

LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND ECSTASY

by Steve Zeisler

In recent weeks we have been studying passages from the book of Proverbs, which dissects and describes real life in all its humanity. Proverbs applies wisdom to real life. In the opening chapters a father is giving instruction to his adolescent son, who has not experienced much of life yet, about what he can expect as the days and years unfold for him.

I was trying to think of an American story, a cultural proverb of ours, that generations have passed down from one to another, and the story of the Three Little Pigs came to mind. I remember hearing the story of the Three Little Pigs when I was a child, and I have read the story of the Three Little Pigs to my children. Presumably when they grow up they'll read it to their children. In this story the parent pig, in this case the mother, says to her sons, "It's time for you to go out on your own and make your own home." It's the same point in life at which the father in Proverbs is addressing his son. And so the three pigs go out. Two of them who are irresponsible young pigs build houses that are insubstantial, of straw or sticks. They quickly erect these houses and then go off to dance, play, and enjoy themselves. The practical third pig, of course, builds his house out of bricks. Then when a threat is mounted to their existence and their future, it's only the third pig who is safe, because he has put in the extra effort, deferred gratification, and built something that will last.

The moral of the story, of course, is that we must invest in things that we want to last and stand up under hard times. Jesus told the story, remember, about a house built on sand and a house built on rock. When the storms come, only the house with the secure foundation lasts.

Building a Home

Houses in these stories are really metaphors for the humans who occupy them. We live in an age in which building authorities establish codes that wouldn't let you build a straw house or a stick house even if you wanted to. You can't build a dangerous house. However, you can build a dangerous home. You can make bad decisions about relationships. You can refuse a strong foundation for marriage and a family. You can stop investing the time and heart that are necessary for the security of a marriage. That's the issue that the father wants to speak to his son about in this setting. There will come a danger like the flood Jesus predicted, or the wolf in the story of the Three Little Pigs. Danger, threat, and temptation will bear down on the marriage that God will give you, and this father wants to warn his son about it ahead of time and teach him about what will secure that relationship.

Let's read the fifth chapter of Proverbs:

My son, give attention to my wisdom,
Incline your ear to my understanding;
That you may observe discretion,
And your lips may reserve knowledge.

For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
And smoother than oil is her speech;
But in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
Sharp as a two-edged sword.
Her feet go down to death,
Her steps lay hold of Sheol.

She does not ponder the path of life;
Her ways are unstable, she does not know it.
Now then, my sons, listen to me,
And do not depart from the words of my mouth.

Keep your way far from her,
And do not go near the door of her house,
Lest you give your vigor to others, And your years to the cruel one;
Lest strangers be filled with your strength,
And your hard-earned goods go to the house of an alien;
And you groan at your latter end,
When your flesh and your body are consumed;
And you say, "How I have hated instruction!
And my heart spurned reproof!
"And I have not listened to the voice of my teachers,
Nor inclined my ear to my instructors!
"I was almost in utter ruin
In the midst of the assembly and congregation."

Drink water from your own cistern,
And fresh water from your own well.
Should your springs be dispersed abroad,
Streams of water in the streets?
Let them be yours alone,
And not for strangers with you.
let your fountain be blessed,
And rejoice in the wife of your youth.
As a loving hind and a graceful doe,
Let her breasts satisfy you at all times;
Be exhilarated always with her love.
For why should you, my son, be exhilarated with an adulteress,
And embrace the bosom of a foreigner?

For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD,
And He watches all his paths.
His own iniquities will capture the wicked,
And he will be held with the cords of his sin.
He will die for lack of instruction,
And in the greatness of his folly he will go astray.

I want to begin our consideration of these verses by acknowledging a possible tension for a number of people hearing this. The heart of the advice in this passage is that the son and his wife should strengthen their marriage all its days. They should communicate with one another, love one another deeply, and act on that love. The best defense against sexual temptation is a healthy, growing, free, and joy-filled marriage. The tension, of course, is that there are many who cannot take the good advice to strengthen their marriage because they are not married, although they would like to be in many cases. The Christian church is sometimes accused of being unconcerned about the needs of single people, the widowed and divorced, the lonely, and those people whose lives don't exactly fit this model. There are some who would probably love to instruct their children in these matters, but they have never been able to have children. They long to have a son or daughter whom they could counsel about the future. Someone even pointed out to me after earlier consideration of this that the phrase "let her breasts satisfy you at all times" can be hard for some women who have had radical breast surgery.

