

GOING DEEPER

DISCUSSION GUIDE

February 14, 2016



Discussion Guide

Character Counts

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- IN WHAT WAYS DID GOD MOVE IN YOUR LIFE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU RESPOND TO HIM?
- WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS WEEK? IN WHAT WAYS, IF ANY, DID YOU INVITE GOD INTO THIS CHALLENGE?
- HOW HONEST HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they state they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- HAVE YOU EVER “FALLEN IN LOVE?” WHAT WAS THIS LIKE?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- USE THE NOTES TO EXPLAIN THE CONTEXT OF “FALLING IN LOVE” AND HOW THIS TIES TO THE CULTURAL NARRATIVES AROUND HAVING A MARRIAGE THAT LASTS.
- EXPLAIN THE BACKGROUND OF THE POEM IN PROVERBS 31.
- READ PROVERBS 31.10-12 ALOUD. READ THE TEXT ONCE MORE SEEKING TO HEAR THESE WORDS AS THE VERY WORDS OF GOD TO YOU.
- IN WHAT WAYS DOES CHARACTER COUNT WHEN LOOKING FOR A SPOUSE? SEEK TO FIND AS MANY WAYS AS POSSIBLE.
- READ PROVERBS 31.13-31 ALOUD.
- WHAT ASPECTS OF CHARACTER ARE HIGHLIGHTED AS COUNTING MOST IN A POTENTIAL SPOUSE?
- IN OUR AMERICAN CULTURE, WHAT MATTERS MOST IN THE SEARCH FOR A POTENTIAL SPOUSE? IN WHAT WAYS ARE THESE LIKE OR UNLIKE WHAT SCRIPTURE HIGHLIGHTS AS MATTERING THE MOST?
- CONSIDER THE FOUNDATIONS OF A MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP BUILT UPON THE THINGS OUR CULTURE VALUES VERSUS THE FOUNDATION THE THINGS SCRIPTURE EXHORTS US TO VALUE. IN YOUR MIND, WHICH FORMS A MORE SOLID FOUNDATION FOR MARRIAGE? COULD YOU ELABORATE?
- WHAT, IF ANYTHING, KEEPS US FROM LOOKING FOR A SPOUSE PRIMARILY USING THE ASPECTS OF CHARACTER SCRIPTURE HIGHLIGHTS? WHAT MIGHT ENABLE US TO SEEK VALUE AND USE THESE TRAITS MORE IN OUR SEARCH FOR A POTENTIAL SPOUSE?

- WHAT ROLE, IF ANY, DO WE HAVE AS A FAMILY OF FAITH IN ENCOURAGING OTHERS TO LOOK FOR THESE ASPECTS OF CHARACTER? WHAT MIGHT THIS LOOK LIKE?
- CONSIDER CONCLUDING BY DISCUSSING WHAT STEPS YOUR COMMUNITY MIGHT TAKE TO ENCOURAGE THE PURSUIT OF THESE CHARACTER TRAITS BOTH INDIVIDUALLY AND IN THE SEARCH FOR A POTENTIAL SPOUSE.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

