

HOW CAN I KNOW WHO TO MARRY?

Will I get goosebumps when the right person comes along? How hard should I be looking? What kind of person does God want for me? What if Mom and Dad or my friends don't like the person I think is right? Does it make much difference if we aren't both believers in Christ?

What about you? Are you getting more and more interested in someone but unsure if that one is marriage material? Or are you longing to be married but not getting any attention? Whatever your situation, you'll want to read what this booklet has to say. It offers biblical principles to guide you through the heart-tugging decisions involved in finding a marriage partner.

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A PERFECT MATCH

*Matchmaker, Matchmaker, make me a match;
Find me a find, catch me a catch.
Matchmaker, Matchmaker, look through your book,
And make me a perfect match.*

-- from *Fiddler on the Roof*

Nobody likes to be forced into a relationship. Being "set up" for a date, or being continually hounded about one's romantic life by sincere but overbearing family members and friends can be unsettling, to say the least. And even though a person may want to be married someday, the often awkward process of finding the right person can seem to be more bother than it's worth. Add to that the risk of making a life-altering mistake, and the decision-making process can be paralyzing.

In many parts of the world, a single person does not have a choice about who to marry. Marriages are arranged by the family (usually the father), and brides are treated much like family property.

The popular musical *Fiddler on the Roof* depicted three young Jewish girls who were afraid of becoming the unwilling partners in arranged marriages to men in Anatevka, their small Russian village. They sang of hope that the matchmaker would make them "a perfect match," but later in the same song they told the matchmaker not to rush, please! As the story progressed, they worked to change the attitude of their father, Tevye, toward marriage selection. Although the matchmaker was still very active in Anatevka, and even though the fathers were a powerful force in the family, Tevye's daughters managed to talk him into giving them permission to marry the boys they loved--except for one daughter who insisted on marrying a young man outside of the family's faith.

Attitudes toward marriage continue to change. In highly mobile, urbanized cultures where family clans are not the chief forces (and fathers do not reign like kings), the decision-making process of bride and groom selection has shifted to the individual preference of the single people involved, though usually with the desire for family approval. But this has not always meant that the single person has made better decisions.

Single young people and divorced or widowed older people are all capable of getting married for the wrong reasons. A young person might enter marriage on the basis of romantic feelings alone--or only cold facts. A divorced person might remarry without having learned from the mistakes of the past--only to marry the wrong kind of person for the wrong reasons. Or a widowed person who feels desperately alone might rush into a new relationship and marry--only to regret it later.

The Bible offers helpful principles that apply to young or old, first-time marriages or second marriages, arranged marriages or romantically induced ones. Whoever does the deciding should consider the issues that will be discussed in this booklet.

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She was young and beautiful, and had grown up in a small town. He was wealthy, an only child, 40 years old, and worked his father's livestock business. Their homes were separated by more than 400 miles, and their eyes had never met before the day they became man and wife.

An old man, a long-time employee of the groom's father, acted as a matchmaker. On the day he arrived in the young woman's town, he walked up to her, asked her a few questions, talked to her relatives, and then knew that she was the one to marry his employer's son. This old man "popped the question" to her father and then made arrangements to take her back for the marriage--and she willingly went!

The bride and groom were Rebekah and Isaac. The Genesis 24 account of what led up to their marriage offers an unusual example of how God can lead two people together. Although it would probably be inappropriate to try to follow every detail of their example today, the fascinating account of Abraham's matchmaking activity presents several sound principles that can be applied to how we decide who to marry in our day and in our culture.

In this study, therefore, we will refer to the story of Isaac and Rebekah. In fact, before you read any further, it would be well for you to open your Bible and read Genesis 24, looking for principles that could be applied today.

In order to get a complete picture of how we are to know who to marry, we will look to other parts of the Bible as well, and we will organize our findings under the following headings: [\(1\) Choose a Believer](#), [\(2\) Trust God](#), [\(3\) Consider Character](#), [\(4\) Use Wisdom](#), [\(5\) Think Ahead](#).

HOW CAN I KNOW WHO TO MARRY?

CHOOSE A BELIEVER

Oil and water do not mix. A mouse and a boa constrictor would not make the best of friends. A person with a paralyzing fear of heights would not be a wise choice as a climbing partner to scale the slopes of Mount Everest. A radical communist would not be a good political running mate for a committed capitalist. A huskie and a dachshund would not work well together as sled dogs in the Alaskan wilderness. And a follower of Christ would not make a good marriage match with a nonbeliever.

