in marriages. Couples should look for activities the man can excel in (which might even involve some of the cooking or shopping or decorating), with the wife seeing these as places where her husband can be honored. A husband might take over some of the heavy or stress-filled jobs his wife now does, as a gesture of protection and caring.

I have one final thought on the topic of the unhealthy entry of women into the world of men that may possibly generate more opposition than just about anything I've written in this book. For this reason I will offer it merely as something to consider, rather than something you have to agree with me about. What I'm talking about is the participation of women in sports.

Perhaps you don't know this, but the word gymnasium literally means "a place of nakedness." Sports came into being long ago as a way for men to increase their strength, physical skills, and competitive aptitude in preparation for battle. Women were never allowed. Even as recently as the

19th century, the only sports a woman might take part in were gentle things like croquet. But today women are part of nearly every athletic event, sometimes even competing directly with men.

*Can* we do these things? Certainly—or at least some of us can. *Should* we? That’s a far different question. An increasing number of young women today are training for such sports as track, swimming, basketball, tennis and so forth. In each case these young women become physically limber and strong, often develop an intense measure of discipline, and frequently become very, very competitive.

My concern is this. In what can be an extremely consuming focus on sports, these young women are moving away from one of the most vital elements of their femininity—their softness. They have to become hardened to continual physical pain. They have to develop a mental toughness that can deplete their ability to be sensitive to others and may distort their own emotional development. Their bodies suffer in ways a man’s body does not. I also believe women are more stressed by (and potentially more damaged by) competition than are men.

But even beyond these problems, I am grieved by what these young girls are *not* encouraged to be. Nothing in the athletic arena specifically prepares them to be wives and mothers and homemakers. They are prodded instead to become stars, an accomplishment that has no place in the expression of a woman’s true femininity.

You see, stars are our heroes. That’s the call of men. Unfortunately, modern stardom has very often lost its connection with true masculinity as well. Instead of becoming famous for bravery or wisdom or other forms of honorable achievement, the men who are our stars have too often excelled in things that are self-consumed or even vile.

Only a few men, and frequently they are Christian, understand that stardom actually entails obligation. As Jesus Himself explained, “For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). Because young men instinctively look to older men as their models, when a man achieves the public visibility we call stardom it becomes a matter of eternal consequence that he represents God well, who is holy in character and strong in His loving care for others.

In the larger scheme of things, of course, both men and women are to show in their unique ways God’s light in the darkness of this world. Sometimes it’s only handful of people who are watching us. Sometimes our influence is more extensive. If we are able to accept with grace the instrument we have been assigned and to play with excellence the music we have been given to perform, then those around us will also begin to comprehend God’s Grand Design, and may themselves be drawn into the beauty of the dance.

## 14 - Does Submission Mean Being a Doormat?

I'm going to begin my answer to this question with a question for you, which I've taken from three different scenes in scripture.

Luke 2:41-51. Twelve-year-old Jesus lingers in the temple to talk with the religious leaders. His father Joseph finds Him and wants Him to leave, and Jesus obeys. Who is more important, Jesus or Joseph?

John 3:14-17. God gives His Son Jesus to be crucified, so Joseph could be saved from hell. Who is more important, Jesus or Joseph?

Philippians 2:9-11. At the end of time, Joseph (along with everyone else) will bow down before Jesus. Who is more important, Jesus or Joseph?

This is of course a trick question. You see, in each of these three scenarios the word "important" changes meaning. In the first, it means "Who has authority?" In the second it means "Who has value?" And in the third it means "Who is honored?" One of the primary reasons people are opposed to the idea of hierarchy these days is because they don't understand the difference in these three meanings.

Hierarchy recognizes that some people are ranked above other people in certain defined ways. God established hierarchies in various parts of human society, including marriage. Partly because we haven't really thought through God's reasons for this, many of us (both men and women) have abused it, ignored it, or passionately rejected it.

This has damaged not only our relationships with each other but also our relationship with God. To better understand the importance—and the sacred truth—of hierarchy, we're going to look at it from the three perspectives in my little quiz: authority, value and honor.

Authority is perhaps best described in Matthew 8:5-10.

Now when Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, pleading with Him, saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, dreadfully tormented." And Jesus said to him, "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that You should come under my roof. But only speak a word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

It's pretty straightforward. Authority means if you say something to the person under you, that person must obey you. The centurion knew Jesus had a very unusual kind of authority—He could speak to a physical ailment (which in this case was probably caused by a demon) and it had to obey Him. We also know from other stories that Christ's authority extended even to the winds and the sea (see Matthew 8:26,27).

