

ENGAGEMENT

PREPARING
FOR
MARRIAGE

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

MIKE MCKINLEY

ENGAGEMENT

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

A Series

DEEPAK REJU

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McKinley, Mike, 1975- author.

Title: Engagement : preparing for marriage / Mike McKinley.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, 2020. | Series: 31-day devotionals for life | Summary: "How will God's gospel love be displayed as you get ready for marriage? Take a month to prepare your heart using thoughtful devotional readings, reflection questions, and practical action points"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019058507 | ISBN 9781629954943 (paperback) | ISBN 9781629954950 (epub) | ISBN 9781629954967 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Marriage--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Betrothal--Religious aspects--Christianity. | Couples--Prayers and devotions.

Classification: LCC BV835 .M3426 2020 | DDC 242/.644--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019058507>

For Jon Cornish,
with the prayerful hope that this will serve
you well in your future marriage

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Tips for Reading This Devotional

EARLY IN OUR MARRIAGE, my wife and I lived on the top floor of a town house, in a small one-bedroom apartment. Whenever it rained, leaks in the roof would drip through the ceiling and onto our floors. I remember placing buckets in different parts of the apartment and watching the water slowly drip, one drop at a time. I put large buckets out and thought, *It'll take a while to fill them*. The water built up over time, and often I was surprised at how quickly those buckets filled up, overflowing if I didn't pay close enough attention.

Like rain filling up a bucket, this devotional will surprise you. It may not seem like much; just a few verses every day. Drip. Drip. Drip. Yet a few drops of Scripture daily can satiate your parched soul. The transformative power of these readings will build over time and overflow into your life.

Why does a book like this make such a difference?

We start with Scripture. God's Word is powerful. Used by the Holy Spirit, it turns the hearts of kings, brings comfort to the lowly, and gives spiritual sight to the blind. It transforms lives and turns them upside down. We know that the Bible is God's very own words, so we read and study it to know God himself.

Our study of Scripture is practical. Theology should change how we live. It's crucial to connect the Word with your struggles. Often, as you read this devotional, you'll see the word *you* because Mike speaks directly to you, the reader. Each reading contains at least one reflection question and practical suggestion. You'll get much more from this experience if you answer the questions and do the practical exercises. Don't skip them. Do them for the sake of your own soul.

Our study of Scripture is worshipful. As you study your Bible, you will learn that marriage is all about God. The Lord makes a covenant with his people and shows us what faithfulness and commitment look like. He demonstrates his love by sending Jesus to die for our sins and by not holding our sins against us. As Scripture teaches us about God's relationship with his people, it helps to prepare us for the lifelong commitment of marriage. If God is faithful, loving, forgiving, and enduring in the commitment he has made with us, so also should we be toward our fiancés if we call ourselves Christians. As we gaze at God and the gospel, they will teach us much about marriage and inspire us to greater worship.

If you find this devotional helpful (and I trust that you will!), reread it in different seasons of your life. It will help you to get prepared for marriage, but you'll find that many of Mike's meditations will be encouraging to you as a married couple as well. So work through it this coming month, and then come back to it a year from now, to remind yourself about what God and the gospel teach us about marriage. You'll also find additional resources at the end of the book to help you as you continue your journey.

That's enough for now. Let's begin.

Deepak Reju

Introduction

SOMEONE ONCE SAID that wisdom is not learning from your mistakes; it is learning from the mistakes of others.

That sentiment should give you a sense of the qualifications I have to write this little book. I have been married to Karen, my college sweetheart, for more than twenty years. In addition to that, in my capacity as a pastor I have walked with couples at every stage of the marriage relationship—from engagement to widowhood and practically all that fall between the two. As a result of those experiences, I have made (or seen other people make) pretty much every marriage mistake imaginable. My hope is to put some of those experiences to work for your benefit. Perhaps you can stand on my shoulders, and the shoulders of the people I know, and avoid our mistakes!

With all that said, however, the most important thing that you can do for your upcoming marriage is *not* to learn tips and skills that will make you more prepared for a life of matrimonial bliss. In fact, that approach to premarital preparation underlies a lot of the reasons that couples struggle. Fundamentally, your marriage is not about you and your spouse. It is not merely the sum of your communication skills, sexual intimacy, and ability to bridge whatever gaps may exist between your view of the world and your spouse's. Those “horizontal” factors are certainly important, but they are not what is *most* important.

God tells us in his Word that he created marriage to be a demonstration of his own love and character—to show his own incredible love for his people. Marriage is intended to be both a sign of God's love and also a reminder that, at the end of the age, God's people will be given as a bride to their bridegroom—the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the most important thing you can know

about marriage. Because of that, we will spend a lot of time (especially at the beginning of this devotional) talking about what marriage tells us about God and about ourselves. Though it may not sound very practical, I am convinced that the reason many couples struggle is because one or both of the people in them lose sight of the “vertical” focus that God intended for their marriage. It is that focus that should guide all our decisions and actions.

