

Men and Women Together For Jesus

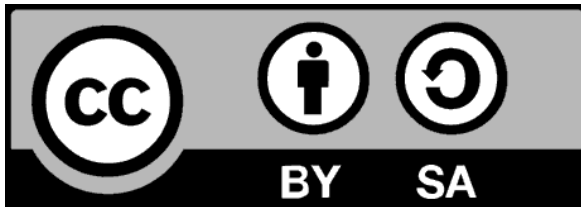


Men and Women Together For Jesus

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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PREFACE

This book is part of a series of literacy practice material designed to provide new readers a variety of information to broaden understanding while building reading skills. It has been adapted by members of New Tribes Mission.

Dispela buk em i wanpela bilong planti arapela buk ol i bin kamapim bilong helpim ol manmeri long kisim gutpela save long rit na rait na long lainim ol arapela samting tu. Ol lain bilong New Tribes Mission i kamapim dispela buk bilong mekim dispela kain wok i stap.

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Introduction

Our lives are made up of many different relationships; from cradle to coffin, relationships exist in every part of life. Relationships range from casual friendships, such as a neighbour, to more complex relationships such as marriage. No-one can escape relationships and the impact those relationships have on us and our communities.

History is rich with lives blessed from the benefits of good relationships. Likewise, over the thousands of years which humans have populated the earth, there are many sad stories of lives ruined due to relationships which have gone wrong.

Over the entire human history there has been tension between men and women. From the earliest records in the Bible, across every culture, in every age, there have been abuses of the relationships between men and women. Great suffering has been endured because people fail to behave towards one another the way God intends.

I'm sure everyone would agree that relationships have the power to bring great joy and peace, but they also can cause great pain and sadness. Regardless of age, no matter what culture you or I live in, our relationships with others determine the joy of our lives to a great degree. Just as relationships are important to us all, they are also extremely important to God.

God is a God of relationships. One of the ways in which God expresses His character is through the way He engages with mankind through relationships. So, to learn more about God, we need to learn more about how He relates with others. From our understanding of God's nature and His behaviour towards mankind we learn how our relationships with one another should operate.

Living the Christian life can be a real challenge when it comes to relationships, particularly with people of the opposite sex. Our past

habits, the habits of our parents, and the behaviours of other people who call themselves Christian, all influence us. However, God reveals Himself to us on every page of the Bible, and it is in the Bible we find the best examples to follow.

While we can learn much from the lives of God honouring people, we see the best when we look at the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible also records the lives of many bad people as examples of what we are not to become. We do well to learn from all the lives recorded in the Bible.

I hope to explore with you God's explanation of how He has designed relationships to function best. Of interest, are the relationships between men and women, including the husband and wife relationship in marriage. We shall learn how God wants us to think and behave so that relationships can grow stronger, becoming glorifying to Him and pleasing to us.

So, we shall give our best attention to the Bible as our guide. We shall explore different types of relationships in the Bible and focus on the ways God has designed for male and female relationships to work best.

The beginning of human relationships

First, we need to explore the beginning of human relationships in order to understand the history of how humanity ended up the way it is now. To do this we shall go to the book of beginnings, the first book in the Bible, which is Genesis. A reading of the first three chapters of Genesis supplies the record of early human history needed for our exploration. We also want to learn what it is that causes problems with relationships, and Genesis explains that well. Later, we shall discover other parts of the Bible which give fuller details in order to expand our understanding of how to apply what we are learning.

At the beginning of time, when God made everything in the heavens and earth, He created His most spectacular creature last. Mankind was that creature, the only creature made in God's image, with the potential to glorify God in ways no other creature could. *"God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them"* (Genesis 1:27; 5:1-2). God made humans different from everything else, different from all the animals, and even different from angels. Humans did not come from animals or angels. They were created by God through Jesus Christ *"through whom also he (God) created the world"* (Hebrews 1:2).

Humans, both male and female, have more attributes which resemble God's nature impressed into them than any other creature. They have both a physical body and a spiritual soul/spirit. People are volitional, exercising personal choice. None of the animals, fish, insects, plants, or the earth itself, resemble God like this.

God only breathed His eternal spiritual life into the lifeless bodies of Adam and Eve. When God created the animals, He simply made them alive as mortal living creatures with no eternal soul/spirit. God did not breathe His spiritual life into animals.

In this way, just as “*God is spirit*” (John 4:24), only humans resemble God by having mind/intellect, and spirit. Even Adam and Eve’s bodies displayed God’s perfection through their perfect health and inability to die.

Only humans can think and reason through matters with understanding of God, of moral values, and of eternity. Humans evaluate things based on truth, whether a matter is right or wrong. People are able to distinguish between good and best, between bad and worst. What’s more, humans possess the ability to express faith in God. Only humans can express that same faith through relationships with each other. People are able to worship God, to thank Him and serve Him.

When we design or plan something, when we invent a machine or build a house, when we calculate numbers, or name a favourite animal, we are expressing that we are made in the image of God. Together, men and women are created in the image of God and both are worthy of respect equally as a sign of respect for our creator.

Now, it happened this way; on the sixth day, the last day of God’s creative work, He formed mankind as His most unique creature. God used His creative intelligence and power to display His beautiful nature within mankind.

As the last act of creation, “*the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature*” (Genesis 2:7). God named that first man Adam.

Adam was soon given the job of naming every type of animal and bird. The Lord God marched all the creatures before Adam, who gave them all names (Genesis 2:19-20). Adam, who was extremely creative with his brilliant mind, quickly completed the naming job. God did not interfere; trusting Adam completely and accepting whatever name Adam gave to each and every species of animal and bird.



Having completed the naming assignment, Adam noticed there was no other creature like himself. Adam was the only human, the only man in the whole earth. *“So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept (God) 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”* (Genesis 2:21-22).

Adam would later name that first woman Eve. The Lord God created Adam and Eve as husband and wife, already married (Genesis 2:25). They were perfect in every way. God the creator, Adam the man, and Eve the woman, all lived in harmony with each other. There was no fighting, no pain, and no sadness. Adam and Eve lived to fulfil God’s desires, to bring God pleasure, and to worship Him. Fulfilling the will of God their creator would provide Adam and Eve with satisfaction, contentment, and great joy.

The Bible further tells us that when God had finished creating everything, including Adam and Eve, He considered it all. He gave careful thought in evaluation of all His work; *"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good..."* (Genesis 1:31). Everything in God's universe; in nature, in the animal kingdom, in humanity, was not just good, but *"very good."* God could not find any fault; nothing was less than perfect. Therefore, He said it was all *"very good."*

Obviously, Adam and Eve would have been happy, contented and secure; knowing that their creator God was caring for their every need. They had nothing to be concerned about, with every desire fulfilled, they were satisfied in every way.

God also created the most wonderful garden in all the earth as home for Adam and Eve. He named the garden Eden. It had the very best of everything God could provide for their pleasure, for food, and their well-being. Eden had unimaginable beauty and wondrous landscape. The entire animal kingdom lived in peace with Adam and Eve and they brought each other great pleasure. From Eden, God blessed Adam and Eve by saying to them; *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth"* (Genesis 1:28).

The whole earth was theirs. Adam and Eve equally had rulership over the entire animal kingdom. They could do whatever they wanted. Together, the Lord had blessed them with absolute authority along with the responsibility to express God's character, His image, to the whole earth.

Genesis 1:28 explains that both Adam and Eve were to increase the human population by having children together. They both were responsible to control the earth by ruling over it, including the oceans and all the fish which lived in them. God intended that they use their combined intellects and energies to master everything on and around the earth in service to their God. Adam and Eve had total freedom to

work together in whatever way they chose. They could be as imaginative and creative as they wanted.

It's difficult for us to imagine how wonderful it was for Adam and Eve. In our time, we have never known a period of total peace. In some way every community and family today experience the pain of damaged or broken relationships.

Perfection ruined

However, there was one small limitation God placed on them; one single thing that God instructed them NOT to do, only one! In this one simple instruction, God gave Adam and Eve the power of spiritual choice, not only for themselves but for all future generations. Now, Adam and Eve could make many choices in their new life on the earth, but this was the only spiritual decision which would change life into death.

They both had enormous freedom and liberty. However, just one negative request lay before them. God instructed Adam, that should he ever choose to do that one negative thing, the consequences would be death.

Here it is. God instructed them, *"of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"* (Genesis 2:17). They could eat of any plant from the entire earth, but this one plant grew in one location, and God said; *"you shall not eat."* That one tree would test Adam and Eve's desire to trust and obey their loving creator God. Would they believe God and obey Him, or would they not believe God and disobey Him?

That one plant in the centre of Eden presented Adam and Eve with a choice that did not exist anywhere else. Would they prefer to maintain the purity and beauty of their relationship with God? Would they

choose to preserve God's holy image within them? Or, would they decide to explore a different way of thinking by behaving differently to everything they had known from God?

They knew that the stakes were high. They knew that one tree represented either ongoing bliss in a happy relationship with God, or a broken relationship with God which meant death. God had warned them, and they understood perfectly. One tree and one decision; that's all that lay between a happy life or a sadly broken relationship with God.

So, the story of early human history unfolds. Recorded for us in Genesis chapter 3 is the event which God's enemy, Satan, used to introduce sin and death into the world. From the beginning, the enemy of God proved to be the enemy of mankind. Satan wanted to hurt God. He knew that getting Adam and Eve to disobey would irreversibly damage that perfect relationship between humans and God.

There are valuable lessons to be learned as we observe the events of this first broken relationship. As these lessons come from Adam and Eve, who were married, we shall apply these lessons to our marriage relationships first. Then we shall explore other relationships and apply God's answers from the Bible to them also.

The first broken relationship

Genesis 3:1a begins; *"Now the serpent (a snake indwelt by Satan) was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made..."* Satan used the serpent, and began by challenging Eve regarding the wording of God's command to her and Adam. He then lies by misrepresenting God's specific instruction to Adam. Because healthy relationships are built on trust, Satan started by calling Eve's trust in God into question.



The serpent/Satan starts by asking in Genesis 3:1b; “...*Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’*” No, the truth was, God had actually said “*of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...*” (Genesis 2:17a). They were free to eat from every other tree, just not that one in the middle of the garden.

Eve was an intelligent woman who knew what she was doing. Although she added a few extra words in explaining God’s command, she had understood God’s command correctly. She was able to repeat the warning accurately to the serpent/Satan who was God’s enemy. Genesis 3:2-3; Eve said to the serpent, “*We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.*”

Next, Satan challenges the consequences for disobedience to God. Genesis 3:4 records his challenge; “*You will not surely die*” the serpent announces. He still does the same today, promising people no negative consequences for disobeying God.

Satan then presents God as having dishonourable motives; as if God was hiding something good from Adam and Eve. Listen to how Satan words his deception for Eve. Genesis 3:5; *“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”* Satan inferred that if you want to know what God knows, eat the forbidden fruit Eve. As history has proven, eating the forbidden fruit did enable Adam and Eve to know and experience death and suffering, just as God knew it would when He warned them.

Eve evaluated Satan’s reasoning. Consequently, she concluded 3 things as recorded in Genesis 3:6a;

- ~ *the tree was good for food*
- ~ *the tree was a delight to the eyes*
- ~ *the tree was to be desired to make one wise (to know what God knew).*

By now, Eve’s curiosity was well heightened, and she responded to Satan based upon her newfound desires. She genuinely believed that Satan was telling the truth. Eve’s innocent mind wanted to know what God knew. She wanted to experience every pleasurable food in the garden, including the forbidden fruit. Genesis 3:6b continues; *“...she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”*

At this point, both Adam and Eve acted independent of God, but NOT independent of each other. In their different ways, both Adam and Eve supported each other in eating the fruit. Sadly though, they both left their best friend out of this critical decision. Their Lord God was ignored in this single decision which would painfully alter the future for everyone.

It’s important to understand that Eve did not act independent of Adam, as he was right there with her throughout the discussion with Satan. She would have felt quite safe and comfortable in Adam’s presence while speaking with the serpent/Satan.

From reading Genesis chapter 3, we observe the following:

- ~ Eve did not seek the advice of Adam or God.
- ~ Eve did not challenge, overrule, or defy Adam. She acted in a transparent manner right in front of Adam, yet he remained silent throughout.
- ~ Satan deceived Eve. Gullibility was in her; NOT pride, not animosity, and not defiance.
- ~ Eve had no pre-existing bad desires in her. She had no negative motives against Adam or God. This was her first-time encounter with deception in her short life of innocence.
- ~ Before and during the first act of disobedience, Eve had no desire to rule or master her husband, that came later.
- ~ Eve took the fruit; no one forced it on her, nor did Adam attempt to stop her.
- ~ Eve was not making her decision for or on behalf of Adam. She passed the fruit to Adam so he could make his own decision.
- ~ Eve gave the fruit to Adam without force. Although Adam didn't ask for it, he never-the-less ate the fruit without being deceived as Eve had been.

Adams guilt was that he remained inactive throughout Eve's talk with Satan. Genesis 3:6b provides the details; "*...she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate...*" Again, we learn the following from Genesis chapter 3:

- ~ Satan did not separate Adam and Eve for this tempting encounter.
- ~ Adam could have interrupted, and he could have questioned, but he didn't. Instead, Adam chose to remain silent and risk death upon his relationship with both Eve and God.
- ~ Adam could have deferred to God for consultation, but he didn't.
- ~ Adam could have said NO to eating the fruit which would have meant living separate from Eve. As Eve would have been expelled from the garden of Eden and would die of old age without Adam.

- ~ Adam could have prevented the full introduction of sin into the world by not eating the fruit, but he didn't.
- ~ Adam chose life and death with Eve over obedience to his creator God.
- ~ Because Adam chose to complete the introduction of sin, he had the final decision, **not Eve**. Therefore, Adam carries the final and ultimate responsibility before God for bringing sin into the world. The apostle Paul says in Romans 5:12 "*...sin came into the world through one man (Adam)...*" (See also 1 Corinthians 15:22; 1 Timothy 2:14).

To be fair, before we get all self-righteous, this was Adam and Eve's first conversation with anyone who called God into question. They did not have any experience at debating with God's enemies. In fact, they did not even know that God had enemies, and Satan certainly did not tell them the truth about his hatred of God. They did not have any idea of how to reason through opposing views of God. Satan obviously realised this and played on their naivety.

If nothing else, we can learn from this deadly encounter between Satan and the first husband and wife. When we are confronted with ideas that challenge God, or call God's words into question, we need to stop. This is the time to discuss with our spouse the issues and go to God's written Word, the Bible, in search of a clearer understanding of what He says on the matter. Sometimes it's a good idea to ask for help from a more mature Christian who knows the Bible better. Plus you need to go to the Lord in prayer, asking for His advice.

The fact is, Adam and Eve mutually and equally entered into sin by disobeying that one instruction; "*of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...*" (Genesis 2:17a). They both gave priority to their desires; they both betrayed their creator God who loved them. They irreversibly damaged the relationship with God, and they damaged the relationship between each other.

When sin entered humanity through their disobedience to God, so also sadness, division, sickness, pain, and death entered. Every human relationship was to experience the ongoing pain of sin's controlling influence and ultimate death, both spiritually and physically.

When you read Genesis chapter three, you read of the first time in the Bible where God describes something which was not good. Until this point, God had seen everything He had made as very good, as perfect. Now something was wrong, things were no longer good. So far, Adam and Eve have been of equal value in every way, and in everything they had done together. From being created equal by the Lord God, to their equal freedom and responsibilities to populate and govern the earth. One was no better or worse than the other. Adam and Eve shared perfect equality in their ability to fellowship with God and worship Him as the only creatures created in the image of God. God valued them greatly, and He grieved over them both equally when they sinned.

Now, follow what happens immediately after Adam and Eve's disobedience. *"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths"* (Genesis 3:7). Both Adam and Eve had their eyes opened to the painful reality of sin at the same time. They both were awakened to the guilt of sin together. Both realized they were naked, and they stitched leaves together to cover themselves. These first cloths were made in an attempt to hide the unavoidable guilt of their sin.

What follows is terribly sad; *"And they (Adam and Eve) heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden"* (Genesis 3:8). The perfect relationship between the creator and humans was damaged. It was not God who caused the problem, but Adam and Eve, who felt it necessary to hide themselves from being seen by the Lord. Sin does just the same today, it causes people to hide themselves from God and pretend He's not there.

Well, as you can imagine, a discussion needed to happen between all three, so God initiated it. Genesis 3:11-13 records the conversation; And he (God) said, *"...Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

God found Adam and Eve hiding, and both equally refused to take responsibility for their sin. Adam blamed God for giving him Eve who gave him the fruit. Eve blamed the serpent whom God had created for deceiving her into disobedience. Neither were willing to take responsibility for their choice to disobey.

We need to notice that God does the same today, He comes in search of us sinners. He patiently, yet persistently, finds us wherever we are and begins the discussion over the sin that separates us from Him. This is a wonderful quality to personally possess; to be the person who initiates the restoration of broken relationships. We shall discuss this in more detail later.

