

The Making of a Great Marriage

Introduction

Kelly: One night about a month ago while David was falling asleep (or maybe he was delirious and talking in his sleep) he said, “most people prefer an airplane analogy as part of a church talk.” Well, he's given many talks in stake conferences so I'll trust his judgment regarding a way to kick off our message. In case you didn't know, President Benning is a pilot.

David: I want to describe to you the perfect airplane. Certainly, this airplane can get us anywhere we want to go. It provides a comfortable and safe flight, and we can see beautiful sites along the way to our destination. Of course, it's going to have two jet engines. Jet engines are super dependable. These engines give us extra power, and also redundancy. If there is bad weather, we have plenty of power to climb up above the storms. If we must fly through bad weather, we have powerful safety equipment that can de-ice the wings and engine inlets so we can safely penetrate through a storm. Sometimes, there will be turbulence on our flight, but we know the structure is strong enough to take it. We have ample capacity to carry along the whole family or other loved ones with us. It is going to take some specialized training to fly this airplane successfully. We have room for two pilots at the controls and they share the workload. What a wonderful way to travel! Everybody should dream of traveling like this!

Kelly: The topic of our talk today is... marriage. Now do you get the “perfect airplane” analogy? Hopefully you’ll see the connection over the next few minutes. To be clear, almost everything we will discuss is applicable to every relationship. Especially the kind of relationships that we, as disciples of Christ, should have.

We want to especially direct this message towards young people. I am a teacher and librarian at a high school. I know something about what your life is like as teenagers and what kinds of messages you’re exposed to in the world, and, sadly, even from your own peers. A French author wrote “marriage has lost its magic to young people.” Students talk to me about all kinds of stuff regarding their plans for the future. Never is marriage mentioned. It’s not that they don’t want to be married someday, but their attitude is that marriage isn’t something that requires planning, education, and preparation, like college or a career. We hope to restore some magic to everyone’s thoughts about marriage.

David: Let us state our qualifications to talk about this topic. First, we unequivocally state that we are as imperfect as any other couple. We are just like you.

We both grew up here in the Valley. There are still a couple of people in the stake that remember us as teenagers. (Shout out and wave to Oliver Holt on zoom) We got married very soon after I returned from my church mission. Quite young, inexperienced, less than 30 college credits total between the two of us, it might seem like it

was a setup for failure. We have now been married for over forty years! We have been through many of the same challenging experiences as others have gone through.

Marriage is an act of faith, and we did have faith. They say that love is blind. I guess you could say that we had blind faith.

We have been married twice as long as the time before our wedding. During that time, we have learned that the most meaningful things in our life have come through:

- family relationships and experiences and
- our relationship with God

These are things that you simply cannot gain by asking ChatGPT. They need to be *experienced*.

Kelly: In a recent poll of Americans (Wall Street Journal), well over 50% described themselves as “pretty happy.” An additional 12% said they were “very happy.” The very happy ones were asked further questions.

- They tended to say that belief in God is important.
- They value strong relationships.
- Of the very happy group, 67% say marriage is important to them. But get this... that was regardless of their own current marital status!

Declaring the doctrine

David: Within the church we participate in ordinances. I like John Widtsoe's definition of an ordinance: It is an

earthly symbol of a spiritual reality. Ordinances have covenants associated with them. Meaning there is a promise or agreement made between you and God. Examples of ordinances include baptism, the Sacrament, and priesthood ordination.

This building is called a meetinghouse, or a ward house. But it is also called a “stake center.” Since we are talking about such a tender and juicy topic, we can just call it a “stake house” today.

There are certain church buildings that we call *temples*. We have one right here in West Los Angeles on Santa Monica Blvd. We were married in that temple.

One of our daughters was also married in the Los Angeles Temple. I will confess to you that on that occasion, in the temple, I started sobbing uncontrollably. It felt like I was feeling, in a single moment, all of the experiences of 35 years of marriage.

A marriage ceremony in the temple is also a priesthood ordinance. But it is unique from all other ordinances in that the covenant is made with God AND with another person.

Remember- an ordinance is an earthly symbol of a spiritual reality. For example: one of the symbols involved in baptism is the physical body being washed in a pool of water. But the spiritual reality is the whole soul being cleansed from sin.

Kelly: One of the symbols in a temple marriage ceremony is the joining of hands across the altar. It is, as Jeffery Holland has said, a symbol of total union, union of their hearts, their hopes, their lives, their love, their family, their future, their EVERYTHING. It is a symbol that we try to suggest in the temple with a word like, “seal.”

But the spiritual reality is that this marriage bond can continue eternally.

Jesus told his apostles, “whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” (Matthew 16:19).

Temple marriage is a sealing together that is designed to have the potential to last through all of time, and into eternity. That sounds like a long, long time!

