

Husbands & Wives

Your Closest Friend



“Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth. As a loving deer and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; and always be enraptured with her love. For why should you, my son, be enraptured by an immoral woman, and be embraced in the arms of a seductress?” (Proverbs 5:18–20)

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Introduction

- I. Proverbs 31:10–31 is an acrostic poem in Hebrew (each verse begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet).
 - A. The virtuous woman described in this passage is devoted to the well-being of her household (Prov 31:10–12, 20–21).
 - B. She makes her home the center of her life, gives generously to the poor, and instructs her children and household workers in genuine kindness.
 - C. Because of her godly life, her husband and children enjoy their lot in life and honor her (Prov 31:27–31).
 - D. “The heart of her husband safely trusts her” (Prov 31:11).
 1. “Her husband trusts her from his heart” (Prov 31:11 CJB).
 2. “Her husband has full confidence” (Prov 31:11 NIV) in her in every area of life; he trusts in her good sense, her fidelity, and her industry.
- II. The Bible teaches us that your spouse is your partner by covenant and your *companion* (Prov 2:17; Mal 2:14).
 - A. I believe most of the preaching on marriage revolves around the *covenant* aspect, i.e., God binds a man and woman together in marriage for life.
 - B. The idea of your spouse being your *companion* often gets little notice!
 - C. The truth is that your spouse is to be your closest friend—the one who gets your undivided attention, heartfelt loyalty, and well-deserved trust.
 - D. Complete confidence and trust in your spouse are essential for a good marriage.
 - E. However, married couples often do things that harm or destroy the trust and confidence that one spouse has in the other.
- III. In my preaching, I give special attention to Bible manners and customs.
 - A. We are 6,000 miles and over 3,400 years from the days of Moses.
 - B. My goal is to present the stories of the Bible in their proper historical and cultural context.
 - C. Often, people read these stories and try to picture them in the setting of modern America, which makes them very hard to understand.
 - D. However, it is much easier to understand and appreciate those stories when they are placed in their proper historical, cultural, and social context.
 - E. As we discuss marriage, I want to point out a relatively obscure ritual from the days of Moses (c. 1,400 BC).
 - F. This ritual will sound very strange to those unfamiliar with ancient customs.
 - G. However, I hope that by the time we are finished, you will understand and appreciate both the ancient ritual and the application we can make of it today.

I. Law Of Jealousy

- A. The fifth chapter of the book of Numbers contains what is sometimes called the “Law of Jealousy” or the “Law of Sotah.”
1. *Sotah* is the section of the *Mishnah* (a book that contains the oral traditions of the Jews) that deals with a suspected adulteress.
 2. The passage discusses what to do when a Jewish man *suspected* but could not *prove* that his wife had been guilty of adultery.
 3. In the late 1800s, German scholars Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch were two of the best-known commentators on the Old Testament worldwide.
 4. Keil and Delitzsch’s *Commentary on the Old Testament* is a classic of the nineteenth century.
 5. People today usually refer to their works as “Keil and Delitzsch.”
 6. Their comments on the fifth chapter of the book of Numbers are worthy of your consideration.
 7. “As any suspicion cherished by a man against his wife, that she either is or has been guilty of adultery, whether well-founded or not, is sufficient to shake the marriage connection to its very roots, and to undermine, along with marriage, the foundation of the civil commonwealth, it was of the greatest importance to guard against this moral evil, which was so utterly irreconcilable with the holiness of the people of God, by appointing a process in harmony with the spirit of the theocratical law, and adapted to bring to light the guilt or innocence of any wife who had fallen into such suspicion, and at the same time to warn fickle wives against unfaithfulness.” (Keil & Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*)
 8. If there were witnesses to the married man or woman’s unfaithfulness, the death penalty would follow (Gen 20:3; Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22).
 9. However, without witnesses, no judge could condemn a person on suspicion.
 10. How would a faithful wife, suspected and slandered by a jealous husband, vindicate her good name?
 11. Where there was doubt, the matter had to be left in God’s hands, who knows everything.
- B. Consider the ritual described in Numbers 5:11–31.
1. Was this rite degrading to women? No!
 2. Imagine the consequences of a woman falsely charged with adultery by an angry husband in a social context in which there was no provision for her innocence to be demonstrated.
 3. Being taken to the priest was an act of mercy!
 4. An innocent woman, unjustly accused by her husband, need not be apprehensive of the outcome and can live free of guilt and condemnation.
 5. The trial she will have is not a kangaroo court—it was conducted within the precincts of the holy Tabernacle, under the jurisdiction of the Levitical priests, in concert with a solemn sacrifice.
 6. The accused woman places herself under the hand of the Lord.