So, God, having confronted Adam and Eve over their sin, administered the discipline; the consequences of breaking their perfect relationship between them and their Lord God. Even today, broken relationships always have painful consequences. But when the relationship between God and us is broken, or gets damaged, that's the worst.

Genesis 3:14-24 details the entire discipline of sin upon the whole earth. But for the moment, we are only going to concern ourselves with Genesis 3:16, which records the Lord's explanation of sin's consequences directly upon Adam and Eve's relationship. To Eve, God said; *"...I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you..."*

It's that last statement which is of interest to us; "*Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you...*" For us, that's an unusual way of wording a serious discipline or judgement. God was not explaining a nice reward to Eve for their disobedience. No, this was serious. As God had earlier promised; this discipline was a judgement with never-ending and painful consequences which would lead to death.

The NET Bible translation words Genesis 3:16 a little more clearly for us; "*You will want to control your husband, but he will dominate you.*" In the original Hebrew language, in which the book of Genesis was written, the word for "*desire*" is only used 3 times in the whole Old Testament. It has the sense of stretching out after; a longing, a desire (Genesis 3:16; 4:7; Song of Songs 7:10).

The context of Genesis shows that Eve's "*desire*" for her husband was about to change. Before she had sinned, she was content to live and serve God as an equal with Adam. But now, as a result of sin, Eve's "*desire*" would be one of mastery. Her affection for Adam would no longer be loving passion. Eve was not going to become a woman so besotted with her husband that her brain would turn off. Loving emotions were no longer going to be her compelling and dominating forces. No, the ugly reality was that Eve would now seek to master her husband through domination.

Plus, childbirth would be difficult and much more painful. With sin came the introduction of death to both born and unborn infants. The joy of childbirth would now be mixed with suffering.

As for Adam, God administered equally painful consequences upon him. Again, the context of Genesis shows that Adam's new urge to "*rule*" his wife was NOT one of loving leadership. Nor was he going to have compelling emotions for sweet protection of his wife. He was not going to be motivated by lovely desires to always do the best for Eve to ensure her comfort, happiness, and wellbeing.

By disobeying God, Adam would change his attitude towards his wife. He would now seek to rule his wife instead of sharing peaceful harmony and earthly governorship with her as an equal. He would inherently seek to have the upper and domineering hand over his Eve.

Adam and Eve had exchanged their wonderful marriage of sweet peace for one of conflict. Before they disobeyed, they complimented and supported each other. Their individual actions would have been in unison and agreement with each other and with God. But now, with Satan's assistance, they had introduced sin into their relationship. Because they wanted to become like God, knowing good and evil, they ate the forbidden fruit and sacrificed purity for enmity and ultimately death (Genesis 3:5).

The consequences were devastating. The cost of sin was deadly. Satan's promise of equality with God turned out to be an eternal damnation of death with horrific effects upon humankind and planet earth. All of which could have easily been avoided, if only they had obeyed.

Up to this time, everything in Adam and Eve's lives had been equal, so God equally disciplined both of them for their disobedience. Both punishments were heart attitude punishments; Eve would now desire to master her husband by trying to control him. Adam would now respond by ruling Eve, by trying to dominate her and have the upper hand and final say.

Both their punishments affected the other, and both their punishments would impact their relationships with other people. The fact is for us today, the effects of our mutual desire for domination in marriage is felt by everyone surrounding the marriage, particularly those closest (children, siblings, close friends etc.) Mankind's fundamental failure in marriage and families, grows out of the original fall into sin and the consequences of that sin. This failure finds its best opportunity to reap havoc in the marriage relationship.

Today, the impact of that first discipline for sin remains just as real. Some people struggle with relationships between men and woman, particularly between husbands and wives. While this power struggle can create tension in any male to female relationship, it is most effective and hurtful within the marriage relationship.

Although God did punish Adam and Eve through the way they would treat each other, He also fulfilled his promise to Adam when He warned that if you eat the forbidden fruit *"you shall surely die"* (Genesis 2:17). There are two ways in which Adam and Eve died. First, they died spiritually, and second, they would *"not be allowed to reach out their hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever"* (Genesis 3:22).

The serpent/snake did not get overlooked by God's justice either. The Lord God said to the serpent; *"Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life"* (Genesis 3:14).

To Adam God said, *"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return"* (Genesis 3:17-19).

Sadly, sin had made Adam and Eve fully mortal. As they grew older their bodies would weaken until death occurred. They would have to work hard to harvest food, and much of the animal kingdom would now be their enemies.

I wonder how often Adam and Eve would have talked of their regret for eating that forbidden fruit? How often would their thoughts grip them with grief as they realised that the world was now totally different to what it could have been? How often would they watch their disobedient

children and grandchildren, and grieve over their introduction of disobedience into humanity? If only they had obeyed God.

Every human relationship was permanently changed for the worse. Respect for others would no longer come naturally. Boys and girls would irritate each other and fight. Men and women would have to work at expressing love. Patience and forgiveness would take great effort requiring grace. Laughter would be mixed with tears. Fear and hatred were introduced into relationships all because of that one act of disobedience.

Today, our communities give evidence of these sad truths which God explains in the Bible. Today's damaged and broken relationships are the direct result of sin's introduction at the beginning of human history.

The questions that hang in many of our minds are "What can be done to overcome or put right relationship pains?" and, "How can we prevent many of these relationship problems?" It's answers to these questions which motivate our exploration of God's Word in search of truth which builds God honouring relationships.

Remember, of specific interest to us are the relationships between men and women, including the husband and wife relationship in marriage. If we have a better understanding of how God created men and women, and the respect He intended us to have for each other because both are created in the image of God, conflict will lessen. Let's continue to learn how God responded to Adam and Eve's failure to obey.

The cost of grace begins

Immediately following God's pronouncement of judgement for the sin of the serpent, Adam, and Eve, we see God doing an amazing thing which none of the offenders expected. Genesis 3:21; *"The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them."*

First, we need to notice that Adam and Eve's sin did not alter the status of their marriage. God did not separate them because they had disobeyed. This is a reassuring reminder for us today; God does not demand that a marriage break apart because its members have done wrong things. God showed Adam and Eve equal grace, undeserved kindness and love. God's grace always works to keep marriage relationships together.

So, as God's children, we should strive in showing grace to our spouse when they fail. Our spouses are equally created in the image of God; therefore, God's grace should flow through us. Remember also, just as Adam and Eve were equally vulnerable to the seductive temptation of Satan, so we also are equally vulnerable with our spouse. Humble grace is a wonderful reflection of the Lord's character in any relationship, but especially in marriage.

Second, we notice that God sacrificed the life of at least one animal to make cloths of skin for Adam and Eve. Because mankind is made in the image of God, the Lord considered their combined sin to be such a violation of His holy character, that an animal life needed to be sacrificed to cover them.

God's loving grace preserved Adam and Eve's lives while sacrificing an innocent animal to cover them. Grace is like that. It always puts love into action so the recipient can experience the sweetness of the grace. When loving grace exists equally within both marriage partners, patience and forgiveness operate to overcome the failings of both. The truth is it takes two soft hearts to enjoy marriage. Both hearts need to be soft towards God and towards each other.



Mutual equality within marriage

Many of the lessons we've been learning from Genesis are continued in the New Testament of the Bible. The apostle Paul wrote a great deal about Christian character in relationships, particularly marriage.

It's important to understand that the truths of God's Word explain how God's character is to be lived by Christians in all cultures. The righteous ways in which the Lord wants His image to be experienced by His people never changes.

A wonderful balance exists in marriage by God's design, it's the mutual nature of equality which best reflects His character. Even though a man and woman may have differing strengths and weaknesses, they may have very different skills and abilities; they are of equal value to God. Therefore, a husband and wife should both think of each other as of equal value to God and to each other.

Likewise, sons and daughters are of equal value to God, therefore both parents are to value all their children equally. All family members have been created equal even though they have different roles and responsibilities within the family.

In marriage, God's design is for husband and wife to equally belong to each other. The apostle Paul wrote many clear-cut instructions to the Church at Corinth which had many troubled relationships. Their Christian marriages were a disgrace to God's name and did not reflect the character of Jesus Christ. Husbands and wives both treated each other without respect, or the dignity God intended. This was because Jesus Christ did not come first as Lord of their marriage relationships.

As the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian Church, he wanted to reinforce the Lord's design for God honouring relationships, especially marriage. Marital abuses were common; physically, emotionally, and morally. Sin had infected every level of the marriage relationship.

Improper sexual relations were also common in that church, which was destroying families and the Church's testimony within the Corinthian community.

Paul affirms a basic principle for all marriages; husband and wife belong to each other first. Their own marriage relationship comes before all other relationships. Spouses are not on loan; *"each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband"* (1 Corinthians 7:2). They have equal title to each other. God has designed marriage so that the wife has equal claim to her husband as he does to her. We call this the mutuality of marriage; the things that God intends to be equally in common with each other.

When it comes to the sexual aspect of marriage, Paul explained; *"The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband"* (1 Corinthians 7:3). Sexual intimacy belongs to one wife and one husband within one marriage relationship. Physical intimacy is not available to anyone outside of that marriage relationship to participate in.

Sexual intimacy is the celebration of love in God's highest and most unique human relationship. God intends for sexual intimacy to be the coming together of spiritual, emotional, and physical components of the marriage.

Sex is not a side issue of marriage; rather, it's an integral component of a healthy love relationship. This facet of marriage is largely dependent upon the health of the other areas of the relationship; the emotional state, having good communication, and balanced mutuality. Sexual intimacy is far more than entertainment.

Paul explains further; *"For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does"* (1 Corinthians 7:4). Not only is there spiritual and emotional equality; God's design includes each spouse's body belonging to the other equally. Authority of each spouse's body

belongs to both spouses. Neither the husband nor the wife has total authority over each other's bodies. That authority is equally shared.

This is of particular value when faced with medical decisions which could impact both spouses and unborn babies. Both mother and father should be included in the decision-making process.

Christian husbands and wives are to equally submit to each other in the general course of married life and in their walk with Jesus Christ as Lord. As Christian spouses, "*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*" (Eph 5:21) forms the most important foundational attitude toward each other "*because we are members of his body (Christ's Church)*" (Eph 5:30). Noticed that the Lord Jesus Christ is the reason for submission one to the other. Christ is at the centre of the marriage relationship.

While equality and mutuality are wonderful balancers in marriage, God never-the-less assigns unique roles to each. As most of us know, often in marriage opposites are attracted to each other. Obviously opposite characters are more inclined to complement and complete each other. However, this also creates the potential for one character to think they are entitled to dominate the other.

Because we live in an age which is insensitive to truth, we need to clearly identify what God's Word says in regard to roles within marriage. God speaks plainly, and with the greatest care to lessen the possibility of abuses by either party.

When love and respect characterise both partners; their roles in the marriage more naturally fall in line with God's design. With equality and mutuality present; authority, headship, love, and submission will be no problem for either partner.

Distinct Roles in Marriage

When speaking of marriage, the Bible records God's truths and principles which give the husband and wife their greatest opportunities to reflect His nature.

While perfectly equal in significance, both are created different in roles and responsibilities. Therefore, neither spouse is ever independent of the other. As Paul highlights in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12; *"Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God"*. Therefore, believing spouses recognise their God-given roles within the marriage and live to enable the other spouse in their God given role.

The Christian attitude sees both spouses submitting because they see themselves in Christ, and live as an expression of loving reverence, respect, and consideration for Christ. 1 Peter 5:5 reads; *"...clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* While this is a general instruction for all believers, it remains true within the marriage relationship.

Notice how God responds to both heart attitudes. It's our choice whether to live under God's grace as humble people, or, to live under His opposition as proud people. This shows how important our attitudes towards others are in God's eyes.

Living in mutual submission allows the marriage to become a visual expression of the spiritual relationship Christ has with the Church. While those who look on may not agree with the truths of it, the evidence of the healthy relationship will be undeniable. Should anyone ask why your marriage is successful, you will be able to give a God honouring explanation (1 Peter 3:15).

The Lord never intended roles within marriage to become a battleground. Nor did He intend for either spouse to use their unique role to control, dominate, or manipulate the other spouse.

The Husband

The following Bible passages show various relationship truths which husbands need to understand in order for them to treat their wives as Christ treats His Church.

As an extension of God the Father's headship, the apostle Paul wants us *"to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God"* (1 Corinthians 11:3 - c.f. Ephesians 5:23). Husbands are assigned the headship role in the marriage. Sadly, in the first century cultures that Paul was writing to, many men had bully attitudes towards women. Therefore, God writes through Paul to correct these abuses toward women, particular the abuses toward wives.

In the original New Testament Greek language, the word *"head"* carries the idea of ruling authority or governor. We see the same headship and submission between God the Father and God the Son. Likewise, we see it between God the Son and the Church.

The apostle Paul continues to define the character of headship by explaining the parallels between Christ's headship and the husbands. Ephesians 5:25-29 explains; *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church."*

Paul's point is this; what Jesus Christ does for the church, the husband is commanded to do for his wife. Paul details what a husband's love should look like. The test for every man is to ask his wife; do you feel that I love you like Jesus loves you? For many of us men, we may not like the answer we hear. Some wives may need a little time to answer, so they can give thought to your relationship with them. While that may hurt, it gives us men the opportunity to change the way we behave toward our wives.

Paul begins by explaining in Ephesian 5:25, that husbands are to look to Jesus as their model for the way to show love to their wives. Jesus love for His Church is seen to be at its strongest when He was sacrificing Himself for the Church. Just as Christ "*gave himself up for her* (the Church)," so husbands are to sacrificially give up things which are of value to themselves in order for their wives to benefit.

This may mean giving up time which he would normally use for himself; instead he uses that time for his wife's benefit. Possibly it's giving up some kind of work duty. Sometimes husbands are able to perform physical duties more easily than their wives. So, a husband will do the physically difficult work to relieve his wife of that struggle. Likewise, the husband may sacrifice money which he planned on using for himself. Instead, he uses that money for his wife's benefit.

The same principle applies spiritually. A loving husband will sacrifice personal pleasures in order to provide spiritual blessing for his wife. He may take care of the children in order to set his wife free from distractions for a time of fellowship or Bible study and prayer with other women. Maybe he would like to give his wife a holiday from her daily duties, so he offers to do those duties for her.

We need to note also, that just as Jesus sacrificed himself willingly, so husbands should serve their wives without complaining. Giving up things of value for our wives should be a pleasure which the wife will value.

Paul continues in Ephesians 5:26 to say that the husband should “*sanctify*” his wife. Now that’s not a word we use very often, particularly when speaking of our wives. However, Paul makes a strong point here; Christian husbands should sacrifice for the spiritual benefit of their wives.

The word “*sanctify*” means to purify or make holy. Put simply, husbands are to do things for their wives which enable her to become more holy. God expects husbands to change the way they live around their wives, to change the way they speak to their wives, so the wife finds it easier to be a pure Christian woman.

A loving husband who happily sacrifices for his wife will look for ways to do this without creating difficult rules. He wants to set his wife free from the painful things in life which drag her down spiritually. He wants to add joyful things into her life which will cause a growing desire within her to be more like Jesus Christ. This is not an opportunity to be harsh or demanding. Rather, the husband works to show grace and kindness in ways which makes personal holiness a pleasant experience for his wife.

Next, in Ephesians 5:26, Paul says that the husband should cleanse his wife “*by the washing of water with the word.*” God wants the husband to take responsibility for making sure his wife is exposed to the Word of God. The purpose for this is again for her spiritual washing. The Bible has amazing power to change people on the inside by washing their hearts and minds with spiritual truth.

God the Holy Spirit takes the truths of God’s Word and applies them to the values, thought processes, and conscience of the person reading. From within, the Holy Spirit continues the changing process so that little by little those changes are seen on the outside. In assisting his wife with this process, the husband’s goal is the same as Christ’s goal for the Church; to present her “*in splendour, without spot or wrinkle*” (Ephesians

5:27). Husbands are called by God to lovingly and carefully help their wives be free from spiritual wrinkles which can ruin their lives and dishonour the Lord.



First, husbands should evaluate themselves, checking that he is not the cause of any imperfections in his wife. This is likely to be the most difficult task any husband has to do. We husbands do well to apply the general instruction by the apostle Paul to our marriages. *“Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother”* [or sister] (Romans 14:13). It’s far too easy, and wrong, to *“say to your brother (or wife), ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye.”* (Matthew 7:4). Self-examination must come first!

Having checked himself, there are different ways a husband can assist his wife in reducing spiritual wrinkles or imperfections. Men should begin with daily prayer for the God of Heaven to strengthen and comfort your wife in living a God pleasing life. Next, pray daily that your Heavenly Father will strengthen you with loving grace and patience as you lead and serve your wife.

Husbands, learn the Bible yourself so that you can share the lessons you have learnt with your wife. Regularly read the Bible with your family. Reading together, then praying together, is very healthy for every family. It's good for husbands and wives to read God's Word together, then pray together about what you have just read.

