

# WHY WAIT?

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Biblical Guidance for Sex and Marriage





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*Why Wait? Biblical Guidance for Sex and Marriage*, David Beaty

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## INTRODUCTION

The couple in my office was prepared for a debate. They were not married, but were living together, and saw nothing wrong with that arrangement. They disagreed with our church's view that sex outside of marriage was wrong. And they reasoned that if it was in fact a sin, it was no different from any other sin. So they wondered, "Why should the church be especially concerned about that particular sin?" Their views were like those of countless other couples who live together without being married:

*"Living together is the best way to test our relationship."*

*"We plan to marry anyway, so what does it matter?"*

*"It makes the most sense financially."*

*"If it is wrong, it's no different than a sin like covetousness or gluttony."*

*"All our friends are doing it."*

While living together before marriage is now more common than not, many people live together with no intention of ever marrying. The arrangement is so broadly accepted in the U.S. that the term "partner" has all but replaced the word "spouse." A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center revealed that "The share of adults ages 18 to 44 who have ever lived with an unmarried partner (59%) has surpassed the share who has ever married (50%)." The Pew study also notes that 78% of eighteen to twenty-nine year-olds believe it is acceptable for an unmarried couple to live together, even if they don't plan to get married.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, "Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S." Nov. 6, 2019.

Clearly, marriage is not seen by many in the U.S. to be the exclusive domain for sex and living together. To maintain that it is may seem unreasonable, unwise, and even legalistic to those like the couple in my office. The culture has changed. So why not accept the new reality as acceptable for Christians? Because God has a better way for his people.

Let me emphasize that this booklet is intended for Christians. It's written for those who believe in Jesus and trust him as Savior and Lord. It is meant for those who want to say "yes" to God and to receive his guidance for their sex life and marriage. Please understand that the teaching here is not intended to limit a couple's pleasure or joy in their relationship. Rather it is intended to maximize that pleasure and joy by pointing to God's way as revealed in Scripture.

But maybe you are a Christian who wonders whether God really has limited sexual relations to marriage between a man and a woman. Does the Bible really teach that? If two people love each other and are committed to each other, why is a marriage ceremony necessary to give them a green light for sex? To answer these questions, we need to look to our Creator—the one who designed sex and marriage.

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## GOD'S DESIGN

***So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. –Genesis 1:27***

God's creation of man and woman was unlike his creative work with any other form of life. In a unique way, man and woman were made in the very image of God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the three persons of the Trinity—were intimately involved in creating human beings. Men and women would enjoy communication and fellowship with the triune God.

In Genesis chapter 2, we are given detail about the creation of man and woman. We read that “the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). When He had given Adam work to do and a command to keep, the Lord said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). (Note: the word “helper” is by no means a demeaning term. A form of the same word is used to describe God as our helper. Psalm 124:8) We then read of how God formed woman. In forming Eve, “the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Genesis 2:21-23).

While man and woman were very much alike, they were also different. They were complementary. They fit together as a team. When God spoke of “a helper fit” for Adam, he was pointing to the need for man and woman to help each other fulfill God’s work and obey God’s Word. They were to be stronger together.

But their complementarity would go beyond their service to God. It would extend to their physical relationship. Man and woman “fit” together physically. Their sexual relationship would express this oneness. It would provide them with a joyful expression of their love. And through their union there could be the bringing forth of new life.

The next verse in Genesis 2 provides the most foundational instruction on sex and marriage in the entire Bible: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). From this point onward, Eve is referred to as Adam’s wife. It is now clear that the “one flesh” union was created by God for husband and wife.

Genesis chapter 3 describes Adam and Eve’s fall into sin and the initial consequences of their rebellion against God. From that time on, sin spread throughout the human race. Brokenness affected every part of human relationships, including sex and marriage. Old Testament writers were not shy about recording instances of rape, adultery, polygamy, and divorce. Various laws were given to regulate male/female relationships and to limit reasons for divorce.

