

Devotional Gathering: Preparing for Marriage

Introduction

Welcome to the adventure—and process—of successfully preparing yourself for marriage and choosing a compatible and eternal marriage partner. You are becoming part of creating a culture shift away from the concept of “instant relationships” that just “magically happen.” Many people jump into marriage with little forethought. Sometimes the result is an enduring relationship, but often it can fail when the couple marries and then discovers they do not know each other, are not compatible, and do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed.

From a Bahá'í perspective, marriage is intended to be an eternal, spiritual union between two people who love God, each other, and are attracted to and pleasing to one another. To support this goal, the couple must understand each other's character and be certain about their compatibility.

You are choosing to be an active and responsible participant in preparing for marriage, seeking a partner, and determining compatibility with him or her. This is too important a decision to approach randomly, passively, or with only your emotions and not your mind and soul. It is wise to ask God for help. Keep in mind, however, that God is more likely to guide you, and you are more likely to learn vital information, if you are in action using your mind, heart, body, and soul. There is a mystical, spiritual component to loving someone and joining your life with him or her, but choosing someone to be with forever is one of the biggest decisions of anyone's life. Careful preparation—a skill-building, systematic, and spiritual process—is essential.

Musical selections are wonderful for touching people's hearts, and you are encouraged to use them whenever appropriate.

Quotations

1. O my God! O my God! Unite the hearts of Thy servants, and reveal to them Thy great purpose. May they follow Thy commandments and abide in Thy law. Help them, O God, in their endeavor, and grant them strength to serve Thee. O God! Leave them not to themselves, but guide their steps by the light of Thy knowledge, and cheer their hearts by Thy love. Verily, Thou art their Helper and their Lord. (Bahá'u'lláh: *Bahá'í Prayers* (US 2002), p. 238)
2. Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá'í marriage. (Research Department of the Universal House of Justice: Introduction to *Preserving Bahá'í Marriages* compilation, item 3)
3. It is not sufficient to pray diligently for guidance, but this prayer must be followed by meditation as to the best methods of action and then action itself. Even if the action should not immediately produce results, or perhaps not be entirely correct, that does not make so much difference, because prayers can only be answered through action and if someone's action is wrong, God can use that method of showing the pathway which is right. (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 461)

4. God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth.... Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears nor comprehend with another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation... ('Abdu'l-Bahá: *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 293)

5. O ye that have eyes to see! The past is the mirror of the future. Gaze ye therein and be apprised thereof... (Baha'u'llah: *The Tabernacle of Unity*, p. 10)

6. The more one is severed from the world, from desires, from human affairs, and conditions, the more impervious does one become to the tests of God. Tests are a means by which a soul is measured as to its fitness, and proven out by its own acts. God knows its fitness beforehand, and also its unpreparedness, but man, with an ego, would not believe himself unfit unless proof were given him. Consequently his susceptibility to evil is proven to him when he falls into the tests, and the tests are continued until the soul realizes its own unfitness, then remorse and regret tend to root out the weakness.
 The same test comes again in greater degree, until it is shown that a former weakness has become a strength, and the power to overcome evil has been established. ('Abdu'l-Bahá: "Star of the West", Vol. 6, No. 6; "Understanding Tests" letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, July 17, 1989)

7. God has endowed human beings with more than one way of receiving guidance in the decisions we have to make, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained. There are the Holy Writings, in which are clear directions for the way in which we should live; if an inner voice prompts us to act contrary to the explicit teachings we can be sure that, far from being an inspiration from God, that inner voice is the expression of our own lower nature, and should be disregarded. There is also the gift of intelligence and good judgment—the faculty which distinguishes man from the animal kingdom; God intends us to use the faculty, which can be a powerful instrument for distinguishing between true inspirations and vain imaginings. There is the power of prayer through which we strive to purify our motives, to seek the Will of God and to implore His guidance and assistance. There is also the law of consultation, one of the distinguishing features of this great Revelation. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: November 29, 1982, unpublished; "Understanding Tests" letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, July 17, 1989)

8. Bahá'í marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity... ('Abdu'l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 118)

9. In the context of the society in which your family now lives, a society in which materialism, self-centeredness and failing marriages are all too common, your sons may well feel that it is wise to have a long period of courtship in which the prospective partners spend much time together and become thoroughly acquainted with each other's character, background and family. (Universal House of Justice: An unpublished letter August 28, 1994, to an individual)

