

God's Wisdom for Cultivating a Marriage

A Sermon by Janet Galante

Wisdom for Life

We're in a series on the book of Proverbs called "Wisdom for Life."¹ We've been talking about how God has wisdom for our lives. The world pulls us in all sorts of directions, offering various paths we could take. We can feel unsure of which way to go. So, we're looking together to the book of Proverbs, and we're learning that God has wisdom for how we can live. God has direction for us.

The book of Proverbs was written long ago, of course, and it speaks from the perspective of a godly Israelite father advising his son over and over again why wisdom is so important.² Here are two examples:

2:6–8: "For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds success in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones." (NIV)

3:21–22: "My son, do not let wisdom and understanding out of your sight, preserve sound judgment and discretion; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck." (NIV)

I love that reminder: don't let wisdom out of your sight! And to do that, we need to be immersed in Scripture, to keep Scripture in front of us. The wisdom in Proverbs covers a lot of areas, and today we'll be talking about God's wisdom for marriage.

Now, I know that as soon you hear me say the word "marriage," there are reactions throughout the room. Maybe it's a good reaction; you're married and would love to hear God's wisdom for marriage. But maybe it's a negative one. It might bring up painful memories, a picture of inequality, or reminders of brokenness. Or maybe you've lost someone, and this stirs up your grief and pain. Maybe you're happily unmarried. Some of you are single but wish you were married.

Before we go any further, I want to be clear about a couple preliminaries:

We need to let this image of sexual temptation also serve, for both men and women, as a metaphor for what it looks like to be pulled away from the path that God has for us.

First, Christians sometimes act like marriage is the goal of life, like it's this pinnacle that we're all supposed to be working toward. Yet I want to say clearly: that's not true. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul speaks highly of being unmarried (1 Cor 7:7–8). And let's not forget that Jesus himself wasn't married. So, as we learn today about God's good gift of marriage, let's remember that it is neither necessary nor the purpose of life. May God meet each of us wherever we are,

bringing wisdom to each situation. I think we can all agree that healthy marriages matter, and that unhealthy marriages have a ripple effect that can harm people outside of those marriages. We are all affected by marriage, and it's good for all of us to be aware of what Scripture teaches, even on topics that apply to us indirectly. As an example, in this series on Proverbs, we will hear a sermon about wisdom for raising children—but I don't have kids. So, that will apply to me in a different way; I do care about kids, and I want the children here to be raised well. I value that wisdom. And I trust the same applies to those in the church who are walking alongside married couples. Let's hear God's wisdom communally and for the good of the church, because following Jesus isn't a solo journey.

Here's a second preliminary, and it may be even more important: This sermon will focus on improving marriages. But I want to make sure you know that, if you are being abused in your marriage, I have a different message for you: Be safe. God is not calling you to stay in an abusive situation.³

Wisdom for Marriage

As we encounter Proverbs, especially as we look at marriage in Proverbs, we find teaching that employs an image of "the adulterous woman." It's a bold image. We see this in multiple chapters, including today's key text in ch. 5. We'll spend most of the rest of our time in ch. 5, and we begin in v. 3. It reads:

For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths wander aimlessly, but she does not know it. (Prov 5:3–6 NIV)

Like I said, it's a bold image—bitter as gall, sharp as a sword, steps leading to the grave. There's a danger of dismissing this image because it sounds unrelatable, exaggerated, or offensive. We'd like to think that we would never fall for such an obvious temptation, so we might ignore this part of Scripture. But when we hear this striking metaphor, I want to make sure we're fully understanding what it's saying. The image of a seductive woman is used throughout Proverbs, and it paints a picture both of sexual temptation and of all the ways we are enticed away from God's wisdom. So many things pull us away, telling us to go on a different path than the one God has for us. We need to let this image of sexual temptation also serve, for both men and women, as a metaphor for what it looks like to be pulled away from the path that God has for us. We can indeed be seduced by the ways of the world; we can go down the path of foolishness.

Now, of course, this bold metaphor does apply to sexual temptation, and we can't afford to overlook that message. If you're in a committed marriage, you might read Prov 5 and think, "I'm not perfect, but I'm definitely not going to fall for smooth speech from an adulterous person." You may think you're immune and gloss

over this biblical warning. If that sounds like you, if you're thinking that warnings against sexual temptation don't apply to you, then I have two reminders.