But when Jesus comes centuries later, he calls people back to God’s original design for sex and marriage. When the Pharisees test Christ by asking: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” Jesus replies:

*Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:3-6)*

Note that Jesus is responding to a question about marriage: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” His reply takes us back to God’s creation of male and female and the “one flesh” union. Jesus adds words to the Genesis passage when he says, “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (v. 6).

There is much to be learned from Jesus’ response to the Pharisees, including these truths:

—God is our creator, and his design should be our guide for understanding sex and marriage.

—Sex was designed by God for the union of one man and one woman in marriage.

—The marital union is so significant that Jesus refers to it as something that “God has joined together.”

Clearly, Jesus believed that sex was intended to be only within the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman.

Later in the New Testament, the apostle Paul would also point to Genesis 2:24 as foundational for Christian marriage. In his longest teaching on the subject, he gives the church guidance on marriage between two followers of Jesus. Paul elevates Christian marriage in a remarkable way when he presents it as a reflection of the relationship of Christ and his church. He writes, “‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.’ This mystery is profound and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:31-32). The apostle Paul, in setting forth doctrine

for the Christian church, affirms the Genesis 2:24 passage as God's design for Christian marriage and sexuality. But he goes further. Paul lets us know that a Christian marriage is intended to be a reflection to the world of Christ's love for his church. This makes it all the more important for Christians to honor God's design for marriage and sexuality.

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## THE MARRIAGE COVENANT

In the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi declares God's words of correction to the people of Israel. He rebukes husbands for unfaithful treatment of their wives. Malachi declares:

*Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. (Malachi 2:14-15)*

In referring to marriage as a “covenant,” God was using a familiar Old Testament word. A covenant was an agreement. It was a word often used to describe God's entering into a special relationship with his people. Though his people were often unfaithful in keeping covenant terms God had established, God himself remained faithful.

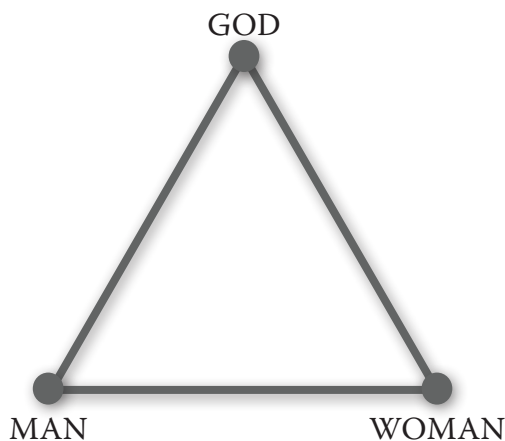
In the New Testament, Jesus is revealed as the mediator of a new covenant. (Hebrews 12:24) Having purchased our salvation and eternal life by his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus brings believers into a new relationship with God. This relationship is based not upon our obedience, but upon the obedience of Christ. Through our faith in him, God's promise to believers is that, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Hebrews 10:17). Scripture refers to this work of Christ for us as “a new covenant.”

Since the word “covenant” is used to describe God's own relationship with his people, it is highly significant that God would use this word for marriage. This elevates the significance of marriage to a higher level than that of a contractual agreement between a man and a woman. A marriage contract might be depicted like this:



The linear representation illustrates that man and woman are the only two parties participating in the marriage agreement.

But a covenant is quite different. A marriage covenant includes God as a third party. A marriage covenant could be depicted this way:



When a marriage covenant is instituted, God is witness of the vows made between husband and wife. Vows are made to one another, but they are made before God. This highlights the importance of having an actual marriage ceremony in which vows are made in the presence of God and others.

After describing marriage as a covenant, the prophet Malachi refers back to God's creation of male and female and the one-flesh union: "Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring." This clear reference to the physical union of marriage places sex in the context of a covenant. God designed sex to be honored within the bonds of a marriage covenant between man and woman, and only in this context is sex consistent with God's plan.