Another way is for the husband to set his wife free from work for a time. This makes it possible for her to go and be taught the Bible by a more mature Christian lady; this is called discipleship. A good husband may ask his wife if she would like to spend time with a stronger Christian woman for this purpose.

Similarly, he may serve his family by taking them to Church worship and teaching times. There are many ways in which a husband can practically assist his wife to be washed with God's Word. If a husband struggles to think of ways, try asking for ideas from another Christian husband who appears to be more successful at this.

In Ephesians chapter 5, the apostle Paul repeatedly highlights the importance for husbands to gently help their wives to be *"holy and blameless"* (Ephesians 5:27). Women, like men, find that holiness does not come naturally. It takes effort with perseverance mixed with much patience. Therefore, much grace is required. Without the grace of Jesus Christ, husbands would be unable to serve their wives in their pursuit of personal holiness.

In Ephesians, Paul continues to build his case for strong and joyful marriages lead by wise husbands. Just as men feed their bodies to provide health and strength, so the husband is to *"love her as if she were his own body"* (Ephesians 5:28). The Christian husband values his wife as being just as important as his own body. So, he cares for her, protects her, and provides for her with the same priority and urgency as he would care for himself. God's Word goes as far as saying; *"He who loves his wife loves himself"* (Ephesians 5:28).

Paul's analogy is strong because Christ lives as our example in His relationship with His body, the Church. In these ways and more, the Christian husband is able to *"nourish and cherish"* his wife (Ephesians 5:29). He appreciates her and values her as being the most precious person in his life.

This is a tall order for any husband, requiring Holy Spirit controlled living which enables and empowers this Christ-like character in his wife. Paul really personalises the importance of a husband pursuing His wife's purity by exhorting husbands to; *"let each one of you love his wife as himself"* (Ephesians 5:33).

Wise husbands patiently lead their family, which should be in synchomesh with their wives. Men: *"love your wives and do not be harsh with them"* (Colossians 3:19). Leadership should not be forced or demanding. It should not display anger and should never humiliate or embarrass others. Rather, it walks side by side in patience.

Christ loved the church (His people) with compassion, mercy, forgiveness, respect, and sacrificial selflessness. Likewise, the husband is to love his wife, valuing her ideas, opinions, beliefs, and ways of doing things. Her strengths are to be acknowledged, valued, and utilised equally as are his own, for she is God's complementary person for the husband.

The apostle Peter, like Paul, emphasises God-honouring marriages where husbands lead in love. *"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered"* (1 Peter 3:7). Peter is not saying that husbands should show their wives honour because they are weak. Just the opposite is true. Peter's point is this; husbands who recognise being spiritually joined with their wives in Christ, should have greater appreciation of their wives. This leads the husband to live in an understanding way with his wife.

Notice the emphasis Peter places on the husband's right behaviour towards his wife if he wants God to answer his prayers. A husband who treats his wife poorly places a hindrance upon his own prayer life.

Let's clarify Peter's words "*weaker vessel*" to prevent any misunderstanding. In the original Greek language of the New Testament, Peter uses a word for "*weaker*" which simply means 'more feeble.' He uses it here as a comparative term, NOT as an absolute statement referring to inferiority.

Peter further clarifies what he means by adding the word "*vessel*" which has the idea of a physical piece of equipment – speaking of the physical body. So, Peter is telling husbands that God wants humility in them because their wives have less physical strength. The apostle Peter wanted Christian husbands to be understanding men who honour their wives. Husbands are to respect their wives for the many ways God has made them strong, even though they may not always be as strong physically. At no point does God, or the Bible, teach that women are weak!

Husbands should not assume that all decisions are his to make alone. God has given him a companion who should share in the decisions of life. Together they combine their thoughts, ideas, beliefs and values to make decisions, hopefully wise decisions.

There should almost never be a time when a husband makes an important decision without discussion and agreement with his wife. A discussion requires input from both the wife and husband. The physical, emotional and spiritual health of the whole family are to be considered by husband and wife when making large decisions. There are many things to consider in a family; food, clothing, medicine, fun times, rest time, family time, and work time, they all need providing for. The team effort of husband and wife is important for the family to live together well.

Peter finishes his teaching on marriage by reminding husbands that their wives *"are heirs with you of the grace of life"* (1 Peter 3:7). Remember Adam and Eve, they were both created in the image of God, and shared God's grace following their disobedience. So today, having received the gift of mortal life, including all the events and blessings within life, husbands and wives equally share God's many grace gifts.

Relationships are a wonderful expression of God's love; He cares deeply about people and their relationships. Therefore, God especially tells us how marriage should work. The husband's loving leadership should win the respect of his wife, and she should respond by being agreeable with it working this way. Wives benefit greatly by making it as easy as humanly possible for her husband to lead their family in the way of Jesus Christ.

The Wife

Up until now we have been discussing marriage and how God has made it the most important human relationship. After learning about the first marriage of Adam and Eve, we focused on the way husbands are to live toward their wives. Now we turn our attention to how wives are to live toward their husbands.

God's Word equally explains the truths wives need to understand in order to experience fulfilment and inspire their husband's love.

If we go back to Ephesians 5:22-24, the apostle Paul explains; *"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."* And again, in Colossians 3:18; *"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord."*

Unfortunately, many cultures over human history have wrongly applied this whole idea of submission. Consequently, many women and girls have suffered greatly. This is not how God designed human relationships. Rather, sin has worked its ugly way into relationships, distorting the beautiful thing God created them to be.

Remember Genesis, both male and female were created equally in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Together, man and woman were to live in harmony, sharing everything God had made for His glory and their pleasure. Even though sin exists in relationships today, God has made it possible through faith in Jesus Christ for the wonder of healthy and happy marriages to exist. Not only in marriage, but in all male to female relationships. God's desire for pure and happy friendships has not changed.

So, let's explore what God meant when He wrote through the apostle Paul about submission. Paul's discussion in his letter to the Ephesian

Church about relationships began back in Ephesians 2:11. Paul builds a large word picture of the many ways in which the many relationships we have with different people are to function as believers in Jesus Christ.

Paul begins chapter 5 with; *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...”* (Ephesians 5:1-2). All Christians should try to copy God’s beautiful nature. Special attention is to be given to living out the self-sacrificing love of Jesus. In other words, copy the love you have received from Jesus and pass His love onto other people.

Paul continues through chapter 5 explaining the need for holiness and godly wisdom in various relationships. Then, in verse 21 he says; *“submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”* As followers of Jesus who are looking for ways of showing his self-sacrificing love to others, we are to submit to each other in every relationship, including marriage. We call this mutual submission. When two people submit to each other, they serve each other, they give preference to each other.

The reason for this mutual submission between all Christians is that submission best expresses our *“reverence for Christ.”* In our efforts to imitate God, it is very important that our speech and behaviour really does cause other people to feel as if Jesus love is coming into their lives.

Paul has just explained that all Christians, of all ages, both male and female, are to be submissive to each other. He then specifies in verse 22 that wives are to especially display submission toward their husbands. Submission, which is the humble way to live Jesus love, best builds the marriage relationship when displayed foremost by the wife.

Paul explains what this submission should look like in real life. First, the wife’s focused submission is to her husband only, no other male comes into this equation. Her sons, her father-in-law, and all other

male members of the family are not included in her special submission. This raises the need for all men to show her respect as a woman of dignity.

As already discussed, the wife's attitude and behaviour is in service to the Lord. As a Christian woman, she desires to promote the character of Jesus Christ more than anything else.

This humble submission is not for the husband to demand or command of his wife. The sweet beauty of submission is experienced when the wife lovingly offers it and the husband gratefully receives it. If the husband insists on instructing his wife to submit, it will most likely cause resentment and friction in their relationship. This is not God's design.

The wife's submission to her "*own husband*" is a good reminder that he belongs to his wife. He does not own her, and he is not the head of any other woman. A wife's submission is a sign of her possession of her husband; he belongs to his wife only, and to no other.

In this way, wives set an example for the Church's submissive obedience towards the Lord. God does not intend this to cause the wife to feel secondary, subservient, or demeaned. Rather, submission is the wife's expression of dignity resulting from her relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sadly, there can be a natural inclination for husbands to allow their love for their wives to diminish. Likewise, wives have a natural inclination to lose respect for their husbands. Therefore, God gives specific instructions to counter these natural tendencies by pursuing love and respect mutually. A wife's respectful submission is to win the growing strong love of her husband. While a husband's loving service leads, this should inspire his wife in loving submission as she respectfully and trustingly follows his lead.

Submission leaves no room for bully behaviour, either by the husband or the wife. Rather, as Paul explains; *“let the wife see that she respects her husband”* (Ephesians 5:33b). This soft-hearted attitude carries no resentment, no jealousy, no revenge, and resists the idea of getting one over the husband. This respectful submission refuses to manipulate, bully, or force control upon her husband. This empowers the wife to enable her husband to be better than other men who may treat women badly. She is able to lovingly and patiently provide her own husband with ideas, suggestions, and even corrections, which can enrich their marriage and assist him in living for Jesus Christ.

In God’s design for marriage there is no place for threats, domineering, or intimidation, which would crush the spirit of the other spouse. Raising of voices until dominance of the conversation is achieved is simply not to be done. Yelling, anger, and emotional accusations or slander have no place in order to get your way. Under no circumstance is physical violence of any kind by either spouse acceptable. These are not the ways of Jesus Christ in marriage, or any relationship.

Here the Christian wife has influence through submission in the home. The entire household, and all guests, will enjoy the sweetness of this Christ like attitude. There is no weakness in submission, only strength under control.

Gentlemen, life will take you through times when even the strongest of men are made weak as kittens because of sickness. A strong, submissive wife, who lives in obedience to Jesus, will show her strength by serving her sick husband. Her submission will carry the family without complaining or sinful attitudes when the husband is unable to serve.

Paul instructed widows at the church at Ephesus saying, *“I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander”* (1 Timothy 5:14).

Apart from the obvious fact that only the wife can bear children, she is to be the manager of the house. There is both responsibility and

freedom to employ her creativity as she wants. The wife is to cover the day-to-day organisational duties to enable the smooth running of the family household. This is not an area for the husband to interfere in. However, a loving husband, with the children, will serve with the wife in order for the home to operate smoothly. Since God has provided the wife as the home manager, this obviously means the husband is to entrust her with the resources and freedom needed to manage well.



The Proverbs 31 husband and wife team

Proverbs chapter 31 begins in verse 1 with *“the words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him...”* King Lemuel recounts advice his mother gave him, and among other warnings, she cautioned against improper relationships with women. Verses 10-31 presents a detailed description of what kind of woman king Lemuel should seek as a wife.

Therefore Proverbs 31:10-31 gives a word picture of a God honouring husband and wife team working together. This passage especially highlights the excellent qualities of the wife.

- ¹⁰ *An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.*
- ¹¹ *The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.*
- ¹² *She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.*
- ¹³ *She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.*
- ¹⁴ *She is like the ships of the merchant;
she brings her food from afar.*
- ¹⁵ *She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens.*
- ¹⁶ *She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*
- ¹⁷ *She dresses herself with strength
and makes her arms strong.*
- ¹⁸ *She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.*
- ¹⁹ *She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.*
- ²⁰ *She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.*
- ²¹ *She is not afraid of snow for her household,*

- for all her household are clothed in scarlet.*
22 *She makes bed coverings for herself;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.*
23 *Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.*
24 *She makes linen garments and sells them;
she delivers sashes to the merchant.*
25 *Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.*
26 *She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*
27 *She looks well to the ways of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.*
28 *Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:*
29 *"Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all."*
30 *Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.*
31 *Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.*

We have just read a detailed picture of feminine wisdom being lived out in the context of her family and her community. This demonstrates that a godly husband and wife team have great diversity and freedoms. The writer of Proverbs shows that an excellent wife is a spectacular woman who is worthy of praise. Likewise, her husband is worthy of respect as he lives and works with his wife while serving as a community leader who sits that the city gate of authority.

The wife has a range of qualities, skills, and personal disciplines which provide for not only each member of her family, but also allows her to bless the community. Also, as this enterprising wife sees additional needs, she works diligently to meet those needs. As if that's not enough,

she watches for business opportunities outside of her normal routine and pursues them as well, without neglecting her family priorities.

The husband does not restrict his wife's ambition simply because of his position in the community as a leader. Nor does he dictate how she is to give expression to her obvious desires, talents and skills. He simply trusts her, as I'm sure she does him. Inherent to Mr. Proverbs 31 leadership skills, is that he is a listener. We see this by the fact that he sits at the city gate, where the city elders would check new-comers and listen to the disputes of the town's people.

Likewise, the wife's excellent management skills not only benefit her various activities, but also enables and qualifies her husband's activities and responsibilities. If she was not a respectful and honourable woman in the community, the husband would not be permitted to sit as an elder.

The truth is, they both complement and enable each other. They complete each other which enables each of them to achieve things they never could have without each other.

Marriage provides the opportunity for variations of duties and responsibilities in response to the circumstances of each family. Proverbs 31 magnificently shows the diversity that can happily exist while expressing the God-given roles of a marriage.

Proverbs 31 shows the home as the woman's primary area of influence and responsibility. Even though she may stay up late and rise early, her family is well cared for. This is not an easy lifestyle for many women. Therefore, they need humble assistance from their husbands.

While most of the Proverbs 31 text focuses on the wife, notice that there is an unmistakable unity of husband and wife. Observe how the husband and wife empower and complement each other.

Wives are not to be trapped but should enjoy enormous freedoms with the blessing of their husbands. The husband is to make it as easy as possible for his wife to supportively submit as expressive of her God given dignity. The point is this; the wife's respect should win the love of her husband, and he should respond by being agreeable with it working this way.

Practical role assignments

For the most part, everyday roles and duties are worked through based upon common sense and practical necessities. Each spouse will obviously have things they like doing more than other things. Just as each will naturally do certain tasks better than other tasks.

Remember, biblically speaking, there are no hard and fast rules for assigning practical responsibilities. This allows for flexibility, the sharing of jobs, and changing duties as required or desired. Both having servant attitudes is a great help when working through the day-to-day practical things that make a family run smoothly.

Remember also, as the wife is manager of the home, God has allowed her flexibility as to who does what. Duties and responsibilities can and will change as life changes. As spouses change over time there is often need for changes in responsibilities.

Attitudes that make a difference

- ✓ Be patient with each other, especially in the early days of marriage.
- ✓ Be flexible and allow grace to overlook the difficult days when things just go wrong.
- ✓ Be willing to change whatever needs changing to make things better.

- ✓ Accept that life changes, families change, and the people we love change. Nothing stays the same forever other than the Lord.
- ✓ Laugh at the silly things which happen. Don't allow the little things that go wrong to become an irritation or to cause a fight.
- ✓ Realise that both spouses are not perfect, and that failure will happen at some point. However, failure creates the opportunity to forgive and learn how to prevent the same thing happening again.
- ✓ Be dependable in your responsibilities; your spouse is depending on you.
- ✓ Acknowledge the unimportant things that really don't matter and get on with doing the things that must get done.
- ✓ Be willing to learn new skills in order to share responsibilities evenly.
- ✓ Be thankful for the pleasure of serving each other through the ordinary and boring duties in family life.
- ✓ Be happy to go out of your way for the sake of easing the load of your spouse.
- ✓ Be content in the family God has placed you.

While each marriage has its own unique husband and wife. Similarly, each marriage will need to identify the strengths and abilities of each other. Those strengths and weaknesses can then be used for the mutual benefit of the marriage and larger family.

With the right attitudes, both spouses can delegate responsibilities which are best for their marriage within the framework of God's design for leadership, management, and submission. Obviously though, there needs to be flexibility and willingness to change the day-to-day workings as required.

A marriage transformed in Jesus Christ is where husbands are empowered by their wives to be humble, gracious servant leaders that inspire their wives to express the beauty of Christ.

A marriage controlled by Jesus Christ is where wives are empowered by their husbands to be humble and merciful managers of the home as

expressions of God's mercy. It's where both husband and wife are most like Christ when they live most sacrificially for Christ and each other.

Equality recognises the same level of value within each person along with the unique giftedness and abilities from God. However, a life of mutual submission, mutual service, mutual honour, with mutual patience and forgiveness, shared with love, does not mean both sameness of responsibilities and roles. There is diversity to explore.

God does not make robot machines. No, He makes men and women different, each are unique and cannot be copied by the other. Headship is not a position of dominance, it's not superiority, and it's not mastery. Likewise, submission is not slavery or forced labour under a dictator leader.

As marriage is designed by God, it stands to reason that when people do not follow His design, the marriage is going to experience problems. Therefore, it's important to know and follow God's design, even when it may be counter-cultural or contrary to what you have been accustomed to. One of the greatest challenges to both spouses is thinking and functioning according to God's design and not necessarily as the world defines the relationship.