First, remember once again that this is a metaphor for *all* the ways we are enticed away from wisdom. There are certainly plenty of things other than sex that can lead us away from prioritizing our marriages. Some of them are obvious, such as addiction. But many of them may be innocent until they ascend to a higher priority than your marriage: work, money, friends, hobbies.

Second, if you think you're immune to sexual temptation, then I want to point out that your stance may actually make you more vulnerable. Your guard is down! The Bible is instructive here, of course. Solomon, considered the wisest man in the world, encountered sexual temptation and lost. Samson, considered the strongest man, encountered sexual temptation and lost. David, the psalmist, unleashed his lust and lost. These three and many others fell prey to temptation, so don't think you're wise enough, strong enough, holy enough. Instead, take the wisdom of Proverbs to heart and be open to what God is teaching you.

Proverbs 5 doesn't only tell us what to avoid, it also tells us what to pursue. For this, let's go on to v. 15:

Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love. Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife? Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman? (Prov 5:15–20 NIV)

Once again, we see strong images here. The Bible does not shy away from discussing sex, so when we hear these verses we may blush a bit and want to move on.⁴ But we should instead read carefully and seek God's wisdom.

Let's read v. 15 again: "Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well" (NIV). Be with your spouse. Enjoy your spouse! Don't neglect intimacy in your marriage.

And now to v. 18: "May your fountain be blessed, may you rejoice in the wife of your youth." With the mention of "wife," we're reminded that Proverbs was written as advice from a wise father to a son. Some of us, me included, are not sons and need to adjust our hearing of the text a little. This is appropriate; Scripture is for all God's people. To use an obvious example, women pray Ps 23, learn from it, and teach from it—even though it's a psalm of David. And women, of course, learn from Proverbs.

So then, God's wisdom is to rejoice in your wife or your husband. How? Go on a date. Compliment each other. Delight in one another the way you did at first. Remember what brought you together. Laugh at each other's jokes. See the beauty in one another. Prioritize each other. Do things together. Perhaps even flirt with one another.

Proverbs 5 goes on with some clear imagery in v. 19 about enjoying one another's bodies, being intoxicated and enthralled by each other's love. We should appreciate that the Bible doesn't shy away from this. The Bible makes clear that sex between a married couple is meant to be enjoyed. It was designed to be enjoyed within the security of a committed marriage, and it's meant to be refreshing and life-giving.

In vv. 15–18, we saw the image of refreshing water, water that sustains and gives life. Now, in vv. 19–20, we see the image of wine as Proverbs tells us to be intoxicated with one another. It cautions against being enticed by someone else, embracing them, being intoxicated by them. Married people must guard against desiring other people, against channeling any desires for sex, romance, or intimacy away from our spouse.

Cultivating Desire

A central feature of guarding against such sins is cultivating desire for your spouse, working hard at desiring your spouse. That might sound strange—cultivating a desire for your spouse. But we cultivate desires for a lot of things. One example is acquired tastes. Some of the things we like the most are acquired tastes, cultivated desires. Most of you enjoyed coffee this morning, and for many of you that is an acquired taste. Another example is your favorite sports team. You weren't born loving that team. Your preference, your enthusiasm was cultivated. You watched their games. You wore their colors. You have ordered your life in ways that foster enjoyment of that particular team.

And God's wisdom in Proverbs says that husbands and wives should order their lives to cultivate intimate desire for each other, and for no one else.

When's the last time you cultivated that desire? How are you directing your thoughts, your time, your attention toward your spouse? Are you building up that relationship or letting it decay? We are surrounded by sexual temptation; our culture uses sex to draw us in. It's in movies and TV shows, even in commercials, and it is readily available online. Our culture says to enjoy the bodies of other people, starting with a fleeting glance. All these things can turn our desires away from our spouses. Cultivating is hard work. What are you watching? How do you spend your time? What do you dwell on? Married or unmarried, our culture says we can indulge ourselves, we can play with fire and not get burnt. Proverbs 6 puts it this way: "Can fire be carried in the bosom without burning one's clothes? Or can one walk on hot coals without scorching the feet?" (Prov 6:27–28 NRSVue).

The world's way of thinking puts us on the wrong path. Proverbs 7, again personifying temptation, says, "Do not let your heart turn to her ways or stray into her paths. . . . Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death" (Prov 7:25, 27 NIV).