Why the fuss over whether or not my spouse is a believer? Nothing should be more important to you or to the person you marry than your spiritual well-being. Abraham knew that. He had his servant travel a great distance (over 400 miles) to find a spiritually compatible bride for his son. It wasn't simply that he was a protective and controlling father--he knew the lasting significance of marriage. Genesis 24 helps us to understand why.

Abraham gave his servant (probably his faithful old servant, Eliezer, mentioned in 15:2) these strict orders: "You will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell; but you shall go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac" (vv.3-4). The Canaanites were notorious idolaters of the basest kind. Their gods and goddesses promoted worship that included human sacrifices and fertility rites with perverse sex.

Who are today's Canaanites? Okay, so maybe the person you've been dating doesn't go to a church that promotes human sacrifices or sexual rituals and doesn't worship fertility gods. The issue, though, is who he is worshiping. Does the person in whom you have a romantic interest know Jesus Christ as Savior? And is that person living for Him? Modern-day Canaanites are not always so obviously pagan. They can appear religious in a positive sense, but being religious is not enough.

Second Corinthians 6:14-15 states, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (NIV). When the apostle Paul wrote those words, he was not speaking specifically of marriage, but the principle certainly applies. A person who puts his faith in Christ is born again (Jn. 3:3-16), and "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Such a radical transformation of our inner spiritual being should have a profound impact on our priorities, our goals, our lifestyles, and our relationships.

First Corinthians 7:39 indicates that a widow, if she chooses to remarry, should marry a man who is "in the Lord." He must be a believer, a person who lives by faith in Jesus Christ. It makes sense that this applies not only to widows but to anyone who is considering marriage.

So, if you are a believer, the person you marry must be a believer too. Look for a person who knows Christ as Savior, and who gives evidence of spiritual growth.

What could go wrong if I don't marry someone who is my spiritual equal? Plenty. If you could talk to Moses or to King Solomon, they could tell you of the dangers to both the family and to the community of believers. Moses got the word about this directly from the Lord, and Solomon knew from firsthand experience the terrible results of marrying outside the faith.

The law God gave to Moses contained prohibitions against intermarrying with the pagans of the surrounding nations. Deuteronomy 7:3-4 states, "Nor shall you make marriages with them. . . . For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods."

Even though Solomon knew better, he misused his kingly prerogatives and married all sorts of foreign wives who served idols. As a result, "when Solomon was old, . . . his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the Lord his God" (1 Ki. 11:4). Both Solomon and the whole nation suffered (vv.11-13).

Throughout Israel's history, when the people married unbelieving pagans, there was a profound, negative influence on the Israelites. Even after their punishment at the hands of foreign armies, the Jews who returned to Jerusalem had to be rebuked by both Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9:10; Neh. 13:23-27), and later by Malachi (2:11-12). Love, lust, and circumstances blinded them to what they knew was right and wrong.

We must be on guard against the temptation to overlook this most basic issue of spiritual compatibility. Just because the other person is "gorgeous," "a hunk," "kind and considerate," or seems to be "genuinely in love with me," don't allow feelings to lead you to trample on your relationship with the Lord.

Even though the apostles Paul and Peter spoke of the possibility of winning an unbelieving spouse to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:12-16; 1 Pet. 3:1-2), that does not mean we should go into marriage knowing we are spiritually incompatible. A believer who marries an unbeliever may be facing a lifetime of spiritual unrest in the marriage and a battle for the spiritual well-being of their children.

Thinking It Over. Why do some Christians choose to marry an unbeliever even though they know it's not right? What areas of conflict could develop in a marriage if the two are not believers? What effect could this type of marriage have on the faith of their children as they grow up?

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TRUST GOD

It's not easy to wait for someone else to give you what you desperately long for. It's silly, I know, but I don't enjoy waiting in a long line at a fast-food place where the smell of the hamburgers only makes me hungrier. I don't enjoy financial crunches when bills come in faster than paychecks, and I'm left wondering when and if the account balance will ever be in the black again.

Our entire lives seem to be a process of learning to wait in dependence on others. It all begins when we are infants--we want our milk, our "blankie," our favorite stuffed animal, or a clean diaper. We have to learn again and again that we can't have everything *now*. We have to wait for Mom and Dad or others to provide what we need.