It is evident in this passage that authority is delegated from above. The word "centurion" comes from the Latin word for "hundred." The Roman government had made this man responsible for one hundred soldiers. These men obeyed the centurion because they understood all too well the power of the rulers who backed him.

When God tells a man's wife and children to submit to their husband or father's authority, He definitely intends them to *obey* him. I know that's a tough four-letter word in modern thinking. Yet the scriptures are clear (see 1 Peter 3:5,6 and Colossians 3:20). The only disobedience God allows is when someone in authority over us tells us to do something that God has specifically forbidden.

It is very important to understand, however, that the point is not for a man's personal agendas to be met through his family. Like the centurion, each husband is given some very specific assignments from God for which he himself will be held accountable. One of those assignments is actually to see that his family is cared for in the best possible way. Other assignments involve ministry in God's kingdom, some of which will require the cooperation of the whole family.

It is possible you have never really witnessed properly lived-out authority. Our fallen nature (with our Enemy cheering it on) definitely motivates us to abuse positions of authority and power. Certainly history is filled with horror stories of such abuse. Perhaps even your own father failed to care for those he was responsible for.

Many modern voices would have us believe that the solution to wife abuse or child abuse is to strengthen the rights of these individuals, which means reducing the rights of the husband and father. In other words, get rid of the hierarchy.

Christians who see authority structures as damaging sometimes speculate that hierarchy was in fact part of the curse after Adam sinned. They would say that in God's original design everyone was equal, and thus we should work to return to that equality so we can become better conformed to the eternal standard of perfection God intends.

But a closer look at scripture does not support this theory. In fact, the very first recorded sin was actually a specific challenge to authority. I'm not talking about Adam and Eve. I'm talking about Satan himself.

“How you are fallen from heaven,  
O Lucifer, son of the morning!  
How you are cut down to the ground,  
You who weakened the nations!  
For you have said in your heart:  
'I will ascend into heaven,  
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;  
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation  
On the farthest sides of the north;  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,  
I will be like the Most High.'  
Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol,  
To the lowest depths of the Pit.”  
(Isaiah 14:12-15)

God's displeasure with Lucifer's rebellion took place long before Adam was created. Nor do we find any indication in scripture that hierarchies will be removed when history ends. One of the grand pictures of eternity is found in Revelation 4:9-11, where the twenty-four elders continually cast their crowns before God's throne as a symbol of their glad submission to His supreme authority.

You see, the problem isn't really hierarchy. The problem is sin. The centurion exercised his authority in a way that pleased God. Many Bible rulers did not. While sin has corrupted every aspect of God's original design, the solution is not to change the design, but to remove the sin.

But even if we are willing to accept the fact that authority can exist without being abusive, what about the question of value? There are many today who see hierarchies as devaluing to those who are lower on the ladder. The picture of a doormat comes quickly into the minds of many women when the subject of submission is raised.

In my second quiz question above, I asked you to compare the value of Jesus who was sacrificed on the cross to the value of those whom He thereby saved from eternal damnation. If you thought very long about that, you probably realized that both Jesus and Joseph have great value, but in completely different ways.

In this context, Jesus' value lay in the fact that only He was perfect enough to qualify as an acceptable sacrifice for sin. Joseph's (and our) value was established through this sacrifice, for it confirms that we have such worth in the eyes of God that He would give His own Son to be tortured and killed for our redemption.

We have a tendency to think of our value in terms of things the world considers important, such as our talent or our wealth or our fame. We who are followers of Christ need to exchange this perspective for one that evaluates our lives by God's standard. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). From this perspective, we become valuable when our character and the activities of our lives are conformed to the plan God had in mind when He made and redeemed us.

For this reason, God has every right to make women valuable in different ways than men. As I've discussed earlier, our modern distortion has persuaded women that they need to find their value the same way men do. But we who are wise will understand that our Maker knew what He was doing. We will gracefully submit to His plan for masculinity and femininity, and each of us will gladly walk in our own assigned "good works."

While the idea of value is generally a matter of our suitability with regard to a certain purpose, honor is quite different. Honor is something that is given to us by others because of who we are. It may take the form of gratitude, of admiration, of respect, or even of worship. True honor can never be demanded by the person receiving it—it can only be freely granted by someone else. Even Jesus said, "If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me" (John 8:54).

In a hierarchy, honor flows in two directions. When we honor someone in authority over us, we are acknowledging the validity and the significance of their position—even if we have no other reason to honor them personally. This is the honor that should go from a wife to her husband. In addition to this "positional" honor, her husband may deserve personal honor as well, perhaps because of his wisdom or goodness or courage.

