

I Know Who She Is

BY GINNY BRIDGES IRELAND

How do we cultivate faithful intimacy and caring? We bear the untidy mark of Adam and Eve's drive to possess intimate knowledge wrapped in self-interest that ultimately leads to our death. We shun God's design for wholeness, which is found in the simplicity of knowing and being known by God and reflected in knowing and being known by one another.

A lifelong fire in Robertson McQuilkin's bones blazed into reality as he was inaugurated as president of Columbia Bible College, now Columbia International University. Before long he led the school to become one of the greatest missionary training schools in America. But Alzheimer's disease spun its wicked web, snatching the personality and vibrancy of his wife's mind and body. McQuilkin submitted his resignation in order to care for her. His friends strongly objected and implored him to reconsider his decision to take on the unseemly daily tasks required to care for her. Yet his decision remained firm. In a last ditch effort, Tony Campolo brazenly pleaded with him saying, "You are reneging on a promise to God!" McQuilkin replied, "There's a promise that is higher. And that's the promise I made when I married, the promise to be there for her in sickness and in health." "She doesn't even know who you are!" Campolo protested. "But I know who she is," he countered, tenderly.¹

Robertson McQuilkin *knew* his wife, a knowledge born of love and not logic. That knowledge sustained him during his grief-filled, exhausting steps to her death. Shakespeare wrote, "Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks but bears it out even to the edge of doom."² McQuilkin's love for his wife remained steadfast and was not altered by his wife's suffering. As a

result, he walked with her even to the edge of doom.

What was McQuilkin's secret? How did he manage to keep on loving and caring for his wife even though a terrible disease had erased all memory of him from her mind? His answer was simple and straightforward: "She may not know me, but I know her."

How do we attain that kind of knowledge in our marriages? How do we cultivate and keep alive that kind of faithful intimacy and caring? Unfortunately, we bear the untidy mark of Adam and Eve's drive to possess the kind of knowledge and control wrapped in self-interest that ultimately leads to our death. We crave a world created in our own image for our purposes; we shun God's design for wholeness for us, which is found in the simplicity of knowing and being known by God and reflected in knowing and being known by one another. We assume something better must exist just beyond our grasp in the next juicy apple. Too often we excel greedily in power but fail miserably in love.

A FITTING COMPANION

Scripture weaves divine as well as distorted threads of knowledge throughout the handful of marriages it showcases. Adam and Eve, for example, sadly misused their knowledge of the other, yet they fulfilled the divine design of knowing and being known by one another. Isaac and Rebekah later would do the same.

Perhaps before Eve appeared, Adam did not even know what was missing in his life, though one rabbinic commentary suggests that as he named the animals and noticed they were in pairs, he may have complained, "Everything has its partner, but I have no partner."³ God remedied Adam's lack of a complement by creating Eve, and Adam was overcome with joy and relief when he first caught sight of her. Adam exclaimed, "This *at last* is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23a, emphasis mine).

God created the woman as the *ezer kenegdo*, the right and fitting companion (Genesis 2:18). Although this Hebrew phrase is often translated "helper" and culturally understood to mean "subordinate," Old Testament scholar Katharine Doob Sakenfeld says it "clearly implies correspondence, opposite, or counterpart. Equality or reciprocity is what is called for, a being who corresponds so that the scales are balanced...."⁴ The Torah Study of Reform Jews pictures Genesis 2:18 as a man and woman facing one another, arms raised, forming an arch between them. As opposites, each one supports the other in equal strength, responsibility, and companionship.⁵

Ezer ("helper") appears twenty-one times in the Old Testament, often describing God as the only helper who is fiercely strong, powerful, and successful. *Ezer* comes to the rescue when the rest of the world walks away powerless: "I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help (*ezer*) come? My help (*ezer*) comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121: 1-2). "There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through

the heavens to your help (*ezer*), majestic through the skies" (Deuteronomy 33:26). Eve is Adam's *ezer kenegdo*, which suggests that she is determinedly faithful to Adam no matter what. Implicit in this description is a relationship of mutual love, respect, and cooperation that flowers into profound intimacy and knowledge.