As Christians, we have to learn over and over that we must wait on the Lord, the One who provides all we need. It's not an easy lesson for any of us. We have to discover that His timing is best, that He has everything under control. That's easier said than done. For a man or woman who has an aching heart and longs to get married, the wait can be very, very hard.

What does the story of Isaac and Rebekah tell us about trusting God to provide? Abraham and his servant Eliezer (rather than Isaac and Rebekah) give us the example to follow (Gen. 15:2-6; 24:2-4). In verse 7, Abraham expressed his trust in God's ability to lead Eliezer to the right woman for his son. Abraham said, "The Lord . . . will send His angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there." This statement of faith was not wishful thinking. Rather, those words grew out of a long-term close relationship that Abraham had with the Lord. He could look back and see how the Lord had met every need and led him in the past. He knew that the Lord could be trusted to guide him in this crucial choice for his son Isaac.

Abraham was a living, breathing example of the truth of Proverbs 3:5-6. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." As Abraham lived by faith, the Lord blessed him and guided his life. His servant Eliezer displayed the same kind of faith when he prayed, "O Lord God of my master Abraham, please give me success this day, and show kindness to my master Abraham" (Gen. 24:12).

Today we can have the same confidence and quiet assurance that our lives are under God's control. As long as we walk humbly, submissively, and obediently, we need not worry that we'll somehow miss God's direction about which way to turn. Just as Abraham humbled himself before the King of the universe, so too we are to seek first the kingdom of God and He will take care of all we need (Mt. 6:33); and that includes helping us to find a spouse or to live for Him as a single person.

Why is God taking so long? You can be sure that any delay you may encounter is for your good, not His attempt to torture you! It can seem as if God is leaving you hanging when you want nothing more than to get married and settle down.

Many young and old people experience "senior panic." A young person can begin to panic when he or she hits the senior year of college or the age when all of his or her friends are getting married. And some senior citizens can become panicky when they are widowed or come to a time in life when they really need companionship. Whether young or old, people can end up looking for a quick fix to their longings for a marriage partner. That, needless to say, is extremely dangerous.

Whether young or old, God wants you to call on Him, walk close to Him, and wait on Him (Ps. 27:13-14; Isa. 30:18). Be honest with the Lord about your desire to be married. Those feelings are right and good! But don't lose patience and wander away from God in your attempt to find someone to marry.

How is your personal walk with God? Are you trusting Him with the small, day-to-day decisions? Are you living in continual dependence on Him? Are you in the place and attitude where He can get your attention?

When the servant of Abraham spoke to Rebekah about his purpose for being in Nahor, he said, "As for me, being on the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren" (Gen. 24:27). Eliezer had followed instructions and was in the place where God could give further direction. We too must be "on the way," walking in obedience to God, if we expect Him to lead us in the future.

Are you in the place where God can lead you? You can't expect Him to direct you to a fine Christian mate if you are hanging around with people who don't have a good reputation, if you are engaging in premarital sex with those you date, if you are neglecting times of personal prayer and worship, or if you are harboring sinful attitudes. We can't expect God's help in choosing a mate if we are living in disobedience to all that we know is His will.

Will God provide a marriage partner for everyone? No. Some people are designed and gifted for the single life while others are designed for married life (1 Cor. 7). Ideally, in a Garden of Eden type of existence, every man and every woman *would* find the perfect mate. But this is an imperfect world, where the ideal no longer is operative. In this present situation, God's will for some people is a life of singleness--and for them, that is *exactly* how He is most glorified in their lives.

Why do I need God's help in choosing a mate? Deciding to marry can be a mind-boggling, life-altering choice, and it has deep and lasting spiritual impact. And quite frankly, most of us don't realize what we are getting ourselves into. We need God's help to prepare us for marriage and to help us select the person who will be best for us.

James 1:5 states, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him." In this verse, James was writing about the wisdom we need to help us deal with trials in our lives. And certainly, trying to cope with singleness and determining if God wants you to marry a certain person or not could be considered a serious trial!

According to the book of Proverbs, we take a giant step toward being wise when we choose to fear the Lord by showing Him the reverence and honor that is due Him (1:7; 2:1-11).

