

Marriage as Covenant: ever-faithful and ever-lasting.

Debbie, the bride: you are always a beauty (pause) of intellectual oddity.
Tim, the groom: always the handsome prince but actually is a quiet rebel.
Perfectly complimented, two become one. I am so happy and excited for the two of you. I can imagine that Paul must have been at a Middle-Eastern wedding similar to this. He must have been just as happy and excited. At that moment of inspiration, he must have been saying to himself: "I have to write this down, for the Ephesians." And wrote he did in Ephesians 5:32-33 "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

The scripture seldom use definitions. That is not the style. Definitions are for the moderns. Ancient text use imagery. Here the earthly relationship of Husband and Wife is compared to the heavenly relationship of Christ and His people. Paul saw a heavenly image and an earthly one, he brought the two together. However, Paul was not the first one to do so. Prophets of old did already: Ezekiel 16:8; Isaiah 54:1-10; Hosea 2:9-10, Jeremiah 31:32 and Malachi 2:14. (Barth, Markus. *Ephesians*. The Anchor Bible, 34, 34a. 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974), Vol 2, p753 fn 525) Jeremiah (Jer 31:32) says: "I was a husband to them (*meaning the Israelites*), declares the Lord." Isaiah (Isa 54:5) says "For your Maker is your husband; the Lord Almighty is his name." Paul being the Rabbi that he was must have the words of these prophets in mind when he wrote those verses in Ephesian. The scripture tells us over and over again that the relationship of the Lord and His people is a covenantal relationship. Marriage is comparable to that covenantal relationship. By inference, marriage is therefore very much a covenantal relationship.

The scripture tells us many things about the covenant relationship. I will only mention two today: ever-faithful and ever-lasting. Beginning from Noah (Gen 9:16), to Abraham (Gen 17:7), to David (2 Samuel 23:5), to Jeremiah (Jer 32:40) and the author of the epistle of Hebrews (Heb 13:20), they all describe the covenant relationship as everlasting. Marriage therefore is also everlasting, in other words: permanent. This is it, till death will you part. This permanency is not only about the relationship. It is about what starts and keeps this relationship: Love. Love, not in eros, agape comes close, but love is "chesed." (חֶסֶד) This Hebrew word cannot be justifiably

translated by any single English word. Some translated it as covenantal love. Other use the hyphenated loving-kindness. If you really want an approximated flavor of this word, you can try: honest, faithful, kind, powerful, tender, selfless, determined and everlasting. Marriage, therefore is honest, faithful, kind, powerful, tender, selfless, determined and everlasting.

God is "chesed." He began this relationship with us because He is simply who He is. Without us knowing, without us doing, He began the relationship. He "let us into" this relationship without us being a good boy or a good girl. No admission is ever required. We "get in" by grace and by grace alone. However, in order to "stay in," we must hear and keep and walk in His instructions. Getting in the covenant is free, staying in the covenant is work. Getting into a marriage is a gift, staying in is work. God is "chesed." Love flows out from Him spontaneously. We, human are not God. To love selflessly and consistently is not natural for us. We must work at it every day. We also celebrate this every day because we know the Holy Spirit will work for us and with us always.

Before I got married, I was doing some reading on marriage and among those readings one question stays with me. The question goes like this: "do you want to have breakfast with this person for the next twenty years?" This rather odd question is rather telling. It reminds us that the concept of ever-faithful and ever-lasting is not abstract, but concrete. It is meant to be part of our act and being. The Hebrew concepts of everlasting is exactly this, concrete not abstract. Everlasting to the Hebrew mind basically means an extended, prolonged period of time. In other words, a long, long, long time. Therefore the idea of an ever-faithful and ever-lasting marriage is simply the sum of all the parts. It is the sum of all the infinite moments of honesty, faithfulness, kindness, strength, tenderness, selflessness, determination that eventually become everlasting. Make breakfast for each other, eat breakfast with each other, go for long walk in the rain, serve each other, honor each other, send gifts and send emoji endlessly. Make these "chesed" moments happen frequently and often and eventually they will become forever. That is why marriage gets better with time. In about twenty years, your two will be like a Grand Cru Bordeaux wine; fragrant and savory. Your marriage will approach the ever-faithful and ever-lasting covenantal relationship with the blessing of the Lord. You now have the blessings from the Lord, your family and your community to begin this journey. So boldly go where no couple has gone before. Make it so.

*Shalom
Simon*