

POWER

"... the gospel ... is the power of God unto salvation ..." (Romans 1:16)

THERE IS SOMETHING BETTER THAN DIVORCE AND MISERY: THERE IS GODLY MARRIAGE (PART 1)

by Wade L. Webster

The comparative words "better than" are used throughout the Bible. However, they are found more in the wisdom literature than in any other section of the Bible. When you stop and think about it, this makes perfect sense. After all, wisdom is about being able to discern between things to determine what is best (Prov. 1:1-6). Solomon used the words "better than" repeatedly in the books that he penned. In the book of Proverbs he spoke of wisdom as being better than gold, silver, and rubies (Prov. 3:14; 8:11; 8:19; 16:16); in the book of Ecclesiastes he spoke of a good name as being better than precious ointment (Eccl. 7:1); and, in the Song of Songs (1:1) he spoke of his wife's love as being better than wine (SOS 4:10; cf. 1:2). Since my assignment concerns marriage, we will give special attention to the Song of Solomon.

Before we begin our study of the Song of Solomon, let's go back to where marriage began. In the second chapter of Genesis, we read:

And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed (Gen. 2:18-25).

In these verses, we see a divine assessment, a divine answer, and a divine arrangement. The divine assessment was that it wasn't good for man to be alone, the divine answer was to create an helpmeet for man, and the divine arrangement was for man to leave father and mother and cleave to his wife. Clearly, God did not want man to be miserable. He wanted man to be happy. Marriage was created to that end. God wanted the husband and the wife to be "heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). Truly, the man and the woman who find a faithful Christian mate find a good thing and obtain the favor of the Lord (Prov. 18:22). Adam certainly felt that he had obtained God's grace when he found Eve. He instantly laid claim to her exclaiming, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 2:23). She pleased him well (Judg. 14:2-3).

Sadly, with the passing of time, man thought that divorce was better than marriage. The Old Testament drew to a close with these sad words:

The LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously

against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously (Mal. 2:14-16).

Men in Malachi's day thought that there was a better way than staying true to their marriage vows. They thought that they could find happiness by putting away the wives that they had chosen in their youth. However, God knew better. The pernicious practice of putting away one's mate persisted until the time of Christ. Jesus addressed the hard-hearted practice and explained that "from the beginning, it was not so" (Mt. 19:4-8). Jesus knew that from the beginning there had been a better way than divorce and misery. Jesus was trying to direct them back to that better way—godly marriage. We need to continually direct men back to this today. As you know, there are some today who continue to prefer divorce to marriage.

In addition to divorce, there were those who thought that fornication was better than marriage. The practice was especially prevalent among the Gentiles (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; Rom. 1:29). As you know, some of the saints at Corinth had been guilty of the practice before their conversion (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Likely, the temptation to return to this prior practice was continuous at Corinth. No doubt, this is the reason why Paul felt the need to write to them to instruct them to "flee fornication" (1 Cor. 6:18). To "avoid fornication," Paul instructed every man to "have his own wife" and every woman to "have her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). Paul knew that there was a better way than fornication. As you

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know, many in our world continue to need this message.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul even spoke of some who would arise and argue that celibacy was better than marriage. We read:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth (1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Those who are familiar with church history know that Catholicism came along and argued for the supremacy of celibacy. Being single was seen as being more honorable than being married. However, the Bible speaks of marriage as being "honorable in all" (Heb. 13:4).

Having established that loneliness, divorce, fornication, and celibacy are not better than godly marriage, let's now turn our attention to having the kind of marriage that God wants us to have. We want to move from surviving to thriving and from getting by to flying high. As noted in the introduction, we want to focus our attention on the Song of Solomon. The Song of Solomon is an inspired marriage manual. In this Song, we see the better way of godly marriage.

One of the most beautiful pictures of marriage found anywhere in the Bible is found in the second chapter of the Song of Solomon. I believe that it pictures the delight that God desires to dwell within our marriages. We read,

For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away. O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for

sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely (SOS 2:11-14).

Truly, the world is a very different place when two people are in love. The barrenness of winter gives birth to the blossoms of spring. The rain stops and the sun shines. The flowers bloom and the birds sing. Sweet fragrances fill the air. Certainly, this is a far cry from divorce and misery. This is marriage as God intends for it to be. This is marriage as God can make it.

Have you ever stopped to think about what your life would be without your mate? Imagine winter returning. Imagine a daily downpour. Imagine the flowers fading and the singing stopping. Sadly, some have experienced this because of death or divorce. I encourage you to go and spend some time with a recent widow/widower or divorcee. It will do both of you some good. It will help you to appreciate what you have before it is gone.