How does the Holy Spirit guide my choices, thinking, feelings? This is a tricky subject simply because we are talking about less-than-objective information. Even though the New Testament contains several examples of how the Holy Spirit can lead through inner impressions

(Acts 8:29; 11:28; 13:2; 21:11; 1 Cor. 14:30), separating our subjective feelings or urges from the voice of the Spirit is not always an easy thing to do. We can be sure that the Spirit would never violate the clear commands of the Bible. The Spirit would never tell us to choose to marry an unbeliever, nor would He lead us to marry for money, nor would He guide us to marry in conflict with the principles of wisdom (see "[Use Wisdom](#)").

The Holy Spirit will guide you as you study the Bible, and He will give you sensitivity to what is right or wrong about a relationship. The inner promptings of the Spirit will be consistent with the truth and godly wisdom.

How should we pray for God to lead us to a husband or a wife? Often and long! God is intimately interested in hearing your requests concerning this matter. As you bring your requests before Him and submit yourself to His direction, you can be sure that He will give you nothing but what He wants for you (Ps. 37:4; Mt. 7:7-12).

Thinking It Over. On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you rate your level of trust in the Lord? Have you spent time praying about who you will marry? Are you living in obedience to God and growing in your relationship with Jesus Christ? Have you learned the secret of contentment, whether you are married or not? (Phil. 4:11-13).

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CONSIDER CHARACTER

What kind of person would you want to perform heart surgery on you? Would you want someone who was a regular user of cocaine, a psychopathic killer, or a medical intern who had cheated his way through medical school? Probably none of the above, right? You would want someone who was a qualified and competent doctor, someone who was prepared for the surgery he was to perform on you.

So too, you need to be sure that the person you choose to marry has the right qualifications to be your husband or wife. This doesn't mean that you should hand out test forms to everyone you date, but it does mean that you should be aware of what traits are desirable in a spouse, and what to watch out for. And perhaps most important of all--what you expect from others should also be evident in *your* life!

What character traits were important in the case of Isaac and Rebekah? As Eliezer came into the town of Nahor, he prayed and asked the Lord to point out a certain kind of young woman; and I don't think he was just asking for some arbitrary signs. Eliezer asked the Lord to bring to him a young woman whose actions would display a submissive, humble, servant attitude. Those character traits would be revealed by her willingness to give a drink to Eliezer and his camels (Gen. 24:13-14).

When Rebekah fulfilled those requirements, the account says that Eliezer watched her closely to confirm if she was the one for Isaac (v.21). As the situation unfolded, she displayed a sensitivity

to the Lord by her willingness to go with Abraham's servant--even after she heard his amazing story.

In verse 16, Rebekah is described as being very beautiful and a virgin. I'm sure that her natural beauty didn't hurt her chances, though we can't be sure that her beauty was a determining factor. We can be fairly sure, however, that her virginity was an important issue. The Old Testament law was very strict about sexual behavior (Dt. 5:18; 22:13-21). Deception at the time of marriage about one's sexual purity could even lead to the death penalty (v.21).

What character qualities are important for people entering marriage today? Here are some traits you should look for in others and develop in yourself:

1. Willingness to serve, humility. He or she should be able to live in harmony with others, be willing to associate with people of low position, not be conceited (Jn. 13:1-7; Rom. 12:16). Above all, he or she should be willing to serve *you*.

2. Sexual purity. Sex was designed for marriage. You should be saving yourself for someone who has been saving himself or herself for you (Rom. 13:13-14; Heb. 13:4).

But what if you or the person you are interested in was sexually active in the past? Have you forfeited the privilege of a happy marriage? No. You will have to deal with the emotional scars of those previous sexual activities, but by God's grace and mercy any person can be completely forgiven and purified by Christ (2 Sam. 12:13; 1 Jn. 1:9).

According to recent surveys, the odds are that many singles who read this booklet will have already engaged in sexual activity. So do you throw the standards out the window? Of course not. Sin never makes lawlessness okay. Our sin only makes us need God's mercy and forgiveness more desperately.

The problems in your sexual past or your future marriage partner's sexual past could be deep-seated personality issues. You would be wise to make sure that the past has been properly dealt with and that sinful sexual behavior patterns have truly been broken and left behind. Otherwise, those same character weaknesses will reappear in the future and threaten your marital sexual relationship. It would be wise to talk over these issues with your pastor or a Christian counselor and make sure that you and your future partner have truly put the past behind and are committed to sexual purity.

3. Devotion to Christ. You should settle for no less than a believer who is spiritually sensitive to the Lord and desires to live for Christ (2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 4:17--5:20; Phil. 3:7-16; 1 Jn. 2:15-17).

