



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 For Better or For Worse
(*Marriage*, pp. 29-36)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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For Better or For Worse

As Hyung Goo Kim and Margaret Kim Peterson were dating and falling in love, he revealed that he had been diagnosed as HIV-positive five years earlier. Yet they married. What did they discover together about Christian marriage and suffering?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a,13

Responsive Reading

Love is hope that promises new tomorrows and heals
yesterday's wounds,
compassion that dispels fear and nurtures the soul,
commitment that stands the test of time and overcomes
mistrust and neglect,
two souls breathing independent breaths in unison.
True love draws us to God
and to one another in covenant for all time.

Reflection

"I could not possibly have been more shocked and dismayed when Hyung Goo told me of his diagnosis," Margaret Kim Peterson recalls. "When I did eventually decide to marry Hyung Goo, I did so in large part because I had come to the conclusion that his HIV infection was not the most important thing about him.... [Our] minds were concentrated wonderfully, from the beginning of our marriage to the end of it. We were always waiting for the end to come, as indeed it did, and the anticipation of that end intensified every aspect of our life together: the happiness we found in and with each other, the intimate bond we forged as we moved deeper into marriage and into illness, the grief we felt over all our experienced and anticipated losses."

Though Peterson is reluctant to offer their brief marriage as a model for everyone, she believes "Hyung Goo and I were, by virtue of our circumstances, in a particularly good position to notice that...Christian marriage is not the same as the modern American fantasy of romance." She explores five differences:

- ▶ *Perfect partner vs. fellow pilgrim.* If we pick the perfect partner, marriage will be smooth sailing—that's a romantic fantasy. It matters whom we marry, but "the big falsehood is that the rest of the story will take care of itself," Peterson says. For the marriage "journey through uncharted territory," you need "a partner whom you can rely upon as a fellow pilgrim, someone whom you would trust with your very life...."
- ▶ *Fall in love vs. discern whom one can love.* Those "ineffable palpitations" of romantic love are wonderful to experience, but they are not enough to get marriage partners through the difficult times they must face. "It is far more important that you choose someone—and that you be someone—whose character is fertile ground for love, [mutual trust, and respect,] than that you be 'in love' with the person you marry before you marry him or her."
- ▶ *Self-reliance vs. leaning on a community.* In our mobile society, many of us depend on a spouse to provide continuity and companionship no matter where we move. But it is unreasonable to



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depend only on our marriages to provide the true community that we need.

- ▶ *Grand plans and gestures vs. small blessings and challenges.* Romance overvalues the dramatic proposal, dream honeymoon, and white-picket-fence aspirations. But strong marriage bonds grow from little things—sharing everyday blessings and overcoming small challenges. “We are always looking over one another’s shoulders at whatever it is we want and haven’t got yet, rather than... putting down roots ever more deeply into the soil of a truly common life.”
- ▶ *Living happily ever after vs. cherishing the moment.* Romance longs for “a curiously timeless, bloodless, future-without-end,” but does not treasure the moments we are given. As Christians we can see marriage as “an opportunity to look death in the eye and choose to love anyway, because that is what God in Christ has already done on our behalf.”

“Hyung Goo and I...couldn’t expect to live ‘happily ever after,’” Peterson writes. “What we could do was...be husband and wife together, accompanying one another on the Christian pilgrimage, depending together on God, on one another, on the many people who cared for us and cared about us.... It was profoundly healing and transformative and, yes, joyful.”

Study Questions

1. How do many Christians today, young and old, embrace the “American marriage fantasy”?
2. What made the Kims’ marriage so valuable?
3. Select one contrast between Christian marriage and the American fantasy of romance. How is your congregation helping its members to understand the difference?
4. How would you counsel a son, daughter, or friend whose fiancé has a chronic and debilitating disease?

