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Foreword

by Ruth Prince

Soon after I came to know the Lord Jesus as my Savior and Messiah in 1970, I came into contact with real Christians whose marriages were a constant testimony to His lordship in their lives. At about the same time, I became acquainted with the teaching and ministry of Derek Prince, Charles Simpson, and others. As a single woman, my prayer to God was, “Set me under authority, in the place You have for me, that I may serve You in the best way and help to prepare for the coming of Your kingdom.”

My prayers were answered several years later, in a way that I had not anticipated, when God chose me to be Derek’s wife, his new “*help meet*” (Genesis 2:18 KJV). Derek’s first wife, Lydia, was an extraordinary woman who laid down her life and her own successful ministry in Jerusalem for her husband. When Derek married her in 1946, she was a respected spiritual leader there with an established work of her own.¹ However, she accepted willingly the behind-the-scenes role of intercessor, homemaker, supporter—that of a true wife.

When I first came into close personal contact with Derek, I was impressed by the way he lived out his teaching in his personal conduct; he “practiced what he preached.” I have come to see that much of his present ability to minister to the needs of God’s people has its roots in the relationship he and Lydia had with one another for almost thirty years and in their relationship, as a unit, with the Lord.

Most of the material contained in *Marriage Covenant* was developed and taught before I came into Derek’s life. Yet, in the same period of time, while I was living in Jerusalem completely out of touch with his ministry and teaching, the Holy Spirit was speaking to me along the same lines about the real meaning of covenant. My

¹ Lydia’s own dramatic story is told by Derek in their book, *Appointment in Jerusalem*, published just before her death in 1975. The 30th anniversary edition is available from Whitaker House.

study led me to Genesis chapter 15. I identified with the experience of Abraham as he entered into a deep, personal, life-changing relationship with God—a relationship so profound that we still refer to our God as “the God of Abraham.” It was a life of total commitment.

During the same period, I was also reflecting on the role of women in the body of Christ. I saw that God had created Eve for the sole purpose of meeting Adam’s need, that man was not complete without his God-given mate. It seems to me that in contemporary Western society, and in much of the church, too many women are endeavoring (often loudly) to do something they were never created to do—to succeed in life as independent, solitary entities. For a number of years, I myself sought fulfillment in that way as a career woman. But when I entered into a relationship with Jesus, my life was redirected. I began to see that it is women who are the losers when they neglect the marriage covenant—along with the men who are not able to achieve the wholeness God intended for them in union with their mates.

I realize that it is not possible for every man and every woman to find that ideal mate and that it certainly is better to be alone with the Lord than to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever. For many, there is no other choice than to remain single. The quality of the single life, with which I am well acquainted, can be determined by the quality of the relationship with God and the relationship with other Christians. Commitment seems to be the key—commitment to God, to His will for your life, and to that part of the body of Christ with which you are connected.

It seems appropriate that the first publishing of this book is just as Derek and I are joining our lives in the covenant of marriage. At the same time, I am joining myself to the part of the body with which he is associated in the United States, and he with the part of the body to which I belong in Jerusalem. We believe we are conforming to God’s preordained plan as we each lay down our life for the other, that we may merge into one new entity under the lordship of Jesus. We know that, as with everything in the spiritual life, this must be walked out on a day-to-day basis. I believe that this book contains not only the pattern, but also the practical instruction on how to do so.

I pray that applying the principles of this book will lead you, whether you are a

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man or a woman, into the wholeness that God wills for you, in covenant relationship with Himself and with His people.

—Ruth Prince, 1978

Marriage Is a Covenant

Is there a secret to a successful marriage? Why do some couples succeed and others fail? Is it all just a matter of chance?

One thing is certain: If there is a secret that ensures a successful marriage, millions of couples in our contemporary culture have never found it. In almost every country in Western civilization, the proportion of divorces to marriages has soared dramatically in the last few decades. In the United States, we have reached a situation where there is approximately one divorce for every two marriages. Fifty years ago, a person familiar with American life would never have dreamed that such a situation could arise in so short a period.

However, the ratio of divorces to marriages does not tell the whole story. Many marriages that have not yet ended in the final shipwreck of divorce nevertheless find themselves in very troubled and unhappy circumstances. In some cases, there is open strife and disharmony, usually involving all those who live under the one roof, both parents and children. In other cases, although things appear fairly calm on the surface, underneath there are the festering sores of bitterness, unforgiveness, and rebellion. Sooner or later, these are liable to erupt in the form of some mental or emotional breakdown, the cause of which may never be precisely diagnosed.