Therefore, as in all facets of Christian living, the husband and wife are *"to be made new in the attitude of your minds"* (Ephesians 4:23). Why is this important? Because it's easy to be misled by pride, selfishness, unhealthy feelings, assumptions, religious tradition, and unmet expectations, when considering who does what in a marriage.

Remember; *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9). When considering roles within marriage, our self-deceiving hearts can be very persuasive. Unfortunately, hearts are often convincing with wrong and damaging ideas if not directed by God's truths on the matter. Culture, family influence, personal history, even religious tradition, can all contribute to a distorted view of how a

husband and wife should function within their marriage and home. As Jeremiah says, once a deceived heart runs with a wrong idea, who knows where it will lead; *"Who can understand it?"* A deceived heart runs independent of God's thinking and does what it does simply because it wants to.

Obedient living under the control of the Holy Spirit is extremely important for a happy marriage. It takes two soft hearts to enjoy a marriage, both his and hers. By walking in the love of Jesus Christ, both husband and wife will have the grace to persevere in a selfless relationship which puts God first and each other second.



Men and Women of the Bible

Even a casual reading of the Bible soon shows that it's history and culture is mostly male oriented. Having said that, the women who are spoken of mostly offer significant insights into God's story for humanity and the Christian faith. Just as it is with the men of the Bible, the women provide memorable lessons for us from both a good and bad perspective.

The godly women of the Bible honour God equally as much as the godly men. These ladies wonderfully show their capacity to please God and live out His character which impacts others' lives.

Two faithful mothers

We see a powerful example of God honouring living in the life of young Timothy of the New Testament. Timothy owed much to his Christian heritage that came from his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois (2 Timothy 1:5). Little is known of these two ladies. However, together they had a profound impact on Timothy's life, which in turn blessed many other people.

The apostle Paul, writing his second letter to Timothy, says this about these two ladies. *"I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well"* (2 Timothy 1:5). What a wonderful tribute to three generations of this Christian family.

The Bible tells us in Acts 16:1 that Paul came across a disciple of Jesus while on his travels, by the name Timothy. *"Timothy was the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek"* (Acts 16:1). Verse two continues to explain that Timothy was *"well spoken of by the brothers"* in the Churches of that area (Acts 16:2). Obviously, Timothy had earned the respect of his local Christian community. The apostle

Paul, likewise, recognised the strength of Timothy's Christian character and invited Timothy to accompany him on his journey.

Either Lois was Eunice's mother, or mother-in-law. It seems that these two ladies raised Timothy together, which would indicate that Timothy's father had died. Or, it's possible that the whole family lived together, which was common in that culture of that time. I personally think it is more likely that Timothy's father had died, as Paul took on the fatherly position in Timothy's life. When Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, he speaks of Timothy this way; *"I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord..."* (1 Corinthians 4:17. See also 1 Timothy 1:2, 18).

Paul also reminded Timothy of his upbringing in his second letter to Timothy. *"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus"* (2 Timothy 3:14-15). It seems that the phrase *"knowing from whom you learned it"* refers to Eunice and Lois. These ladies would have taught the Jewish Scriptures to Timothy from an early age, training him in the life of faith in the Messiah Jesus.

Paul had great confidence in the skills of these two ladies who had passed on the gospel truth to Timothy. Not only did they teach the knowledge of God to Timothy, but they lived a faithful life themselves as an example to him. Paul commends Timothy for the way in which he had faithfully continued living out the faith he had learned from his mother and grandmother (2Ti 1:5).

It is God's intention for faithful women to be a powerful influence in the lives of their children and grandchildren. Christian ladies can rest assured that God honours the important role they play in passing on the truths of Jesus Christ to the next generation.

As a result of Eunice and Lois, Timothy continued to grow strong in his walk with Jesus Christ. Scripture would also suggest that he later became the pastor of the Church at Ephesus (1Ti 1:3).

Ruth and her God

In the Old Testament, there is a short, yet powerful book entitled “Ruth.” This four-chapter story tells of the remarkable lives of three main characters: Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. While the characters of Naomi and Boaz are worthy of our attention, we shall take the greatest lessons from Ruth.

Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman, the other being Esther. Ruth is the only book in the Old Testament named after an ancestor of Jesus, as Ruth is mentioned in the genealogy record of Jesus in Matthew 1:5. Likewise, Ruth is the only book in the Old Testament named after a non-Jewish person, she was a Moabitess. So, Ruth is not only a unique person, but she is a woman in which God carried out a wonderful life transformation, so much so that He wanted to tell the world for ever about her through the Bible.

The nation of Moab came about, according to Genesis 19:30-37, because Abraham's nephew Lot was enticed into getting into such a drunken state that his daughters were able to seduce him into committing incest. Lot's daughters apparently believed that the end of the world had come because of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Consequently, the eldest daughter gave birth to a son who was named Moab, and he became the father of the Moabites.

The Moabites lived on the South Eastern side of the Dead Sea, which was a barren desert land. The Moabites were polytheists. That is, they believed there were many gods. However, the chief god of the Moabite nation was Chemosh. This wicked religion even required the people to sacrifice their babies on burning alters to their false god.

As you would imagine, the Moabites were enemies of Israel. Moab was a constant thorn in Israel's side and their relationship was marked by constant hatred and war. You can read some of it in 1 Kings chapter 11 and 2 Kings chapter 3.

For 18 years, during the time of the Judges of Israel, the Moabites ruled over the Israelites, until finally Eglon the King of Moab was assassinated by Ehud one of the Israelite judges (Judges 3:12-30).

In Numbers chapters 22-25 you can read how Balak king of Moab employed the services of the prophet Balaam to curse Israel. This account of Balaam shows us just how far from God the people of Israel had become. Balaam was an Israelite Prophet for hire.

As you may know, it did not go well for Balaam, and Balaam ended up getting straightened out by the angel of the Lord and his own talking donkey. On this one occasion, God enabled this donkey to speak clearly, telling Balaam exactly what's what on God's behalf!

We read about this in Numbers 22:21-33.

²¹ So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

²² But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him.

²³ And the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road.

²⁴ Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side.

25 And when the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again.

26 Then the angel of the Lord went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left.

27 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

28 Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?"

29 And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you."

30 And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."

31 Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face.

32 And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me.

33 The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live."

The nation of Moab became cursed by God. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Deuteronomy 23; Isaiah 15-16; and Jeremiah 48.

Deuteronomy 23:3 tells the extent of God's curse. The Lord shut Moabite people out from being able to join with Israel in worship. "No Ammonite

or Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the Lord forever..."

While Isaiah 16:14 shows how far God took this curse against Moab.

"But now the LORD has spoken, saying, "In three years, like the years of a hired worker, the glory of Moab will be brought into contempt, in spite of all his great multitude, and those who remain will be very few and feeble." This was fulfilled much later, 300 years after King David. The Assyrian King Sargon, wiped out Moab in the year 715BC, leaving only a small remnant who were utterly crushed and powerless.

The point of telling you about Moab is this; Ruth was a Moabitess. This was Ruth's world; where she was born and grew into her adult life. This was all she had ever known, idolatry, human sacrifice, and hostility against God and His people Israel.

The life of Ruth is a testimony to the extraordinary things God can accomplish in someone's life, and against all the bad circumstances of their life. It turns out, as we shall discover, that God is bigger and more powerful than any amount of pain life can dish up. When we surrender, putting God first, He can do amazing things which we never thought possible.

We are going to learn how God not only works with but plans our life circumstances to be used for His purposes. God engages the most unlikely people to work together, fulfilling His intentions, and usually without them knowing what He is up to.

We shall also learn how believers in Jesus as Lord are to align their thinking with God's thinking throughout life's difficulties. Plus, we shall discover how God's children can be confident, content, and victorious through the most extreme struggles.

The story of Ruth took place over 3000 years ago during a period when Israel had no King. While being ruled by Moab, Israel had various

judges to implement God's law and resolve community disputes. The problem with having no King as the nation's spiritual leader was that; *"Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* (Judges 21:25). Instead of being guided by a God-fearing leader, people simply did what they wanted. As you can imagine, the nation of Israel became more and more wicked and no longer cared about the Lord their God.

With all that as an introduction to Ruth, let's begin to consider the story, starting at Ruth 1:1-5. Ruth's in-laws were Elimelech and Naomi (Ruth 1:2), who had two sons; Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. Due to the draught in Israel and the lack of food, they moved to the country of Moab and remained there. While in Moab, Elimelech the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons.

Following their father's death, both sons married Moabite women; their names were Orpah and Ruth, which is questionable to say the least. I suspect this was as a result of the father's death and losing his headship. No matter what the reasons, they disobeyed the Lord and married pagans. Marriages with people of other nations that worshiped false gods were forbidden in the Law of Moses. Deuteronomy 7:3-4 explains; *"You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods..."*

Mahlon and Chilion, with their wives remained living in Moab for about ten years. During this time both Mahlon and Chilion also died. So now, Naomi was left living in a foreign land without her husband or two sons. Naomi's only family were her two daughters-in-law: Orpah and Ruth.

The story continues in Ruth 1:6-18, where Naomi decided to return to her hometown of Bethlehem with both her daughters-in-law, as she had heard that now there was more food available in Bethlehem. Naomi figured that the abundance of food was the Lord's doing, which affirmed her decision to return to Bethlehem in her thinking.

Initially both Orpah and Ruth were happy to make the journey to Bethlehem with Naomi. Obviously, both these younger ladies must have felt a great sense of loyalty to Naomi. However, part way into the journey Naomi changed her mind and instructed both her daughter-in-laws to go back to Moab and live with their biological families, as they will be better cared for and may even be able to remarry a Moabite man.

Ruth 1:13b reads; *"No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me."* Both Naomi and Ruth understood that it was God who was overseeing these painful events. Naomi's pain was worsened by knowing that her two daughters-in-law were suffering because of God's dealings with her.

Ruth 1:14-15 tells how Orpah returned to her people and to her gods. Notice that Naomi did not say Orpah was returning to her people's gods, but to her gods. Orpah obviously had never detached herself from her past idolatry and still worshipped the blood thirsty gods of Moab.

At this point Ruth would have realized the cost of following Naomi, she would need to be willing to totally abandon her false gods of Moab. Ruth would have witnessed Orpah counting the cost and then departing. How disheartening that must have been for Ruth, not to mention for Naomi.

The truth is however, spiritual differences can cause major divisions in families. Particularly between families that worship false gods, and those who worship the one true God and His Son Jesus. In Luke 12:51-53, Jesus warned; *"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵² For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. ⁵³ They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

The story continues in Ruth 1:16-18, where we see that Ruth was committed to her mother-in-law Naomi and to the God of Israel, as the Lord was to be her own God from now on. *"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God"* (Ruth 1:16) was Ruth's verbal commitment. This was a defining moment in Ruth's life, the moment when belief became personal and was her own choice. This was the moment of Ruth's conversion, her salvation by faith in the God of Israel.

Ruth's belief moved her from simply being a person connected with God's daughter Naomi, to being personally connected directly to God. When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more. Naomi was satisfied with Ruth's belief and commitment.

In Ruth 1:19-22 we read of Naomi and Ruth's arrival at Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown. Even after being away for a minimum of ten years, the community still recognised Naomi.

However, Naomi was returning with great sadness in her heart. She said to the towns people; *"Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"* (Ruth 1:20-21).

Naomi recognised that God had directed the hardships upon her life. However, she didn't use her pains as an excuse to justify disbelief, anger, or hatred towards God. Yes, Naomi was a broken woman, emptied of all she had previously valued. Her joy in life had be replaced with bitter pain. Naomi had changed from being full in the world's eyes to being empty, but now she was ready for God to use her.

Naomi did not say that the Lord had allowed this, no, *"the Almighty has brought calamity upon me"* (Ruth 1:21b). It's a difficult but healthy lesson for us all to learn. There are times when God uses extremely painful circumstances to achieve His purposes.

Naomi didn't use her pains as an excuse to isolate herself from God's people. Rather, she did the opposite. She relocated from the godless environment of Moab to be with God's people in Bethlehem.

In the middle of her sufferings, Naomi had picked up a disciple along the way, Ruth. Pain is often the thing God uses to call unbelieving people to walk away from their old life, and their old gods, to come follow the one true God.

Ruth 1:22b tells us that Naomi and Ruth; *"...came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest."* This is significant, because the events and



relationship connections that follow all revolve around the sessional timing of the barley harvest. We shall explore this shortly.

So far, we've talked a lot about Naomi, that's because Naomi is significant to Ruth being introduced into the story and the significance of Ruth's future.

Let's look at Ruth's introduction to God's world. Remember, her past life in Moab had been one of idolatry, religion that practiced human sacrifice, and hostility against God and His people Israel. Ruth had a dark past which didn't put God off or slow Him down. He loved Ruth

and wanted the very best for her. The Lord had purposed to bring Ruth into alignment with His will and plans, which is exactly what He did.

Ruth's introduction to the God of Israel was very painful and costly; having lost her husband and moving away from her family and friends. God used Ruth's relationship with her husband, who was now dead, and then God used Ruth's relationship with Naomi. It often works this way; God uses a faithful believer to introduce a non-believer to God's kingdom. Initially the non-Christian has no idea of what God's doing, but the Christian should know.

Together Naomi and Ruth began this new chapter in life. Naomi in her hometown of Bethlehem and Ruth as an alien. An alien in a foreign land which would soon become a place which would change the entire world forever. But no-one realised that yet.

Ruth could have been like her sister-in-law Orpah, who took what she saw as the easy, more comfortable path by returning to her Moabite family, but Ruth didn't. Ruth didn't put culture or religion before following Naomi or God. Although Naomi would have been Ruth's primary motivation, she did realise that to follow Naomi was to follow God Almighty.

Often in life, God kindly gives us a spiritual companion to lead and support us. Naomi was God's ambassador to Ruth. God used the famine, all three of the men's deaths, the sense of loss and abandonment, isolation from Jewish family and community support, and financial desperation, not to mention hunger because of the famine. God built such a strong relationship between Naomi and Ruth that nothing would separate them. These two ladies knew what loyalty was. Loyalty to each other and loyalty to God.

God used Naomi's life and circumstances to position Ruth to where she needed to be in order to believe and therefore be a willing participant in God's plans. Naomi had no idea what God was up to other than it was

painful. Yet Naomi was faithful to the Lord, and that is what made her useful. Faithfulness qualified Naomi for the mission at hand. Faith overrules pain and personal loss by obedience and faithful living.

Ruth, like Naomi, had absolutely no idea of the future blessing they would enjoy. Nor did they know about the part they were playing to bring about blessing for millions upon millions of believers who were yet to come.

Notice that God didn't ask either Naomi or Ruth for permission to do what he did. He simply did it. God didn't take women who had been studying O.T. prophecy and had a good idea of what was going on. No, God recruited women who were completely naive of what He was up to, but these two women were willing.

This is God's world, God's timetable, and God's mission. However, I'm sure that if you had asked Naomi or Ruth, they would have said that they were simply doing what they thought was best at the time. Yet it was God who maneuvered these ladies' lives in order to accomplish His will.

Ruth chapter 2 introduces the third main character into our story, Boaz. *"Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz"* (Ruth 2:1). Some historians suggest that Boaz was about eighty years of age, and Ruth was possibly forty years old when this took place. This means they were neither youthful nor naïve of the realities of life.

Ruth got Naomi's permission to go out into the fields owned by Boaz and pick up the grain which was missed by the harvesters. This was a common practice of the poor people in Israel for getting food.

One day Boaz went out into his fields which were being harvested and saw Ruth, whom he did not recognise. *"Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, 'Whose young woman is this?'"* ⁶ *And the*

servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, 'She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab' (Ruth 2:5-6). The reapers knew Ruth, as she had asked their permission to follow along gleaning the left-over grain after them. They also explained what a hard-working woman she was and how few times she stopped for rest.

Boaz proceeded to introduce himself to Ruth and informed her that he had instructed his workers to allow her to follow more closely to the reapers which would allow her to gather more grain. He also gave Ruth reassurance of her safety, as he had warned his workers not to touch her. Not only so, but she was given permission to drink water from the staff's water vessels as often as she felt thirsty.

Well, Ruth was quite overwhelmed by Boaz' generosity, and asked why her? To which Boaz replied; *"All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before" (Ruth 2:11).* Word had got out of Ruth. The community respected her before they even knew her personally because they had been told of her good character through the past painful events.

Boaz continued; *"The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:12).* Boaz recognised how significant it was that Ruth was now in Israel under the care of God. Ruth thanked Boaz for his kindness and carried on working.

At mealtime, Boaz said to Ruth, *"Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over" (Ruth 2:14).* Boaz then instructed his staff further on allowing even more of the prime grain to be left for Ruth to gather. So, Ruth 2:23 tells us that Ruth *"kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests."* Boaz leaves us a challenging example due to the gracious and caring way in which he treated Ruth. He was unusually

kind and generous to Ruth. In being so kind to Ruth he was living a good testimony to his staff. The fact that Ruth was a Moabite woman makes Boaz' behaviour even more remarkable, as Jews and Moabites were normally enemies.