The Giver of Gifts

There are a number of reasons why this might be a passage that does not easily connect with you and your experience, but it's important nonetheless. The Lord God has created human sexuality with purpose, and he has not left us in the dark about the nature of that purpose. It is a gift from him, it is overseen by him, it matters to him, and our choices in these areas are ones that will bring blessing to us, or if we choose unrighteousness, negative consequences. The point is that if God has given us this gift, then we can believe that he is the giver of gifts in other areas of our life. We learn truth about ourselves going all the way back to the Garden when God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." He intervenes and meets the needs of people in this area. If all that is true, then he also intervenes and meet the needs of divorced people with shattered backgrounds, single people who are not yet married and would like to be, and folks without children. An old hymn makes the point, "out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth and giveth and giveth again." So we are learning something of the nature of the gift-giver by focusing on this particular set of issues and gifts.

We live in a world that is denying that aggressively at every turn. Certainly those without biblical faith deny that there is any core truth about human sexuality. For them, any and every experience under any and every circumstance is, in the plurality of the modern world, to be valued equally with every other experience. But the same kind of foolishness is invading even in the church. The General Assembly *Special Committee on Human Sexuality* of the Presbyterian Church USA has recently issued a study that is to go before the larger body. There is a phrase used in it, justice-love, an ill-defined term invented by this committee. However, they advocate this: "Where there is justice-love, sexual expression has ethical integrity. That moral principle applies to single as well as to married persons, to gay, lesbian and bisexual persons, as well as to heterosexuals. The moral norm for Christians ought not to be marriage, but rather justice-love." Now this is a Christian study group that's trying to advise the next generation as well as this one as to what God's intention is. And the sorrow here is that if we stop believing that God cares enough to give us more direction than this about our sexuality, then we're going to lose track of the possibility that he cares for us in the other areas where we need him. Do we go to a heavenly Father who has made a way for us in this area and therefore can be trusted across the board? The answer is yes and that is why I advocate that we consider what God's word has to say to us about these things, regardless of our situation.

A Tale of Two Women

The fifth chapter of Proverbs brings two women before the young man learning from his father. In verse 3 we are introduced to the adulteress or the foreign woman, and then in verse 18 "the wife of your youth." Various English translations use different phrases for the Hebrew term adulteress. What it means is a woman who is categorically out of bounds. The nature of the marriage covenant and the nature of the covenant between God and his people means you have absolutely no business being sexually involved with her. She is a "foreign" woman; she is outside the circle. She is inappropriate. Again, language like this flies directly in the face of the kind of statement I just read from the Presbyterian study, where the questions they ask are about your feelings about the relationship, rather than about covenant, responsibility, and the call of God. But in the Scriptures there is a circle drawn around the marriage relationship, and for a man to look at someone who is outside that circle is utterly inappropriate.

Honey and Wormwood

Some very clear points are made in the first paragraph of this chapter. "[Her] lips drip honey." There is an initial sweetness about her. "[Her speech is] smoother than oil." However, the sweetness turns to wormwood, an extraordinarily bitter alternative. The oil-smooth speech turns to a sharp sword that is cutting and destructive. The point is that the end of the story is not what it appears to be at the beginning.

One last thing that I would say about this woman is that she herself, as the father in Proverbs suggests, is something of a victim. Christian compassion can lead us to be concerned about a woman who would destroy a marriage, who would aggressively try to intervene between a husband and wife. (Of course, men as well as women break up marriages. This is talking about anyone who is sexually aggressive in an inappropriate way.) In verse 6 we note that "she does not ponder the path of life, her ways are unstable and she does not know it." She is going to hell. She herself is victimized by whatever is making her do what she is doing. So there can be an evangelistic compassion for such a person, but it is very dangerous to listen to her or to let her point of

view, her wiles, her honey and oil accomplish the destruction they intend.

Beginning in verse 7 the father says, "My sons, the expectation is that you will choose a good woman to marry, and that having begun a relationship with her, the day will come when the opportunity for sexual sin will present itself. Let me tell you how you should react when this circumstance occurs. Step 1: Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house." (Verse 8.) Don't go near the door, don't return the phone call, don't go on the trip. Don't allow yourself to be put in a situation where saying no will be more difficult than it is now. Stay away. That's word of advice number 1.

Dissipated Lives

Then he goes on in verses 9 through 14. "Step 2: Look at the end of the story." That's another powerful way for you to be defended against this kind of thing: Make sure you look at the end of the story, not just the beginning. Verses 9 and 10 talk about your vigor being given to others, your strength to a stranger, your years to the cruel one, your hard-earned goods to the house of a foreigner. It is true, isn't it, that people who are seduced away from their spouses and abandon their children find their own lives slipping away from them. The cruel one involved here might be someone who by of his knowledge of the sin extorts money from the man who has gone astray. Modern divorce courts foster antagonism that grows and grows; you have to spend money defending yourself, and everybody loses. The children have less time with their parents. Someone else ends up raising your kids.