Those who are specifically concerned with mental health have suggested that about one out of every four persons in America today either needs, or will need, some form of psychiatric care. Psychiatric treatment centers are overflowing, and professional psychiatrists are in ever increasing demand. This has a direct bearing on the condition of marriage and the home, because it is generally agreed that the majority of mental and emotional problems can be traced back to tension and disharmony in the home, primarily in marriage relationships. Thus, the progressive deterioration of mental and emotional health is one of many symptoms in

contemporary society that point to the most urgent social problem of our day—the breakdown of marriage and the home.

The reaction of certain contemporary sociologists to this situation has taken the form of passively accepting the inevitable. Some have even gone so far as to assert that the concept of marriage was a “mistake” in the first place and that it is no longer relevant in our present “advanced” state of social progress. However, many of the so-called experts who make such pronouncements are themselves the product of unhappy homes; more than a few also have the record of at least one unsuccessful marriage in their own lives. We may therefore have grounds to inquire whether their statements to the effect that marriage is irrelevant or outmoded do not merely put them on the level of the fox in Aesop’s fable. He had tried desperately to reach a cluster of luscious grapes, but failed. His final comment was, “They’re probably sour anyway!”

In the face of this confused situation and these conflicting opinions, I want to state, clearly and briefly, my own personal conviction. I believe that there is a secret that can ensure a successful marriage. Furthermore, I believe that this secret is revealed in the pages of one unique book—the Bible.

Before I proceed to explain what this secret is, it will be appropriate for me to give a little of my own personal background. This could be interpreted as presenting my credentials and qualifications for addressing this subject.

Personal Background

I was educated at two of Britain’s most famous educational institutions—Eton College and Cambridge University. Prior to World War II, I pursued a career in philosophy, and in 1940 I was elected to a fellowship (resident professorship) in this field at King’s College, Cambridge. However, the impact of World War II interrupted my academic career.

In 1941, while serving as a hospital attendant in the British army, I had a dramatic, life-changing encounter with God—something that was totally out of line with my previous philosophic theories and preconceptions. Out of this encounter, I formed two conclusions that I have never since had reason to change: first, that Jesus Christ is alive; second, that the Bible is a true, relevant, up-to-date book. These two

conclusions radically and permanently altered the whole course of my life.

When I was in Jerusalem in 1946, I married a Danish lady, Lydia Christensen, who was the “mother” of a small home for girls that she had founded there. Through my marriage to Lydia, in one day I became the adoptive father of eight girls, of whom six were Jewish, one was Arab, and one was English. Also at this time, I studied for two years at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Lydia and I and our eight girls continued living in Jerusalem throughout the upheavals that marked the birth of the State of Israel. We thus came face to face, as a family, with the grim realities of siege, famine, and war. Later we moved, still as a family, to Britain.

In the years that followed, I served in various capacities in various lands: as a pastor in Britain; as an educator in Kenya; as a Bible teacher and conference speaker in Europe, Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and other countries. Throughout all my travels, Lydia was always by my side. Sometimes, after we had been ministering together in public, people would make the comment, “The two of you work together as if you were one person.”

In Kenya, Lydia and I adopted our ninth child, an African baby girl. We successfully completed the raising of all our nine girls. At the time of this writing, all but our youngest have married and have presented us with many grandchildren.²

After thirty years, my marriage with Lydia was terminated by her death. Our life together had always been an open book—not only to our children, but also to countless people who, through the years, came to our home for counseling and prayer. Of all those who knew us in this way, I question whether there are any who would not agree that our marriage was happy and successful. Certainly it had its fair share of tensions and problems—more than would be experienced by a “normal” couple who spend their whole life in one familiar setting. But the success of a marriage does not depend upon the absence of tensions and problems; it depends upon a special quality of relationship that needs to be developed between husband and wife.

In the pages that follow, it is my intention to share with you the secret of how to

² Note: All of Derek Prince’s daughters have since married.

build a relationship of this kind. I trust that the brief outline of my life to this point will be sufficient to demonstrate that my convictions are not just a set of abstract theories that have never been put to the tests of real life.