FALLING IN LOVE

SWEATY PALMS. BUTTERFLIES IN THE STOMACH. EUPHORIA. COUNTLESSLY CHECKING TO SEE IF SHE’S CALLED. ENDLESSLY PONDERING WHAT LIFE WITH HIM MIGHT BE LIKE. CHANCES ARE IF YOU HAVE ANY OF THESE SYMPTOMS YOU HAVE “FALLEN IN LOVE.” THE CONCEPT OF FALLING IN LOVE IS A CENTRAL COMPONENT TO OUR CULTURE’S NARRATIVE CONCERNING WHAT IT TAKES TO HAVE A MARRIAGE THAT LASTS. THE NARRATIVE RUNS SOMETHING LIKE THIS: TO BE HAPPILY MARRIED YOU MUST FIND SOMEONE WITH WHOM YOU FALL HOPELESSLY IN LOVE. YOU KNOW YOU HAVE FALLEN IN LOVE WHEN THE OTHER PERSON MAKES YOU FEEL GREAT, WHEN YOU FEEL WITH THEM LIKE YOU HAVE FELT WITH NO ONE ELSE. CERTAINLY, LOVE IS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF MARRIAGE, BUT THE IDEA OF KNOWING YOU HAVE FALLEN IN LOVE BY THE WAY YOU FEEL IS ACTUALLY ROOTED IN THE TEACHING OF PLATO. IN PLATO’S MYTH OF THE ROUND PEOPLE, IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT THE TWO HALVES OF AN ORIGINAL ROUND PERSON HAD FOUND ONE ANOTHER WHEN “THE PAIR ARE LOST IN AN AMAZEMENT OF LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP AND INTIMACY, AND ONE WILL NOT BE OUT OF THE OTHER’S SIGHT, AS I MAY SAY, EVEN FOR A MOMENT: THESE ARE THE PEOPLE WHO PASS THEIR WHOLE LIVES TOGETHER, AND YET THEY COULD NOT EXPLAIN WHAT THEY DESIRE OF THE ANOTHER.” (SYMPOSIUM, TRANSLATED BY BENJAMIN JOWETT, COLLECTED WORKS OF PLATO, 4TH ED., OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1953).

HOWEVER, THE FEELINGS SO OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH FALLING IN LOVE MIGHT BETTER BE DESCRIBED AS INFATUATION. THE FEELINGS ARE REAL, BUT THEY ARE NOT LASTING BECAUSE THEY ARE THE RESULT OF BRAIN CHEMISTRY. WHEN YOU COMPARE AN MRI OF A CRACK ADDICT’S BRAIN WITH THAT OF AN INFATUATED PERSON, THEY LOOK EXACTLY THE SAME. THIS IS BECAUSE THE EXPERIENCE OF FALLING IN LOVE TRIGGERS THE SAME ADDICTIVE RESPONSE WITHIN THE BRAIN; THAT IS, FALLING IN LOVE REALLY DOES CREATE A MIND-ALTERED STATE.

WHEN A PERSON BECOMES INFATUATED WITH ANOTHER PERSON, THE BRAIN RELEASES A LOT OF PEA (PHENYLETHYLAMINE) WHICH FUNCTIONS LIKE A NATURAL AMPHETAMINE. THIS NATURAL “DRUG” THEN TRIGGERS THE BRAIN TO RELEASE DOPAMINE AND NOREPINEPHRINE ALL THE WHILE SUPPRESSING SEROTONIN. THE RUSH OF DOPAMINE INTO THE BRAIN INDUCES INTENSE FEELINGS OF PLEASURE. THE NOREPINEPHRINE MAKES YOUR PALMS SWEAT AND THE BUTTERFLIES DANCE IN YOUR STOMACH. THE LOW LEVELS OF SEROTONIN LEAD TO OBSESSIVE THINKING EVEN AS THE DOPAMINE SEEMS TO INITIATE FANTASTICAL THOUGHTS AT SUCH A RAPID PACE THAT THE PERSON CAN NO LONGER DISTINGUISH BETWEEN WHAT IS REAL AND WHAT IS

IMAGINED.

THIS BRAIN-CHEMICAL COCKTAIL IS WHAT LIES BEHIND THE READINESS OF INFATUATED COUPLES TO DISPLAY A GAP BETWEEN PERCEPTION AND REALITY. "HE IS THE MOST TRUSTWORTHY PERSON I HAVE EVER MET," COUPLED WITH THE CONFUSED FACES OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS WHO KNOW THE MAN CONSTANTLY LIES. THESE CHEMICALS ALSO LEAD PEOPLE TO IDEALIZE THEIR RELATIONSHIP. "SHE TOTALLY GETS ME." OR, "I HAVE NEVER FELT MORE CONNECTED."