This season can be one of the saddest times of the year. I've done weddings that involve almost intricate complexity in trying to seat mother and new stepfather, former stepfather, previous stepmother, etc. This family over here hates those people, and so on. The whole wedding is taken up with trying to deal with multiple-interconnected pockets of antagonism and bizarre family relationships. And everybody loses. I got a graduation notice in the mail the other day from a man I know whose son is graduating. He didn't get to raise his son. Somebody else got to raise his son because he abandoned the family when the child was young. He's trying to connect with his son again. The years have gone by, and he's lost. He never got to be a father.

Verse 11 talks about the wasting away of the body. It might be a reference to sexually transmitted disease. You groan at the latter end when your flesh and body are consumed. In the age of AIDS we are surrounded by examples of the fate described here. But whether or not it is referring to a sexually transmitted disease, I think that the suggestion is that everybody's body is going to age and grow weaker. Sexual potency diminishes over time, and when you contemplate the capability of sex to bring about life and enhance relationships, do you want to spend it on nothing and have nothing to show for it even in your old age? No family, no grandchildren, no joy? These fires don't last forever. Eventually they burn out.

Verses 12 and 13 talk about self-recrimination, anger at yourself for what you've done and the fool you've been. Verse 14 suggests that you don't have the respect you wish you had from the community you belong to. So the father's second piece of advice is, "Look at the end of the story, my son, before you make these choices."

Marriage Renewal

Lastly, the most important word of advice from the father and the greatest theme of this chapter begins in verse 15. "Step 3: Make your own marriage healthy." The surest antidote to this kind of sin is for you to focus energy toward building the marriage that God has given you. Make it a living thing. Value it, and revive it as an antidote to the wiles of the adulteress.

I want to say one word in passing before we look at some very specific, wonderful advice about marriage revival. It seems to me that not every marriage fits in this category, because the general assumption here is that there has existed, at least at some point, a healthy marriage. Wisdom advocates giving life again to something that once existed with a degree of health and beauty, which has grown tired, worn, and a bit lifeless. Unfortunately, there are some marriages that have never been healthy. There are some marriages that are filled with manipulation and violence, that are built upon the infliction of hurt on one another. Those marriages don't have anything to revive. They need to go back to the very beginning and start all over again. They need

counsel. They really need to be given life for the first time.

But the large majority of marriages in a community like ours essentially have a healthy foundation, but because of the stress of time, difficulty, pressure, routine, boredom, and lack of attention, the partners have grown apart. Therefore the offer of the honey-lipped, smooth-voiced seductress seems to be a thrilling alternative. That's the condition that this chapter is speaking of. The advice of the father is, "Don't listen to that voice. Turn back with enthusiasm, wonder, and delight to the woman God has given you."

Fountain and Cistern

Let's consider this advice, then, in specifics. There's some wonderful poetry here. There's the imagery of water in a desert country. The Middle East has always been a place where water is an extraordinarily valuable commodity. Later there's imagery of a hind and a doe-bounding, energetic, graceful animals-used here and in the Song of Solomon to talk about sexual desire. I think it will help us to look at these poetic terms.

The first is this business of water and what it produces. The imagery here is of a fountain and a cistern, a stream and a well. It's probably making some allusion to male and female sexual expression. The basic assertion is that our sexuality produces the possibility of life, and it is given from one to the other. It is produced in one and retained by the other. The fountain leads to the cistern, the flowing stream to the well. Water can be captured and used to cultivate the garden and to quench the thirst of the family. In our sexuality we need one another; there are complementary responsibilities and possibilities. Between a husband and wife who love each other, all the possibilities that God built into our sexuality produce something useful. Therefore, drink from your own cistern, the woman with whom you have cultivated a relationship. I think what that is saying is that a relationship that has existed over time has the possibility of granting refreshment and hope and reality as no other relationship can.

My wife knows me better than anybody alive, save the Lord God himself. She understands my failings. The things about me that I hope are hidden to everybody else aren't hidden to her. She has insight into times when I'm actually doing better than I think I am in some area of life when I'm discouraged, and she has reasons to be hopeful about me. No one is in a position to be as refreshing to me as someone who understands me and is committed to me and loves me anyway. Such a marriage partner is in a better position than anyone else to slake your thirst, the desire you have for human connection, sensitivity, and understanding.

So drink water from your cistern; that is, go to the husband or wife who knows you well enough to be really refreshing to the ache in your heart or the thirst in your soul, who sees you as you are and still loves you. Go to that person for support and concern. Don't let the apparently sensitive, loving voice of the adulteress deceive you when she says, "Oh, I understand and care for you!" She doesn't know you or understand you, hasn't really seen very deep into you, and offers you something she can't give.

