



preparing for marriage

God's plan for your life together

Leader's Guide



Preparing for Marriage: Leader's Guide

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Published by

The Good Book Company Ltd

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ISBN 13: 9781905564361

Printed in the UK

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introduction

The majority of people that many ministers prepare for marriage are not Christians. They may be attracted to you and your church because of the building, because of parental pressure, or because they have a vaguely-formed idea that being married in church is the ‘proper’ thing to do. For whatever reason they arrive at the door, there is both a responsibility for the minister to ensure that the couple are properly prepared for marriage, and an unmissable opportunity to explain the gospel to people who are lost without Christ.

Sadly, perhaps mainly because of the limited amount of time that pastors can give to marriage prep due to other time commitments, many churches are failing to fulfil *either* responsibility. We prepare people for the wedding day, but fail to have significant input into their marriage. And, because we sometimes feel awkward about preaching to a captive audience, the opportunity to explain the gospel slips out of our hands.

Preparing for Marriage is designed to help churches which are helping couples get ready for marriage to do both things within a limited time frame.

While not neglecting some of the practical aspects of marriage, *Preparing for Marriage* is unashamedly evangelistic. It is built on the premise that if people are not relating to God in a right way, they will not relate to each other in a right way—so talk of finances, chores, and even sex will, in the long run, be of little help. Some couples may think that they are already experts on these subjects—and could probably teach the minister a thing or two—this may well be true! But they will almost certainly know very little or nothing about the good news of Jesus Christ.

From Genesis 3 onwards, we see that without a right relationship with God, human relationships suffer. Sin breaks our relationship with God

and also stops us from relating to our fellow men properly—including our spouse—regardless of how good at communication we are!

Undoubtedly, the best thing for all marriages is that both partners are committed to God through his Son, in whom we see what true love, self-sacrifice and forgiveness really are—the very qualities that build healthy, happy, stable marriages.

While not ignoring ‘practical’ aspects of marriage, *Preparing for Marriage* seeks to explain the gospel as the model for marriage. It also seeks to show that a relationship with God through faith in Christ is the very best thing for a couple as they embark on a lifelong commitment.

Why use Preparing for Marriage?

1. It’s to the point. The best thing by far that a Christian minister can do for a non-Christian couple is to tell them the good news of Jesus. This is our primary task, and we ought to major on this. Many Christian ministers are not qualified (or not needed) to offer advice on the wide variety of topics that are often discussed on marriage prep courses.

While there is inevitably much which is not covered in a course of this length, the idea is to make the most of the opportunity that conducting weddings offers, and so make sure that couples are left with the gospel ringing in their ears, rather than just wedding bells.

2. It’s short. When people come to a church to be married, the wedding legalities and a pretty building are usually all that they want from us. It is not unreasonable, and indeed part of our spiritual duty, to make marriage preparation obligatory. However, that being so, most couples would balk at a course which was long, either in number or length of sessions. In addition, if your church building is in demand for weddings, too long a course will divert your energies from other ministries. *Preparing for Marriage* can be completed in four sessions of 30-45 minutes each.

You may like to have a meal together before the fourth session, which is a good time to discuss some of the practicalities of the marriage service. An optional fifth session can also be offered with a mature Christian couple who have been married for some time, in which to freely discuss any practical issue that is a concern for that particular couple.

3. It's relevant in a gospel-focused way. While majoring on the gospel, *Preparing for Marriage* has the integrity of being about marriage—it's not just an unwarranted 'preach' which ignores the real reason for the preparation. It makes the point that the gospel is good for marriage, and is actually the supreme model of how husband and wife are to relate to each other.

There are also very practical questions for couples to think through and discuss between sessions, which help to apply the Bible's teaching. So as we teach that marriage is the closest human relationship (a couple become 'one flesh'), the couple are encouraged to think through what affect this will have on other relationships with children, parents, or friends?

There are lots of good things we can do to help people prepare for marriage, but we must do the best thing. There is nothing better than explaining the good news of Jesus for making the most of the opportunity that weddings provide.

How to use Preparing for Marriage

Preparing for Marriage can be used with just one couple in a home over a cup of coffee; or with lots of couples together in a group setting, in a church hall, say.