Right from the beginning of their friendship, Ruth and Boaz showed respect for each other that expressed both of their faith in God. They built their relationship on trust in God, purity toward each other, and gracious kindness. These are powerful qualities to build any relationship on, which will always attract the blessing of God.

Ruth chapter 3, as with chapters 1 and 2, is about how God practically uses everything and everyone at His disposal to bring about what He wants. This is what we call the 'providence' of God. When God invisibly coordinates the circumstances, events, and people in our lives, to provide the right environment for His intended outcome. God is often undetectable by the natural eye, but He is present and active.

By doing this, God achieves what He wants while engaging the decisions of the people involved. People have their part to play, and God does not violate their dignity or integrity in permitting them to play out His will.

He not only permits but invites people to actively engage with Him in the events of life.

The Bible allows us to look inside the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, to learn how God brings all these circumstances together in the most amazing way.

Ruth 3:1 shows us the compassionate heart of Ruth. *"Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?"* In the Hebrew language which this was written in, the word used for "rest" is *"mānōāh,"* and it means a settled spot, or a home, a place of rest. Naomi understood that the home should be a

place of rest and security. Therefore, Naomi wanted to provide a truly restful and secure home for her daughter-in-law Ruth.

Naomi was not thinking selfishly, she was other minded, she had Ruth's best interests at heart. She sought Ruth's betterment before her own. She was even willing for her own life and plans to stand still while Ruth advanced ahead with her new life. This attitude of placing self-second, is what the apostle Paul spoke of when writing to the Church at Philippi. Philippians 2:4 *"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."* God's people should always place others before themselves, especially within their family and Church community.

Naomi had it in her mind to bring Ruth and Boaz together. But she wanted to do it in a way which respected the Jewish culture and would appear correct to the community. Naomi explained the local culture to Ruth, because being from Moab, Ruth would not have understood their ways. Ruth 3:2a *"Is not Boaz our relative..."* and verse 12 gives more information about who Boaz was. Ruth 3:12a *"Now it is true that I (Boaz) am a kinsman redeemer..."*

The kinsman-redeemer was a male relative who, according to the Old Testament law, had the responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble, or in danger or need. A kinsman-redeemer was responsible to buy a fellow Israelite out of slavery (Leviticus 25:48). He was responsible to be the *"avenger of blood"* in making sure the murderer of a family member answered for their crime (Numbers 35:19). He was responsible to buy back family land that had been lost (Leviticus 25:25).

But more importantly, He was also responsible to carry on the family name by marrying a childless widow (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). And this is where Boaz came in. Boaz was recognised as a kinsman-redeemer for the family of Elimelech – the dead husband of Naomi, and father-in-law of Ruth. Therefore, Ruth could appeal to Boaz to safeguard the future generations of Elimelech's family and take her in marriage. It may seem unusual to us, but it was regarded as proper in the culture of that day.

Without a kinsman-redeemer, the family name of Elimelech would come to an end. In order to keep the family name of Elimelech alive, it was thought to be an important duty for a kinsman-redeemer. These protections showed how important it was to God to preserve a family name in Israel.

As Boaz was a kinsman-redeemer for Naomi's family, this was an important and life changing matter. Boaz was obviously a man of integrity who understood the rules associated with the role of kinsman-redeemer. He did not try to get out of his responsibility to marry Ruth, nor was he willing to cut corners or cheat. He would do God's will God's way. He knew that if it was really of the Lord, then it should be done in the proper way.

Although Boaz could show acts of kindness to Ruth, he could not initiate a proposal for marriage and had to leave that to Ruth if it was ever to happen.

In Ruth 3:2b Naomi tells Ruth that Boaz "*...is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.*" Barley and wheat were planted in the autumn and ripened in spring. However, Barley matured faster and would be harvested first. The combined barley and wheat harvest period were about 7 to 8 weeks (April to May). Therefore, Ruth and Boaz would have worked close to each other in those weeks covering the barley and wheat harvests, giving them opportunity to get to know each other.

However, according to the customs of that time, we would not say that Ruth and Boaz were "dating or courting" in the way we think of "dating and courting" in our modern culture. They were not paired off as a couple with one-on-one time with each other. Rather, they spent their time together in the context of a working group of men and women who worked for Boaz during the harvest time.

The threshing-floor was commonly located on the actual harvest-field out in the open where there would be a brisk breeze. It was a carefully

levelled and compacted piece of ground. The grain was separated from the straw and husks by either beating it manually or, by spreading the sheaves on the threshing floor and getting oxen to walk over it repeatedly. This loosened the edible part of grain from the chaff that surrounds it.

Then winnowing forks, like our pitch forks, were used to throw the mixture of grain and chaff into the air so the wind could blow away the chaff, leaving only the good grain falling to the ground. This job was often performed in the evening to catch the night breezes which blew after a hot day and often continued well into the night.

The farmer usually remained all night in harvest-time on the threshing-floor, not only for the protection of his grain, but for the winnowing process to continue. The farmer who was the owner would often lay down to sleep on the ground, at the end of the heap of barley which he had been winnowing. It was also not uncommon for the staff to sleep next to the owner.

If during the night, a servant needed a bed covering to keep warm, custom allowed them to pull part of their master's bed covering (Called the 'wings') over them. Remember, with this being a workplace, they would have slept in the same clothes they wore during the day. So, there was nothing inappropriate in a servant, even a woman servant, pulling the corner or loose and unused part of the master's bed covers over themselves.

Now, because Boaz was a generation older than Ruth; their custom was that he could not make any advances or invitations toward Ruth. This meant Boaz had to wait for Ruth to show interest in him first.

Fortunately, Naomi had it all figured out in her mind; she tells Ruth to go wash, pretty herself up and dress well because you need to communicate your willingness to get married to Boaz (Ruth 3:3a). Naomi went on to explain her plan which she was confident fitted the local customs and would be understood by Boaz.

Naomi explained; ‘you need to go to the threshing floor where you’ve been working with Boaz. Don't let anyone know what’s going on. Then, when Boaz has finished eating and drinking his evening meal and he has laid down to sleep, make your move. You should uncover his feet, lie down crosswise at his feet, and pull the loose corner of his bed covering over yourself.’ This was the way a woman in that culture could gracefully initiate a proposal for marriage to a man without being seen as domineering or manipulating.

Well, on this particular night, Ruth was at the threshing floor, having been well instructed by Naomi. When Boaz had finished his work and eaten his evening meal, “...*he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain...*” (Ruth 3:7).

Ruth 3:8-11 tells how that evening played out. “*At midnight Boaz was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a kinsman-redeemer.’ And he said, ‘May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.’*”

Boaz awakened at midnight to discover Ruth lying at his feet, he did not abuse her or try to take advantage of her. Nor did he suggest that Ruth was up to some kind of mischief but gave her the opportunity to explain. His gracious attitude showed he understood Ruth’s offer of marriage as genuine.

When Boaz said, “*May you be blessed by the Lord,*” he showed that he, like Naomi, wanted this scenario to work out for Ruth’s blessing from the Lord. Boaz realised there was more to this situation than a younger lady trying to take advantage of him. He genuinely wanted to do what was right by Ruth and the Lord.

Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz leave us a good example to follow. These three people leave a powerful example of how believers in God can work together for the blessing of everyone. We too should pray, serve, give, and sacrifice comfort and convenience for others to receive a blessing from the Lord. These humble qualities are what's needed in God's people for others to realise just how much God loves and cares for them.

When you are offered an opportunity to serve or encourage another believer, and you are free or able to do it, yet you decline, you have rejected a God moment, a God opportunity. You, the other person, and God, all miss out on the blessing and the pleasure. James 4:17 *"Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."*

When Boaz said to Ruth, *"do not fear"* (Ruth 3:11b), he wanted to set Ruth free from fear. He wanted Ruth to experience the same peace he experienced. Boaz was a man who built respect and dignity in others, which is exactly what Ruth needed. That's why Boaz reassures Ruth that the people of the town recognised that she was *"a worthy woman"* (Ruth 3:11c). He wanted Ruth to feel secure in the safe relationships of the community and his care.

Boaz explains that there was a small matter of business that needed attending to if this was to work out; *"...Yet there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I"* (Ruth 3:12b). There was another man who was closer to Ruth by marriage in the family tree. This meant that the other man, whose name we are not told, could purchase all the property that Elimelech owned, including the right to marry Ruth. If this second man was not interested, then Boaz was legally entitled to buy the land and marry Ruth.

Next Boaz does something quite unexpected. *And he said, "Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out." So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her...* (Ruth 3:15). Boaz was a generous man also. He gave Ruth six measures of barley which equals about 67

litres by today's standard, which would have weighed at least 30 kilograms.

Boaz did not give Ruth from the left-over barley, or from the spare barley. He didn't withhold from her until he saw how things worked out with the barley sales. No, Boaz' generosity was spontaneous, selfless and in abundance. Ruth was loaded with the freshest barley. Obviously, Ruth was gracious enough to accept the gift without argument. Boaz gave so much barley that the blessing of the gift would have overflowed into Naomi's life.

We can only imagine how excited Ruth must have been when she returned home to Naomi early the next morning with a load of barley and a full heart. I'm sure Ruth would have had the most wonderful time telling of the night's events to Naomi.

Naomi settled Ruth's heart; *"Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today"* (Ruth 3:18). Naomi understood the natural impatience that occurs when romance is involved. Naomi didn't presume to know the outcome ahead of time, nor did she tell God what he must do to satisfy her. She simply called Ruth to watch with humility. Watch to see how God works out His will through Boaz' response to you Ruth. This is how you will know God's will in the matter.

Naomi obviously understood how the male heart works. She was confident that Boaz would carry through with three instinctive responses.

"...for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today" (Ruth 3:18b).

- Boaz would fulfil his responsibility as "kinsman-redeemer."
- He would respond to what he knew to be a marriage invitation from Ruth.

- He would not treat this matter in a lazy manner. He was a man on a mission. He was going to get this thing happening as quickly as possible, even within that same day.

There were two parts to the redemption process that Boaz needed to carry through with:

- First was the redeeming of the land for Naomi. He would have to buy back the land of Elimelech (Naomi's dead husband's land).
- Second, he would have to take Ruth to be his wife (Naomi's daughter-in-law).

But first he needed the permission of the other kinsman-redeemer.

Ruth 4:1-12 tells us how this played out. Boaz was a smooth operator. He went that same morning and sat at the city gate. And it just so happened that the other kinsman-redeemer came along. Boaz greets the man and invites him to sit and talk. Boaz also invited ten men who were elders of the city to join them as witnesses of the conversation. Boaz explains to the man about Naomi, Ruth, and the land. He also reminds him of the responsibilities of the kinsman-redeemers in their family line.

The other kinsman-redeemer responds to Boaz by saying that he's willing to buy the land, but for some reason, he was unable or unwilling to take Ruth as his wife. So, he declines Boaz's offer and gave permission for Boaz to buy the land and marry Ruth.

The redemption agreement was confirmed and witnessed. The custom of that day was for the man who yielded his right to redeem to give Boaz one of his sandals and he limped home. This was a tangible sign of a completed transaction, and Boaz would keep his sandal as evidence of the completed transaction.



Boaz then calls the ten elders, plus members of the public who were present, as witnesses of the completed transaction. Boaz publicly announced his intentions to marry Ruth, to have children, and to continue the family name of Elimelech.

Boaz was an excellent kinsman-redeemer. He stood in Ruth's place and took the entire responsibility upon himself. Boaz was quick and proactive in going to the place of negotiation, a public place with witnesses.

When we think of Boaz, we think also of Jesus Christ who is our redeemer. Boaz negotiated with the other man, just as Christ did with God for our redemption.

- We remember that Christ paid the price for our redemption on the cross. As Boaz paid with money, Jesus Christ paid with His own life, His own blood, to appease the judgement of God.
"In him (Jesus) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses (sins), according to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Jesus paid the price for our sin, the price set by God was death. So, Jesus died the death penalty that you and I should have died. That is how Jesus Christ has bought us

through his death on the cross. This is what we Christians believe in.

- Like Boaz, who purchased a Moabite bride who was cursed, doomed to judgment, but now purchased at a price, cleansed and set free. *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:13).* You and I were cursed, just like Ruth the Moabite lady. Yet Jesus broken the curse that was on us because He paid our price of death. So, if we truly believe that is what Jesus has done for you, you are set free from the curse and receive eternal life in Christ.

The cross of Calvary is where our redeemer, Jesus Christ, paid the full price to buy us out of the curse and take us out of our spiritual poverty, out of bankruptcy, and bring us into eternal blessing.

So it is that we come to the cross, to Jesus Christ, with our appreciation and gratitude enriched because of the lessons we learn from Boaz.

Likewise, we learn the power of obedience to God through the many lessons we have learned from Naomi and Ruth.

But mostly, we learn the life changing power of God through the life of Ruth. God graciously saved Ruth out of an evil community of idol worshipers. God worked invisibly in Ruth’s life without stopping. God’s goal was to totally transform Ruth into a woman who thought like God and behaved with honour.

Ruth models the very best of Christian character for us to learn from. Ruth never gave up, she never turned back, she never blamed God for the painful things, nor did she complain at Him. Ruth is a woman that we today, both men and women, can learn from and ask God to teach us to have the godly character of Ruth.

Two wild men and one wise lady

1 Samuel 25:2-38 tells of a short period of time in the lives of David, Nabal, and Abigail. Although brief, the attitudes and events were life changing for all three people. These three demonstrate the painful side of human nature and the wonderful side of a God pleasing person.

I'm sure these three people would have thought initially that they were in control of the events that unfolded. However, it turns out that God was at work during this strange chapter of their lives when God accomplished precisely what He wanted.

While David was a complex man who did not always live an obedient life, God says of him; *"...I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will"* (Acts 13:22). David was a shepherd boy who grew to be a warrior, then a king. Due to his changeable moods, David had periods of life when he acted foolishly and would suffer the consequences of his bad behaviour.

The story recorded in 1 Samuel chapter 25 is one such occasion, when God stepped in to save David from his own foolish anger. On this occasion God employed the services of a remarkable woman who understood how to apply the Lord's wisdom to a fiery situation.

At this particular time, David and his army were running from King Saul's army and moved into the wilderness area of Paran. Nearby lived a very wealthy man who owned *"three thousand sheep and a thousand goats"* (1Sa 25:2). *"Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was discerning and beautiful, but the man was harsh and badly behaved"* (1Sa 25:3).

Nabal and his wife Abigail were opposites. Nabal was a successful businessman who valued money more than people. Consequently, he had no trouble treating people badly. His kind wife on the other hand, valued God and people more than money.

As the story goes, David's men were happy for Nabal's employees to graze their sheep in the same pastures as they were in. Actually, they got on well together and David's men watched over the shepherds to ensure nothing bad happened to them and no sheep were stolen.

So, on one of the days when Nabal was shearing his sheep, David sent ten men to greet Nabal on his behalf and request some food due to their supplies getting low. After all thought David, my men and Nabal's shepherds have lived and worked together happily, surely Nabal will help us out just this once.

Unfortunately, grumpy Nabal did not respond well. *"Nabal answered David's servants, 'Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. ¹¹ Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?'"* (1Sa 25:10-11). Obviously, David's ten men returned and reported Nabal's insults precisely.

Well, as you can imagine, David's solution was to instruct *"his men, 'Every man strap on his sword!' And every man of them strapped on his sword. David also strapped on his sword. And about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage"* (1Sa 25:13). David was seriously in revenge mode; he wanted Nabal's blood and the lives of every man in Nabal's household and employment.

The story continues when one of Nabal's servants told Abigail about what had happened and how David was marching to deliver revenge. *"Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves and two skins of wine and five sheep already prepared and five seahs of parched grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on donkeys"* (1Sa 25:18). Abigail was on a private peace mission without Nabal's knowledge.

Meeting David and his troops, Abigail *"hurried and got down from the donkey and fell before David on her face and bowed to the ground. ²⁴ She fell at*

his feet and said, 'On me alone, my lord, be the guilt' (1Sa 25:23-24). Abigail took the humble path. She was even willing for David to place the blame on her for her husband's insulting behaviour. Abigail showed real quality of character which surpassed the behaviour of her foolish husband.

She presented David with the gifts of food and acknowledged her understanding of the Lord's blessing and sovereign protection over his life. She even understood that the Lord would one day appoint David as king. In the middle of Abigail's pleading with David, she begged; *"Please forgive the trespass of your servant" (1Sa 25:28).* Abigail was seeking forgiveness for sins that she did not commit.

She continued to explain to David that she did not want the guilt of innocent blood on his hands. David responded to Abigail; *"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! ³³ Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand! ³⁴ For as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male" (1Sa 25:32-34).*

The wise actions of Abigail caused David and his men to bless her and return to their camp in peace. Nabal, his family, and all his employees were saved through Abigail's actions. All this took place without Nabal knowing of it. He had no idea that his wife had saved his life.