Scripture is consistent in its teaching for followers of Jesus to limit sex to marriage. In writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul acknowledged the struggle that many people have with sexual desire. While commending the gift of singleness for focused service to the Lord, Paul recognizes that marriage is also a gift. For those for whom sexual desire is strong, he writes: "But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Corinthians 7:9).

The solution to strong sexual desire toward one's fiancé (or boyfriend or girlfriend) was not to indulge, but to marry. The apostle Paul was teaching us that sex belongs only in the covenant bonds of marriage.

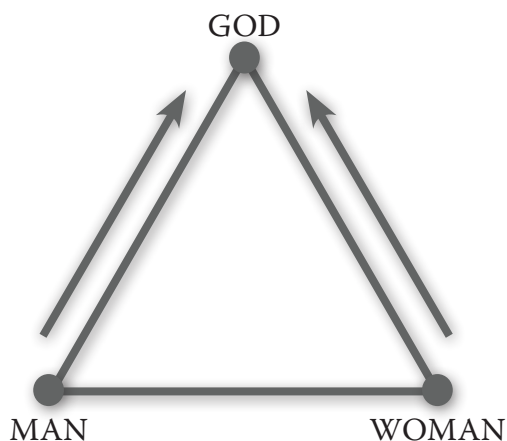
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# THE BENEFITS OF WAITING

## Spiritual Growth as You Wait for Marriage

Everyone recognizes that marriage can be challenging. Engaged couples realize that good premarital counseling can help prepare them for the challenges ahead. They are wise to get the best biblical and practical preparation possible. But some couples question why waiting on sex is necessary—or even wise. They wonder why it is not reasonable to “test” their physical relationship while they wait to marry. But violating God's instruction is never a way to obtain God's blessing. A couple who genuinely wants God's blessing upon their premarital preparation will seek to honor God as best they can during that time.

Let's look at the covenant illustration again:



Note that in this triangular depiction of covenant, as man and woman each move closer to God, they also move closer to one another. This is what should be happening in premarital preparation. The months or weeks before the wedding should be a time of rich spiritual growth for the couple. They should be

learning to pray together and to seek God's guidance in Scripture together. They should be discovering the joy of serving the Lord as a couple. But does it make sense to seek greater closeness to God while at the same time willfully disobeying God by having sex outside of marriage? You cannot seek a greater work of the Holy Spirit in your lives while deliberately grieving him.

For couples who recognize that they have dishonored the Lord in their physical relationship and are willing to change, there is hope. The gospel offers us cleansing of sin and a new start. As the apostle John writes: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). It is never too late to make a fresh start with God. Couples who are willing to cease sex until marriage can experience much spiritual growth together in the waiting.

Finally, please don't make the very common mistake of putting more emphasis on your wedding and reception than on your spiritual preparation for marriage. One lasts a day and the other lasts a lifetime! Recognize the importance of spiritual preparation for your marriage, and take the necessary steps to have God's greatest blessing upon that time.

### **A Greater Likelihood of Marital Success**

In his book, *The Ring Makes All the Difference*, author Glenn Stanton uses data to show that cohabitation lowers the probability of a successful marriage. He quotes professor Jay Teachman, of Western Washington University, who says, "One of the most clearly defined correlates of cohabitation is an increased risk of marital dissolution." Teachman also warns that

premarital sex itself is associated with a higher risk of marital breakup, though at lower rates than living together before marriage.<sup>2</sup>

The idea that premarital sex or living together before marriage improves the odds for a successful marriage is simply not supported by data. Glenn Stanton summarizes his findings when he writes: “I have chosen to make the case that cohabitation is not a wise or healthy choice based not on Scripture but on science.”<sup>3</sup>

## **Development of Self-Control and Discipline**

The man and woman who can exercise self-control before marriage are better prepared to exercise self-control after marriage. In most marriages there will be times when couples are apart for days or even weeks. Health issues may arise that make sex difficult or uncomfortable. Regardless of the cause, couples who have developed the discipline of waiting on sex before marriage may be better able to wait, when necessary, after marriage.

