

Contents

Introduction	1
Great Expectations	12
Misunderstandings	14
Irregular Unions	16
Infertility	18
Marriage Is a Journey	20
Co-creating with God	22
Obedience to the Spirit	24
The Gospel of Prosperity?	26
The Married Contemplative	28
Letting Go	30
Material Goods	32
Wrong Kind of Trust	34
Power	36
Christ's Presence in Marriage	38
Transformation	40
Marriage and Eucharist	42
Mission	44
Giving Your All	46

Personal Sacred Space	48
Healing	50
One Flesh	52
A Unique Kind of Friendship	54
Forgiveness	56
Marriage Is a Mini-Church	58
Creeping Separateness	60
Peak Experiences	62
Gratefulness	64
Persons-in-Communion (You in Me, I in You)	66
The Ministry of the Towel	68
This Is My Body	70
Sacrificial Love	72
Deep Valleys	74
Listening	76
Discovering Christ at the Kitchen Table	78
The Divine Advocate	80
Love Is Eternal	82
Beyond This Book	84
Selected References for Further Reading	85
Index of Main Subjects	88
Index of Scripture Readings	90

Irregular Unions

Reading: Matthew 1:1-17

Reflection:

Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. . . . Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah. (Matt 1:2, 16)

Matthew's Gospel begins with a long list of fathers who beget sons in the generations leading up to Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. Scripture scholars note that only five women are mentioned: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. They are noteworthy because of the "irregular unions" that produced offspring.

Judah had sexual intercourse with Tamar, thinking she was a prostitute, when really she was his daughter-in-law in disguise (see Gen 38). Rahab was a prostitute who was kind to Hebrew spies (see Josh 2). Boaz and Ruth came from strikingly different cultural backgrounds (see Ruth 4). King David and Bathsheba had an adulterous relationship (see 2 Sam 11). Finally, Mary conceived Jesus in the most unusual manner of all—without Joseph!

These relationships were outside what was considered acceptable, yet God blessed them with children. It was through these children and their descendants that God would fulfill his promise of sending a Messiah of Jewish lineage.

It's interesting that Matthew uses Joseph's ancestral chart, even though he could be considered a stepfather or adoptive father. Matthew knows of the virgin birth and yet notes Jesus' heritage by listing his stepfather's ancestry, giving Joseph a special status alongside Mary.

Few married couples, if any, have an ideal, storybook marriage. Spouses come in all shapes and sizes, and so do marriages. Sometimes couples may feel "different" because of infertility, a different approach to "roles" in marriage, a child conceived before marriage, or entering into a second marriage and forming a blended family. They may receive criticism for marrying outside the faith, having too few children, or having too many children.

But the Spirit of God can and does work through the most unusual scenarios. If the Messiah's family heritage included "irregular unions," we can see that God showers blessings in places we least expect. Over the long haul, God's grace and mercy triumph.

Meditation: Is there something about our marriage that some people might consider "irregular"? How might God's grace work through the situation to bring about something good?

Closing prayer: Loving God, you know the depths of our hearts. Encourage us to trust in your goodness and mercy at all times and in all situations. Amen.

Healing

Reading: Matthew 10:5-8

Reflection:

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give. (Matt 10:8)

As a teenager, I cringed inwardly whenever I saw my grandmother waiting on her husband at the table as if she were a servant girl. She would bring Grandpa his soup and wait while he ate it. Next she would serve him his dinner, and only when he began to eat did she dish herself up a plate of food and sit down at the table. I never heard her complain about this practice. Perhaps it came natural to one who was raised by immigrant parents of another time and culture.

One year, when I was in my late twenties, I flew back home to visit Grandma when she was experiencing an extended illness. When I entered the kitchen on the morning after my arrival, I was greeted by a most unusual sight: Grandpa fixing breakfast. There was a tray all laid out to take upstairs to Grandma. As it turns out, he had been serving her breakfast in bed every day for quite some time.

Illness provides an opportunity for spouses to show the depth of their love. “In sickness and in health” may be the most challenging vow, writes family ministry specialist Leif Kehrwald in *Marriage and the Spirituality of Intimacy*. While

one partner faces the trials of illness, the other faces the challenge of caring for the spouse, letting go of cherished plans, taking on an increased workload, and rolling with the punches. The common cold is nothing compared with what some couples face with chronic illness, accidental injury, or depression. Lehrwald says that although no one desires suffering, these situations serve to draw couples into deeper connection with their spiritual side, with God, and with each other.

In *Marriage: A Spiritual Journey*, theologian Kathy Heskin explores the ways marriage provides a space for emotional and spiritual healing. Every one of us carries childhood wounds, hidden fears, and personal weaknesses. As spouses develop deepening trust over the years, they begin to risk sharing these broken or hurting areas with each other. With loving touch and compassionate listening, inner healing begins to take root. Marital partners, Heskin writes, become a “means of grace for each other.”

Meditation: When your spouse experiences illness or emotional pain, how do you respond? When you are suffering, how does your spouse respond? How might times of illness, physical discomfort, or emotional wounds be used to draw you together as a couple?

Closing prayer: Loving God, sometimes we find it difficult to understand pain and suffering. Help us to focus not on the “why” but rather on how we can best love each other in the midst of adversity. Remind us often that you are with us, even when we can’t feel your presence. Amen.