That evening, Nabal held *"a feast in his house, like the feast of a king. And Nabal's heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk. So she told him nothing at all until the morning light" (1Sa 25:36).* That next morning Abigail explained everything to Nabal; *"and his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. ³⁸ And about ten days later the Lord struck Nabal, and he died" (1Sa 25:37-38).*

In between these two angry men stood one wise woman who was willing to take a risk as God had directed her. Abigail was an extraordinary woman, a woman of courage and faith. Had it not been for her, David would have committed a terrible crime and become guilty of killing many innocent men.

God was very kind to David (1Sa 25:26). Had God allowed David to do what he wanted; he would have been guilty of the deaths of many innocent men. God graciously intervened. Nabal could have chosen to treat David kindly, which would have prevented this whole incident, but he didn't.

Had Abigail remained silent she would have been distraught with grief from all the deaths in her household. Instead, she acted. Her integrity shows in that she waited until Nabal was sober the fooling day before explaining what had taken place.

Abigail was the only one who initiated doing the right thing and saved many lives. I'm sure she would have thought that she was showing initiative, but it was God who placed those ideas in her thinking. Had she not acted; the history records would read very different.

Abigail's humility in the way she went about subduing David's anger was both wise and shrewd at the same time. Abigail leaves us a monumental example on using humility, self-sacrificing love, and skillful negotiation to prevent disaster. In doing so, Abigail worked with peaceful methods leaving room for God to work out His justice on Nabal. She also provided a way forward for David without bloodshed. It turned out that God inflicted His righteous judgement on Nabal, and he lost his life. David went on to marry the widow Abigail, and later he became king.

Men and women's roles in the Church

The study of biblical context looks at the facts or circumstances that surround a situation or event. Context is amongst the most powerful tools we have for understanding the Bible correctly. When we read any section of verses, it's important to read and understand the verses before and after also. This provides us with the context; the correct setting in which that part of the Bible was written. It also better equips us to understand what the original author meant when he used those specific words.

When we come to thinking about the roles of men and women in the home or Church, context is really important. Understanding who should do what duties in different situations is important for both families and Church life if we want to function as God intends.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah explained the Lord's compassion to Israel and showed that God is always wanting and ready for sinners to turn back to Him. We read in Isaiah chapter 55. *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. ⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts"* (Isaiah 55:8-9).

The lesson to Israel remains the same lesson for us today. God's thinking process and His standards are different to ours. His holy mind is not cluttered with all the noise and voices we have in our minds. God's values are perfectly holy and never change, which makes Him very different to us. Therefore, God often explains ways of doing things which are quite different to the way we would naturally do those same things.

Sometimes the Lord has clear guidelines He wishes us to follow, while other times He grants us great freedom to do things our way. Most of the time God provides us with clear instructions accompanied by the reasons for those instructions. Usually God wraps all this information up in a section of the Bible which requires us to look at the whole picture

before reaching our conclusions. This is why context is important. So it is with differing roles for men and women in general life, in family life, and in Church life.

Just as God designed the bodies of men and women to be different, so it stands to reason that God never intended men and women to do everything the same. God designed women for motherhood, and men for fatherhood. Those are two very different roles assigned by God for all mothers and fathers. Yet, we all understand that there are some parts of parenting where mother and father do the same things.

God also designed men and women with quite different natures. Instinctively men and women like different things and work at things differently. Sometimes however, we go about doing the same tasks differently and other times the same. It's good to recognise and celebrate our similarities and differences while exploring ways in which different people can complement each other.

As we learned from Genesis, both men and women are equal in God's sight. As the Lord created both in His image, so, in the body of Christ (The Church) both retain equal value and dignity. Regarding believers' position in Christ, Paul told the Galatian Christians; *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28).

The Bible records that at Pentecost the Holy Spirit came on men and women alike. *"When the day of Pentecost arrived, they (the men and women from Acts 1:13-14) were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit..."* (Acts 2:1-4). Both male and female are equal in salvation and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He makes no distinction between the two.

Therefore, both men and women are to be treated with equal respect because God made us this way in His Church. Similarly, God gives spiritual gifts and abilities, including teaching, to both men and women for them to make valuable contributions to our communities, our families, and our Churches.

The personality of each individual Church group is unique because God has uniquely brought together a specific group of men, women, and children in each congregation. Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour enters every believer into the Church. At that moment every new believer is *"sealed with the promised Holy Spirit"* (Ephesians 1:13) and given a unique gifting (ability) for serving others in the Church.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, the apostle Paul explains the Holy Spirit's work in this area further. *"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord;⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."* (See also Romans 12:3-4). God the Holy Spirit gifts every Christian differently so that the whole Church family can benefit from a variety of abilities.

Notice that the Holy Spirit distributes the gifts and abilities to each Christian. He does this invisibly and asks no one's permission. No person in the Church has the job of gift distribution, nor is gift distribution assigned to the Church as a whole.

Therefore, *"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies - in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ..."* (1 Peter 4:10-11). The intention for our spiritual gifts is that they be used and not left dormant. This is one of the many ways in which Jesus Christ works in His Church, for the purpose of His Father's glory.

The thing about spiritual gifts which often gets forgotten, is that every Christian is to use their gift *"to serve one another."* The Holy Spirit never intended for us to be selfish with the gift He gave us. To meet the many needs in other's lives, the Holy Spirit has equipped believers in the Church with a great variety of gifts.

As part of using our God given abilities and talents for others, we are to accept the unique way God has made us. Likewise, we are to accept the unique way God has made others. Humility is needed within us all, so that we do not compare ourselves with others. Each person, and especially each Christian, is unique by God's specific will and design.

Just as in your earthly family, so in God's family people who are quite different are to humbly accept each other. This means that most of the time we serve each other by cooperation and respect. We simply get on and do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Following Paul's encouragement for unity amongst the believers at Philippi, he explains the visual expressions of unity in their relationships.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). This touches the lives of each and every Christian, in every size church, in every culture.

Sadly, part of fleshly attitudes is that of being selfish. Selfish people usually think they are better than others. As a result, selfish people do not usually serve the people whom they think are not worthy of their attention. This attitude breeds pride, with pride much pain always follows.

Paul's answer is for everyone not to be selfish. The evidence of this godly selfless attitude is humility. Humility always considers other people to be genuinely *"more significant than yourselves."* This is not a pretend humility, it's a humility fueled by love. When believers think of their

Christian brothers and sisters as being more significant, they give attention to meeting the needs in those lives. Your personal interests fade into the background while other's needs automatically take priority.

Just as unity in the Church compels the practical nature of this encouragement, so it is selfless love and humility that grows unity even further. A sense of oneness and common love grows throughout the people of God as they surrender personal issues which do not conform to God's design.

Paul continues by providing the Philippian believers with the highest motivation and example to assist them in their efforts. The heart issue Paul is about to explain is that the quality of relationships between believers directly reflects the quality of relationship those believers have with the Lord Jesus Christ. That makes this chapter in the Bible a very personal place to read for self-examination of our hearts.

Philippians 2:5 details the provisions provided to every believer in Christ. By that I mean, Paul explains the spiritual resources, or tools, that are available to every Christian through their faith relationship with Christ. If you are struggling with a lack of unity, or selfish, or lazy towards serving others, you need to begin by realising that all the resources you need to fix these problems are found in Christ.

Philippians 2:5 reads; *"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."* Paul tells us that the mind you and I need in order to have loving, humble, and selfless relationships, already belongs to us in Christ. When we walk with the Lord, controlled by His Spirit in obedience to His Word, we find that the thoughts and attitudes that live in Christ will grow in us.

Therefore, as God's people grow in Jesus Christ through humble, selfless love, so the differences between people will shrink to become unimportant.

While the diversity of giftedness and service in the Church is great, the Lord has assigned two specific roles to men only. The public teaching of God's Word in the assembled church, and the role of elder, are assigned to men only (1 Corinthians 14:29-40; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9). In all other spheres of church life, men and women submissively share their duties in service to one another and the Lord.

The key issue which Paul wanted to bring clarity, was that of authority in the Church. Paul explains in 1 Timothy 2:12-14; *"I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."*

This authoritative public teaching role of God's Word is assigned to men not because women are inferior or less gifted by the Holy Spirit. It is not because women have less intellectual or educational ability. It is not because women are of less value than men, or because they cannot cope with the emotional pressure.

No, the reasons Paul presents for male teachers in the Church are two-fold; *"Adam was formed first"* and *"the woman was deceived and became a transgressor."* These are a combination of God's sovereign design and historic consequences for the introduction of sin into the world (Genesis 3:16).

It needs to be noted that God has provided women with enormous freedom in Church life and service. There are many opportunities for gifted women to teach God's Word, in the family home, in children's ministries, in evangelistic ministries, in various types of women ministries, and in discipleship of other ladies, to name a few.

Like men, women can share their faith with unsaved people. They can give testimony of the Lord working in their lives. They can sing and offer joyful praise to God. Likewise, many are skilled musicians and should assist the Church in worship with God honouring music and vocal

talent. There are no biblical grounds that forbids women from serving along-side of men as they participate in gatherings for the Lord. The only restriction is that they should not occupy a role of spiritual authority over adult men.

The New Testament tells us of times when both men and women shared together in prayer. As mentioned earlier, when the disciples were waiting for Pentecost; *"All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers"* (Acts 1:14). Verse 15 tells us that there were about 120 people present during that time of united prayer. Of interest is Mary, Jesus mother, she was praying with one of her other sons, James.

As noted earlier, 1 Peter 4:10-11 describes how every Christian is responsible for actively using their spiritual gifts in service to the larger church congregation. In this sense, there are many ways gifted women of our churches could teach men their skills in caring for one-another. Our spiritual sisters have been brilliantly designed and created by God to give expression to the diversity of God's character amongst His people.

To prevent anyone from thinking too highly of themselves, all of us should remember; *"in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman"* (1 Corinthians 11:11). We are all interdependent upon each other, which is exactly how the Lord designed us to be; *"submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ"* (Ephesians 5:21).

While on his journey to Jerusalem, Paul stayed at *"the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven..."*⁹ *He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied"* (Acts 21:8-9). Obviously in the early New Testament church ladies exercised their gift of prophecy (See also 1Co 11:5-6).

The apostle John, in the Revelation of Jesus Christ, states that all those redeemed by Jesus blood, are made *"a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen"* (Revelation 1:6;

5:10). All equally share in the privilege and responsibility of worshipping and glorifying God through Jesus Christ.

Regarding elders

Elders, as described in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Peter 5:1-3, are to be men who scripturally qualify as an elder. In other words, the church does not take a man, appoint him as an elder, then train him to meet the qualifications. No, he is to already be living the qualities of an elder. The church simply recognises those existing qualities and good works, then appoints or designates him as an elder.

1 Peter 5:1-3 details some of the qualities of a man who could be considered for the position of elder or shepherd. The Greek word used by Peter in the original New Testament for elder is "*Presbuteros*." Paul also used the same word when writing to Titus about elders. It's used sixty-six times in the New Testament to indicate a "senior male overseer," as it is always given in the masculine form. The feminine form, "*presbutera*," is never used in reference to elders or shepherds.

When Paul wrote to Timothy about elder's qualification, he used the Greek word "*episkopē*" which carries the idea of being a male superintendent or bishop (1 Timothy 3:1-7). A prospective elder should not be coerced, convinced, or persuaded into the role. As Peter says, he should not be "*under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you*" (1 Peter 5:2). In all three passages, the role of "*elder*" is specified for males only with the title elder being interchangeable with bishop/pastor/overseer.

Regarding deacons

At no time does the New Testament describe an elder or deacon as the same. They are two distinctly different areas of service carried out by differently gifted people in the church.

In New Testament times, deacons were appointed to serve in a physical capacity as the needs occurred (Acts 6:2-3). By focusing on the more physical needs of the Church, the deacons freed the elders to give time and energy to the spiritual needs of prayer and ministry of God's Word (Acts 6:4).

Paul gave Timothy instructions for recognising the qualities that should already be present in the life of a prospective deacon (1 Timothy 3:8-13). The original Greek word for deacon is "*diakonos*" which basically means "servant," and only occurs in the masculine form. There is no feminine form for deacon in the Greek language. Consequently, Paul had no word that could be used to describe a female deacon. So he did the next best thing, he referred to them as 'women' in the context of the discussion on deacons.

Many modern Bibles use the words "*their wives*" at the beginning of verse 11; "*...let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified...*" (1 Timothy 3:10-11). The original Greek word used for "wives" is "*gune*" which means "a woman" but may include a wife. While "*gune*" can be translated several different ways, we understand 1 Timothy 3:11 identifies the female role of a deacon. This is seen by the use of the word "*likewise*" in verse 11, which refers back to the subject of deacons.

There is no clear biblical text which forbids women serving as deacons. After all, deacons are simply those who exercise their gift of servanthood. Therefore, a believing sister serving alongside her Christian brothers as fellow servants is a natural expression of love within the family of God. In fact, Romans 16:1 may indicate that a

woman named Phoebe was a respected deaconess in the church at Cenchrea.



New Testament One Anothers

I come finally to a very practical set of Scriptures scattered throughout the New Testament. These verses, both individually and collectively, contain some of the most powerful help available for all relationships.

When thinking of how to behave with other believers, consider the New Testament “one anothers.” These are amazingly simple to understand, yet they can be a challenge to put into practice.

By grafting these attitudes and behaviours into our lives we prevent many, if not most, of the irritations and offenses which cause problems in our friendships. In fact, these principles should be applied to all friendships including your non-Christian friends. I doubt anyone will complain if you are this kind of a friend.

While the list below is not comprehensive, and the explanations shall be brief, I trust they serve by growing your general understanding of how the Lord wants us to treat one another. When put into practice, these behaviours, which begin with heart attitudes, will enable believers to live Jesus Christ even to our enemies. Again, the most wonderful relationship on this earth, where we are also to live these one-another truths, is our marriage.

1) Love one another

(Romans 12:10; 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:8; 1 Christ 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11–12; 2 Christ :5)

The apostle Peter understood love well, because he knew what it was to fail Christ, yet Christ continued loving Peter. A few hours before Christ’s crucifixion, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times (John 13:37-38; 18:17-27). Peter realised he had failed Christ. Saddened by his own lack of loyalty to Jesus *“he went out and wept bitterly”* (Matthew 26:75).

When Peter says, *“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins”* (1 Peter 4:8), he understood the seriousness of those words. Christ’s love for Peter showed grace which could not reject Peter, therefore Christ did not punish Peter. Instead, we read in John chapter 21 of Christ restoring the damaged relationship with Peter and Peter responded by affirming His love for Christ.

The love we show to others is to be earnest, sincere, without double standards, and lasting. Love should have no finish line or end. This love of Christ is a genuine love which survives the difficulties and pains of life. All the other New Testament one-anothers can only operate correctly in our lives when love comes first. Love is the standard by which all else is evaluated.

The Greek word used by Peter in this verse for love, is *‘agape.’* Agape love is supreme love which shows affection through acts of kindness. It is the love which sacrifices itself in order for others to experience affection. It is the love which gives and does not keep a record of how much or how often it has given. This is why the New Testament uses the word *‘agape’* to describe God’s love. The love Christ has for us sinners is *‘agape love.’*

Christ explains this type of love in John 15:13 *“Greater love (agape) has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”* Love is willing to give of its own life to save another. This love best seen in Christ, who gave His life willingly on the cross so we sinners could receive the gift of eternal life through faith in Him.

With Christ’s love as his foundation, the apostle Paul details the components of *‘agape love’* in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. Listen to how Paul ends chapter 13; *“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love”* (1 Corinthians 13:13). Christians are to be known for their love, particularly between each other, then for the unsaved world.

Paul starts 1 Corinthians 13 with a comparison. *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal"* (1 Corinthians 13:1). Paul understood that no matter how gifted you are, or how wonderful your words are, if love is not the root which grows everything in your life, everything is a waste. Behaviour without love is an empty sound that has no value. Worthless noise is in effect what Paul calls actions without 'agape love.'

In verse 2, Paul stretches further the worthless activities of life without love; *"if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing"* (1 Corinthians 13:2). Religious abilities and giftedness, no matter how greater they are, without love adds up to a total value of zero.

By now the Corinthian readers would be asking themselves; then what is it Paul about love that makes it so special? He answers that in verses 4 to 7 where he launches a rapid-fire explanation of what makes 'agape love' so special and unique. *"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

When we see love explained in such detail, we begin to understand that our human idea of love falls terribly short of God's perfect love. Worldly love grows out of impure desires which only wants self-gratification. Man's love is short tempered and carries grudges, never really wanting to forgive and forget the sin of others. Impure love is happy to live with sin and all kinds of wrong thinking, wrong speech, and wrong behaviour.

Human love is comfortable speaking lies when needed in order to cover up sin. Natural love is always suspicious of others and

questions the genuineness of other's words because it knows how untrustworthy it is. Fleshly love comes and goes with every wave of emotion. At best, fleshly love is temporary and totally unreliable, without the capacity to give selflessly.

