

# A Covenantal Kind of Love

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Imagine it is the end of the month and my wife and I only have R500 left in the budget. My last pair of decent shoes is torn, and my wife needs a new blouse for work because all her blouses are faded. Inevitably, an argument ensues, right? I insist that she uses the R500 to buy herself a new blouse, while she insists that I buy a new pair of shoes. Ah, the beauty of covenant!

These are the kind of *arguments* that are symptomatic of the 'other-centred' loving that we have learned from Christ. If you are having these '*conflicts*' regularly, then you can be assured that you and your spouse have a healthy understanding of what a marriage covenant is all about. But maybe you don't? What does the Bible have to say about covenant, and how does that relate to my marriage? Let's have a look.

## **What is Covenant?**

When two people are married, whatever their reasons for marrying and whatever their expectations may be, God considers the two to have entered into a covenant with one another (Malachi 2:14). But what does this mean? We see many examples of covenant in Scripture that help us to form a mental picture. Some covenants were made between God and His people (for example, the covenant made between God and Abraham in Genesis 15), while some of them were made between people (like the covenant between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18:1-4).

What makes marriage so holy, so solemn and so breathtakingly beautiful is that your marriage covenant emulates and embodies the covenantal love of God towards His people. It was God's covenantal love that provoked Him to love the nation of Israel so relentlessly throughout their idolatries, their wanderings, their faithlessness, their torrid lack of faithfulness and fidelity, towards the God who had delivered them and redeemed them for Himself.

The life and the love of Jesus for His people is the fullest expression of covenant in Scripture

It was Jonathan's covenantal love that caused him to be such a faithful friend to David. He warned

David away from danger at the risk of his own life (1 Samuel 20). He promoted the cause of David to such an extent that it ultimately cost him the kingship (1 Samuel 31)!

It was the covenantal love of Christ that led him to say that *'There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for a friend.'* (John 15:13) The life and the love of Jesus for His people is the fullest expression of covenant in Scripture, so it is no coincidence that the most illuminating description of marriage takes its cue from the covenant which Christ has entered into with His Bride, the church (Ephesians 5).

There are several very practical elements to covenant that are worth considering:

### **Living In and Through Each Other**

When Jonathan made covenant with David, he gave him his robe, tunic, sword, bow and belt, symbolising that **'all that I have is yours'** (1 Samuel 18:1-4). In covenant, I am effectively saying to my marriage partner, 'My life is in you. I'm living out my life through you. You are the expression of what I am. I no longer live for myself, I live for you. All that is mine I give to you. I am committed to seeing you fulfil God's dream for the breath He bestowed in you. I place your interests above my own. I am here to love, hold and serve you with all my life.'

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Jesus modelled to us that covenant requires self-sacrifice (Luke 22:19,20), and it is no different in marriage. Marriage will inevitably reveal that I am not quite as *'dead to sin and alive to Christ'* (Romans 6:11) as I thought I was! Marriage will reveal those parts of myself that are still self-serving or broken or unwilling to trust and to give. Even as you read this article, it may become evident that there are still parts of you that you have not fully yielded to Christ, or to your spouse.

### **A Relationship of Trust and Nurture**

*'For no one ever hated his own flesh, but **nourishes and cherishes** it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."* (Ephesians 5:29-31)

God's idea for the covenant union was that it would be a tightly-knitted relationship which is safe and intimate. Husband and wife are to look out for and care for one another as if they were caring for themselves. We are to nurture and encourage one other so that both of us can reach God's dream as a covenant unit.

In a world that can be so destructive and discouraging, our marriages can be a rich source of care, encouragement and safety.

The language of 'nurturing' and 'cherishing' speaks of such tenderness, affection and care to see my spouse thrive in this life. With our words and our care for one another, we build each other up. In a world that can be so destructive and discouraging, our marriages can be a rich source of care,

encouragement and safety.

### **Intentional and Faithful Love**

Covenantal love is not the cheap and 'convenient love' that is so common-place outside of Christ. The goal of convenient love is self-pleasure, while covenant love is generous and faithful. It is the love which says, *'I will be with you, even till the very end of the age'* (Matthew 28:20). It is not contingent on how my partner makes me feel.

Over time, a husband may grow disinterested in his wife and find his attentions drifting elsewhere. A wife may grow familiar with her husband and not honour and cherish him as she used to. It is through these challenges that we remember our calling in marriage to demonstrate God's covenantal love, and to go back and *'do the things you did at first'* (Revelation 2:5). As we do this, we find God's grace working actively in our relationship, to bring back the passion and the devotion we had at first.

Marriage is intended to give expression to the Gospel of Christ.

Convenient love ends in divorce when my marriage is not giving me the pleasure it did before. Covenantal love seeks to please God first and honour the oaths that we made before Him. It is the permanence and the fidelity of covenant that allows the deep level of trust, intimacy and self-giving that is only found in godly marriage. Godly marriage is beautiful, meaningful and such a wonderful gift from God, but its purpose is more than just to be a blessing for myself. Marriage is intended to give expression to the Gospel of Christ. As husband and wife live out the kind of love that only Christ can inspire, their marriage becomes a sign-post, pointing to a faithful, generous, covenant-keeping God.