THE TROUBLE WITH THIS BRAIN-CHEMICAL COCKTAIL IS THAT ITS EFFECTS WEAR OFF ANYWHERE FROM 12-24 MONTHS. IN OTHER WORDS, PEOPLE FALL OUT OF LOVE! IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT IT IS AT ABOUT THIS MARK THAT PEOPLE REPORT A HEIGHTENED DISSATISFACTION WITH THEIR PARTNER, AND BEGIN TO LOOK FOR AN ESCAPE FROM THEIR RELATIONSHIP.

THE TEXT

GENESIS 24.1-27: *SEARCHING FOR A SPOUSE*

THE NARRATIVE CONCERNING THE MARRIAGE OF ISAAC AND REBEKAH IS ONE OF THE LONGEST IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS, AN INTERESTING INTERPLAY OF GOD'S PROVIDENCE AND THE FULFILLMENT OF HIS PROMISES. YEARS HAVE PASSED. ABRAHAM IS OLD AND SARAH HAS DIED. HOWEVER, ISAAC HAS NOT MARRIED, A NECESSARY STEP FOR THE PROMISE OF GOD TO ABRAHAM THAT HE WOULD BECOME GREAT TO BE FULFILLED (GENESIS 12.1-3). THEREFORE, ABRAHAM SETS ABOUT THE PROCESS OF FINDING A WIFE FOR ISAAC. THAT A FATHER WOULD INITIATE THE SEARCH FOR HIS SON'S BRIDE WAS NOT UNUSUAL IN THE ANCIENT WORLD AS MOST MARRIAGES WERE ARRANGED IN ORDER TO CONNECT FAMILIES, CONSOLIDATE WEALTH, BUILD ALLIANCES, OR GAIN TERRITORY. AS ABRAHAM BEGINS HIS SEARCH, HE IS PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH MAINTAINING HIS COVENANT WITH GOD. GOD HAS TAKEN HIM OUT OF HIS HOME IN MESOPOTAMIA AND GUIDED HIM TO THE LAND OF CANAAN, PROMISING THAT ONE DAY ABRAHAM'S ANCESTORS WILL POSSESS THE LAND (GENESIS 12.1-8). ABRAHAM UNDERSTANDS THAT THIS PROMISE HAS BEEN MADE TO HIS FAMILY AND NOT TO THE CANAANITES. THEREFORE, HE CANNOT ALLOW HIS SON TO MARRY A CANAANITE WOMAN, NOR CAN HE ALLOW HIS SON TO LEAVE THE LAND. BOTH ACTIONS WOULD BREAK COVENANT WITH GOD. THUS, HE SENDS HIS MOST TRUSTED SERVANT BACK TO MESOPOTAMIA TO FIND A WIFE FROM AMONG HIS FAMILY WHO REMAINS THERE. THE PROSPECT OF MARRYING WITHIN ONE'S FAMILY WAS A COMMON WAY OF MAINTAINING DISTINCTIVENESS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, AND THIS SEEMS TO BE THE POINT IN THIS CASE, MAINTAINING A DISTINCTIVENESS FROM THE CANAANITES.

AFTER LOADING 10 CAMELS WITH GOODS, THE SERVANT DEPARTS FOR MESOPOTAMIA AND ARRIVES, AFTER AN UNSPECIFIED TIME, IN THE TOWN OF NAHOR AND MADE HIS WAY TO THE WELL. HE ARRIVES AT EVENING, ONE OF THE TWO TIMES WHEN WOMEN CAME TO DRAW WATER. UPON ARRIVING, THE SERVANT OFFERS A PRAYER REQUESTING THE GUIDANCE OF GOD IN FINDING A BRIDE FOR ISAAC. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THE SERVANT DOES NOT FORSAKE THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN HIS SEARCH FOR ISAAC'S BRIDE. IT IS