The scriptures teach that this life is the time to prepare to meet God. Sometimes, our use of the phrase “endure to the end” makes it sound like life is just about surviving to the finish line. It is not! Life is to be enjoyed! And marriage and family are such an important part of that enjoyment.

Marriage doesn't guarantee pure bliss. It was probably never meant to be easy. That's because marriage is, at its core, a pathway to greater holiness. A successful union between two people requires humility, compassion, unselfishness, and sacrifice – the same principles that Jesus lived by and told us to live by.

David: Merrill J. Bateman (general authority, president of BYU) taught: “When a man understands how glorious a woman is, he treats her differently. When a woman understands that a man has the seeds of divinity within him, she honors him not only for who he is but for what he may become. An understanding of the divine nature allows each person to have respect for the other. [An] eternal view engenders a desire in men and women to learn from and share with each other.”

Our life on earth is not the beginning nor the end of our existence. After we die, our spirit will continue to live in the world of spirits and await the day when our spirit and a perfected body will be joined together eternally in the resurrection. God wants our treasured, loving relationships to also continue for eternity.

And it is this simple... If you want something to last forever, you treat it differently. ... It becomes special because you have made it so.

Making course corrections

Kelly: What do you do if a marriage doesn't seem to be working perfectly? Well that pretty much describes every single marriage. Because every single marriage in this stake can be better. Isn't that really part of the unique teachings of this church: that we should be constantly progressing— seeking to learn and grow and fulfill the command that Jesus gave to be perfect (Matt 6:48). The Bennings are certainly not perfect. But we have

experienced bursts of perfect-like bliss, and we are striving to experience that more often.

President Dalin Oaks said “A good marriage does not require a perfect man or a perfect woman. It only requires a man and a woman committed to strive together toward perfection.” (general conference 2007)

Sometimes life gets really tough. Everyone needs to know that marriages can survive very serious crises, if the couple is willing to work.

David: With any kind of hobby, or vocational pursuit, you would expect to be continually learning and training. You might even hire a coach. Some people are naturals. President Grasteit can swing a golf club and the ball goes 300 yards nearly every time. For me, I benefit greatly from lessons and practice to hit the ball a fraction of that distance.

Professional help is available, and there should be no stigma attached to using that help, whether it is for a golf swing, or for marriage and other family relationships. We used a program called Marriage Encounter a number of years ago and learned quite a bit from that experience. We have also spent time with therapists.

Kelly: If things are really tough and you don't even know where to start, here's a tip from a movie about marriage called Fireproof; start by trying to spend one day without saying something mean to your spouse. (This would work

for a parent, or a child too!) And then try to repeat that on the next day, etc.

In a proclamation to the world, our church leaders said: “Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities.” In other words, the Lord measures the success of a family by the quality of its relationships.

Putting it all together

David: Not long ago my mother sent a card to us and mentioned how she has observed that Kelly and I cherish each other. That is a great word. Look up all the definitions you can find for the word “cherish” and try to put those things into your family.

It is wonderful when couples and family members have fun routines and laugh together. We got into the routine of saying to each other before we go to bed: “Thanks for marrying me!” This has now become kind of a fun game, to see who remembers to say it first and fastest when we get into bed or at other random times. (look at each other and say it quickly)

Kelly: Find joy in serving your spouse with no expectation of return. Think about this as another way to put off the natural human, and to try to develop true Christian character. A marriage is a perfect petri dish for growing your service skills. If I am focused on meeting David’s

needs, and he's focused on meeting *my* needs, both of our needs are met, but not by ourselves for ourselves

Try to find something to do each day for your partner without them even knowing. Sometimes the thing will be big. Sometimes something simple – pick up their socks, wash their cereal bowl. You can do things for each other when they are watching, but also do things when they are not watching.

A family should really be a team. Our daughters have a phrase: “winning at life.” When a family is working together, they *are* winning! Help each other, split up the physical AND mental workload. Take turns with all the tasks and responsibilities in life.

David: Pro tip... if you're going to try to do the laundry, do not put women's burgundy corduroys in the same wash load with the whites. Fortunately, Kelly just laughed at my mistake.

But it is so much more than sharing the family workload. It's really about sharing everything: thoughts, dreams, concerns, sadness, joy, progression... This is an adventure you are on, and every adventure has ups and downs, disappointments, and surprises.

I can tell you that the adventure of marriage has not only exceeded my expectations, but has exceeded my imagination.

Yoked Together

Kelly: A few weeks ago during our come follow me study we came across the verses where Jesus says “take my yoke upon you and learn of me... for my burden is light.”

To the agrarian society that first heard these words, the lesson was probably easy to understand. But we had to do a deep dive to learn how yokes work, and why this lesson is so significant. It's really quite fascinating.