Let’s suppose that a husband and wife have a conflict. Maybe you and your fiancé have already experienced a few of those, and so you can call an example to mind. Or perhaps it is difficult for you to imagine ever fighting, besotted with moony engagement bliss as you may well be. If that is you, congratulations! But you can be sure that the day is coming; any healthy relationship between married sinners is going to have to deal with some conflict eventually.

So let’s say that our newlyweds are having an argument over their finances or where they should spend their Christmas vacation. The conviction that underlies this devotional is that what this couple needs, first and foremost, is not better anger management techniques or a system to split up the holidays fairly but rather an understanding that God has created their marriage for a definite purpose. As a result, both husband and wife are under a type of constraint—they are not free to do whatever they wish or to pursue their own desires at all costs. Their Creator has given them to each other to be a picture of his love and forgiveness. The way that they treat each other, even in times of conflict and stress, is meant to mirror the self-giving love that exists between Christ and his church.

That conviction, if allowed to take root deep in our hearts, will do more to build healthy, happy, and God-glorifying marriages than a thousand lessons on how men and women communicate differently. There is a place for advice on communication (and on other aspects of marriage), and indeed we will get to those kinds of things in this devotional. But if those lessons are not grounded

on the foundation of God's purposes for marriage, they will crumble like sandcastles into the sea.

Before we begin, one more piece of housekeeping is in order. To put all my cards on the table, I want you to know that I write this devotional with a few assumptions in mind.

- I assume that you are preparing yourself for an upcoming marriage. If that does not fit your exact circumstances, you are still welcome to read on; in fact, I hope that you do. But my intention is to calibrate my illustrations and applications to someone who is about to get married.
- I hope that you and your intended are engaged in premarital counseling through your local church. This devotional is not meant to replace that crucial piece of your joint preparation for marriage. I am writing to you as an individual to help you to prepare *yourself* for marriage rather than writing to both of you as a couple.
- I assume that you are a Christian. If you are not, then again, you are more than welcome to read on. But I will write as if you believe that the Bible is true and you wish to bring your thoughts and life and marriage into an ever closer alignment with the things that are revealed to us within it.

I write this with prayers that the Lord might use it in some small way in your life and marriage, for his glory and for your happiness!

THE BIG PICTURE
OF MARRIAGE

DAY 1

God Is . . . a Husband?

“For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. For the LORD has called you like a wife.” (Isa. 54:5–6)

WHEN YOU THINK about what God is like, what comes to your mind?

This is a difficult question. After all, how can limited people understand an infinite being? How can created beings comprehend what it would be like to have always existed? What does it mean for sinful people who are living in a fallen world to think well about a perfectly Holy One?

Because he is gracious, God wants to be known by the people he has created; and to that end he has stooped down to reveal himself to us. In the Bible, the Lord uses many metaphors and word pictures to help us to understand what he is like and how he relates to us. He is a King, because he rules over us and is a law-giver (see Ps. 47). He is a Judge, in that he is the one who evaluates all our thoughts and actions (see Ps. 7:11). He is a Shepherd, for he leads his people to safety and provision (see Ps. 23).

But perhaps the most surprising and revealing image that God uses for himself in Scripture is that of a husband to his people. When God says through the prophet Isaiah that he is our husband and his people are his wife, it is a picture of the most intimate kind of knowledge and love. We know how a husband feels about his wife, and we might be tempted to wonder whether or not God, the “Holy One” and “Redeemer,” could really love his people like that. The answer, gloriously, is yes!

The fact that God refers to himself as a husband tells us something important about him and the amazing love that he has

for us, but it also shows us something very important about the institution of marriage. If God is a husband, then marriage is not merely a social construct or even primarily a way for people to find companionship and start a family. Instead, marriage is fundamentally a picture of God's love. It is a way for us to understand and display the depth and intensity of the love God has for his people.

In the end, the thing that makes a marriage a Christian marriage is not that the couple attend church together (though they should) or raise their children to know the gospel (though that is a good thing to do). At its essence, a Christian marriage should be a man and a woman who understand that they have been brought together into an intimate relationship for the purpose of learning and displaying the way that God loves us in Christ. This is a foundational truth on which to build your own marriage.

Reflect: Take time to meditate on the truth that God, as your husband, knows you intimately and loves you—even if you do not always feel like he does. How might a better understanding of God's love help you to love your future spouse?

Act: Find a Christian who has been married for a while and ask them how marriage has helped them to better understand God's love.