EQUALLY IMPORTANT TO NOTE THE TYPE OF GUIDANCE REQUESTED. THE SERVANT ASKS THAT GOD LEAD HIM TO A WOMAN WHO WOULD GIVE HIM WATER AND THEN WATER HIS CAMELS. A CAMEL WHO HAS NOT DRUNK IN SEVERAL DAYS CAN CONSUME UP TO 25 GALLONS OF WATER AT ONCE, AND THE AVERAGE JUG FOR DRAWING WATER WAS NO LARGER THAN 3 GALLONS. THEREFORE, THE SERVANT IS ASKING TO BE LED TO A WOMAN WHO IS NOT JUST POLITE BUT A WOMAN WHO IS INORDINATELY HOSPITABLE AND CARING. HE IS ASKING TO BE LED TO A WOMAN OF GREAT CHARACTER. GOD GUIDES HIM TO REBEKAH WHO IS OF THE PROPER FAMILY AND OF PROPER MARRYING AGE. UPON ASKING FOR A DRINK, REBEKAH PROMISES TO GIVE THE SERVANT AND HIS CAMELS WATER. HOWEVER, THE SERVANT SAYS NOTHING. HE WAITS TO SEE IF REBEKAH IS A PERSON OF HER WORD, A FURTHER TEST OF CHARACTER. AFTER REBEKAH FINISHES WATERING THE CAMELS (HOURS LATER?) THE SERVANT REWARDS HER AND ASKS OF HER FAMILY STATUS. UPON DISCOVERING SHE IS OF ABRAHAM'S FAMILY, HE KNOWS HIS JOURNEY IS COMPLETE.

PROVERBS 31.10-31: *THE CHARACTER OF A SPOUSE*

THE FINAL WORDS OF PROVERBS ARE AN ACROSTIC POEM PRAISING THE VIRTUES OF A GOOD WIFE. IN HEBREW, ACROSTIC POEMS PROGRESSED WITH EACH SUCCESSIVE LINE BEGINNING WITH THE NEXT LETTER OF THE ALPHABET. THE POINT OF SUCH POETRY WAS TO PRONOUNCE THAT EVERYTHING CONCERNING THE SUBJECT HAD BEEN STATED, MUCH LIKE OUR PHRASE "A TO Z." AS PART OF THE WISDOM TRADITION, THE POEM COUNTERS THE WISDOM OF CULTURE. SPECIFICALLY, THIS POEM COUNTERS THE ANCIENT (AND MODERN!) PREOCCUPATION WITH EVALUATING WOMEN FROM AN EROTIC VIEWPOINT. IT DOES THIS BY CELEBRATING THE ORDINARY ACTIVITIES OF THE GOOD WIFE WHICH IN FACT MAKE HER DESIRABLE AND BEAUTIFUL. THIS WIFE IS PRECIOUS BECAUSE SHE USES HER STRENGTH, ABILITY, AND WISDOM TO SELFLESSLY CARE FOR OTHERS. IT IS IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE THAT THIS POEM FOCUSES SOLELY UPON THE DESIRED CHARACTER OF A WIFE. THIS IS BECAUSE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO ENGAGED IN A SEARCH FOR A SPOUSE WERE MEN, AND THIS WAS OFTEN DONE BY HIS PARENTS! IN OUR MODERN SETTING, ONE MIGHT SUBSTITUTE "HUSBAND" FOR "WIFE" FREELY THROUGHOUT THE TEXT, BECAUSE THE ADVICE GIVEN CONCERNS THE CHARACTER TRAITS TO LOOK FOR AS A PERSON SEARCHES FOR A POTENTIAL SPOUSE.

THE POEM BEGINS WITH AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF THE WORTH AND VALUE OF A WIFE (SPOUSE HEREAFTER) WHOSE CHARACTER IS EXEMPLARY. ACCORDING TO THIS ADVICE, THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO LOOK FOR IN A SPOUSE IS CHARACTER! THE PERSON WHO FINDS A SPOUSE OF EXEMPLARY CHARACTER DISCOVERS HE HAS A RELATIONSHIP BUILT UPON TRUST, A RELATIONSHIP WHICH IS ROBUST AND LASTING.