In these notes I have included suggestions for how the course might work out with a single couple one-to-one (121) or in a group setting. However, the 'start up exercise' should only be used for groups if you are confident doing it, and if you are sure that the people doing the course (especially the blokes) will be comfortable with it. If people feel awkward or embarrassed or put on the spot they, understandably, won't want to return. For most people, it will be strange enough coming to a group like this—let's not make it more difficult than it need be! If you are in any doubt as to whether these exercises are suitable for your group, it is best, having welcomed people and discussed anything raised by the previous session, to crack on with the talk, in which they are free just to listen anonymously.

During the talk, there are times when you will read the Bible (from the Study Guide). It's probably best to do this yourself—certainly in the first session. If you can be sure that the people you are doing the course with can read comfortably, and would not be embarrassed by reading in a group

context, then you may like to invite someone to read the Bible verses. You'll have to gauge for yourself whether this would be appropriate—but I would err on the side of caution, as usually, people don't like to be put in the spotlight in an unfamiliar context. In addition, the reading of God's Word is the most important part—so it's important that it is read well.

At the beginning of the first three sessions, there are a few questions for each couple to think through (after Session One you can encourage them to think about these in advance). You could still give a few minutes at the beginning of each session for further thinking (or initial thoughts if they didn't get round to it in the week), while you sort out the drinks! Make sure you have pens available. Encourage the couple to talk about their answers with each other, before discussing them with you.

At the first session, you may like to begin by outlining the structure of the sessions so that they will know what to expect and how things will work eg: 'We will usually start with a few questions to think about, I will give a short talk followed by an opportunity for you to ask any question you like.

When it comes to the time for the talk, point out in the study guide the summary of the material you are about to cover, along with the relevant Bible verses, before you begin the talk.

I have included a full transcript of the talks as I deliver them to give you a guide to how it could be done, but do, of course, feel free to make it your own—inserting your own illustrations and insights. It will always come across more personally, and with more conviction, if you spend the time doing this. If you want to listen to how I deliver them, you can listen online at www.thegoodbook.co.uk (search for Preparing for Marriage).

At the end of the talk, encourage them to take a couple of minutes to think through what has been said, and then encourage discussion by inviting them to make any comments or ask any questions that they may have.

May God bless you with insight, courage and sensitivity as you share this material with couples on the brink of marriage. And through it, may the Lord Jesus, who gave himself for his bride, be glorified.

Pete Jackson

March 2007

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a marriage made in heaven?

Study Guide

Write down:

- ★ *What was it that first attracted you to your future wife/husband, and what attracts you to them now?*

- ★ *What do you think is best about them?*

- ★ *Why do you want to get married?*

how it all started

GOD THE CREATOR...

- of men and women
- of everything
- of marriage

MARRIAGE...

- ...for one man and one woman...
- ...for life

GOD...

- made everything and is therefore in charge
- can be known by us because he has spoken
- has even shown us what he is like in Jesus

Questions for discussion:

★ *What do you think of God's blueprint for marriage?*

★ *Has anything you've heard today surprised you?*

★ *If God made everything (and everyone), how should people treat him?*

What God says in the Bible...

Genesis 1 v 26-28

²⁶ Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'

Mark 10 v 6-9

⁶ At the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'⁷ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,⁸ and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one.⁹ Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.

Colossians 1 v 15-16

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God ... For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things were created by him and for him.

Mark 4 v 35-41

³⁵ That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, 'Let us go over to the other side.'³⁶ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him.³⁷ A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped.³⁸ Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, don't you care if we drown?'³⁹ He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, 'Quiet! Be still!' Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.⁴⁰ He said to his disciples, 'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'⁴¹ They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'

to think about together...



1 *Marriage is the closest relationship between two human beings—they become 'one flesh'. How will this affect or change your relationship with:*

- *any children you may have?*
- *your parents or parents-in-law?*
- *brothers, sisters, best mates?*

2 *What boundaries will you need to set for these other relationships?*

3 *How will you make sure that you grow closer together as a couple, rather than get stale or drift apart?*

TOP TIPS

Here are some ideas that others have found helpful:

- ★ Spend half an hour every day talking together—each ask the other about their day, worries, hopes, plans, frustrations, etc.
- ★ Plan to spend two uninterrupted hours alone every week—just enjoying one another—having fun together!
- ★ Every few months or so, plan a day away by yourselves.
- ★ Find an activity that you can do together.
- ★ Plan to eat together
- ★ If you have children, try to have two or three days away together on your own once a year.

Discuss with your partner how you can put these ideas into practice.

