

Four questions every couple should ask before they get married (And none of them is about compatibility)

The foundation of a biblical marriage is not compatibility. That's the foundation of a cultural marriage. And it's soft soil. Compatibility is temporal. Compatibility can get your marriage off to a nice start. But it lacks the legs to carry you to the finish line. Marriages that start with only a tank full of compatibility, end up on the side of the road looking for a gas station. Any marriage can start well. It's finishing well that demands something with a higher octane than compatibility.

That's because the things that make a couple compatible are like the weather. They're subject to change. Life happens. For example, physical compatibility changes when body parts sag and belt sizes increase. Intellectual compatibility changes with a dementia diagnosis. Common interests become uncommon when the unexpected interrupts your expectations. Sexual compatibility cools off pretty fast when the pressures of life heat up.

It's not that compatibility isn't a marriage factor. It is. And it's an important factor. It's just not the foundation. Covenant is. The Biblical plan for marriage is covenant.

God designed marriage to be your greatest source of relational happiness on the human level. In Proverbs 18:22, God said, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing." In Proverbs 5:18, he said, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth."

But God is describing covenantal marriage. Malachi 2:14 says, "The Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by **covenant**." And in Proverbs 2:17, God says, "She forsakes the companion of your youth and forgets the **covenant** of her God." Biblical marriage is covenantal.

There are four components in a covenantal marriage. God describes them at the front end of the Bible, in the second chapter of the first book. It's fitting that the foundational principles of marriage are found in the foundational chapters of the Bible.

Here's what it says in Genesis 2:24-25,

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

Let's unpack the verse by asking four questions. Every couple who plans to get married, and who wants to build a covenantal marriage, needs to ask these four questions.

Question 1. Will you be loyal?

Covenantal marriage is rooted in an exchanged loyalty. The first part of the verse says, "Let a man leave his father and mother..." A child's first loyalty is to his/her parents. God intended the marriage covenant to be the place where first loyalty would slip from parents to partner. The moment a couple enters a covenantal marriage, they pledge loyalty to each other above all others. Nothing comes between the two of them: not parents, a job, siblings, or friends. Nothing competes with your spouse for your affection. Nothing competes with your spouse for intimacy. Nothing competes with your spouse for emotional support. Unquestionable loyalty means you will never make a significant decision of which the other is not aware, and is in agreement.

There is no limit to what a couple can endure if the other is resolutely in their corner. A man can go through hell, if there is a woman standing by his side with unquestionable loyalty. The Bible says, “Two are better than one.... For if they fall, one will lift up the other” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). Unquestionable loyalty will carry you both to the finish line. On the other hand, anything that competes for the loyalty of either, and wins, will become a wedge between the two. That will divide the marriage as surely as an axe splitting wood.

Question 2. Will it be permanent?

Compatibility sustains a marriage until the two become incompatible. Compatibility marriages are verbal, or written, contracts, which get shredded when they're breached. Covenantal marriage is for life. That's what God meant when He said, "...and hold fast to his wife." This is the imagery of a sailor strapping himself to the mast in a storm to ensure that he won't be washed overboard. He is "held fast." Each one needs to ask and answer the question: "Am I strapped to the marriage mast for life, no matter what may come?" There is no trapdoor in a covenantal marriage.

Covenantal marriages are never shredded, because they're not contracts. Make no mistake, the marriage vows will be breached, even in a covenantal marriage. Sometime, somewhere, somehow, they will be breached. Because every marriage consists of two sinners. But a breached covenant requires forgiveness, not divorce. "For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part" is covenantal language. In a covenantal marriage, there are no conditions under which either party will seek a divorce.

Some say this is unrealistic. Not so. Our culture still values covenantal relationship. But it's limited to parent and child. A parent's commitment to a child is permanent and unconditional. It's a mirror of God's covenantal love for us. A parent who fails to live up to his/her covenantal commitment to a child is still shamed, even in our culture. It wasn't too long ago, that the marriage covenant was valued the same way in the culture.