THE AUTHOR HIGHLIGHTS THREE CHARACTER TRAITS WHICH COALESCE TO FORM THE DESIRED CHARACTER FOR A SPOUSE: INDUSTRIOUSNESS (13-19), DEVOTION (20-28), AND FAITH (29-31). MANY EXAMPLES FOR EACH ARE GIVEN. SOME READERS HAVE INTERPRETED THESE EXAMPLES TO BE PRESCRIPTIVE; THAT IS, A SPOUSE (PRIMARILY WOMEN!) MUST DO THESE THINGS. THIS IS NOT THE CASE. RATHER,

THESE EXAMPLES ARE ILLUSTRATIVE OF WHAT THIS CHARACTER MIGHT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICAL TERMS. AN INDUSTRIOUS CHARACTER IS THE WILLINGNESS TO WORK, SOMETHING WHICH IS PART OF THE OUTWORKING OF GOD'S IMAGE WITHIN PEOPLE (GENESIS 2.15). THIS MIGHT BE WORKING IN THE HOME (13-15) OR IN THE WORKPLACE (16, 18-19). WHATEVER THE CONTEXT, THE INDUSTRIOUS SPOUSE IS WILLING TO GO ABOUT THEIR WORK WITH ENERGY (17). THE DEVOTION OF A SPOUSE INVOLVES THE WILLINGNESS TO GIVE OF ONESELF FOR THE BENEFIT OF OTHERS. THIS DEVOTION IS KNOWN AS LOVE THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE AND IS ITSELF AN ESSENTIAL PART OF GOD'S CHARACTER (1 JOHN 4.7-12). THIS LOVING CHARACTER SHOWS UP IN CARE FOR THE POOR (20), CARE FOR ONE'S CHILDREN AND SPOUSE (21-23) AND CARE FOR CO-LABORERS (24-25). PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTER TRAIT IS THAT OF FAITH, A PROPER RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. THE OUTER ASPECTS OF ONE'S PERSON—CHARM AND BEAUTY—FADE, BUT FAITH GROWS AND SPEAKS TO THE GREAT WORTH OF A POTENTIAL SPOUSE.

REAL LIFE WITH BLAKE:

DOES WHO I MARRY MATTER? OF COURSE IT MATTERS, BUT ON THE JOURNEY OF MARRIAGE I AM LEARNING THAT WHAT MATTERS MOST IS NOT WHAT I THOUGHT MATTERED. RACHEL AND I MET IN THE YOUTH CHOIR OF OUR CHURCH. WHEN I FIRST SAW HER, I THOUGHT SHE WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL GIRL I HAD EVER SEEN. I STILL DO. I DID EVERYTHING I COULD TO LET HER KNOW HOW MUCH I WAS ATTRACTED TO HER. I PULLED HER HAIR, KICKED HER CHAIR, AND GENERALLY GOT HER IN TROUBLE. REALLY. YOU CAN ASK HER. I COULDN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT HER. I HAD TO HAVE HER ATTENTION. SHE WAS THE ONE FOR ME. I JUST KNEW IT, BECAUSE SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL. LUCKY FOR ME, SHE IS A PERSON OF DEEP CHARACTER, EVIDENCED BY HER WILLINGNESS TO PUT UP WITH AND THEN MARRY A GUY WHO PULLED HER HAIR AND KICKED HER CHAIR. THE LONGER WE ARE MARRIED, THE MORE I REALIZE THAT HER CHARACTER IS WHAT DRAWS ME TO HER THE MOST AND THE THING WHICH MAKES HER A GREAT WIFE. DON'T GET ME WRONG. I THINK RACHEL IS BEAUTIFUL, BUT HER OUTER FEATURES ARE NOT WHAT MATTER MOST OR EVEN WHAT MAKE BEING MARRIED TO HER SUCH A RICH AND REWARDING EXPERIENCE. RACHEL IS PATIENT, KIND, COMPASSIONATE, AND PERHAPS ONE OF THE SMARTEST AND HARDEST WORKING PEOPLE I HAVE EVER MET. SHE IS FAITHFUL AND THOUGHTFUL. SHE MAKES SPACE FOR ME TO BE ME AND LOVES ME ANYWAY. BEST OF ALL, SHE HAS A PASSIONATE LOVE FOR GOD. SHE MAY BE BEAUTIFUL BUT IT HAS BEEN THE LATER THINGS WHICH HAVE PAID GREAT DIVIDENDS IN OUR MARRIAGE. THEY ARE THE THINGS WHICH MAKE HER MOST BEAUTIFUL TO ME.