When we are the ones in authority, our honor toward those under us looks a little different. Peter instructs husbands (in 1 Peter 3:7) to give honor to their wives "as to the weaker vessel." Paul tells them to "nourish and cherish" their wives as they would their own bodies (Ephesians 5:28,29). Again, the husband may also honor his wife because of her wisdom or goodness or courage. But he must lovingly take care of her simply because she is his wife.

I hope you're beginning to see that hierarchy in itself is not an evil idea. Everyone other than God the Father is in submission to someone. The Father models authority perfectly, even as His Son models perfect submission in relationship to the Father. If all those who are in authority exercised it as the Father does, submission would be our greatest joy. We would feel treasured and cherished and nourished and liberated to become fully what we are created to be.

Ah, you say. But what husband exercises his authority even close to God's standard? That's an easy quiz. None of them do. But because God Himself is the source of all authority, our submission as wives should be "as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22). God is the one who has told us to submit to our husbands, and our obedience or our disobedience toward them is actually our obedience or disobedience to Him.

But what if I have to suffer? Well, there's no what-if about that either. We *will* suffer (see chapter four). What we must remember is that suffering is only temporary, it purifies our character, and if

we're suffering for the right reasons it means we're walking in the right direction. We're following in the footsteps of our Lord.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

I have a question for you though. Is it really the suffering that bothers you most? If you do submission right, most husbands will respond quite graciously, especially those who are sons of God. I wonder how many wives are actually beaten *because* they were obedient?

However, the image of a doormat has two parts to it. One is that people walk on it and wipe their muddy feet on it. While I guess that's not pleasant, it certainly isn't as bad as being nailed to a cross. But the other part of the image has to do with something besides suffering, and that's pride. Not a lot of prestige in being a doormat.

Remember the "first sin" I talked about earlier in this chapter? In his pride, Lucifer really convinced himself that he could "ascend above the heights of the clouds" and "be like the Most High." The true key to our understanding authority and submission can be found by comparing the mindset of Satan with the mindset of Christ.

When Jesus was tested in the wilderness (see Luke 4), He basically passed the three tests that Adam and Eve had failed in Eden. He did not give in to "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" that John describes in 1 John 2:16.

However, I believe that even before He came to earth, Jesus passed a far more important test than this. The phrase in Philippians 2 that reads "who. . .did not consider it robbery to be equal to God" can also be translated, "who. . .did not consider equality with God something to be stolen." If we look at the situation this way, we will see that Christ's first temptation, something He had to consider "grasping" (as another translation puts it), was equality of position with the Father.

Unlike Lucifer, Jesus truly understood the glory of hierarchy. He also knew that authentic honor comes as a result of authentic humility. Honor, remember, is never grasped—it is only given. The rest of the Philippians passage confirms that Jesus was right and Lucifer was wrong.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

Lucifer wanted a throne above God's and ended up in the "lowest depths of the Pit." Christ humbled Himself in death and was given the throne at His Father's right hand (Hebrews 10:12).

God presents each of us with this same choice. Here is how James describes the process.

God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. (James 4:6-10)

You see, godly submission is a challenge that both men and women face. It isn't just for us females. In fact, pride can more often be a battle that men struggle with. Remember, their deep need is for significance, and pride is the counterfeit solution to that.

Which brings me to the main point I want to communicate. One of the highest aspects of our calling, as women and as wives, is to model for the world what submission is supposed to look like. Can we humble ourselves and purify ourselves—and accept even a doormat role if that is what it takes—because we understand that one day we will be lifted up? Can we become content with the concept of sitting at the right hand of our husbands, not as equals but as cherished companions?

For that is precisely Christ's call to His church. Like Joseph in my quiz, we along with everyone else will one day bow our knee to Him as Lord. But those of us who have become His family will then be lifted up into the privilege of eternally enjoying His presence in the glorious hierarchy of God's kingdom.

Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For “He has put all things under His feet.” But when He says “all things are put under Him,” it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:24-28)

## 15 - Why Is Sex So Powerful?

Life is one big mystery novel. When God made the universe, He purposely left His fingerprints on everything in it. He wanted the people He had made to search for Him, to figure out His ways, and to discover His amazing beauty and brilliance and goodness.

According to Romans 1:18-21, everyone can see these clues until they become blinded by their sin. For those of us who have God's Spirit alive in our spirits, the divine patterns of creation should be getting more and more visible. We should be seeing everything around us either as a picture of some part of God's perfection or as revealing some aspect of hell (which is what exists when God's perfection has been rejected).