Water in the ancient Middle East was a source of life. It is in our day too, isn't it? If you see someone who is watering their lawn and all the water is going into the street in Palo Alto, you can report them to the police, and they'll get fined for it! You can't waste water in this community anymore; it's against the law. If we waste it, it's gone. Everything will start dying. That's really what the father is saying here. There's only so much potential for intimacy, there's only so much that we're going to be allowed to give to another person. Therefore, the stream should flow into the cistern and the garden can get watered. Children, community, everyone around can benefit because care has been taken.

The Wife of Your Youth

The second point he makes here is, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth" (verse 18). Now that's an important statement. Rejoice, to begin with, is a wonderful note to sound. But he doesn't say, "Rejoice in your youthful wife." Wives do not stay youthful any more than husbands stay youthful. The wife you married in your youth will grow old right alongside you, and just as bald spots and wrinkles show on you, gray hair and stretch marks show on her. Marriage is a process of sharing a history together. The wife of your youth is the one you married when you were both young, at least in this story, and you grew together and had children together. So you can remember her in the early days, in the middle days, in the later days. You can go back over all that

history that you shared together. There's a tremendous source of joy in having more than just yesterday and today; there's a history. She's the wife of your youth, she's the one who stood beside you through it all. Some of it was hard, some of it was painful, and some of it was wonderful.

In the last few months Leslie and I got out I don't know how many hundreds of photographs we had taken over the 19 years of our marriage, stuffed in bags and envelopes, and stored in drawers or cabinets. They were in complete disarray, no good to anyone, and we decided that we had to do something about it. So we took a number of evenings and put them in albums. We made an album for each of our kids and a larger album for ourselves. It was wonderful to see pictures of ourselves and our children over the years, to remember things like a camping vacation when we went to the lake with all our friends, and so on. We went through all the things that we remembered and rejoiced in the partner of our youth.

Shared history is something you don't ever want to undervalue, even if a lot of it was hard. The adulteress will never share those days with you, will never be part of that life with you.

Then the third wonderful word of advice that's given to the son by his father here is to be intoxicated with his wife physically. "Exhilarated" in the New American Standard translation really means "drunk." It is very clearly physical lovemaking spoken of here. It is her breasts that are to satisfy you always. The graceful hind and doe and so on are erotic poetry. He is saying that your physical relationship with your wife ought at times to sweep you away. It ought to be a part of your life that isn't lost to you. It's one that you cultivate. You can make love with someone you have slept with, walked with, and talked with, more sensitively and freely, if you choose to, than someone you've just met for the first time. It's an important part of marriage, something that neither this father nor God himself is in any way hesitant to speak of. You have the refreshment of understanding, the joy of years spent together, and physical intimacy that you refuse to let die. You refuse to let it become routine, you refuse to let it be a source of manipulation or discord in your marriage. You choose to be lovers. The father is teaching his son how to give life to a marriage that seems a bit lifeless in comparison to the offer of the adulteress.

Now what happens practically, if there is someone to whom you are attracted outside of your marriage, is that everything seems to get reversed from this. It seems that the joy, the vitality, the freedom, the excitement, the energy, and the newness are in her speech and what she has to offer. Marriages can, unfortunately, become routine. The children cry and you're tired, and there are bills to pay and not enough money. Partners complain, "why didn't you do this," and "why did you do that," and the same conversations take place over and over again. There is a sense of flattening out of the experience that can happen to husbands and wives.

But what the proverbist is saying here is that in reality the potential for joy, for ecstasy, for refreshment, and delight exist in the marriage. What is being offered out there is going to turn to bitterness more quickly than you have any idea, and all the promises that seduce fail to pay off. Then everybody loses. You've destroyed something valuable and gotten nothing for it, and the streams of water are poured out in the streets.

The last point I would have us focus on is verse 21: "For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the LORD, and He watches all his paths." Now it's interesting that in the two previous verses he said, first, be exhilarated or intoxicated with the physical presence of your wife, the caresses, the joy of your sexual union. And secondly, he said, don't be intoxicated with the foreign woman. God is looking with delight on the communication, the lovemaking, the tenderness, the growth of a marriage. And please, if you are among those Christians who were raised with the thinking that sex was dirty or wrong or embarrassing, work to reject such notions. Listen to the Scriptures. There is none of that in the Bible. The Lord delights in married love. He also sees and disdains unrighteous sexual expression. But the eyes of the Lord, both in his approval and in his disapproval, are on us always.

Recognizing that our ways are before the eyes of the Lord, let us respond to him with repentance and renewal: repentance of sinful thoughts and actions that involve our sexuality, and renewal of love and joyful intimacy with the marriage partners God has given us.

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