- C. How was this rite applied in ancient Israel?
1. The *Mishnah* has an entire section (tractate) dealing with this problem.
 2. The *Tosefta* and the *Babylonian Talmud* also discuss this matter in great detail.
 3. We will note how the ritual was applied in just a moment.
- D. Who was subject to this rite?
1. The *Mishnah* says it was only a woman who had already been warned twice by her husband, in the presence of two witnesses, to not talk to a particular man.
 2. She had to have been alone with the man long enough to have sexual relations.
 3. If the husband is jealous and witnesses have seen her in the presence of the man she was forbidden to talk to, they would go to the Tabernacle.
- E. Before we see what happened at the Tabernacle, let me hasten to point out that if you are married and continue to associate with someone your spouse has asked you not to talk to—you are a fool!
1. This applies to both men and women!
 2. Whether you are the husband or the wife, you do not belong to yourself but to your spouse (1 Cor 7:3-4).
 - a) In the normal realms of life, a Christian's body is theirs to take care of and use as a gift from God.
 - b) In the spiritual sense, our bodies belong to God (Rom 12:1).
 - c) However, in the marital realm, your body belongs to your marriage partner.
 3. Some years ago, I had a friend who grew a full beard, and his wife hated it.
 - a) When he married, he didn't have a beard, so I strongly suggested that he get rid of it!
 - b) He had no right to dishonor his wife in that way.
 - c) He would have been a selfish pig if he didn't get rid of it.
 4. I have seen women come into the meetinghouse with a new hairstyle, and other women tell them how wonderful it looks.
 - a) Then the woman will sometimes say, "Oh, my husband really hates it!"
 - b) If your husband hates it, why are you wearing it like that?
 - c) Ladies, why don't you admit you're selfish?
 5. The truth is that you have no right to displease your spouse!
- F. What happened at the Tabernacle (and later at the Temple)?
1. This ritual was designed to show the justice of God.
 2. The accused woman presented herself *before the Lord* and His priest for vindication or condemnation; the results would be seen in her own body.
 3. God in heaven was the only one who knew the truth of the situation and the One who would ultimately mete out the appropriate justice.
 - a) The woman who had been brought to the Tabernacle would not take this issue lightly.
 - b) Public humiliation, shame, anger with her spouse, and exposure before the priests and people were all terrifying prospects.
 - c) Neither would her husband take these issues lightly.
 - d) He was not just spreading rumors about his wife in the privacy of their home.

- e) He, too, was coming before the Lord, and he, also, might be judged.
 - f) This ritual was an expression of the mercy of God to women whom prideful men so often abused.
4. The priest charged the woman with telling the truth concerning this matter.
 5. She could *confess* and say, “I am unclean,” meaning she admitted guilt.
 - a) In the Second Temple period, the woman was taken to the Nicanor Gate (*Mishnah, Sotah* 1:5), and the priest would rip her clothing (exposing her breasts), loosen her hair (a shameful act in the ancient Near East), and he would take her jewelry away.
 - b) “And all women are allowed to stare at her, since it is said, that all women may be taught not to do after your lewdness” (*Mishnah, Sotah* 1:7).
 - c) She was not put to death because she was not caught in the act.
 6. If she *denied* any wrongdoing, she would take an oath affirming her innocence before God and His people.
 - a) She would then drink the water that had been provided by the priest (probably taken from the laver between the altar and the Tabernacle).
 - b) The water itself was not bitter—it *became bitter* only *if* she was lying.
 - c) A small amount of soil from the floor of the Tabernacle was not likely to give the water a *bitter* taste.
 - d) Rather, we should consider the idea of the holiness of the place, hence the holiness of the ground on which the Tabernacle is placed.
 - e) Holy dust is added to holy water not to change the taste but to emphasize its holiness.
 - f) The bitterness of the water was *potential*, not actual, and the cursing associated with it was also *potential*, not actual.
- G. If she were guilty and had lied under oath before God, she would then bear her guilt in her body and the inner chambers of her heart.
1. The NIV translation has a margin note for Numbers 5:22 that says the water “causes you to have a miscarrying womb and barrenness.”
 2. Because of her deceit, she would be barren for the rest of her life.
 3. Childlessness was believed to be a curse from God in the ancient Near East, subjecting one to shame, ridicule, and reproach from others (cf. 1 Sam 1:8).
- H. What would happen if the woman was innocent (Num 5:28)?
1. She was blessed with more children—symbolic of God’s blessing (Ps 127:3–5).
 2. Her husband would have been shamed before the entire assembly and exposed to the world as being a jealous man.
 3. “In our highly sophisticated society, such procedures for deciding right from wrong seem not only primitive but cruel. At this stage of their history, however, the Hebrew people could not be expected to act other than according to conventions recognized and acceptable in their culture. In this divine provision we have an ‘oath which is dramatized’, and there are a number of in-built protective devices that are not present in the ‘trials by ordeal’ typical of the ancient and medieval world.” (Raymond Brown, *The Message of Numbers*, 45)
- I. We have examined this ancient ritual to remind us of the terrible crime of adultery.