For next time: Talk through the issues on this page, and fill in and discuss your answers to the questions opposite.

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a marriage made in heaven?

Leader's Guide

Welcome

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- Greet the couple and put them at their ease.
- Give them each a copy of the *Study Guide*, and explain that you will be working through it in the following weeks.
- If you have not already done so, establish the date and time of your subsequent meetings, and the date of the wedding.

group

- Try to make an effort with the set-up of the room—simple flowers on the tables, music playing as people arrive and appropriate refreshments. If you are working with several couples, seat them at separate tables, or in groups of four.
- As above, but get the participants to introduce themselves to each other. You might like to use this standard ice-breaker. Get one partner to introduce their future spouse to another couple. Then shout out information that they have to give without looking or asking. Colour of eyes; what they are wearing; birthday; favourite film, food, activity; football team they support etc. This should produce some laughs, may cause a riot, but also raises an important initial question. How well do they actually know the person they are about to commit their whole lives to?

Opening

Start by answering the following questions from page 5 of the booklet:

- ★ *What was it that first attracted you to your future wife/husband, and what attracts you to them now?*
- ★ *What do you think is best about them?*
- ★ *Why do you want to get married?*

These are important issues to establish at the start. Many couples arrive at wedding prep with inadequate answers to these questions. It is not unusual for some (usually men) *never* to have told the other that they love them!

Answers to these questions should be discussed openly and honestly, and where appropriate, you should encourage them to put things right straight away. I know one minister who orders the blokes to have the 'I love you' conversation there and then—and leaves the room for 10 minutes!

Session 3 defines what true love is for men in particular—self sacrificial commitment—so it is important not to give in to the way many women might define love—as a romantic feeling. If the questions create a stir, then ask: *'What do you most want for your partner?'* as a follow-up question. If the answer is *'the best; to be happy; etc.'* then you can encourage them that, even if they cannot, hand on heart, talk about deep feelings, then what they are expressing is actually true love.

Handling the responses and implications of these first questions in a group is much more difficult. These things certainly need to be explored, perhaps in a private interview when you meet to discuss the practicalities of the ceremony. From the front in a group setting, you should encourage couples to plan an evening when they can talk these things through in the week following.

Talk

The Big Idea: God is the creator of everything (including marriage), and everyone (including us). He is therefore in charge, and established the pattern for how married life should be.

Introduction

I think it's brilliant that you want to get married. You've decided to have a Christian wedding in church, and I think that's brilliant too!

This little course intentionally looks at both marriage and the Christian faith side by side because, as I hope you'll see, the Christian faith is all about a marriage—marriage between God and his people—and in particular between Jesus and his followers (Christians; the church). It is that relationship which is the model for the marriage between a man and a woman.

During our four sessions together we're going to consider both the wonderful things about marriage, and also the hard things—the things that can make marriage difficult. We're also going to think about the best way for you to live your married life together. I'm going to encourage you to talk together about a number of practical things in between these sessions. We'll also consider the promises that you're going to make on your wedding day, and there will be the opportunity for you to discuss any aspect of marriage that you want to.

But, as with most things, the best place to start is the beginning, so in this first session we will look at the origins of marriage, which we're told about in the Bible...

➤ **READ: Genesis 1 v 26-28 and Mark 10 v 6-9**
(on p 7 of the Study Guide)

God the Creator...

The first thing to say is that God is a God of relationships—you can see that in v 26, where he says: *‘Let us make man in our image.’* It becomes clear later in the Bible that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit were working together in creation. And because God is a relating God, he made us for relationships too—a relationship with Himself and relationships with each other. So marriage was God’s idea from the very start...

Verses 27-28 tell us that a special relationship between one man and one woman was set in place at the beginning of creation. It involves them leaving their families, being united to one another, and becoming one flesh. This is an important phrase. It refers both to sexual union, and to the fact that this is a permanent relationship. Which is why Jesus warned that *‘man should not separate them’*—a challenge that I will repeat to everyone in the church after you have made your vows. This very special, life-long relationship is what we call ‘marriage’. It means that there is no such thing as a trial marriage, because marriage is permanent, and by nature, a trial is not—so a trial marriage is impossible.

But hang on a moment, you might say! Looking at the origins of marriage is all very well, but surely this is just speculation? How can we really know anything about God—how can we know that he even exists?