Perhaps I should add that at the moment of writing I am about to remarry. Coincidentally, I met my second wife, Ruth, like my first, in Jerusalem. I enter this second marriage with a quiet trust that God will also crown this marriage with His blessing, as Ruth and I meet the conditions that He has revealed in Scripture.³

Marriage Is a Mystery

In Ephesians 5:22–32, Paul explained the Christian view of marriage. He concluded by saying, “*This mystery is great*” (v. 32). Thus, he acknowledged that marriage is a mystery. In Paul’s time, the word *mystery* had a more specific meaning than it does today. Then, it had religious associations. It denoted a form of knowledge that conferred valuable benefits but was restricted to a special group who were bound together by their religious practices. For a person to have access to this knowledge, he first had to be initiated into the group.

Thus, Paul’s use of the word *mystery* to describe the marriage relationship suggests two things: first, that there is a little-known form of knowledge that can make marriage what it ought to be; second, that a person can acquire this knowledge only by undergoing certain tests and meeting certain conditions. It is the main purpose of this book to initiate the reader into these tests and conditions.

In the book of Deuteronomy, when the children of Israel were ready to enter into their promised inheritance in the land of Canaan, Moses reviewed for them the kind of lifestyle God had planned for them in their new environment. He promised them, on God’s behalf, that if they would keep God’s law, they would be abundantly blessed in every area of their lives. In particular, Moses told them that their homes would be like “*heaven upon...earth*” (Deuteronomy 11:21 KJV). He painted a beautiful picture of contentment and unbroken harmony. Such was the level of home

³ Note: Derek and Ruth remained happily married until her death in 1998. Together, they traveled and ministered around the world, fulfilling the Great Commission.

life God had planned for His people.

About twelve hundred years later, through the prophet Malachi, God took stock of Israel's conduct since they had entered into their inheritance. In general, they had failed to meet God's conditions and therefore had not enjoyed the level of life He had planned for them. In His assessment, God pinpointed a number of specific areas of failure. One was in the Israelites' home lives, and specifically in their marriages. Here is what the Lord said concerning this:

And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (Malachi 2:13-14)

Obviously, Israel's failure in this respect was not due to lack of religion. They were "*cover[ing] the altar of the LORD with tears.*" Yet, for all their prayers, their marriages were failures. We are quite often confronted with a similar situation today. People may be very busy with religious activities and yet be unable to make a success of their marriages. Their religion does not enable them to succeed at home. Indeed, excessive preoccupation with religion outside the home, by one or both parties, is sometimes an important factor in the failure of a marriage.

The essence of Israel's failure is contained in the closing phrase of Malachi 2:14: "*though she is...your wife by covenant.*" Israel had come to view marriage as a relationship for which they might set their own standards, one that they were free to initiate or terminate on their own terms. God reminded them, however, that He views marriage quite differently. According to His unchanging purpose, marriage is a covenant, which is the secret that alone ensures the success of the marriage relationship. Once this secret is forgotten or ignored, marriage inevitably loses its sanctity. When marriage loses its sanctity, it also loses its strength and stability.

Much of what we see in our contemporary civilization is closely parallel to the condition of Israel in Malachi's day, and the root cause is the same—a wrong view of marriage.

Jesus' Standard of Marriage

After Malachi, the next and fuller revelation of marriage comes to us through Jesus. The essence of His teaching on marriage is contained in a conversation He had with some Pharisees:

And some Pharisees came to Him, testing Him, and saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And He answered and said, "Have you not read, that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh'? Consequently they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate." They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

(Matthew 19:3–9)

In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, the rabbi in the village is depicted periodically teaching his young students about Jewish Law and spiritual things. At one point in the movie, he says that, among other things, if a wife burns the cake she is baking, that's grounds for divorce. There are many rabbinical laws that deal explicitly with how and when divorce is supposedly acceptable.

When Jesus taught about marriage, however, He never accepted the current Jewish standard. He always went back to God's original intention for marriage. Here,

His remarks were prefaced by “*from the beginning.*” In Hebrew, the book of Genesis is called *In the Beginning*. So, when Jesus said those words, He was directing His questioners back to the Genesis record of creation, which is the basis of all His teaching on marriage and the first record we have of the joining of man and wife. He didn’t accept the standards prevalent in the Judaism of the day; He always went back to His Father’s original plan, unfolded in the garden of Eden.

We may sum up the teaching of Jesus in this passage in four successive statements:

1. The form of marriage that had become accepted in Israel under Judaism was below the level of God’s will.
2. God’s real purpose for marriage was expressed when He originally created man and woman.
3. In the initial union of man and woman, they were so perfectly joined together that they lost their separate identities and became “one flesh.”
4. It is the purpose of Jesus to restore marriage in the lives of His disciples to the original standard revealed at creation.