The reason sex is so powerful is because it is God's most important picture. I'm not just referring to sexual intercourse, but to the entire drama of masculinity and femininity that is designed to find its completion in sexual intercourse. When a marriage is spiritually healthy and when the act of lovemaking is performed as God intends, the man becomes the initiator, the protector, and the provider, and the woman becomes the responder, the receiver, and the grateful adorer. Sexual intercourse is where God focuses love, grants us pleasure, establishes a family, and creates new life.

It should not surprise us that our Enemy has invested his greatest energies in demolishing these divine aspects of sexuality. In so many ways sex has been reduced to pleasure alone, and has been separated from love, from commitment, from child-bearing, and now from masculinity and femininity. When this happens, it no longer reflects that which it was designed to communicate about the nature of God and His creation.

When God put Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, He told them they could eat any fruit except the fruit of one specific tree. God had designed fruit to sustain their lives, and had also put the ability to enjoy eating into these perfect humans so they would gladly receive this nourishment. Hunger pains weren't necessary yet, because the relationship between the first couple and their God was such that both of them would find pleasure when His gifts were simply enjoyed.

When the Enemy (in the form of a snake) suggested to Eve that she should also consider the forbidden fruit, it stirred up in her a false but powerful sense of neediness for something God had not permitted her to have. When Eve and Adam gave in to this temptation, that sense of neediness (or lust) permanently entered their souls and ours.

Through this one act of disobedience, the glory of their created sexuality was now turned back against them. Their marriage became a power struggle. Childbirth became painful. Their firstborn son jealously killed his younger brother—and it went downhill from there. "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

Thousands of years later God provided the remedy for the fall of the human race through the excruciating death and miraculous resurrection of His own Son. But the battle between our fallen sexuality and our redeemed sexuality continues on. In recent years our Enemy has made enormous advances, successfully deceiving even those who are believers in Christ.

In this chapter we're going to examine those purposes for sexuality that represent the heart of God's plan and thus the reason for its power: love, commitment, procreation, and the glory of masculinity and femininity. We'll begin with love.

One of the best ways I've found to understand love is through two mighty nature-pictures which God built into creation. These enormous physical entities model the most extreme opposites in our universe. I'm talking about suns and black holes.

Suns pour out a seemingly endless supply of light and heat. Our own sun sustains every aspect of our lives, through its warmth, its light, and the energy it puts into plants through photosynthesis.

Scriptures describe God's love as being much like the sun's rays, always flowing outward, blessing everyone it touches, and building into us the capacity to nourish others as well. This love, called *agape*, has nothing to do with the nature of the one who receives it. God doesn't love us because we are good or beautiful or perfect, but because *He* is.

In stark contrast, the black hole of lust destroys everyone it touches, including the one who does the lusting. It insatiably reduces its objects to something to be consumed. Scripture describes those who are in bondage to lust in vivid poetic terms.

These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves. They are clouds without water, carried about by the winds; late autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, pulled up by the roots; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. (Jude 12-13).

These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. (2 Peter 2:17-19)

When sexuality is kept pure, the love it expresses echoes the *agape* nature of God. It is unselfish—characterized by a lover enjoying the joy of the beloved. But that little step of rebellion back in Eden catapulted the human race into the blackness of demonic perversion. Now the motivations of sexuality are all too often infused with lust, or are replaced by lust altogether. What God designed to be creative and beautiful becomes destructive instead.

A second reason God made sexual attraction and the desire for sexual intimacy to be such strong forces in our lives is because it is His chosen way to portray our relationship with Him. Throughout scripture we find that God consistently describes His commitment to His people (and their loyalty to Him) in sexual terms. The book of Hosea is especially built on this theme of God's faithfulness to the people He loves.

I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord. (Hosea 2:19-20)

The Hebrew word for "know" in this passage is the word *yada*. It's the same word found in Genesis 4:1 when it says that Adam "knew" his wife Eve, after which she conceived and bore her first son. While *yada* is used in other passages without sexual connotation, it is still appropriate to understand that God's intimacy with us is intended to be even MORE personal and intense and revealing and bonding than sexual intimacy.

You see, all of these pictures on earth are only shadows of the eternal realities of God's kingdom relationships. Not only does God communicate the potential unity we can have with Him through the union of human marriage, but He also describes our rejection of Him using images of adultery.

For now, O Ephraim, you commit harlotry; Israel is defiled. They do not direct their deeds toward turning to their God, for the spirit of harlotry is in their midst, and they do not know (*yada*) the Lord. (Hosea 5:3-4)

All too often we forget how seriously God intends us to see our human activities as impacting our relationship with Him. When we do not “direct our deeds toward turning to our God” because other things have become distractions or competing priorities, we are violating our faith covenant with Him in the same way as an adulterous spouse.