4. Right priorities. The one you choose to commit your life to as husband or wife should not be committed to money, pleasure, or popularity (Eccl. 2:1-11; 5:8-17; 6:1-12; Mt. 6:33; Rom. 12:2; 1 Tim. 6:10; Heb. 13:5).

5. Right beliefs. Don't marry a heretic! You don't have to agree on every minor issue, but make sure that you agree on the biblical basics of sound doctrine (1 Jn. 4:1-6).

6. Commitment to church. God did not intend the Christian life to be a game of solitaire. He designed the church to meet our needs and for us to serve others. You should agree on this issue with your future mate (Eph. 4:1-16; Heb. 10:24-25).

7. Loving attitude. This is the most basic characteristic that every believer should possess (Jn. 13:35; Gal. 5:22; 1 Jn. 3:11-20). Don't marry a grouch! I can't imagine why such people would attract any prospects, but they do--by hiding their true character and by luring with other qualities. The wisdom of Proverbs warns us that being married to an irritable and contentious person can be torture! (19:13; 21:9,19). Examine your relationship and see how you get along. Are you always bickering? Do you feel verbally or emotionally abused?

8. Self-control. Does the potential mate show restraint when angered? Is he or she addicted to alcohol, drugs, food, sex, work, sports, or impulse buying? (Prov. 23:20-21; 25:28; Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 5:15-18).

9. Honesty. The writer of Proverbs said that "an honest answer is like a kiss on the lips" (24:26 NIV). If a person truly loves you, he or she will show that affection with honest words.

10. Beauty below the skin. The Lord looks for attractive inner qualities in a man and a woman; should we do any less? (1 Sam. 16:7; Prov. 11:22; 31:13; 1 Pet. 3:2-5). Beauty is only skin-deep, but character goes right to the bone. You should find your mate to be physically attractive to you, but that's not as important as inner attraction.

11. Responsibility. Don't marry a selfish, lazy person who lacks the desire or the means to fulfill certain responsibilities. Rebekah and her father could tell from Eliezer's gifts and his description of Isaac that he would be able to take care of her needs (Gen. 24:22,35,53). That sounds coldly practical, doesn't it? But contrary to some opinion, you can't pay bills with promises of love.

In 1 Timothy 5, the apostle Paul said, "If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (v.8). Paul didn't mince words, did he? If you shouldn't marry an unbeliever, you certainly should not marry a person whose financial irresponsibility and laziness make him "worse than an unbeliever." The "sluggard"

who is mentioned so often in Proverbs is a person to be avoided as a mate (24:30-34).

12. Good relationship with parents. How a person relates to his parents will tell you a lot about his character. God places great value on showing respect and honor for parents (Eph. 6:1-3).

How can expectations be too high or too low? Some people may expect perfection while others don't expect enough. The problem with any kind of list (like the one above) is that we can make impossible demands on another person. Certainly the basic spiritual and character qualities should be there, but we cannot expect a person to be perfect. There's no such creature on this planet! So be reasonable. Don't budge on the major issues, but allow room for growth of character. The important matter is whether or not the person you marry is devoted to Christ and is allowing God to work in his or her life to become more like Jesus Christ.

And one other practical note: Don't choose someone with the idea that you will be able to drastically alter his or her character after the wedding ceremony. Be prepared to live with that person even if he or she never changes!

Thinking It Over. What area of your life needs some prayerful attention? Would you be a good "catch" for someone looking for a marriage partner? If you are thinking about marrying someone, do you know that person well enough to conclude that he or she would help your relationship with Christ?

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USE WISDOM

If you were looking for a car to buy, would it be wise to open the newspaper to the auto section in the classified ads, close your eyes, put your finger down randomly on the page, and then purchase that car? Would it make it any better if you prayed and asked God to help you to point your finger to the right want ad? Or is the whole scene a bit ridiculous? God wants us to use wisdom, whether we're buying a car, selecting a place to live, choosing a college to attend, or looking for the right person to marry.

Some decisions in life can be settled by flipping a coin--like trying to decide whether to have peanut butter or bologna on your sandwich for lunch. But most other choices demand more brain power. A choice of a spouse, for instance, takes a lot of thought, a lot of prayer, and a lot of dependence on God for His leading. After all, it is a decision that will affect you (and your spouse) for the rest of your life. It's not something you can afford to take lightly.

What does the story of Isaac and Rebekah show us about how to use wisdom? Genesis 24 holds several bits of practical wisdom. When we combine it with the teaching of the whole Bible, we can get a good collection of practical tips.