If we consider the account in the first and second chapters of Genesis of the creation and union of Adam and Eve, one fact is emphasized throughout: God Himself was directly and personally involved. It was His decision, not Adam’s, that Adam should have a mate; it was He who formed Eve from Adam; it was He who presented her to Adam; and it was He who established the terms of the covenant relationship in which He united them.

Therefore, it is correct to say that, all through the Old Testament, marriage was viewed as a covenant relationship. However, the concept that developed under Judaism was on a lower level than that which had found expression at creation. Under Judaism, the covenant relationship was viewed as being merely horizontal—between a man and a woman. But the covenant relationship established at creation had two dimensions—horizontal and vertical. Horizontally, it related Adam and Eve to each other; but vertically, it related the two of them together to God.

"A Cord of Three Strands"

A passage in Ecclesiastes expresses in allegorical terms the difference between these two levels of marriage:

Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

(Ecclesiastes 4:9–12)

The principle from which Solomon started, "*Two are better than one*," agrees with the reason that God gave originally for providing a mate for Adam: "*It is not good for the man to be alone*" (Genesis 2:18). Solomon went on to give three examples that clearly illustrate this principle: when two are together and one falls, the other can help him up; if two lie down together, they keep each other warm; if two are attacked, together they can drive off the attacker. But the last example that Solomon gives is different: "*A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.*" In this case, the strength is supplied not merely by two together, but by three together.

We may use Solomon's pictures to illustrate the difference we have observed between the concept of marriage under Judaism and the concept of marriage that was initiated by God Himself at creation. Solomon's first three examples of "two together" illustrate the concept of marriage on the human plane, a horizontal relationship, merely between a man and a woman. But Solomon's fourth picture—the "*cord of three strands*"—illustrates marriage as it was conceived at creation, a binding together of three persons: a man, a woman, and God. The relationship between the man and the woman is still on the human plane; but when God is added to the relationship, it introduces a new dimension. He becomes an integral part of the marriage.

One of the most revolutionary features of the teaching of Jesus was His standard of marriage. He refused to settle for anything less than the original purpose of God. For this reason, Solomon's picture of "*a cord of three strands*" not only illustrates the pattern of marriage established at creation, but it also portrays just as accurately the pattern of marriage for believers today who are united through their faith in Christ. The principle that binds them inseparably together is *covenant*. What Solomon said of a cord thus formed is still true today; it "*is not quickly torn apart.*"

Some time ago, I was speaking in New Zealand on this picture of Christian marriage as a cord of three strands. At the end of my talk, a man came up and introduced himself. "I am a professional rope maker," he said. "My business is making ropes. I want to tell you that what you have said is absolutely true in the practical realm. The strongest rope is a threefold rope."

Then he went on to give me the following explanation: The largest number of strands that can all touch one another is three. If you take away one and leave only two, obviously you weaken the rope. But if you add an extra strand and make four, you do not add to the strength of the rope because all the strands no longer touch one another. If you have a rope of three strands, one—or even two—of the strands may be under pressure and start to fray. But as long as the third strand holds, the rope will not break.

This rope maker's explanation made the picture of Christian marriage as a threefold cord so vivid for me that I went on meditating on it for days. In my mind's eye, I could see the rope under such tremendous strain that two of its strands began to fray. But the third strand remained strong and held out until the strain was eased and the two frayed strands could be bound up.

That's exactly how it is, I thought to myself, in a truly Christian marriage! There come times of strain when both husband and wife may begin to weaken and feel unable to hold out. But God Himself is that third strand, and He holds on until the strain is eased and both husband and wife can be healed and restored.

In our comparison of Christian marriage to a cord of three strands, we have said that the principle that intertwines the strands and holds them together is covenant. Clearly, this makes covenant an essential element of a successful marriage. And yet,

although covenant is one of the central themes of biblical revelation, most Christians today don't truly understand it.

Therefore, we will now go on in chapter 2 to examine the nature of covenant as it is revealed in Scripture. Then, in chapter 3, we will explain in practical terms just how covenant works to unite a man and a woman in marriage and to hold them together. In chapter 4, we will talk about how you can discover whom God has for you to marry.

In chapters 5 and 6, respectively, we will examine how covenant also serves as the essential binding force in two other vitally important relationships: between God and the individual Christian, and between fellow Christians in their relationship to one another.

Finally, in chapter 7, "The Point of Decision," we will give practical direction to those who feel a need to bring their personal relationship into line with the principles explained in this book.