Do you know that an ox is a designation for a trained steer or heifer? A young steer will progress through several stages of proficiency, including “clever steer,” “handy steer” and “working steer” before earning designation as “ox.”

Typically, an untrained animal is yoked with a trained ox. The one with less experience learns from the other one.

David: If a trained ox can pull 5,000 pounds (hold up 5 fingers) and an untrained ox can pull 2,000 (add 2 fingers) pounds, together they can pull 10,000 pounds (10 fingers) —much more than the sum of the two.

Over time, the untrained ox becomes trained and the two begin to walk in-step with each other. Then they can pull 15,000 pounds. (three hands, 15 fingers total) They have become a team!

There is so much to this lesson! Jesus wants us to be yoked with him so we will learn. The closer we are, side by side to Jesus in the yoke the better we will learn. We will eventually begin to walk in-step with him, and thus the burden really does become light.

We can also learn about marriage and other family relationships from this lesson. Picture a wife and a husband. Or a parent and child. We work together, and over time we really become an effective team able to accomplish significantly more than we can do alone. It is one of those examples of the combination being greater than the sum of the parts.

What young people can do

Kelly: To our teenagers....

We really hope you are listening and seeing that marriage is not just a box to check...Prophets have taught us that, "Marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God and the family is central to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children." Not only is marriage CENTRAL to God's plan, it can be the most awesome, fun, and rewarding adventure of your life.

We have some tips for you:

Do some dating when you are 16,17,18 years old, before your mission. Learn how to communicate with individual people face to face, and how to really get to know them.

You are not dating at this age with the purpose of marrying. That means these teen dates should be a low pressure time to learn some important social skills. Learn the skill of carefully listening.

Learning communication skills will help you be a better missionary.

David: Many of you are starting to seriously plan your future. Some of you are concerned about how you will continue your education after high school. Will it be a university? Perhaps Community College? Maybe a trade school? How will you get into one of these places, and how are you going to pay for it?

If you are really concerned about your future, take marriage seriously now. Plan for it at least as much as you ponder and plan for education and career. Study what the Lord has said about marriage. What makes a strong marriage? Actually, the question really is: what makes an eternal marriage? Make it a priority starting now.

There are some serious challenges in today's world that are affecting what age people are getting married, and whether they are even getting married at all. We need to mention two of them.

David:

1. Pornography. Doctors and sociologists are saying this is destructive to marriages. It is so bad! A recent study reported that more than 56 percent of divorces

had a partner with a porn addiction. Young people; actually everyone: please avoid pornography like the plague that it is!

Kelly:

2. Reports indicate that online dating apps are hurting the dating and marrying process. It is so easy to “swipe left.” Clearly, there are some good reasons why you should immediately disqualify someone from your dating pool. But as mentioned earlier, it is extremely beneficial for you to spend time actually communicating with people in real time, in real space. A real person is so much more than their two-dimensional depiction in a photograph.

Maybe if there's one big take away from our message, it is this: do not look at marriage and family through the filter of the world's opinions. Instead, it should be viewed, studied, and lived according to the way God and his prophets have taught about it.

Conclusion / Testimony

David: Let's go back to our perfect airplane. It is a lot like a marriage. We have two pilots at the controls, and they are working together. With the right equipment on board, meaning great relationship skills, we can travel right through storms of life. We have two engines working to keep us moving forward, because if we're not moving forward we will lose our lift.

If one of our engines stops working, the airplane can actually keep flying. But there's a whole host of challenges

that have to be dealt with. It would probably surprise you to know how challenging it is. May God send special blessings to everyone who is in a phase of their life where they are the only operating engine.

You probably didn't know this, but each airplane must have a pilot operating handbook or POH onboard to be legal to takeoff. A POH has all of the information needed to operate the aircraft, it describes the boundaries or limits of safe operation, and it contains instructions for emergency situations. Let's equate that to having the scriptures and messages from latter-day prophets onboard in our family. Within them we will find the information needed to safely make it to our eternal destination, and to have joy in the journey.

Kelly: When a marriage is soaring, you can feel the peace of Christ. And that is not just the couple—but also for everyone around that couple.

The life of Christ is the story of giving the Atonement-- that magnificent eternal gift of love which includes the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

David: The story of Adam and Eve is the story of receiving the Atonement. Indeed, this is really the story of every single person, and every single marriage.

God, our Eternal Father lives and loves us. We are His family. Jesus the Christ does indeed live today, having perfectly accomplished the mission His father gave Him.

This means that life everlasting is in our future, repentance and forgiveness is possible, and Eternal Life in the presence of God is our potential.

Kelly: May each of us work to fully receive the Atonement of Jesus Christ into our lives so that potential of Eternal Life can be realized.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.