10. Bahá'í law places the responsibility for ascertaining knowledge of the character of those entering into the marriage contract on the two parties involved, and on the parents, who must give consent to the marriage. (Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 368)
11. Bahá'u'lláh has clearly stated the consent of all living [birth/natural] parents is required for a Bahá'í marriage. This applies whether the parents are Bahá'ís or non-Bahá'ís, divorced for years or not. This great law He has laid down to strengthen the social fabric, to knit closer the ties of the home, to place a certain gratitude and respect in the hearts of the children for those who have given them life and sent their souls out on the eternal journey towards their Creator. (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Notes, p. 207)
12. He is the Bestower, the Bounteous!
 Praise be to God, the Ancient, the Ever-Abiding, the Changeless, the Eternal! He Who hath testified in His Own Being that verily He is the One, the Single, the Untrammelled, the Exalted. We bear witness that verily there is no God but Him, acknowledging His oneness, confessing His singleness. He hath ever dwelt in unapproachable heights, in the summits of His loftiness, sanctified from the mention of aught save Himself, free from the description of aught but Him.
 And when He desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation, and enjoined it upon us in that which was sent down out of the heaven of sanctity in His Most Holy Book. He saith, great is His glory: "Enter into wedlock, O people, that ye may bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants. This is My bidding unto you; hold fast to it as an assistance to yourselves." (Bahá'u'lláh: *Bahá'í Prayers* (US 2002), pp. 117-118)

Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the responsibilities of the individuals in considering marriage? Of the parents?
2. What are some of the tools available to you in making decisions?
3. How will you know whether your marrying is in alignment with the Will of God?
4. What is the value in learning from your relationship history?
5. What will you have to detach from to assess yourself and your relationships effectively?

Skill-Building: Understanding Your Expectations of Marriage

Read together this quotation:

“Marriage must be viewed in its correct relation to the individual and to the community at large. You will never get the most out of anything unless you understand its proper function. Marriage should be looked forward to, primarily, for the lifelong comradeship it provides. It is likely that your life partner is going to outlast all your other intimate relationships. Your parents will most probably die before you do, your children will grow up and make lives for themselves, your brothers and sisters and friends will have their own intimate relationships in life which will perforce have to take first place. But your partner, your wife or husband, will be there with you always. Joys and sorrows will have to be shared, the home, the children, the income, to a great extent your interests and diversions, will be a common holding. Before you marry you have to realize this, you have to ponder whether you two can go through all that together satisfactorily.

“Do not expect too much of marriage, or too little... Your union cannot produce more than you two contribute to it. If you are full of imperfections, intolerant, impatient, exacting, dictatorial, suspicious, short-tempered, selfish, do not imagine that these characteristics are going to make your marriage happy or that by changing your partner a new union will be more successful! Marriage, like all our other relationships in life, is a process which, among other things, serves to grind the sharp edges off us. The grinding often hurts, the adjustment to another person’s character is difficult at first, that is why love is needed here more than in any other relationship. Love, being essentially a divine force, binds; it leaps like a spark the gaps between people’s thoughts and conflicting desires, between perhaps widely different temperaments. It heals the wounds we all inflict on each other whether inadvertently or in moments of rage, jealousy or spite. To the influence of love in marriage is gradually added another powerful catalyst: habit. The common home, the daily association, produces a common framework, and habit, one of the most powerful forces in life, begins to knit husband and wife together. It acts as a wonderful stabilizer; if love is allowed to fail, habit itself may be strong enough to preserve the union.” (Rúhiyyih Rabbani: *Prescription for Living* (1978 edition), pp. 87-88)

Discuss the following questions:

1. What does this author lead you to expect from marriage? Do you agree with her?
2. How can you identify the expectations that you have about marriage?
3. What are some of the main expectations you hold about marriage? What do you expect your partner to do? How will you know if these expectations are realistic or unrealistic?
4. Why do you think you have developed the expectations you have about relationships and marriage?
5. How could having an unrealistic expectation cause problems in a relationship or marriage?
6. What are some realistic expectations? How could agreeing to them contribute to a better relationship or marriage?