Notice in the creation story of Adam and Eve that the basic human need for equal companionship is illustrated before the need for sexual relations. Not until Genesis 4 does Adam "know" his wife through physical intimacy. The biblical term "to know" captures a closeness that deepens within, but transcends, the sexual aspect of marriage. Just as two become one flesh, two become intertwined in every aspect of life. As friends, lovers, and partners, the possibility of life-affirming intimacy emerges. It is an arena of knowing and being known, graced with love and acceptance, that encourages the other person toward wholeness. This intensity of love and knowledge in monogamous marriage, writes Naomi Harris Rosenblatt, "parallels the intensely committed relationship between one human and one God."⁶

A loving marriage of knowing and being known by another person necessitates our moving beyond being squeezed into society's mold, to a life Parker Palmer calls an "inner understanding of the other, which comes from empathy; a sense of the other's value, which comes from love; a feel for its origins and ends, which comes from faith; and a respect for its integrity and selfhood, which comes from respecting our own."⁷

MISUSED KNOWLEDGE

Such intimate marital knowledge sometimes backfires, however, falling far short of the divine ideal. Betrayal, hurt, and manipulation for selfish ends can displace love's comforting trust. "Knowledge is power," wrote Francis Bacon, and the power of intimate knowledge combined with strength and equality can be misused and abused.

Such was the case in the loving yet tumultuous marriage between Isaac and Rebekah. After their classic romantic meeting in the fields of the Negev, Isaac "took Rebekah and she became his wife; and he loved her" (Genesis 24:67b). In the context of the story in Genesis 24, his love seems to mean far more than sexual union: he delighted in who she was and in her beauty. From that initial meeting, Isaac was fiercely loyal and devoted to Rebekah. His love reflected a quiet and deep certainty. Rebekah mirrored this kind of love for Isaac as she comforted him after his mother's death. At this point in their relationship they reflected the divine plan for marriage: mutual help and support and a wonderful quality of *knowing* that sustained them through difficulty.

But as the fragrant bloom of their romance faded, they used their knowledge of one another to manipulate. Rebekah chose to break the practice of primogeniture, the cultural mode of protecting the family unit and its goals, and conspired against Isaac and Esau to fulfill her own goal of Jacob's suc-

cess (27:5 ff.). Perhaps she had learned the art of betrayal well from Isaac himself, who earlier had protected himself at her expense in Gerar. There, he attempted to pass off Rebekah as his sister to King Abimelech in order to save his own life (26:6-11). The piercing wails of Esau floating throughout the house and Isaac's tormented trembling that shook its walls were echoes of Rebekah's tears and despair, born of Isaac's betrayal of her long ago and held within her breast for years.

Scripture tells us that despite their mutual betrayal of trust and love, Isaac and Rebekah never forsook one another. Perhaps they were able to refocus their loyalties on a higher plane than their once all-consuming selfish desires. Perhaps he rued growing apart from her and taking their initial love for granted. Or perhaps she realized that revenge leaves a bitter taste. Maybe he thought with grave disappointment, "I know who she is for I am just like her." Could this depth of knowledge—a knowledge and intimacy reflecting God's initial design—have become the catalyst for hope of a deeper love, one that prompted each to forgive the other?

THE CHOICES WE FACE

In our marriages we face the choice of using the power of intimate knowledge for good or evil: to stay when it would be easier to leave, to lose one's life for the sake of another, to choose the higher calling, to live as Christ, to serve as life-affirming opposites to draw one another toward the salvation of wholeness. It is this journey of faith and choice that keeps us from hurting one another more often than we do. As each partner makes this daily, sometimes difficult, choice for good, he or she becomes more whole, creating a marriage reflecting God's intention. It is a noble calling, one in which we find our life by losing it.

No marriage will be perfect this side of eternity. In *The Warrior, the Woman, and the Christ*, G. A. Studdert-Kennedy describes marriage as a "joyous conflict" of "self-conscious persons who rejoice in one another's

individualities and through the clash of mind on mind and will on will work out an ever-increasing but never finally completed unity."⁸ As we bring our individual selves to marriage, we learn along with Palmer that "the self is above all communal, and its communality draws on 'everything we have got.'"⁹ Perhaps we resonate with Sybil's view of her family in the

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film *The Family Stone*. When asked angrily by her future daughter-in-law Meredith, "What's so great about you guys?" she replies, "Uh, nothing.... It's just that we're all that we've got."¹⁰

And all we've got is more than enough, especially if at the end of life we can say tenderly and lovingly, "I know who she is." Or "I know who he is."

NOTES

1 Tony Campolo told this story in his sermon, "It's Time...To be Christ's Presence in Our Community," at the 2003 Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Fort Worth, TX.

2 William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116."

3 Naomi Harris Rosenblatt, "The First Rebel," *Women of the Bible*, U.S. News and World Report, Special Collector's Issue (2006), 5-17.

4 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "The Bible and Women: Bane or Blessing?" *Theology Today*, 32:3 (October 1975), 222-233.

5 See the "Ezer Kenegdo" word study at www.godswordtowomen.org.

6 Rosenblatt, 6.

7 Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 53.

8 Cuthbert A. Simpson, "Introduction and Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1952), 500.

9 Palmer, 53.

10 *The Family Stone*, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2005.



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