As you can see from God's Word, '*agape love*' is God's love, and it is the very opposite of everything the world says love is. We experience God's love through His Son Jesus Christ and the working of His Holy Spirit within us. God's love is never changing; therefore, it is always trustworthy. God's love is '*agape love*' which sacrifices itself so that we can experience the benefits and blessings of knowing Him.

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7-8).

As we all know, it's easy to love those who are nice to us. To love someone who irritates us is difficult, but to love your enemy, that takes supernatural strength. When Jesus taught love, He taught a love which is not natural to mankind. He said, *"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"* (Matthew 5:44). Love is to be the driving force within every believer, *"because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit"* (Romans 5:5). This is not a man-made affection, this is not physical lust, this is Holy Spirit generated love which sacrifices self in order to point others to Jesus Christ.

"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). John was saying in effect, that loving Christians are evangelistic Christians. The worldly unbelievers in your life, and in your community, will recognise love, and love will awaken them to realise that you have something they lack, and that is the love of Jesus Christ.

2) Live in harmony with one another

I think everyone enjoys living in harmony with others, especially with your own family. When harmony is broken, peace is removed, anxiety begins to grow, and love begins to lessen. Which is why the apostle Paul explained the importance of harmony to the Church at Rome. *“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly (Romans 12:16). Never be wise in your own sight.”* Paul says four things here which are important.

The first is obvious; *“Live in harmony with one another.”* Harmony is when people are agreeable with each other and there is compatibility with each other. It's when each person determines to allow the most important thing to be the thing which holds their friendship together. For Christians, that's Jesus Christ. Christ is to be the most important one in every believer's life, and it is Jesus Christ who we are to agree on as taught in God's Word. Christ is the harmonising Person in Christian relationships.

We all realise how easy it is for harmony to stop in friendships. It does not take much for people to find both small and large things to think differently on. The result is always the same if it's not rectified, a loss of harmony. Therefore, harmony needs to be protected. We should talk often of the beauty of harmony in our Christian relationships, so that we have a growing appreciation of it.

For the second, third and fourth things, Paul explains in Romans 12:16b how to guard against losing harmony. *“Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.”* The word used by Paul in the Greek language for *‘haughty’* means high or lofty. In other words, do not think that you are higher or better, or more important than others. That kind of thinking produces pride and arrogance which leads to self-righteous attitudes.

The remedy Paul gives is wonderfully humble; *“but associate with the lowly.”* Always be willing to associate with people who have less

than you do, who know less than you do, and who feel less loved than you do. Be close to people who are not as strong as you, who have fewer friends than you, and who love God less than you do. These are the people we Christians should include as friends because they are the ones we can introduce to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Finally, Paul says; *"Never be wise in your own sight."* To have and display the humility of Christ is a powerful tool which God can use through your life. Humility creates opportunities to show love. Love should always lead to the cross of Jesus Christ. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). When the love of Christ is believed in and trusted in, it leads to eternal life.

Always look for ways to strengthen the harmony you already have with others. Equally, be quick to restore harmony when it is damaged. Seek forgiveness, put right the things that are wrong, return things that should not have been taken, and treat everyone with loving purity.

3) Welcome one another

Romans 15:7 *"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."*

This is so simple, yet so powerful. It's too easy, especially with people we know well, to become so familiar with them that we stop treating them as special. The next thing that happens is we stop inviting them into our lives as special guests. We lose our appreciation of their high value.

Our Christian brothers and sisters should always be treated as valued guests at the events of our lives. We welcome them into the various circumstances of our lives by saying and doing things that cause them to feel appreciated and wanted.

Welcoming is so important, that you are to think of the ways in which Christ welcomed you into His spiritual family. Now, do the same to others. In this way others will be able to recognise the welcoming love of Christ.

It may be a smile, or a happy voice that says hello. It could be the way you tell someone that it's good to see them again. Anything which causes them to feel appreciated by you. Even inviting someone into your house instead of letting them stand outside. Offering someone a drink when you know they may be thirsty. There are many ways we can make others feel welcome in our lives.

Just as Christ persevered with inviting you to come and receive salvation, so you are to persevere in creating ways of welcoming people into your life. The person who receives your welcome will then be able to connect your welcome with the welcome of Christ. When they feel wanted and appreciated by you, they will find it easier to feel wanted and appreciated by Christ.

4) Admonish one another

Colossians 3:16 *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."*

The word 'admonish' is not a common word now-a-days. In the original Greek New Testament language 'admonish' had the idea of putting something gently into someone's mind to caution them, or to warn them.

This is not always received well, because often we Christians go about it the wrong way. The apostle Paul is careful to explain how we are to admonish so that the person receiving the warning will be more inclined to listen and take notice.

First you are to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” As always, this speaks of a humble heart attitude that is living with God’s Word entrenched in its own life first. This should remove pride because it first examines self to ensure that you are not guilty of the same error which you want to correct in another believer. “How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? (Matthew 7:4). It’s so easy to overlook the same fault in your life, which makes your warning to someone else nothing more than hypocrisy.

The actual correction is to include “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” To show that the issue is important and not just personal preferences, the subject being discussed should come from God’s Word. If the Bible speaks to the fault, the person is more likely to take notice. The teaching and warning is to be done with wisdom. It should not be rushed into, and it must display loving humility, so the other person understands you have their best interest at heart. Wisdom says this is to be done with care; in a wise manner that reflects the love and holiness of God.

In preparation for admonishing, there needs to be considerable prayer, self-evaluation, and correct understanding of God’s Word on the matter being discussed. It is possible, that following careful preparation, you may realise you are not the best person to do the admonishing. There may be someone more qualified than yourself. You may also discover that the matter should be dropped all together, as a loving friendship might achieve better results.

5) Care for one another

1 Corinthians 12:25 *“that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.”*

Two facts are true in our Christian lives. Christians who truly care for each other stay together in unity. Likewise, Christians who live in true unity care for each other.

The idea of care that Paul speaks of is that careful thought should be given to how the members of the church family are to provide for, maintain, and protect each other. Obviously, this won't happen if there is arguing or selfish behaviour.

Notice that Paul does not say that only one or two people are responsible to care for everyone else. Every member of the Church family is to equally be on the lookout for each other. Regardless of age, whether male or female, the love of Jesus Christ is to be concerned with the wellbeing of the other members.

6) Serve one another

Galatians 5:13 "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

When we serve, we are placing others before ourselves. If everyone in the family of God served others, everyone's needs would be met. No one person would get all the attention, because they would be serving others while being served.

Serving one another brings equality into the family of God. However, if one person refuses to serve, everyone misses out on the blessing, including the person who will not serve.

As we have seen many times before, love is the heart attitude which empowers the desire to serve others. When love stops, service stops. Sometimes acts of service never start because there was never true love in that person's heart to begin with. Loving service is not selfish or prideful, but humble and generous. Why? Because the loving, serving heart, wants others to experience the love of Jesus Christ through their acts of service.

To enable the many needs for service, God the Holy Spirit has gifted each believer with their own unique blend of abilities, talents, and desires. We call this a 'gift' of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Peter explains in 1 Peter 4:10; "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

As we become aware of other's needs, we often notice that we have the ability to meet that need. From that recognition of need grows the desire to act by doing something to fulfil the need. This is done because we want to express the many variations and flavours of God's grace into other's lives. In doing this, we are good administrators of God's grace. People's needs are met, and God gets the praise.

7) Bear one another's burdens

Galatians 6:2 *"Bear one another's burdens..."*

To 'bear' is to carry another person's burdens; their loads in life which are too difficult for them to carry. Physical burdens are difficult, while emotional burdens are painful, but spiritual burdens are often overwhelming.

In God's wisdom, He has given us Christians to each other so that we can be the body of Christ to each other. The body of Christ has the capacity to do the physical work of Jesus here on earth while we wait for Him to return. Therefore, we look for those heavy loads in our brother's and sister's lives which are too heavy for them to carry alone. We step up; sometimes to help them carry the load, and other times taking the load completely off them because we are better equipped to carry it.

If you want your Christian relationships to grow strong and healthy, look for loads you can carry. The person you are helping will realise the love of Jesus is genuine when their load is lighter.

8) **Be patient with one another**

Ephesians 4:2 *“with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”*

Patience is an interesting part of the Christian character. That’s because patience can be used by God to win the long slow races in life that require endurance. You will have noticed that the apostle Paul placed patience in between humility, gentleness, and bearing with one another in love. That’s because, in order to be patient, you will need to be humble, gentle, and caring with love.

Patience is not a quality that stands on its own. It needs the support of a humble heart that knows how to be gentle with people in order to show love for a long period of time.

Patience does not let go of the people it loves easily. Love tells patience to hang in there for the long walk together. Patience allows the irritations of friendships to be forgiven because patience knows you need to be in that person’s life for long time.

The evidence of the Holy Spirit working in your life will be seen by “the fruit of the Spirit [which] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Patience is right there in the middle. I suggest, when the Holy Spirit is working “love, joy, and peace” in your life, patience will flow naturally. When we try to force ourselves to be patient without love ruling our hearts, we get angry and resentful. However, patience is the perfect product of “love, joy, and peace.”

9) **Be kind to one another**

Ephesians 4:32 *“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”*

I don’t think anyone hates being treated with kindness. Kindness shows through in words and behaviour. Kindness changes the way

we say and do things. That's because kindness is one of the beautiful expressions of love.

Kindness often means you will walk the extra mile with someone even though you are tired. Kindness gives people more than one opportunity to get something right when you know they will probably fail. In fact, kindness sounds very much like how God worked salvation in our lives. "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, 5 he saved us..." (Titus 3:3-5).

Kindness adds sweetness to every relationship it works in. Kindness overcomes past pains and even helps to forget those nasty memories. Kindness is a perfect expression of God's character.

10) Forgive one another

Ephesians 4:32 *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."*

Colossians 3:13 *"bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."*

The subject of forgiveness is possibly the greatest challenge Christians shall experience. From minor, accidental irritations to major, deliberate offenses, they all need forgiveness. Only the love of God, through the Word of God, in the energy of God the Holy Spirit in the human heart, are we able to be equipped for a lifelong mission of forgiving others.

Despite what we may think, and what the world will tell you, those who know what it is to be forgiven by God are best equipped to forgive others (Ephesians 4:32). Before we consider the issues of practical forgiveness, we must first ensure we have been forgiven by

God ourselves. True forgiveness grows out of a relationship with Jesus Christ that starts with Him forgiving you of your sin. Only then are you equipped with the inner resources to forgive as you have been forgiven.

Colossians 3:13 makes it very clear; “you also must forgive.” Forgiving others is not optional for a Christian. Forgiving is not the last option after everything else fails. Paul says it straight for everyone who believes in Jesus as Lord – “forgive.”

For many of us, talking about forgiveness is not a problem, it’s the doing forgiveness that we struggle with. The older we are when we begin forgiving the more difficult it seems to be to start forgiving.

It helps by understanding that God did not forgive us outright. No, it’s only “in Christ” that God forgives us. Jesus had to pay yours and my price for our sin on the cross to buy our pardon. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:23-25). So it is with us toward others, we forgive others in Christ, to honour the forgiving work Jesus did on the cross for us. We forgive others for Christ’s glory.

Forgiving others is not about getting justice, or revenge, or even getting what you want. It’s about expressing God’s character, while letting God be God with those who have offended you. It’s about trusting God’s justice more than man’s justice. It’s God’s mercy in place of man’s anger. It’s about giving up wanting your enemy to hurt like you hurt. It’s about setting your enemy free from your anger and your consequences.

Forgiveness is about allowing God the freedom to save your enemy through salvation in Jesus Christ, should He choose. It’s about you

committing to NOT hold a grudge against God should He save your enemy and grant them forgiveness and eternal life.

We who have been forgiven by God have no right to withhold forgiveness from our fellow sinners. Proverbs 20:22 *“Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.”*

Through forgiveness the Lord saves us from the pain of seeking revenge. So often people take revenge and never get to experience the power of forgiveness. When you have been offended, be patient. Entrust the situation and the other person who offended you to God. Forgive that person in your heart and pray for God’s blessing to come into that person’s life.

Jesus instructs us to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). We not only forgive our enemies; we show the evidence of our forgiveness by love and prayer for them. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Romans 12:14) is the proof that the Lord Jesus Christ lives victorious in us believers.

When we chose not to forgive, the following happens:

- We dishonour God’s character. We deny the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we bring shame on the testimony of the Church.
- Unforgiveness makes a lie of our Christian testimony with the unsaved world. When we refuse to forgive, the unsaved person thinks we are no better than they are. To the non-Christian, we are proving that the gospel has no power over the sin of unforgiveness.
- Realise that unforgiveness causes much rejoicing in the kingdom of darkness. We save God’s enemies a lot of work because they also try to get people to withhold forgiveness.

- An unforgiving heart will sooner or later show anger. Anger first of all destroys the life of the person who owns it, then it tries to destroy other's lives.
- While we may practice forgiveness with most people, sin will sometimes deceive you into thinking that you are entitled to withhold forgiveness from those people who have damaged you the most. We owe it to God, because of Jesus forgiveness of us, to forgive everyone who hurts us.

While we may not be able to erase our memories of past offences, we can be like God in choosing not to bring those memories into our thinking. When one of those painful memories pop in, remind yourself that those memories are in the wrong place. Your mind is a place of forgiveness by the power of God's Holy Spirit. You remind yourself that you have already forgiven that person. And again, you give that person to God in prayer asking for His blessing on their lives.

Nowhere is the power of forgiveness more effective than in the marriage. The Christian home, the family, with mother and father leading with love and forgiveness is an inescapable and unstoppable tool in the hands of our Saviour. Your community will be unable to deny the evidence of Jesus Christ in your family.



11) Sing worship with one another

Ephesians 5:19 *“addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart”*

Colossians 3:16 *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”*

Down through the ages, God’s people have always been singers who declare the wonders of God in song. Singing is therapeutic for the heart, mind and soul. Our entire inner beings are lifted in joy when we sing of our Lord.

Therefore, singing becomes an act of both worship and service. While praising God, you are also uplifting the hearts of your fellow believers. Hearty worship in song builds unity as the truths of God are affirmed in those songs.

Our singing can also be an effective tool for evangelism. Singing expresses the emotions that often the unbelieving hearers are experiencing, therefore they relate to the truths of the song.

12) Regard one another as more important than yourself

Philippians 2:3 *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”*

This can be amongst the greatest tests of our loving humility. Do we really treat other people as more important to us than ourselves? Do my words and actions cause others to think that I value them more than I value myself?

Words and acts of kindness can be the simplest little things in a person’s life which can become the most powerful when they feel that you consider them as more important.

As we have noticed earlier, our greatest example is the Lord Jesus Christ. *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2 Corinthians 5:21). As we grow in our appreciation of Christ's sinless sacrifice for us, we should grow in our expressions of our value of others.

13) Speak truth to one another

Ephesians 4:25 *"Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another."*
Colossians 3:9 *"Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices"*

God's people are to be honest people, because God is truthful. Jesus said of himself, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life..."* (John 14:6). Truth is the very essence of who Jesus is. Therefore, as believers in Jesus Christ we are to also be truthful.

Being truthful does not mean we can use our honest words to bash people over the head. Truth must be spoken in love in order to stop our words becoming a weapon. Truth in love builds long, trusting and dependable relationships which honour God.

Truth does not look for ways to mix in words of error to achieve what we want. The more we value the other person we are speaking with, the more we will want to only speak truth to them.

Truthfulness speaks of reality and no imagined things. Truth contains nothing fabricated from wishful thinking or dreams.

14) Encourage one another

1 Thessalonians 5:11 *"Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."*

Encouragement is a powerful tool in the lives of Christians. It's so easy to do, and yet also easy to forget. Encouragement can begin

with the way you greet someone, telling them how good it is to see them. Encouragement causes the other person to realise that you value them and appreciate them being in your life.

It can be as simple as having good manners; saying please and thank you. Saying excuse me, or sorry. These powerful little words which communicate respect and love can sink deep into people's hearts as they come to understand you care for them.

This raises the important of the instruction in Hebrews 10:25 *"not neglecting to meet together... but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."* It is so easy to simply forget the importance of Christians meeting together to do what only Christians can do. Christians worship God together, they sit under the reading and teaching of God's Word together, they pray together, and they serve together.

When we fail to meet together, we rob God of the opportunity to bless us through worship, teaching, praying and serving together with His people.

However, there is an aspect of encouragement I wish to dwell on for a short time. It is the wonderful quality of being a refresher of others. Among the wonderfully encouraging friends in life, exists an even smaller group who possess the ability to not only make you feel better, but inspire the desire to carry on. The New Testament identifies this as 'refreshment.'

We all know the feeling, when you're grinding your way through a dark and difficult period of life. Possibly a bad day, a bad week, or maybe a much longer period. The pain of whatever is wrong grows an inner numbness to life which you feel and others can see.