Notice the word "stray." Do not let your heart stray. Very rarely does anyone choose to destroy their marriage. Instead, we wander. A few steps in the wrong way, uncertainty at a crossroads. And then . . . we're on an entirely different path, sharing with strangers what belongs to our husband or wife alone. Straying can include lingering

looks, feeding false friendships, secret conversations. We've got to be careful about these kinds of actions.

Let me mention some practical specifics: Don't keep secrets from one another. Be careful who you confide in, especially when confiding about your marriage. Don't hide your computer or phone from your spouse—what you're viewing and who you're talking with. Don't adjust or polish your appearance to please anyone.

I know these things may sound prudish. Don't hear me wrong: Do have friends of the opposite sex. Do have friends who are unmarried. I don't want to rob your joy or restrict your happiness, so remember that Proverbs is about two paths—wisdom and foolishness—and the wise path leads to peace and joy.

Proverbs 4:18 says, "The path of the righteous is like the morning sun, shining ever brighter till the full light of day" (NIV). That's the path we want to pursue today. It can be a hard path to walk, for we see people cultivating desire outside of their marriage all the time.

Resist Upgrade Culture

Cultivating a marriage is at odds with what I call "upgrade culture." Our world trains us to always want the new and better thing. We want a bigger TV. We want the next iPhone. We want the car that has the fanciest features. New trends come into style, so we upgrade our wardrobes. The world is changing faster and faster, and it's training us to move on to new things constantly. We're trained to upgrade.

This mentality bleeds into the way we view marriage. Your spouse isn't cutting it anymore? You should probably move on. Time for a change. We focus on what we're missing rather than what we have. We're trained to upgrade.

But Proverbs says stop. Think. What path are we on? Upgrade culture cultivates dissatisfaction, not healthy desire. Upgrade culture reminds you that you didn't marry a perfect person, but wisdom reminds you that your spouse didn't marry a perfect person either.

Instead of upgrading your spouse, upgrade your marriage! How do we do that? Pour your energy into loving your spouse. Focus on that relationship, tend to it and let it grow. Make time for each other. Compliment and thank one another. Communicate. Apologize. Serve one another. Show interest in each other's work. Make time for sex. Pray together. Read the Bible together.

**God's forgiveness and grace are big enough
for you. You are loved by God. And God might
be inviting you today to repent. To apologize.
To make amends.**

Together in Scripture

I want now to make a specific recommendation. First, a reminder: During this sermon series, all of us are encouraged to read the

book of Proverbs. It has thirty-one chapters, so it's sensible to read through it in a month. Reading it more quickly or more slowly also makes sense. Find a reading plan that works for you.

That's a reminder; now here's the new suggestion for those of you who are married: Read through Proverbs together. Find a daily time and spend the next thirty-one days reading Proverbs together. Wherever you are in your marriage, whether you're doing great or struggling, whether you're a newlywed or you've been married for decades, Proverbs has something for you.

One of the things it has for you is a vision for equality in marriage. The strong woman of Prov 31, for example, is well-known to many of you.⁵ Notice the mutuality in her marriage:

31:11-12: "Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life." (NIV)

31:28-29: "Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: 'Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.'" (NIV)

Wisdom for Everyone

For some people, this message might sting. It might remind you of how you fell short in the past. If that's you, I want you to hear this today: God has grace for you. This message isn't meant to condemn you. It's meant to shine the light on the way God invites us to live. God's forgiveness and grace are big enough for you. You are loved by God. And God might be inviting you today to repent. To apologize. To make amends.

If you're here today and someone has failed you, if you have been hurt in your marriage, or in a former marriage, or in another important relationship, know that you are not alone in this. We value you and love you. As I said earlier, if you're experiencing abuse in a relationship, we're here to help you get to safety and beyond.

All of us—including those who aren't married—have relationships that we want to be wholesome and permanent. Don't give up on your family, don't give up on your friendships; invest in them. I encourage us to be people who cultivate relationships, who create strong communities.

All of these things apply to each of our relationships with God. God has made promises to us that God will keep. We need to recognize the investment God has made in the permanence of our relationship.

In fact, the Bible uses marriage as a metaphor for our relationship with God. Not because marriage is perfect, but as a symbol of God's committed love.

[Editor's Note: At this point, the sermon as originally preached moved into the Lord's Supper, using the wedding feast of the Lamb mentioned in Rev 19:9 as a transition and focusing on the committed love that Christ has cultivated for us. Those who make use of this sermon may close it in a way appropriate to their setting.]