## **A Good Witness to Those Around You**

When we embrace the gospel and become followers of Jesus, we become his representatives in the world. We are his witnesses. When people examine our lives, what they see should point them to God. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14,16).

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All the Difference*, Moody Publishers; Chicago, 2011, 62-63.

<sup>3</sup> Stanton, 128.

But when a Christian couple lives together without marriage, they are presenting a very observable witness to the world – one that contradicts God’s design. Their example is saying that they believe cohabitation is fine.

Like it or not, if you are a Christian, your life is sending a message to those around you. The way you live speaks to the genuineness of your faith. Your example may influence what others think about your faith, your church, and even your Lord.

Sometimes a Christian couple will say they are living together, but abstaining from sex until they are married. The problem with this is that no one else knows the couple is abstaining. Others simply see two professing Christians living together; and of course they will assume that couple thinks premarital sex is fine. Our witness matters. And Scripture calls us to avoid every form, or appearance, of evil. (Thessalonians 5:22)

### **The Joy of Knowing You Have Done the Right Thing in God’s Eyes**

When meeting with engaged couples who were living together, I have encouraged them to move apart until their wedding. I think this provides them the best opportunity for spiritual growth during their engagement. It strengthens their witness as devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Perhaps most importantly, it helps them approach their marriage with the knowledge that they are doing what they believe to be right in God's eyes. God's gracious forgiveness will cover sins that are past, and he will give a fresh start. There is much peace and joy in knowing you are doing your best to please God.

In those cases in which financial constraints make it difficult or impossible for an engaged couple to move apart for a time, the church can help. Whether by direct financial support or the offer of a guest room by a hospitable member, the church can support couples in pursuing what we believe to be God's best for them.

Over the years, I have known couples who chose not to move apart before their wedding. Others have chosen to live separately until married. I can't be sure, but I suspect those who chose to live separately will always be grateful for their decision. There is an abiding joy that comes when you know you have done all you could to please and obey the Lord.

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## CONCLUSION

***Let marriage be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed be undefiled. -Hebrews 13:4***

In the verse above, God is reminding us that sex is undefiled, or pure, only in the context of the covenant of marriage. To engage in sex before marriage is to take the act of covenant consummation without the covenant. And despite what some say, sexual sin is not just like any other sin. The apostle Paul writes to Christians:

*Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20)*

While Scripture speaks strongly about the seriousness of sexual sin, it speaks even more strongly about what God has done to forgive and cleanse us from our sins. And we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. It is only because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross that any of us can approach God without condemnation. As the apostle Peter writes: "For Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).

Through faith in Jesus, our sins can be forgiven and we can be given a fresh start. This is true not only for individuals, but also for couples. If you have been sexually active and possibly living together while unmarried, there is grace available to reestablish your relationship on a biblical foundation. By acknowledging

your sin and turning in trust to Jesus, he will give you his grace for a new beginning. As you submit yourself to the lordship of Jesus Christ, may these words be true for you:

*Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Hebrews 13:20-21)*

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## A PRAYER FOR ENGAGED COUPLES WHO WANT A FRESH START IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP

“Father, we come to you in the name of Jesus. We acknowledge that we have sinned by not honoring you in our physical relationship. Please forgive us, and enable us to honor you from this point forward. Thank you for the assurance that if we confess our sins, you are faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”(1 John 1:9)

“Please give us the wisdom and grace to take the necessary steps to glorify you in our relationship as we await marriage. Lord, we want your best in our marriage, and we want to express that desire by honoring you now. Please let our time of preparation for marriage be a time of great spiritual growth as we learn to seek and obey you together. May you be glorified in our present and future relationship. Amen.”

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## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Sam Alberry, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* The Good Book Company, 2020.

Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All the Difference*. Moody Publishers, 2011.

Tim and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*. Penguin Books, 2011.

David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Should We Live Together?" What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation Before Marriage, A Comprehension Review of Recent Research, Second Edition, *The National Marriage Project*. [www.nationalmarriageproject.org](http://www.nationalmarriageproject.org)





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