At first reading, it may sound as if Abraham's servant did something like opening the classified ads and putting his finger to the page. But let's look a little closer for some sound principles that we can apply to our situations today.

Look in the appropriate place. To find a compatible, spiritual wife, Abraham sent Eliezer to the logical place--his hometown (Gen 24:3-4,10). Eliezer didn't go into a pagan Canaanite village to look for a wife for Isaac, just as it wouldn't make sense for us to go to a Buddhist shrine, an atheist's club, a Satanist church, or a singles bar to find a person who loves the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ask the Lord for help. Eliezer prayed about the marriage he was arranging (Gen. 24:12) and he saw the Lord lead. Nothing could have been more practical or wise. Proverbs tells over and over again that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (1:7). The most logical move you can make is to put your searching heart into God's hands.

Don't base your decision on one "sign." Even though you may believe the sign is from the Lord, don't throw out wisdom.

One part of the story of Isaac and Rebekah is often misunderstood. When Eliezer asked the Lord for a sign (a young woman who would offer water to him and his camels), he didn't jump to the conclusion that Rebekah was the right one when she offered water. The text tells us that even after she passed the initial test, Eliezer quietly observed her and wondered if she truly was the one who was right for Isaac (v.21).

Eliezer had observed Rebekah's character as she humbly brought water for him and his camels. And when he talked with her, he learned that she was from the right family (vv.24-27). Then, as he talked with her father and her brother, Eliezer received added confirmation when they were quick to give their approval. And the final indication was Rebekah's own declaration that she was willing to go (v.58). The combination of all these factors helped to verify the choice.

Seek advice. Do you realize how much Isaac must have trusted Eliezer's judgment? I can't fathom the idea of letting someone else choose the person I would marry. I like to imagine that Isaac had a long talk with Eliezer before he left on his wife-hunt, telling his longtime friend and servant what he wanted in a wife. What we do know for sure is that Abraham trusted his servant's judgment, and Eliezer didn't make an arbitrary decision. Genesis 24 tells us that Eliezer carefully explained the purpose of his journey to Rebekah's father and submitted to his counsel (v.49). And Rebekah herself humbly followed the direction of her brother and father (vv.51,58-61).

Our thinking process is not always as objective as it should be. Emotions can blind us to serious character flaws in the person we are interested in marrying. The Proverbs remind us of the need to double-check our judgment with the counsel of people we can trust (12:15; 20:18).

What other practical items should we consider today? In addition to the four guidelines just mentioned, we should consider the following:

Study the family. How a person gets along with parents and brothers and sisters will tell you volumes about his character. A son who "mistreats his father and chases away his mother is a son who causes shame and brings reproach" (Prov. 19:26). A person who honors his father and mother (Eph. 6:2-3) enjoys the favor of the Lord. Such a person shows the kind of character that we should want in a mate. How do his or her parents relate to one another? You can be sure that their example has left a deep impression on your future mate.

And by the way, don't forget to study your own family life and your parents' marriage example. What you've observed may or may not be the type of marriage that God wants you to imitate.

Don't rush! Make sure you know yourself and the other person well enough to be certain that you are right for each other and ready for a lifetime relationship (Prov. 19:2; 29:20). Love at first sight is a myth. The only thing you can catch at first sight is a superficial attraction--or a cold. Love takes time to grow and develop.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Look in the appropriate place.
2. Ask the Lord for help.
3. Don't base your decision on one "sign."
4. Seek advice.
5. Study the family.
6. Don't rush.

Should I consider marrying someone from another race? The Old Testament regulations that Jews were to marry only within the Jewish race were intended to keep Israel from close associations with their idolatrous neighbors whom the Lord wanted destroyed. The purity of the race was also important because of God's plan for Israel as a unique nation, the race through whom the promised Redeemer would come.

The racial distinctions, therefore, were primarily spiritual distinctions. And the New Testament does not promote a separation of the races.

So, no biblical reason exists for prohibiting marriages across racial lines today. But a word of caution is needed. From a practical standpoint, you must consider the differences not merely of skin color but, more important, cultural backgrounds and even social acceptability. You and your marriage partner need to be able to relate to one another on many levels. Be sure that you can overcome whatever cultural barriers may be there, and be sure that you are ready and willing to endure any social stigma that you or your children may face. Prejudice against interracial marriages is an ugly reality we all have to come to grips with. So, caution and careful evaluation are needed.