The third spiritual impact of sexuality is found in its ability to generate new life. When Adam and Eve were told to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), it is clear that procreation through sexual union was part of God’s plan from the very beginning. Children are specifically said to be the blessing of the Lord (Psalms 127:3). How tragic it is that the passions of corrupted sexuality are now responsible not for bringing life and blessings, but for prompting the murder of millions of unborn babies.

We also must not overlook another aspect of procreation. If I’m right that marriage is God’s most important creation-picture, then parenthood would take second place. When we become the parent of a child, we discover in ourselves a new and powerful capacity to love that brings deep insight into God’s love for us. If this parental love is corrupted by our selfishness or our woundedness, it not only diminishes our understanding of God, but it also seriously hinders our children’s ability to come to know Him as a loving Father.

All these aspects of sexuality—love, commitment, and procreation—are extremely significant. But if I were to ask you why *you* think sex is powerful, these would probably not be what first comes to your mind. For many people, especially in this generation, the compelling nature of sexual desire and the physical sexual act itself are pretty much the essence of what sex is about.

Nevertheless, people who are sexually active soon learn that the physical pleasures of intercourse don’t really satisfy the entirety of their sexual longings. You see, God designed lovemaking to be the centerpiece of something much larger, which is the deep satisfaction of being a man or a woman in this world, doing what men and women are created to do.

We’ve talked about this a lot. In addition to having his physical needs met, a man needs to be honored and appreciated for his manly courage and diligence and sacrifice and heroism. A woman has physical needs as well, but equally compelling is her need to feel secure in her husband’s appreciation of her beauty and her other womanly qualities. She needs to know he cherishes her as he would his most precious possession, or even his own body (Ephesians 5:28).

But rather than heading us in these righteous directions, our Enemy has instead taught us to focus on the sex act as being the only real deal. What this has done is to put far too much weight on physical pleasure. When the basic sensations get too familiar and tame, we are then ready to be drawn into something more novel and intense. Whether it’s new methods or new environments or new partners—or even a new type of partner—the lure of the weird and wild eventually destroys all that was ever sacred in sexual intimacy.

Sadly, for many people this lure actually begins before they ever have a chance to understand or experience God’s designed sexual pleasure. Like fire in a fireplace, God intends sexuality to warm and delight the marriage hearth. But we live instead in a world of wildfires. Sexual imagery, seductive clothing, and the tsunami of pornographic opportunities deprive most young people of any healthy concept of sexual joy.

This has resulted in a generation that either is addicted to obsessive sexual cravings or (in some cases) is so repulsed by sexuality that they have shut down their natural sexual desires altogether. Our Enemy isn’t particularly concerned which way we go, as long as we end up missing out on God’s intended plan by which our true sexual natures can flourish.

While unfortunately I can’t exactly transport you into a world that is safer and saner, what I can do is to challenge you to deliberately conform your own desires and actions to God’s Grand Design.

You see, God is still God. Our Enemy was defeated by Christ on the cross. Person by person, sexual health is possible.

But we need to realize that it comes at a price. While our culture endlessly fixates on the pleasures of sexuality, it is purposely silent about the many pains that are also a built-in part of sex. Intercourse itself can be painful, especially for women. Childbirth is painful (again for women). But in God's plan, men are also supposed to suffer.

Think about how it works in the animal kingdom. If you've ever seen stags or stallions battling for the right to mate, you'll know there can be a great amount of bloodshed involved. While human males rarely duel for their damsels, there should be a measure of testing, courage, and even competition before a man can win the hand of the woman he loves. Moreover, he is supposed to work diligently to "prepare a place" for her before he takes her as his bride (that's what Jesus has promised to do for us—see John 14:2).

In our world, men claim their sexual rewards way too easily. No longer is much investment required (alas, men don't even pay for dates all that often). No longer is there a guarantee that a man will protect and provide for the children he sires. No longer is he expected to treat a woman with special dignity and courtesy. She (often at her own request) is now just one of the guys. Except, of course, she isn't.

However, one of the most important kinds of suffering that is supposed to be part of sexuality is the waiting itself. That's because the season before marriage is another of God's creation-pictures. When our singlehood also includes celibacy, we develop a strong sense of anticipation for what is in store for us in marriage. We dream about the joys of sexual union. We dream about the blessings of children. Everything in us pulses with an awareness that we were designed by God to be a husband or a wife.