DAY 2

An Unfaithful Bride

“How sick is your heart, declares the Lord GOD, because you did . . . the deeds of a brazen prostitute. . . . Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings.” (Ezek. 16:30, 32–33)

LATE LAST NIGHT, I received an email from a couple who were asking to meet with me for some marriage counseling. It’s typical for such emails to come in after I have gone to bed. I guess that by the time a couple puts kids to bed, has a vigorous fight, and calms down enough to conclude that they should get some help, it is going to be pretty late in the evening!

What made this email remarkable is that the person who sent it to me admitted that they had been unfaithful to their spouse. Being a pastor means helping people through these kinds of situations, and sadly I have had to deal with this issue before. But even so, the news made me feel sick. I remembered the couple meeting with me for premarital counseling; I remembered the joy and beauty of their wedding ceremony. Now, their immediate future will involve wading through intense feelings of anger and betrayal.

Today’s shocking passage from the prophet Ezekiel is not one that you normally read in a book aimed at preparing couples for marriage. But, just as we saw in yesterday’s reading that marriage teaches us about the spiritual reality of God’s love, in a similar way this passage is one of the places where the Bible uses marriage to vividly illustrate the nature of our sin.

And it is remarkable that when God wants us to understand our sin, he uses adultery as his illustration. God is the husband of his people, but the citizens of Jerusalem in Ezekiel’s day were

like an unfaithful wife. They were promiscuous in their worship of other gods, and so they are pictured here as a woman who joyfully receives multiple lovers. You and I may not be guilty of the specific sins that tempted people in those days, but whenever we look to sin to give us the joy and satisfaction that God promises us, we are throwing our lot in with them.

What does that mean for us? If marriage is meant to teach us about our relationship to God, then we should sit and contemplate seriously the idea that our sin is like spiritual adultery. It is unfaithfulness to and betrayal of God, our husband. Imagine how terrible it would feel if your upcoming marriage were marked by infidelity and betrayal—and let that feeling help you to hate your sin and be quick to repent when you do sin. Do not take sin lightly, for God does not take it lightly.

Reflect: Are there areas in your life in which you have taken sin lightly? Remember that God takes sin so seriously that it cost him his Son to restore us.

Act: Repent and ask for God's forgiveness and for the strength to resist sin—particularly in your upcoming marriage.

DAY 3

A Restored Bride

“I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers but not overtake them. . . . Then she shall say, ‘I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me than now.’” (Hosea 2:6–7)

“I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.” (Hosea 2:19–20)

THE BEGINNING OF the book of Hosea provides a real-life parable that helps us to understand God’s faithful love. The Lord instructs the prophet to marry a prostitute named Gomer; even though Hosea cared for her and provided for her, she was always looking to other lovers. The idea seems to be that Gomer’s unfaithfulness was a picture of Israel’s sinful idolatry against the Lord. Hosea and Gomer’s marriage was a picture of the truth that we saw in our previous devotional: that sin is spiritual adultery.

Now, we might expect that the point of this parable was to make an example of this unfaithful woman—to give her what she deserved for her sins and thus to show Israel the consequences of idolatry. But it turns out that this is not a story about judgment; it is a story about redemption. Through the prophet, the Lord says that he will intervene in two ways to deliver his people out of the midst of their rebellion.

First, he would make their experience of idolatry difficult and unfulfilling—would “build a wall against her, so that she [could] not find . . . her lovers” (see Hos. 2:6–7). The plan was that Israel’s disappointment with their sin, and with their failure to find what they were looking for in other gods, would cause them to return to the Lord.

The second promise amounts to an astounding word of grace: God would establish a renewed “betrothal.” Betrothal is like a more formal version of our idea of “engagement” and is established when the would-be groom pays a price and gives gifts to the father of the would-be bride. In this case, the Lord would reestablish his relationship with his wayward people through the gifts of righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness (see v. 19). They would be spiritually transformed and restored to a personal relationship with their God (see v. 20).

Now, you might be wondering to yourself, what on earth does this have to do with my engagement and upcoming marriage?

Do you remember when we said that marriage is meant to be a picture of God’s love (see day 1)? Here in Hosea 2 we get an amazing glimpse into exactly what that love is like. God’s love is not the love a groom has for his bride when she looks radiant and beautiful on their wedding day. Nor is it the delight that a bride feels when she sees the groom looking dashing in his tuxedo. The Lord’s love is much greater than the love of this “honeymoon stage.”

The picture of his love that we see in Hosea 2 is extraordinary—it is an underserved love, an undying love, a purifying love. It is a love that will ultimately find its fulfillment in Jesus.

Reflect: God does not love you because of how good you are. He loves you despite your sins.

Act: Make a list of three ways you might be called upon to show love in your future marriage. Are you committed to showing love even if your spouse does not deserve it?