II. Adultery Destroys The Soul

- A. The patriarch Job said adultery was *wickedness* (Job 31:9–11).
 1. The KJV and ESV call it a “heinous crime.”
 2. The NIV says it is “shameful, a sin to be judged.”
- B. All adulterers are covenant breakers (Mal 2:14–16; Prov 2:16–17).
 1. The person who commits adultery never commits just one sin!
 2. Adulterers lie to their spouses, the witnesses who stood by them at their wedding, and their God!
- C. This is why we are told to “flee sexual immorality” (1 Cor 6:18).
 1. God created sexual intimacy to be an essential ingredient of marriage, but sex outside the marriage relationship *always* hurts someone.
 2. “There is force and emphasis in the word *flee*. Man should escape from it; he should not stay to reason about it; to debate the matter; or even to contend with his propensities, and to try the strength of his virtue. There are some sins which a man can resist; some about which he can reason without danger of pollution. But this is a sin where a man is safe only when he flees; from pollution only when he refuses to entertain a thought of it; secure when he seeks a victory by flight, and a conquest by retreat. Let a man turn away from it without reflection on it and he is safe. Let him think, and reason, and he may be ruined. The very passage of an impure thought through the mind leaves pollution behind it. An argument on the subject often leaves pollution; a description ruins; and even the presentation of motives against it may often fix the mind with dangerous inclination on the crime. There is no way of avoiding the pollution but in the manner prescribed by Paul; there is no man safe who will not follow his direction. How many a young man would be saved from poverty, want, disease, curses, tears, and hell, could these two words be made to blaze before them like the writing before the astonished eyes of Belshazzar (Dan. V.), and could terrify him from even the momentary contemplation of the crime.” (Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament*)
- D. Adultery destroys the soul (Prov 6:20–35).
 1. One of the differences between the Law of Moses and the wisdom of Solomon is this long speech!
 2. Only one verse contains the word *commandment*; the rest of the passage seeks to impart wisdom to guide our way into a happy and blessed life.
- E. Not only did the writer of the book of Proverbs warn his son about the dangers of adultery, but he also told him how to avoid it by spending time with his wife, the woman who was supposed to be...

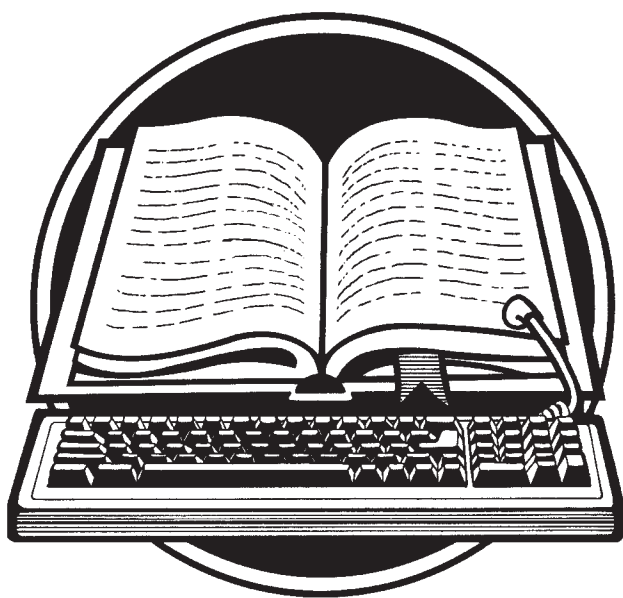
III. Your Closest Friend

- A. The book of Proverbs unashamedly calls for seeking fulfillment of intimate desires within marriage for the *enjoyment* and good of *both* husband and wife.
- B. The consequences of adultery should motivate a person to avoid it (Prov 5:7–14).
 1. The writer warns that associating with an adulteress will rob a person of health and prosperity.
 2. The price of infidelity may be high, for everything one works for—position, power, prosperity—could be lost through such indiscretion.

- C. As a strong preventive to marital infidelity, the writer of Proverbs admonishes husbands to “drink from your own cistern” (Prov 5:15–23).
1. “The wife is a cistern, well, spring, stream or fountain because she is able to satisfy the desire of her husband. In the ancient Near East, a spring on one’s property was regarded as very valuable and significant. The idea, then, is this: be content with marital relations with your own wife. Find your delight and satisfaction in her rather than going elsewhere to taste the wells and springs of others. Faithfulness to your own wife is so natural and so pleasant that the question must be asked, Why would you ever be attracted to anyone else? What is more, remember that all of your life is directly viewed by God—and that includes the bedroom!” (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Peter H. Davids, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, 285)
 2. The advice of Proverbs applies to our culture, where adultery is so common.
 3. In contrast to most of what we hear today, the book of Proverbs urges couples to look to each other for lifelong satisfaction and companionship.
 4. Many temptations entice husbands and wives to leave when marriage becomes dull to find excitement and pleasures elsewhere.
 5. However, God designed marriage and sanctified it, and only within this covenant relationship can we find real love and fulfillment.
 6. Don’t let God’s best for you be wasted on the illusion of greener pastures elsewhere.
 7. Instead, rejoice with your spouse as you give yourselves to God and each other.

Invitation

- I. God never intended marriage to become boring, lifeless, and dull.
- II. Intimacy in marriage is a gift God gives married people for mutual enjoyment.
- III. Real happiness comes when we find pleasure in the spouse God has given us and commit ourselves to meet their needs.
- IV. The real danger is doubting that God knows and cares for us.



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