Let's examine the love that Solomon and the Shulamite shared:

Their Love Was Spoken

Throughout the Song, Solomon and the Shulamite expressed their love for one another. They did not just assume that the other one knew how they felt. They declared it. In the second chapter, we read, "My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away" (SOS 2:10). Notice the language in the passage "my beloved," "my love," "my fair one." The expression, "my beloved" appears 25 times in the book (1:14, 16; 2:3, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17; 5:2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 16; 6:2, 3; 7:9, 10, 11, 13; 8:14), with "wellbeloved" appearing 1 time (1:13). The expression "my love" appears 12 times (1:9, 15; 2:2, 7, 10, 13; 3:5; 4:1, 7; 5:2; 6:4; 8:4) with "whom my soul loveth" appearing another 5 times (1:7; 3:1, 2, 3, 4). The expression "my fair one" appears 2 times (2:10, 13) with "fair" and "fairest" being used another dozen times (1:8, 15, 16; 2:10, 13; 4:1, 7, 10; 5:9; 6:1, 10; 7:6). This means that at least 57 times in the Song, Solomon and the Shulamite expressed their love for one another in the

way that they referred to each other. Of course, this does not include all the other names and descriptive language that they used for one another (SOS 2:14; 5:2; 6:9).

Not only was their love spoken, it was specific. They didn't just make generic statements of love to one another. They spelled out what they loved about each other. Solomon declared:

Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead. Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them. Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks. Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies (SOS 4:1-5; cf. 6:4-7; 7:1-5).

Please note that Solomon referenced her eyes, her hair, her teeth, her lips, her temples, her neck, and her breasts. He didn't just say she was fair, he spelled it out. He said that she was "the work of the hands of a cunning workman" (SOS 7:1).

Throughout the book, the Shulamite humbly downplayed her beauty. In the first chapter, she spoke of how the sun had blackened her skin as she kept the vineyards of her brothers (SOS 1:5-6). She had the skin of a common laborer, rather than that of a court lady. She confessed that she had cared for other vineyards, but not for her own (SOS 1:6). In other words, she had dressed the vineyard, but not herself. She told the king not to look on her (SOS 1:6). Her hair and her clothes were a mess. She was sweaty and dirty from work. However, Solomon didn't see any of that. He saw her grace and her beauty, not the blackness of her skin or the grime on her clothes. He called her the "fairest among

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Deuteronomy 5:32

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women" (SOS 1:8; cf. 6:1, 9) and compared her to a thoroughbred horse (SOS 1:9-11). It bears noting that Solomon was an expert horseman (1 Kings 10:25ff). He knew the difference between a plough horse and a show horse. The Shulamite was definitely a show horse. In the second chapter, the Shulamite humbly described herself as a common flower of the field (2:1). However, Solomon didn't see her that way at all. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing common about her. He saw her as a "lily among thorns." In his eyes, she stood out among the daughters of men. He claimed her (put his banner over her 2:4), comforted her (with flagons and with apples 2:5), and cuddled her (with embraces 2:6). Solomon wasn't just slapping paint on a house. He was painting a masterpiece.

In like manner, the Shulamite spelled out what she loved about Solomon. When the daughters of Jerusalem asked what elevated her beloved above another beloved, she declared,

My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand. His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven. His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set. His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh. His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires. His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem (SOS 5:10-16).

Please note that the Shulamite referenced Solomon's skin, head, locks, eyes, cheeks, lips, hands, belly, legs, and face. The daughters of Jerusalem got a detailed list of what made Solomon the most eligible bachelor in Israel. He was an "apple tree among the trees of the wood" (2:3). Amazingly, Shulamith even complimented his ride. It was powered by three score horses (valiant men 3:6-8) and had lots of wood trim and chrome (cedar, silver, and gold - 3:9-10). To top it all off, the interior was purple (3:9-10). It was a ride fit for a king.

Like Solomon and his bride, couples today need to express their love for one another; and, they need to be specific in doing so. They need to paint pictures that clearly convey how they feel. They need to give honor to one another. Peter wrote, "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered" (1 Pet. 3:7). In this passage we see five ingredients of a successful marriage: habitation "dwell with them," education "according to knowledge," appreciation "giving honor unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel," cooperation "as being heirs together of the grace of life," and supplication "that your prayers be no hindered." Of course, in this part of our study, we are focused on the honor or appreciation that mates are to show to one another.

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