

Husbands in the Wilderness

Three weeks ago I introduced a personal study that I am going to be doing parallel to our adult class on the Gospel of Mark. Here is a quick summary: Paul said, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...” (Eph. 5:25). Rather than assuming Paul is *only* referencing the final act of dying, we should be able to see Christ giving himself up for his church in every aspect of his work. In short, there should be a lesson about how I can be a better husband in every story we read in the Gospels.

Our first textual lesson in Mark covered 1:1-13, and was devoted entirely to the theme of wilderness. I feel a distinct pressure to tread lightly here lest I compare my own marriage to the Israelite’s punishment of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, or Jesus striving with the wild beasts and being tempted by Satan (this is a sorry attempt at a joke). All joking aside, marriage sometimes is a hard place.

One of the better books I have read on marriage is Gary Thomas’s *Sacred Marriage: What if God designed marriage to make us holy more than to make us happy?* His thesis is this: “Any situation that calls me to confront my selfishness has enormous spiritual value, and I slowly began to understand that the real purpose of marriage may not be happiness as much as it is holiness. Not that God has anything *against* happiness, or that *happiness and* holiness are by nature mutually exclusive, but looking at marriage through the lens of holiness began to put it into an entirely new perspective for me” (p. 22). If Jesus’ love for his people were all about his own personal happiness, then he would have never gone into the wilderness. Instead, the wilderness is the place where all distractions are taken away and where our focus is narrowed to two options: either ourselves or the Lord. Holiness is the goal—not happiness—and sometimes the wilderness is a hard place.

The wilderness is where God is. Interestingly, chapter 2 of *Sacred Marriage* is entitled, “Finding God in Marriage.” He says, “The first purpose in marriage—beyond happiness, sexual expression, the bearing of children, companionship, mutual care and provision, or anything else—is to please God” (p. 32). This was precisely what Jesus’ struggle with Satan was all about. Satan said, “Turn these stones into bread to fill your belly.” Jesus said no. Satan said, “I will make you the king of all the kingdoms of men if you worship me.” Jesus said no. He refused because his wants, needs, pleasures and desires were not his central focus. Truly, the core of Christianity is to die to one’s self. Only after putting the old self to death and burying it in the waters of baptism can we begin to restore the relationship with God that was lost in Eden. Where better can we learn to die to all fleshly passions and desires than in marriage where another’s needs are to constantly come before my own?

The wilderness is a place of preparation. John was there to prepare the way for Jesus. After Jesus went out to John and was baptized, he went into the wilderness for 40 days, presumably to prepare for his immanent ministry. Paul did the same thing after he was baptized (Gal. 1:17). There is a clear pattern in the Scriptures that God doesn’t ask anybody to “jump off a cliff” without at least thinking about it first. He expects preparation. Jesus even seems to have discouraged people from obeying the Gospel because they didn’t put the necessary thought ahead of time into what it meant to being a disciple (Lk. 14:25).

How much time goes into preparing for a wedding? How much time goes into preparing for a marriage? It is often like pulling teeth to ask a man to read a book that will enhance his marriage, or help him to improve personally. We simply are not willing to put the time in on the front side. The picture of the wilderness

demonstrates that one way Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her was to make solid preparation in order to do his job well. Let us put an equal amount of effort into preparing to love our wives as Christ loved the church.

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