Do you see the parallel? Even more than being created to be married on earth, we are created to be joined forever with Christ in heaven. But because we were deceived in the garden of Eden, and because we have been deceived ever since, humanity has impatiently tried to bring heaven to earth, to build alternate gods, to consummate our existence prematurely. Even as we have corrupted God's plan for human marriage, so we have also lost sight of our eternal destiny which marriage was designed to picture.

Do you remember when Christmas used to be exciting? There were all those days and weeks when you waited anxiously, knowing that the time would come when the presents could be unwrapped and the joyful surprises discovered.

But in our modern society much of that is lost. Many of us get nearly everything we want as soon as we want it, without having to wait for Christmas. Even when there are gifts under the tree, they are rarely surprises. We've made our lists, and the gifts are what we've asked or hinted for. More often these days we get cash, gift cards, or returnable gifts—so we can simply make our own selections.

For the givers as well, the magic is also gone. It's been stolen by the frustrating burden of trying to bring joy to people who are consumed with expectations and yet will probably be less than pleased with what they receive. The season to be jolly has been replaced by greed, stress, and melancholy.

To get Christmas back, and (far more importantly) to get the proper joys of marriage back, we need to return to our understanding that all of life is God's gift. God is the supreme Giver, and He gives His best to those who abandon their lists, cease their grasping, and simply leave the choices—and the timing—to Him.

Just as He found joy in the pleasure of Adam and Eve when they gratefully ate the permitted fruit, so God finds joy in our enjoyment of sexuality when it is received as He intends. It is when we deliberately embrace and delight in our masculinity or femininity, culminating in the ecstasies of the

marriage union, that we enter most fully into the Grand Design and begin to understand what heaven is about.

## 16 - What Does the Future Hold?

When I was in my teens and early twenties, our culture was going through the dramatic changes I described in chapter one. At the time, however, I was really not aware of what was happening. That season of my life was filled with so many complexities of its own that the changes around me simply merged together with my own transitionings.

It is therefore entirely possible, and understandable, that many of you are also unaware of the astonishing changes which are again shaking the foundations of our culture. Even those of us who have the perspective that comes with age are having a very hard time comprehending what is going on. While these changes can be found in every layer of society—political, economic, technological, educational, and so forth—I'm going to limit myself to two specific areas which I believe are most related to our present discussion.

My first concern is our rapid loss of freedom. Because most people in your generation have not been provided with a very extensive (or very accurate) view of human history, you probably have little sense of the unusual circumstances in which so many of us live. You may never have thought much about the fact that things like well-stocked grocery shelves, or smooth highways, or climate control (I'm talking about the temperature of the room you're in, not global warming) weren't part of the experience of the vast majority of the human race throughout history, and still aren't in much of our world today.

Because we take so many of these conveniences for granted—since after all, we've always had them—we tend to focus on the things we still might be lacking. Add to this the fact that hundreds of times a day we are presented with not-so-subtle suggestions concerning what we might want, and the result is an awareness not of our abundance, but of our deficiencies.

Then from the other side, we are deluged with choices. In my Letter I mentioned dinner buffets and ice cream parlors, but now (five years later) I would probably do better using the examples of cable channels and cell phone apps. We have come to evaluate our happiness based on how close we have arrived to the perfect state of our clothes closet, our cable programming, and our cell phone plan (or, perhaps, our perfect job or perfect vacation or even our perfect church) as the result of choosing between so many attractive options.

We also unconsciously connect the idea of freedom with our ability to pursue this kind of happiness. In other words, we feel more free when we can choose between twenty movies than when there's only one show in town. But I would like to describe to you another way of looking at freedom which you may not have considered.

Imagine you are in a theater, completely absorbed in some kind of action film. Suddenly the fire alarm in the theater goes off. How long would it take you to leave the world on the screen and rejoin the world of alarms and fire exits? It might take a few moments to sort between the two realities, but eventually you'll get out the door.

Now suppose you're going through your regular day, with all those texts and all those visits to Google or Facebook. What would happen if the internet or your cell service dropped out? I don't mean just for a few hours. I mean, for good.

In the case of your interrupted movie, even if the theater burns to the ground, you'll probably still get to finish the show sooner or later. But the thought that you might not get back on the internet or on your phone—ever? I doubt there's even a place in your brain that can contemplate that possibility.

It's hard to overstate our enormous dependence on modern communications technology. What feels like freedom—our ability to instantly talk to anyone on the planet, or our access to just about any kind of information we might care to know—is actually an elaborate bondage. I'm not implying

that technology is evil. I'm just saying that when we lose our ability to function without it, we are essentially admitting that someone else has a frightening amount of power in our lives.