Let me ask another question: How can we know anything about anyone? How do you know anything about each other? Answer: You have to speak. And if you hadn’t spoken when you first clapped eyes on each other, then you wouldn’t know each other, and you certainly wouldn’t be here today on the brink of getting married.

It’s the same with God. If God has not spoken then he can’t be known, and what people say about him (and his view of marriage) is just a guess. But if he has spoken, then he *can be* known.

The very first chapter of the Bible says that God is a speaking God. As early as v 3 we’re told: *‘And God said: “Let there be light”, and there was light’*. That first chapter of the Bible goes on to tell how, at God’s word, all creation came into being: stars, oceans, plants—everything—even human beings. The message is very clear—you name it, God made it.

Now I want you to imagine making something yourself—perhaps a small wooden table or a clay vase. You’ve made it, so it’s yours—you own it. Basically, you’re in charge of it and you get to decide what happens to it—whether to keep it yourself, give it to your fiancée, or smash it up. You call the shots because it’s yours.

Well, because God made the world (and us), we all belong to him and he’s in charge. That means that he has the right to be in charge of both the world and our lives.

I wonder if you’ve ever thought of God like that. That’s the Bible’s view of him—not an old man with a long beard sitting on a cloud, but the Almighty Creator of everything (including you and me), who is actually in charge of us all, and who has spoken so that he can be known.

Obviously, it’s one thing knowing something about someone, but a very different thing knowing them personally. Some people dream of marrying a super-model or a hunky film star. A few become obsessed and write them letters or hang around outside their millionaire mansions, hoping to catch a glimpse of their ‘dream partner.’ Of course, they can stand outside and write all the letters they want, but their only chance of having a personal relationship with a super-model or a film star is if that famous person decides to come out of their mansion and speak to them. It’s the famous person who must take the initiative—it’s up to them not you!

Well, in the person of Jesus, God has stepped out of his mansion, and come down to meet us. Listen to what another part of the Bible actually says about Jesus:

➤ **READ: Colossians 1 v 15-16 (on p 7 of the Study Guide)**

That’s why Christians take Jesus so very seriously. He’s the one who shows us what God is like. He’s the image of the invisible God—he is, as someone put it: ‘God with the skin on’. And you can see that in what he did... Colossians 1 tells us very clearly that he is the Creator of all things—he’s the one responsible for all the creating that we’re told about in Genesis 1. So if we want to know what God is like, we must look at Jesus.

And a quick look at Jesus’ life backs up this incredible claim: he healed the sick, raised the dead, fed thousands of hungry people with a single packed lunch—and he showed amazing authority over creation.

► **READ: Mark 4 v 35-41** (*on p 7 of the Study Guide*)

You can tell it was a bad storm because experienced fishermen believed that they were about to die. They woke Jesus up, and he did an extraordinary thing: He basically stood up and told the wind and the waves to calm down and shut up! He spoke to them... and instantly they obeyed him.

Speaking to the wind and waves would probably be enough for you or me to be locked away. But when Jesus does it, they obey—it's not a problem for the one who made them. And Jesus' friends, who were first terrified of the storm, are now afraid of Him—they realise they are in the presence of true greatness and awesome power. Look at what they say in v41b: 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'

Well, that's a brilliant question—who is it that has such great power? Genesis 1 tells us that God is the one who speaks and creation does exactly what he says. The same thing happened when Jesus spoke. Who could Jesus be, other than the God of heaven?

When God finished creating everything, we're told that he saw that it was good. The world was a great place and people related both to God and to other people in the right way (no arguments or fights)—it was brilliant! But you don't need me to tell you that the world is not like that now—currently 40% of marriages end in divorce, and of those that survive, many are only relationships of convenience. What on earth has gone wrong? We'll find out next time!

Questions for discussion:

- ★ *What do you think of God's blueprint for marriage?*
- ★ *Has anything you've heard today surprised you?*
- ★ *If God made everything (and everyone), how should people treat him?*

Refer the couple(s) to the questions in the booklet (p 6), and field the questions they raise. If you are running the course in a group setting, you could get them to discuss the questions in groups of four, and then feedback answers after a few minutes. Better to note the questions and promise to return to them in a subsequent session, than to over-run on the first session.

Homework

Encourage each couple to meet during the week specifically to talk through the questions and tips on page 8. Also encourage them to work through the initial questions on page 9 so that you can get off to a flying start next week!

Your notes

Your notes

Your notes