God designed marriage to be the primary unconditional human relationship in your life. Your relationship with your kids is the second. The greatest gift you can give your children is to raise them in the shade of a strong, stable, safe, loving family, led by parents who enjoy a permanent, unbreakable, covenantal union.

How about including the following promise when you exchange your wedding vows? "We pledge that we will never seek to end this marriage in a court of law by divorce."

Question 3. Will you grow?

Notice the process. "They shall become one flesh." It doesn't say, "They *are* one flesh." "Oneness" is not instant. It takes time. Actually, it takes a lifetime. You grow into oneness. "They shall become..." "Becoming one" produces a rich marriage. Building a rich marriage is like growing a rich bank account.

Growing a rich bank account is simple. It's not easy. But it is simple. Maximize deposits, minimize withdrawals. Large, frequent deposits are best. The more the merrier. The smaller, less frequent, the withdrawals, the faster the deposits grow. That's how to get rich... slowly... carefully... over a long time.

That's also how to grow a rich marriage. Every marriage is a relational bank account. Its' currency is words, tone, and body language. Maximize relational deposits, minimize withdrawals, and you'll have a rich marriage. That's a promise. It's not easy. But it is simple.

So what are relational deposits? The Bible says, "Put on then... compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another, and if one of you has a complaint against

the other, forgiving each other... And above all these... put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” These are the eight relational deposits. Every time you intentionally invest any of these into your relationship – wrapped in words, tone, and body language – you’ll deepen the richness of your marriage account. This is the soil in which love and affection grows. These are the ingredients that feed the deepest longings of the human heart.

So, are you making deposits that will grow a rich marriage? A word of caution. Be very careful about withdrawals. That gets at the fourth question about a covenant marriage.

Question 4. Will it be safe?

Two will become one, so long as the relationship is marked by loyalty, permanence and growth. But it must also be safe. That’s what the rest of the text means: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not shamed.” They had total exposure with each other, yet they had no shame. They experienced total vulnerability, yet faced no danger. The marriage was a safe place. A marriage relationship should be a stranger to harm. You can’t promise to never hurt. We hurt because we sin. We sometimes hurt because the other person sins. Hurt people hurt other people. But you must promise to never cause harm. Hurt is forgivable. Harm destroys.

Harm is like cancer. Healthy cells bond. Malignant cells harm healthy cells. They divide and destroy. Relational cancer makes a marriage unsafe. Relational cancer inflicts terminal harm. Relational cancer creeps and smolders. It attacks marriages cell by cell, often over a prolonged period. Harmful actions are often undetected until they’re terminal.

Relational cancer grows when someone opens the door to anything that is harmful to the health of the marriage. Breaching loyalty, threatening divorce, making sustained withdrawals, are all cancerous. So are harmful words and actions, profanity, obscenity, attitudes, hostile tones and body language, disrespect, lies, anger, mistrust, addictive behavior and neglect. Left unattended, harmful agents will metastasize and eventually terminate the marriage. The first time harmful words or behavior is tolerated, and left unchecked, is the beginning of the end.

Marriage should be a safe place. A covenantal marriage is the safest relationship in the world. Have zero tolerance for harmful agents. Protect the perimeters. An early warning sign of impending harm is fear. Ask each other: “Are you afraid? Do you fear for our marriage? Are you afraid of me? Another early warning sign is loss of trust. Ask each other: Do you trust me? Ask yourself, “Am I trustworthy?” A word to the wise is sufficient. Change course when necessary. Do whatever needs to be done. Send up a flare before the marriage is underwater. Ask for help. Seek out the help of a trusted, wise mentor who knows what it takes to build a lifelong marriage. Be prepared to pay any price. The longer harmful tumors are left unattended, the longer, and more expensive, the counseling will be. Protect your marriage from relational cancer and you will become one flesh. Pledge your commitment to never cause harm, and your marriage will be safe.

These are the four components of a covenantal marriage. Grow a rich marriage, and it will be your greatest life accomplishment. Nothing else comes close. It will be your greatest source of happiness. It will be the greatest gift you will give your kids. Knead these into the soil of your marriage and you will finish strong. This is how to finish well.