Then someone steps into your life and somehow lifts your spirit above the pain. The problems remain, but somehow that person,

through their presence and words, poured into you a sense of love and desire, which grew hope.

Those refreshing people are the heroes of life. They may not even understand themselves, just how they have such an impact on others, but they do. These people are the best of the best encouragers. The effect they have on you is more than superficial, and more than temporary. They refresh emotionally and spiritually which usually has physical benefits also.

The New Testament captures a snapshot of one such person. He's a humble man who exists within a low-profile letter. We read of him in the apostle Paul's letter to Philemon; that one-page snapshot of a runaway slave and his caring master.

Paul writes to his close friend Philemon who lived in Colossae. At the time of writing, he was chained to a Roman soldier twenty-four hours a day during his two-year house arrest in Rome. In his letter Paul writes about spiritual equality, forgiveness, reconciliation, and relationships between Christians. (Philemon :7, 20)

The story goes like this. Onesimus was a run-away slave from his Christian owner Philemon, who lived in the city of Colossae. Apparently, Onesimus stole something from Philemon, which, by Roman law, entitled Philemon to impose the death penalty should Onesimus get caught.

Onesimus, who now feared for his life, fled to Rome which was a 2100 kilometre journey. Rome was a large city with a sizable slave population, which enabled Onesimus to blend into the crowd undetected.

While we are not told of the circumstances, Onesimus somehow came to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. Consequently, Onesimus somehow visited the apostle Paul while under house arrest which

was a form of imprisonment. Paul and Onesimus became close friends with the apostle discipling him in the truths of Christ. When writing to the Colossian Church, Paul describes Onesimus as a *"faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you"* (Colossians 4:9).

Paul now writes this letter to Philemon, which Onesimus carries on his long return journey to his offended owner, a leader in the Colossian home Church (Philemon :2). I would imagine Onesimus was very nervous as he approached his original home, knowing he had to come face-to-face with Philemon. After all, there were harsh Roman laws for run-away slaves, and Philemon could legally enforce any of those laws, from flogging to death.

In his letter, Paul pleads with Philemon; *"I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment"* (Philemon :10). Paul had such a close relationship with Onesimus as mutual believers in Christ, that he considered himself a spiritual father to Onesimus. It almost sounds as if Paul was the one who introduced Onesimus to Christ for salvation.

Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus *"no longer as a bondservant (slave) but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother..."* (Philemon :16). In Christ we are all equal. No-one is more important than any other. The Lord has no favourites. God does not listen to anyone more or less than any other son or daughter of His. An apostle had no greater value than any other believer.

Paul wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus of his past wrongs so much so, that he even promised to pay whatever debt Onesimus might owe Philemon (Phm :19).

Now, listen to what prisoner Paul has to say to slave owner Philemon; *"For I (Paul) have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother (Philemon), because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you"* (Philemon :7). All the way from Rome, Paul

had heard of the character of Philemon, he had a reputation of directly refreshing the lives of other Christians. What a wonderful quality to be known for!

Obviously, Philemon was a man with at least modest financial resources and influence. He was wealthy enough to own at least one slave (Onesimus). And it seems that he was a leader of the Christian Church that met in his home. Often those qualities can create friction or resentment with other people. Jealousy sometimes interferes with relationships, even amongst Christians sadly.

However, that was not the case with Philemon. His reputation was that believers of all status reported that they were refreshed by him. Now watch the effect that Philemon's refreshment of others has on Paul the prisoner.

Reading Philemon :4-5, Paul expresses his appreciation for Philemon. *"I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints"*

- The first thing that happened within Paul was that news of Philemon made Paul thankful to God. Paul could had got jealous, but he didn't. While Paul was chained to a Roman soldier, Philemon was able to live freely, doing the Christian work that Paul was unable to do.
- The second thing to take note of is that the good news of Philemon motivated Paul to pray. Sometimes when life is tough, God's enemy whispers in your ear that prayer is a waste of time. Not true! Prayer is a wonderful and simple way of engaging with God on behalf of other people. Even while suffering himself, Paul prayed earnest prayers thanking God for His work in Colossae and Philemon. Christians can have a serious impact upon other's lives through prayer, God wants those prayers, regardless of how difficult life may be. Paul's thankfulness

could be heard whenever he thought of Philemon, in his speech and his prayers.

- Third, Paul's gratitude was fuelled by Philemon's *"love and... faith... toward the Lord Jesus."* The last thing any struggling Christian needs to hear about are other Christians struggling in their faith. Philemon's love for, and faith in Jesus Christ inspired Paul, it even uplifted and strengthened Paul's own love and faith in Jesus. We often underestimate how powerful this kind of encouragement can be for others. When others struggle, they really do need to see and hear that you are continuing strong in your loving faith for Jesus. This example can generate genuine spiritual refreshment in others' lives and should never be undervalued.
- Fourth, Paul was refreshed by the fact that Philemon's love and faith was also *"for all the saints."* Philemon did not have a theoretical or pretend love and faith, it was real. Philemon showed just how genuine his belief was by sharing it with all the saints, which is another name for believers (Christians). Notice that Philemon was not selective with who he showed love and faith to, but to every saint. Philemon did not show favouritism. He was not biased toward anyone, but towards every one of God's children.
- The fifth blessing Paul received found in verse 7; *"I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother (Philemon :7a).* Philemon's loving brotherly relationship with Paul caused a lot of joy and that joy generated comfort within Paul while imprisoned. Joy is the sense of contentment regardless of circumstances. God's work was carrying on despite Paul's imprisonment. That's often the effect of discipleship, it continues long after you are separated from those you have taught God's Word to. Comfort is the sense of relief. It's the realisation of calm following a state of agitation. And that realisation generates renewed strength and desire.
- Sixth, Paul was refreshed *"because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you"* (Philemon :7b). I think Paul's point is this;

he personally knew the man who was doing the refreshing. Paul helped teach Philemon the gospel truths years earlier, and now Philemon was teaching those same truths of Jesus Christ to others. As parents, we feel satisfaction when our children do good things for others that we have taught them to. Likewise, Paul felt that spiritual fatherly satisfaction which invigorated him with refreshing joy. The saints in Colossae were refreshed by Philemon, Paul the prisoner in Rome was refreshed by Philemon, and we today can also be refreshed by Philemon.

Towards the end of this letter to Philemon, Paul makes a request; *"Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ"* (Philemon :20). This sounds a little unusual considering Paul has just explained how Philemon has already refreshed him.

However, there remained one very important task Paul expected Philemon to do. This task would possibly be the greatest test of Philemon's love and faith – receive Onesimus back as a forgiven brother in Jesus and not as a criminal run-away slave.

There are times when we all need to realise that other people watch us. They need to see serious loving faith and obedience in our lives at the most difficult times of our lives. This affirms the reality of Jesus Christ for them by confirming the validity of their own faith in Christ. And it generates through refreshment the energy they need to persevere in their own Christian walk.

This short request of Paul's at the end of his letter reminds you and I that there are times when we need to ask for refreshment ourselves. We all need to be willing to be refreshed and ready to refresh one another when we become aware of the need. Therefore, get to know one another. Watch your relationships grow. Pray and refresh each other. Together you will be able to

give God the glory for His grace that works so powerfully in our friendships.

You see, the service of refreshment works best when it's mutual. When both persons in a friendship live refreshing lives towards each other. This need is greatest in our marriages. When the love of Jesus Christ lives through the lives of both spouses and refreshes both spouses. Refreshing friendships are great friendships, and that is precisely how God intends it to be.

15) Seek good for one another

1 Thessalonians 5:15 *"See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone."*

This instruction is another simple and easy one to do. To begin with; do not do bad things to your brother or sister in the Lord. The flip side of that is, make sure that everything you do for them is a good thing. Whether it's small or large, cheap or expensive, quick or time consuming, make sure it's a good thing which will also be pleasing to the Lord.

Whenever you are talking about a brother or sister in the Lord, make sure you say good things about them. If you cannot think of anything good to say, then say nothing.

Whenever you are planning anything which includes a brother or sister in the Lord, ensure your plans are for their good and not their harm. Only do things for them which would cause them to speak well of Jesus because of your kindness.

The content of your good works should show that thought was put into it. This simple attitude and action of goodness honours the Lord and encourages your brothers and sisters in the Lord.

16) Stir up one another to love and good deeds

Hebrews 10:24 *“let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works”*

Motivation comes easy and naturally to some people, while others are not self-motivating. This second group rely on external influences in order to achieve the things that need doing in life.

It’s the same in Christian living. Our friendships, especially with our Christian brothers and sisters, can serve as powerful motivators for right living. The writer of Hebrews carefully explains how we are to *“stir up one another”* as this involves everyone in our circle of friends. It is to be a mutual stirring, not isolated to just one or two special friends. The stirring is to go back and forward between friends so both people involved are motivated by each other to live for Christ.

First the author of Hebrews instructs us to *“consider how to stir up one another.”* This is an important aspect of Christian living; therefore, we are to give thought and prayer to the matter and not treat it lightly. By thinking first, we are treating our Christian friends as important. This shows that we value them, and we do not want to say things which would discourage them. All relationships in the body of Christ deserve us giving thought to how we speak and behave toward them, from children to adults, we are to think first.

The author even details the reasons and the end result we hope to achieve in the other person’s life. Specifically, our motivating words aim for *“love and good works”* to be the result. More to the point, our words should cause our hearers to want to love God and love others more. Our words should cause our hearers to want to go and do good works to others more. Put together, our words should cause our hearers to desire the love of Jesus Christ to flow through them by their actions into others’ lives. Then they get to repeat the process by motivating their hearers to *“love and good works”* also.

Words are powerful, therefore we are able to impact others' lives for "love and good works" if we choose our words carefully and prayerfully as Jesus' mouthpiece.

17) Confess your sins to one another

James 5:16 *"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."*

James, the half-brother of Jesus, is not teaching that we have to confess our sins to someone in order for God to forgive us.

The context of James chapter 5 is about believers who are struggling and physically sick from the painful battle of the Christian life they were experiencing. And in that spiritual battle of life we believers need to talk with each other, to seek council from each other, including to confess our weakness and even our sins to each other. This confession is for accountability and support with one another. If you have sinned against that person, you confess that sin against them so that they can forgive you and reconciliation of your damaged relationship can happen.

Confession of sin to each other opens our lives for others to see in and help as needed. James is not telling us to publicly tell everyone about our every sin. No, this confession is for private discussion and prayer. For private words of wisdom to come from God's Word. A trusted friend is best for these times. The weaknesses talked about are not for gossip, but for private and cleansing talk which includes prayer.

There are also times when the struggles of life are so great that you should go the elders of your Church to speak openly and honestly. Their humble wisdom which grows out of God's Word will guide you in ways you can walk faithfully with Christ. Their prayers will

encourage and strengthen you. Unity will be enriched, and the Lord will be honoured.

18) Pray for one another

James 5:16b *"...pray for one another..."*

Prayer is simply talking with God. You can talk with God any time of the day or night. You can talk with God from any location in the world. You can speak with the Lord out loud or silently in your thoughts, it makes no difference.

There are two sides to James' prayer instruction; two ways this should work out in our lives. If both sides of your prayer life are not put into practice, both sides will suffer loss.

The first is the obvious one. We should be active in praying for each other. It is too easy to say to someone that you will pray for them and proceed to forget about them. James is not speaking here of those two second prayers which say; 'Lord bless brother so and so, Amen.' Those prayers are of little to no value and I suspect are disheartening to the Lord. Present thoughtful prayers with some detail. This will give you details to watch for God's answers.

The second side to prayer is not so obvious, yet it is equally important. We need to ask others to pray for us. Give others the specific things you need them to remember when they are praying for you. Of course, the same applies to you, ask others for specific things in their lives you can pray for. These items should include things to be thankful for as well as requests.

It's important to remember; *"this is the confidence that we have toward him (Jesus), that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us"* (1 John 5:14).

"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. ² Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live" (Psalms 116:1-2). God listens to your prayers!

Prayer is us partnering with God as He graciously interacts with someone else in a different location. Prayer unites people together in a common cause, even though they live in different places (Roman 15:30). Prayer is to be a priority because we understand that we are engaging with God Almighty. Talking with God in prayer is for the purpose of glorifying Him, of speaking well of His character, and giving thanks.

Second, prayer has a strong focus on intercession, that is, giving thanks and making specific requests on behalf of someone else. Prayer takes time to talk with God on behalf of others who are struggling, less mature spiritually, or weak in their faith relationship with the Lord (1 Timothy 2:1). Prayer even presents the case for non-Christians to the Lord because we are confident the Lord listens to us and He loves them also.



19) Be hospitable to one another

1 Peter 4:9 *"Show hospitality to one another without grumbling."*

Hospitality can be shown by almost everyone. Hospitality is kindness in welcoming guests into your space, your home, and your time. From children to the elderly, both men and women, all are able to participate in the kindness of being hospitable to others.

Inviting others into your space can be carried out in many different ways. Often, the most effective hospitality is the simplest hospitality. Simply sharing a little time with someone is often needed the most. A little time and a good listening ear tell the other person that you care for them.

Sometimes food might be involved, but not always. Sometimes a drink of water with a smile is all the medicine the other person needs for them to feel refreshed by you. After all, encouraging and refreshing other believers in your presence is the whole purpose for hospitality with God's people.

I'm sure you noticed that Peter said to do hospitality *"without grumbling."* Grumbling, or complaining, usually undoes all the good that could have been achieved by your kindness. People who need to know you care for them, and that the Lord cares for them, can feel downcast when they have to listen to complaining, especially when it comes from another Christian.

20) Be humble toward one another

1 Peter 5:5 “...Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”

Peter could not have said it any clearer. Every believer in Christ should intentionally place themselves within the spiritual clothing of humility. Humility begins in the heart, then it influences the mind and thinking, last of all it displays itself through behaviour and speech.

Humility is for every man and woman, every boy and girl. Humility opens your heart to discover the most wonderful heavenly truths of Jesus Christ. Humility does not fight, it does not argue, it is not weak, it is not a failure, it never gives up, it is strength under control for the glory of God and the blessing of others.

I wanted to end this book by encouraging you to give serious thought to the godly quality of humility. Love is the greatest (1Co 13:13), but love is only love when it is humble. A tiny drop of pride quickly turns love sour. Pride neutralises any and all efforts of love, making it worthless.

Pride can sneak up on us without detection sometimes. In the early stages of pride, it can be difficult to identify because it disguises itself as humility. Pride is a master at putting on different masks. But one thing is for certain; *“When pride comes, then comes disgrace”* (Proverbs 11:2a). But thanks to God, for He has designed life so that *“with the humble is wisdom”* (Proverbs 11:2b). Humility has nothing to hide, it is happy to be continually learning. Humility never needs to lie to cover its words or actions. Therefore, humility grows wisdom in the human heart because humility is pure and not two-faced.

Through all the sufferings that Job experienced; losing his children, losing all that he owned, his extreme sickness, and the criticism from the people he thought were friends, Job remained faithful to God. Job explained his determination this way; *“till I die I will not put away*

my integrity from me" (Job 27:5). All of the external things in Job's life suffered great loss, but in his heart of hearts he remained righteous.

Job went on to explain the relationship between belief and behaviour. *"Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding"* (Job 28:28). It takes humility to place God first in your life. To *"fear"* the Lord is the highest form of respect and honour anyone can show Him. When you fear the Lord, He comes before all others, that is what it means to be wise in God's eyes. The effect this God centered fear has, is that your understanding of God grows so that you *"turn away from evil."*

To fear the Lord and grow in His wisdom and understanding of life gives you the spiritual resources to grow your earthly relationships to reflect your heavenly relationship with the Lord.

Consider our Lord and Saviour Jesus. He was God! He did not need to be more like God the Father because in every way possible He was one and the same as the Father (John 14:7). Jesus was the creator of everything that exists, He alone keeps everything in the universe holding together (Colossians 1:17), for everything that exists was created for Him to the glory of His Heavenly Father. *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"* (Colossians 1:19). Jesus is worthy of your attention, worthy of your worship, and worthy of every day of your life.

As God, Jesus lived in the majestic beauty of heaven. Yet He stepped down from heaven to earth. He exchanged His heavenly body for the body of a tiny baby. This was a huge step down in His humility. In order to take on the body of a little baby, He had to empty Himself of His heavenly position of greatness and power. He temporarily put those powerful parts of Himself to one side which allowed Him to become human – the creator became the creature.

"And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). Jesus Christ humbled Himself for the purpose of going to the cross to die for our sin. Jesus is the greatest example of humility.

I encourage you to think often of Jesus Christ, inviting the Lord to grow a humble heart within you that thinks and behaves like Jesus. Invite Jesus to use you in spreading His love into other people's lives, beginning with your husband or wife, then your children, then your community and Church family.

"...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). May our lives, may our marriages, may our families, and may every relationship we have in this life bring praise and glory to Jesus as Lord!