What I'm going to say next will (again) probably surprise you. *While both are important, I'm far more concerned about your minute or two of confusion in the theater than I am about the brain-frying possibility of no more internet or cell phones.* Okay, breathe deep. I know you're still recovering from the idea of no phone—and then I hit you with this?

Whenever we lose something (or someone) we are very dependent on, we inevitably feel great shock, and grief, and often despair. Sometimes we never recover, at least not completely. But in the middle of the chaos we have a sharp awareness of what has happened. We know exactly what has gone away, and exactly what our relationship has been with that which is missing. Whatever strengths we have, whatever resources are at hand, can be applied to the situation. Everything becomes clear in those moments, which means we are definitely participating in the world of the truly real.

By contrast, when we're sitting comfortably in our theater seats (or possibly on the edge of those seats), our minds and emotions have moved into another world that is *not* real. Even if the film is based on a true story, it's not our story or our reality. Over time, after literally thousands of movies or books or video games or TV episodes—or pornographic encounters—we begin to lose our “reality balance.” Who we are and what is real, and more significantly, what is important and worth fighting for, becomes increasingly and dangerously blurred.

If the day comes when our modern technological tools are taken from us, or (which may be more likely) when they are controlled by someone in such a way that we must compromise some aspect of our faith in order to continue their use (see Revelation 13:16,17), then it will be a severely difficult time for all of us. *But how much more are we at risk when we are blindly comfortable in our virtual worlds*—where apocalypses are rather ordinary events, and we don't realize we have gradually been overtaken by a real one outside the theater doors.

Which brings me to my second concern, the one that motivated me to write this book. As our culture increasingly tries to persuade us that manhood can be morphed into womanhood (and vice versa) with no particular consequences, we are in grave danger of losing the irreplaceable treasures of masculinity and femininity.

One of our Enemy's most successful tactics has been to make us forget that we are not our own, nor are we on our own. We have developed a false sense of independence, as though our lives were somehow handed to us with no strings attached. We're just supposed to give life our best shot, becoming as successful and happy and perhaps even as good and as useful as we possibly can. But if we fall short—well, you can't say we didn't try.

The idea that there's a God who will hold us accountable for what we think and say and do is not a very welcome thought in our world. Yet rather than face this fact, society has banded together in opposition to God. Somehow if all of us choose to ignore His requirements, it seems to us we might be able to win our case when it finally comes to court.

How foolish we are. It's been tried before, remember? “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). God responded to what He saw by sending an earthwide flood which destroyed all but a few people. Again, this event was purposely given to us as a picture—of the evil nature of rebellion, of God's strong judgment against sin, and of His mercy toward the few whose hearts refuse to turn against Him.

Just as in the day of Noah, God still desires to rescue those who choose to stand against the lies and the social pressures and the enticements of sin. Knowing we could not stand alone, He purchased our salvation through the blood of His Son and now gives us supernatural power through His

indwelling Spirit. Those of us who have received these gifts are therefore called to search out and to conform our lives to God's Grand Design.

While there is more to the Grand Design than simply the patterns of masculinity and femininity, our willingness (or refusal) to embrace these gives a clear indication of our attitude toward the rest. We are not allowed to accept only the portions of God's plan that suit our personal preferences. We cannot live part of our lives His way and part in the ways of the world. As the apostle John bluntly put it, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

What does John mean by "the world or the things in the world"? He's not talking about trees and flowers and other aspects of the natural world. He's also not talking about those necessities by which our physical lives are sustained.

Rather, he is warning us that we cannot trust in or live by the wisdom and the priorities of this world. J.B. Phillips translated Romans 12:2 this way: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity."

This is not simply a theological concept. God absolutely intends us to apply it in our real lives—right here, right now. In other words, when we watch television or movies or read books that are produced by those who do not know God, we must be VERY careful not only to discern exactly where the line between truth and deception falls, but also to keep our thoughts and responses on the righteous side of that line.

The only way that line can remain clear and strong is for us to fill our minds with more of God's scriptures than we do the ideas of this world. Otherwise, I promise, you'll become confused. Our Enemy is much smarter and far more devious than we generally suppose.

Remember how I described love and lust. Love, like the gentle sunlight, only warms us when we choose to stand in its rays. Lust however is greedily aggressive. We deceive ourselves into thinking we can view it from a distance and not be touched by it. We have no idea how very vulnerable we are, in this battle for our souls.

What does the future hold? I see our world separating rapidly into two streams, one very large, one much smaller. The larger flow is being drawn into the abyss of self-worship. It takes on many faces, quite a few of which look very religious. It offers promises of pleasure and prosperity, all the while robbing those who are in it of the most essential aspect of their humanity, which is their potential relatedness to God.