Notes

1. This sermon was preached in July 2024 at First Christian Church in Johnson City, Tennessee; a video is currently available at <https://fcc-jc.org/page/461?Item=888>. The series had eight sermons: "Introduction: Wisdom for Life," "Wisdom for Eternity," "Wisdom for Getting Wisdom," "Wisdom for Marriage," "Wisdom for Work," "Wisdom for Words," "Wisdom for Raising Kids," "Wisdom for Friendships."
2. CBE's resources on Proverbs include Craig S. Keener, "The Role of Women in Proverbs," *Priscilla Papers* 8/1 (Winter 1994) 1–3; Glenn Pemberton, "Daughter Divine: Proverbs' Woman of Wisdom," *Priscilla Papers* 32/2 (Spring 2018) 14–20.
3. Those who use this sermon are encouraged to expand this paragraph and the similar statement in the conclusion, including mention of local resources available to someone in an abusive marriage. CBE's resources on abuse include Amy Smith Carman, "The Abusive Religious Leaders of John 8: How a Misnamed Story Can Help Religious Institutions Deal with Sexual Assault," *Priscilla Papers* 33/3 (Summer 2019) 8–11; Sandra Dufield, "The Suffering Among Us: When Power Leads to Abuse, We Must Respond," *Priscilla Papers* 15/2 (Spring 2001) 14–16; Catherine Clark Kroeger, "The Bible's Nonabusive Intention for Family Relationships," *Priscilla Papers* 25/3 (Summer 2011) 21–24; Catherine Clark Kroeger, "Witnessing Against Abuse," *Priscilla Papers* 11/1 (Winter 1997) 32–33 (reprint 37/1 [Winter 2023] 3–4); Tim Krueger, ed., *Eyes to See & Ears to Hear Women: Sexual Assault as a Crisis of Evangelical Theology* (CBE, 2018); Scarlet Hai Yin Tsao, "Restoration of Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse: How Can Caregivers Contribute to the Process?," *Priscilla Papers* 20/1 (Winter 2006) 13–22 (reprint 37/1 [Winter 2023] 22–27).
4. CBE's resources on sexuality include Sara Barton, "A Biblical Example of a Sexually Healthy Woman for a World where Unhealthy Sexuality Makes Headlines," *Priscilla Papers* 32/1 (Winter 2018) 10–14; Havilah Dharamraj, "Green-Eyed

Lovers: A Study of Jealousy in Song of Songs 8:5–7," *Priscilla Papers* 32/1 (Winter 2018) 3–8; Philip T. Duncan, "Nurturing Voyeurism, Vibrant Sexism, and Violence: Why We Can't (Yet) Afford to Forget about *Wild at Heart*," *Priscilla Papers* 31/1 (Winter 2017) 3–8; Jason Eden, "Are Women Passive? What History Says about Gender, Sexuality, and Christian Ministry," *Priscilla Papers* 29/3 (Summer 2015) 15–20; Timothy Paul Erdel, "Exploring the Garden of Feminine Motifs in Song of Songs," *Priscilla Papers* 34/2 (Spring 2020) 3–9; Dawn Gentry, "Mutuality, Mystery, and Marriage: Love in the Song of Songs," *Priscilla Papers* 32/1 (Winter 2018) 18–20; Elizabeth Gentry, "My Resounding 'Yes' to God and Embracing My Sexuality: Singleness and the Song of Songs," *Priscilla Papers* 32/1 (Winter 2018) 15–17; April Kelly, "Early Christianity's Concept of Sexuality," *Priscilla Papers* 33/1 (Winter 2019) 14–18; Arthur H. Lewis, "Equality of Sexes in Marriage: Exposition of the Song of Songs," *Priscilla Papers* 11/2 (Spring 1997) 45–46; Aida Besançon Spencer, "The Song of Songs Celebrates God's Kind of Love," *Priscilla Papers* 28/3 (Summer 2014) 7–13 (reprint 37/1 [Winter 2023] 14–20).

5. CBE's resources on Proverbs 31 include Megan K. DeFranza, "The Proverbs 31 'Woman of Strength': An Argument for a Primary-Sense Translation," *Priscilla Papers* 25/1 (Winter 2011) 21–25; Hannah Rasmussen, "Finding the 'Proverbs 31 Woman,'" *Priscilla Papers* 32/2 (Spring 2018) 21–26; William David Spencer, "Diamond or Diamond Mine? A Meditation on Proverbs 31," *Priscilla Papers* 16/2 (Spring 2002) 16–20.



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