What if my parents don't approve? Do you have to follow their wishes? If you want to keep peace in the family you do! But if you are old enough to make a mature and responsible decision, and you think that you are making the right choice, what then?

Whatever you do, don't neglect to show honor for your parents (Eph. 6:2-3) even when you disagree with them. Give them time to see your perspective. Talk it out with them. Find out exactly why they don't want you to marry so-and-so. It could be that they sense a serious character flaw or some other problem that you are not aware of. Give them the benefit of the doubt for a while. Don't overreact. Ask the Lord to help you and your parents to see the issues clearly. Affirm your love and respect for them.

Your pastor and others may be able to give you objective counsel about what to do. It could be that your parents are being unreasonable, but do all you can to preserve your relationship with them. Try to win their approval, but don't try to force it out of them. The person you want to marry should be able to understand and wait for a while.

Only as a last resort, after you have carefully and prayerfully examined your motives, your readiness for marriage, your compatibility, and your love, should you ever bypass your parents' wishes.

How much freedom do I have to choose? Is there only one person in the world who is right for you, or do you have several options that would please God? This is another issue that isn't so easy to answer because we get into the matter of God's sovereignty and our free will--and that's beyond human comprehension.

We can be sure, however, that God is in control and that He has given us freedom. That freedom includes the ability to make mistakes--both innocent ones and sinful ones. Instead of sitting around and fretting about whether or not we are selecting the one person in the world God planned for us to marry, we would be better off living in continual dependence on the Lord, trusting Him to bring us to the person who is right for us.

Thinking It Over. What can keep us from using our heads before getting married? What practical issues mentioned in this chapter are essential to a happy marriage? What makes you a practical choice for someone to want to marry you? What practical reasons would a person have for not wanting to marry you?

HOW CAN I KNOW WHO TO MARRY?

THINK AHEAD

Would you dive headfirst into a lake without learning first how deep and how warm (or cold) the water was? Would you buy a house or agree to rent an apartment without checking it out first? Would you accept a job if you didn't know what you would be doing, how much you would be paid, what kinds of benefits you would receive, or what the working conditions were? Only if you tended to act on impulse or if you were very desperate, right?

The same is true in marriage. Few people decide to get married without some idea of what they are getting into. The problem, though, is that too often they have less than a biblical view of marriage in mind, or they naively expect the romance to continue without a glitch, or they merely continue to duplicate the less-than-ideal marriage patterns they observed as they grew up. As a result, when problems arise in the marriage, they fail to address the issues properly and live in conflict, ignore the problem and hope it goes away, or else they decide to end the marriage. That's why it's so important for those who are contemplating marriage to think ahead to what they're getting into.

What did Rebekah and Isaac think they were getting into? Genesis 24 doesn't tell us much about this. We have to assume that they, like Abraham, knew what had been passed down to them from the first marriage in the Garden of Eden. And they had watched their God-fearing parents respect the Lord's plan for marriage.

Isaac must have known, for example, that marriage had strong spiritual implications--he knew that his wife was not to be a pagan idolater but someone who was spiritually compatible and who would join him in preserving the faith and passing it on to the next generation (24:1-7). For the 37 years before his mother had died, Isaac had observed his parents' relationship.

What is God's view of marriage? God designed marriage to be the closest and best of all human relationships. A man and woman were created to complement one another's physical, spiritual, emotional, and social needs and abilities in the special relationship we call marriage (Gen. 2:18-25). Their union was to be more than merely a sexual act, it was to be a union of purpose, hearts, and souls. Your selection of a marriage partner must be someone who will complement your needs, and someone whose needs you can joyfully fulfill.

God conducted the first marriage ceremony, and He has been involved in every ceremony since then. Jesus referred to the creation account of Adam and Eve and the one-flesh union of man and wife, and then He said, "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mt. 19:6).

God clearly has made known his hatred for divorce (Mal. 2:16). New Testament passages like Ephesians 5 extol the sacredness of the marriage relationship and the need for husband and wife to give each other their all.

What are the responsibilities of the husband and the wife? Contrary to some opinion, marriage is not a master-slave relationship. And contrary to the pattern of some existing marriages, it is not supposed to be an adversarial relationship either. The following are two key marital responsibilities:

Sexual faithfulness (Ex. 20:14, Gal. 5:19). This is faithfulness in both action and attitude (Mt. 5:27-28). Husband and wife are to have eyes and thoughts only for each other.