REAL LIFE WITH YOU:

DOES IT MATTER WHO WE MARRY? OF COURSE IT MATTERS. SO, WHO ARE WE SUPPOSED TO MARRY? THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE ENCOURAGES US TO MARRY THE PERSON WE FALL IN LOVE WITH, THE PERSON WHO TURNS US HEAD OVER HEELS. IT EVEN PROMISES THAT WHEN WE FIND THIS PERSON, SHOULD WE MARRY THEM, WE WILL REMAIN HEAD OVER HEELS IN LOVE WITH THEM. . .UNTIL WE DON'T. WE FALL OUT OF LOVE AND THEN WE HAVE PERMISSION TO FALL OUT OF OUR MARRIAGES. FALLING IN LOVE IS GREAT, A WONDERFUL GIFT OF BRAIN CHEMISTRY GOD COOKED UP. THE PROCESS OF FALLING IN LOVE IS FUN AND EXHILARATING. IT IS A TREMENDOUS EXPERIENCE. . .THAT DOESN'T LAST. GOD GAVE US THE GIFT OF FALLING IN LOVE BUT HE DIDN'T INTEND WE USE THIS EXPERIENCE AS THE PRIMARY MARKER FOR DETERMINING OUR SPOUSE. ACTUALLY, THE EXPERIENCE OF FALLING IN LOVE CAN HAPPEN OVER AND OVER AGAIN THROUGHOUT LIFE, A TESTIMONY TO NEW BEGINNINGS IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS, NOT ALL INTIMATE AND PHYSICAL. GOD INTENDED WE LOOK FOR SOMETHING MORE THAN A "HOTIE" OR "STUD" AS CONFIRMATION OF OUR NEXT SPOUSE. GOD DESIRES WE LOOK FOR CHARACTER. GOOD CHARACTER IS HARD TO FIND, BUT IT IS GOOD CHARACTER THAT MATTERS THE MOST IN A MARRIAGE. GOOD CHARACTER IS CHARACTER WHICH MIRRORS GOD'S CHARACTER. IT IS THIS CHARACTER WHICH MAKES THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S LIFE WITH ANOTHER PERSON IN THE RELATIONSHIP OF MARRIAGE POSSIBLE. IT IS THE FERTILE SOIL OF A GOOD, ROBUST MARRIAGE. SO HOW DO YOU FIND GOOD CHARACTER? CONSIDER INVOLVING THE FAMILY OF GOD IN THE SEARCH. FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS THE PEOPLE OF GOD HAVE INVITED GODLY COUNSEL IN THE QUEST TO FIND A SPOUSE. PERHAPS THIS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER IN A CULTURE THAT EMPHASIZES FALLING IN LOVE. WE NEED OTHERS TO THINK FOR US AT A TIME WHEN OUR EMOTIONS KEEP US FROM THINKING STRAIGHT. INVITE YOUR FRIENDS, YOUR FAMILY OF FAITH INTO THE DATING PROCESS. SPEND TIME TOGETHER AS A GROUP RATHER THAN JUST THE TWO OF YOU. EXPERIENCE LIFE TOGETHER AND ASK FOR THEIR GUIDANCE. IF YOU ARE ALREADY MARRIED, DON'T GO LOOKING FOR A PERSON OF CHARACTER! BECOME THAT PERSON. WE CAN'T CONTROL OTHERS BUT WE CAN CONTROL OURSELVES, MOST OF THE TIME. PURSUE GOD AND BECOME THE PERSON YOU WERE MEANT TO BE. IT WILL MAKE A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE!



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