The other stream is quieter and less enticing. It is characterized by a willingness to lay down the comforts and pleasures of this world, by the denial of self and the embracing of suffering, and by obedience to God even when He leads you through difficult and lonely passageways. What is most important to understand is this: *you can only be in one stream*. You are either headed toward the light, or else you are falling—with a great company around you—into the darkness.

It is my belief that your willingness to delight in the specific sexual identity God has chosen for you—and your commitment to enhancing that identity by becoming as masculine or as feminine as you possibly can, with the responsibilities and limitations that each of these include—is a strong indication of which stream you are in. As our world becomes increasingly hateful toward the purity of God's plan, you (as His follower) should be less and less willing to allow their media messages to fill your mind and direct your emotions.

Instead, *you must strive to truly remember what you were made for*. You will then begin to figure out that the longing in your heart—which you thought was simply a longing to be married—actually goes beyond that. You will begin to realize that when you were born a man or a woman, you were

given both the opportunity and the assignment to become a powerful and radiant part of the Grand Design.

Men, you have been given the astonishing privilege of representing the strength and authority of God in our world. You can show His wisdom, His courage, His hatred of evil, and His self-emptying love to a world that has almost completely forgotten these things. Each of you (with a few rare exceptions) is called to find a woman and to raise sons and daughters. Each of you is called to do battle with the Enemy of our souls. Each of you is called to spend time in the presence of God until you reach the point where people listen to you and hear Him.

Women, you have been given the astonishing privilege of representing the object of God's love on earth, which is His church. As His beloved, you can show the peace, the joy, the beauty, and the graciousness of God to a world that has almost completely forgotten these things. Each of you (with a few rare exceptions) is designed to become the loyal helper of a godly man, together creating a home where love and wisdom protect your children and where you can welcome those who are wounded or lonely. As you also seek the heart of God, you will find yourself instinctively drawn to prayer and meditation and praise, and through these devotions His Spirit will flow freely out of your spirit to everyone you touch.

What will this assignment cost? In a very real sense it will cost everything. I believe God has portioned out exactly enough resources for us to accomplish what He planned for us to do. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). Paul also writes, "God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8). God promises us enough strength, enough time, enough mental energy, enough money, to fully complete our divine to-do lists.

However—and listen carefully—the energy we expend working out at the gym may be what God has allotted for us to keep our house cleaned or repaired. The time we spend on our entertainments could very well mean we will get to the end of our life with many of our "good works" undone. If we focus our minds on meaningless distractions, we are likely to miss some important truths God wants us to learn. And of course if our money is spent on things that perish, we will miss His better plan of pouring blessings through us into the work of the Kingdom.

You see, in the final count it all comes down to these ordinary every-day choices. Our Enemy's battle plan is to get you to make the wrong choice, one little decision at a time. He doesn't really need to tempt you into those terrible sins (although he'll do that too if he gets the chance). *He just needs to convince you that the war hasn't actually started yet.* It's an easy—and an eternally significant—lie.

Part of the incentive for making these right choices will simply be your desire to please your Father. Another part of it comes as you begin to walk this pathway of righteousness, for you will discover that (in spite of the battle) life actually works better the way God planned it. To be sure, the brokenness of life will inevitably bring some difficulties along the way. But even these are best handled by remaining true to God's standards.

But there is one other reason for choosing to remain obedient to God. Think about the last wedding (or the last dozen weddings) you attended. There always comes that moment when the guests stand and turn to watch the bride enter the doorway and begin her walk toward the front. All eyes are on her, radiant in her beauty. But *her* eyes are on one person only—the man to whom she is about to commit her life forever.

Deep in your spirit, if you are truly born into God's kingdom, you will find an intense aching for something you don't really understand. It is a divine loneliness, an existential incompleteness, that speaks more strongly than any theological argument can for the truth of God's existence. You were created, together with all saints, to become one with the Prince of heaven.

Just as the bride in that wedding has waited a long time for this moment when she will approach her future husband, so we who belong to Jesus should be waiting with eager anticipation and undivided attention for our Bridegroom to appear. He has paid the ultimate price for us. He has provided all we need to become beautiful and holy. He is even now preparing a home for us, far grander than we can imagine.

And one day soon our Father will give the sign, and we will stand in the doorway of eternity, our eyes fixed on the face of our Lord. In that moment everything that mattered on this earth will fade from our minds, the things we could never understand will be made wonderfully clear, and the longing in our hearts will at last be completely satisfied by His mighty and eternal love.