Distinctive roles (1 Cor. 11:3-16; Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Tim. 3:4,12; Titus 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1-7). Just as within the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Spirit are equal but have different roles, so too the husband and wife are given different roles by God.

The husband is to provide loving leadership (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23,25,28; Col. 3:19). He is to do all he can to understand his wife's needs and treat her with tender respect (1 Pet. 3:7).

The wife is to provide loving help to the husband and family (Gen. 2:18; Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Ti. 2:4-5; 1 Pet. 3:1).

It is popular in some cultures today for the distinctive roles of husband and wife to be discarded as sexist and outdated stereotypes, which no longer apply in our modern, enlightened world. The problem with that view is that God created men and women with different biological and relational roles. And the Bible gives no indication that God's created distinctives should be ignored or glossed over.

No one said it would be easy! Love takes a lot of work. A person who goes into marriage with the notion that life will be total romantic bliss has a rude awakening ahead. Most people are more realistic, but their expectations still exceed the reality that they encounter.

How important should sex be? Your sexual relationship is an expression of the intimate relationship of body and soul that you and your spouse will share. The sex drive is a powerful force; because of that, God designed marriage as the place where that drive is fulfilled (Heb. 13:4). First Corinthians 7:2 and 9 tell us that the desire for sexual fulfillment is one good reason to get married. Granted, more ought to be involved, but the sexual attractiveness will be there, and the sexual relationship should be enjoyed unreservedly (Prov. 5:15-19). A husband and wife are to recognize that they have a duty of providing sexual satisfaction to their mate (1 Cor. 7:3-5).

Is premarital counseling necessary? Maybe not necessary, but couples have found it to be very helpful. Some people have gotten enough good, sound biblical counsel from their parents as they have grown up, and they've seen good marriages in action, so for them extensive counseling probably isn't necessary. Many pastors insist on counseling sessions with every couple they marry, and that's a good idea. At the very least, a couple needs to understand what marriage is all about, how to handle disagreements, how to handle their roles, how to relate to each other sexually, and how to build one another up spiritually. And good premarital counseling paves the way for later counseling if problems arise in the marriage.

Thinking It Over. Why do the responsibilities of marriage scare some people? How does society today view commitment in marriage? What kind of good and bad marriages did you observe in your family and friends as you grew up? How will you make sure that your marriage honors the Lord?

IS IT LOVE?

How do you know if you're in love? True love is more than a sensation--though you may feel on top of the world when you are with the one you love. But feelings can lead you up on a mountain one day and down in a valley the next. The kind of love we need in order to enter a marriage fully prepared, "for better or worse, for richer or poorer, . . . till death us do part," is a love that is self-sacrificing--a giving of oneself for the sake of the other.

No one on this earth (except Jesus) has ever exhibited perfect love, but what we desire is the most perfect expression of love that is possible. Substitute your name and the name of the person you're considering for marriage in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 wherever the word *love* occurs. See how you measure up to the biblical pattern.

_____ is patient.
_____ is kind.
_____ is not jealous.
_____ is not boastful.
_____ is not arrogant.
_____ is not rude.
_____ is not self-seeking.
_____ is not easily angered.
_____ does not hold grudges.
_____ does not delight in evil.
_____ rejoices in the truth.
_____ protects.
_____ trusts.
_____ hopes.
_____ perseveres.

"I DO"

"I do"--two little words with awesome implications. In a wedding ceremony, the words "I do" represent a man and woman's willingness to enter into a special relationship and to promise their love and devotion to each other--for a lifetime. It's not a relationship to be taken lightly or to be entered into hastily. The man and the woman need to be convinced that they are spiritually compatible, right and good for each other, and ready for the challenges of married life.

Before a person says "I do," however, another wedding should have taken place. No, I'm not advocating bigamy, nor am I encouraging divorce and remarriage. The marriage I'm referring to is a spiritual one--the joining of our hearts with God's.

Have you ever said "I do" to the Lord? Have you recognized that God has offered you a proposal of forgiveness of sin and the enjoyment of life with Him for now and eternity? The

conditions of this marriage are quite simple. Just say "I do" to God--tell Him that you admit your need of forgiveness (Rom. 3:23) and accept the free gift of eternal life that Jesus Christ died on the cross to buy for you.

If you've done that, you have taken the first all-important step in finding the person who will walk with you and Jesus Christ.