Departing Hymn: “Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go” (verses 1-3)

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O light that follows all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine’s blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

George Matheson (1882)

Tune: ST. MARGARET (Peace)

For Better or For Worse

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To contrast the contemporary American fantasy of romance to Christian marriage.
2. To consider how many Christians today embrace the American fantasy of romance.
3. To explore how congregations can encourage and support married couples that endure suffering and hard disappointments.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Marriage (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Oh Love That Will Not Let Me Go” locate the tune ST. MARGARET (Peace) in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

When Margaret Kim Peterson was dating and falling in love with Hyung Goo Kim, he revealed that he had been diagnosed as HIV-positive five years earlier. “Because of the highly stigmatized nature of Hyung Goo’s health condition,” she writes, “I didn’t disclose it to everyone I knew, but from those I did tell, the response was swift and unanimous: end the relationship, and end it now. Some of the responses were kind and some were not so kind, but the substance of them was the same: sensible Christian people do not even think of marrying people who have serious things wrong with them.

“A particularly harsh reaction came from a male friend who, when I told him of Hyung Goo’s HIV status, responded with the story of his own first marriage. His wife had developed chronic kidney failure, a burden with which my friend found it impossible to live, so he divorced her. ‘If I had known that this would happen, I would never have married her, and I will not stand by and watch you throw your life away on this man,’ he said to me, heatedly. Even at the time, this seemed a tad self-justifying, but it was still profoundly upsetting. It was also illuminating. This wasn’t just about AIDS; this was about tragedy. It was about death and hardship and loss and the supposed responsibility of sensible people to steer as clear of all of them as possible” (*Marriage*, p. 30).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will grow in love that draws them closer to one another and to God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Theologian Margaret Kim Peterson and Hyung Goo Kim dated, fell in love, and chose to marry despite Hyung Goo's having tested positive with the HIV virus five years earlier. Peterson tells the story of their remarkably intentional marriage focused on the goals of companionship and emotional intimacy in *Sing Me to Heaven: The Story of a Marriage* (Brazos Press, 2003).

Drawing upon her personal experience, Peterson keenly observes five differences between Christian marriage and the contemporary American ideal of romance. Her insights can benefit not only men and women who are contemplating marriage, but also married couples that encounter suffering and hard disappointments later in their relationships.

Study Questions

1. Peterson says that the fantasy “is held by at least ninety percent of the scores of young people who enroll in the senior-level college course in Christian Marriage that I teach. And those young people have often been encouraged in this fantasy by their elders, who are eager to portray marriage as a means by which Christian people gain access to the good things of life – sex, children, emotional intimacy, adult status – and who are very reluctant therefore to consider whether marriage might occasionally or routinely have a dark side as well as a sunny side.” She notes that Christians “patronize online dating services that promise bliss, pure bliss, if only we will follow their advice about finding romance with the perfect partner.... We sanctify our unions in weddings that are designed to be showcases for all the perfection money can buy, we read marriage-enhancement books written by people who claim never to have had a problem that couldn't be solved in ten minutes or less, and when we meet people whose problems are too serious to conceal – illness, bankruptcy, or (gasp!) divorce – we hold our metaphorical skirts aside and murmur, ‘Boy, am I glad it's not me.’”
2. “There was a kind of innocence to those years, an innocence that came with the singleness of purpose that our life embodied. Our marriage was about seeing each other through to the end, period,” Peterson says. “Hadn't our marriage been the very apotheosis of intimacy and self-giving? ... We were concerned for one another to the near-total exclusion of anything else.” Despite the hardships that they faced, they could “face life's limitations and gifts together, for as many days as we were given. We could be husband and wife together, accompanying one another on the Christian pilgrimage, depending together on God, on one another, on the many people who cared for us and cared about us.... It was profoundly healing and transformative and, yes, joyful.”
3. Invite members to form small groups to brainstorm a few of the contrasts. The culture entices us to embrace the fantasy of romance; thus, congregations must not only delineate the features of Christian marriage, but also show their value in a winsome way. How can each contrast be shown in discipleship groups (marital counseling, retreats, movie discussions, or weekly support groups), sharing of stories (interviews, stories, or testimonies about marriages in the congregation), regular worship (sermons, songs, and prayers of support and encouragement), and special services (weddings, funerals, and themed worship events)? Do young people, couples, and single adults reflect together about Christian marriage?
4. We want our children and friends to have good lives. If they marry, we hope marriage will bring them joy and strengthen their relationship with God. Should we encourage them to marry a fiancé with a chronic disease? No single advice fits every situation. Yet, Peterson shows that such a marriage can be fulfilling and lead to spiritual growth. She and Hyung Goo Kim discovered there is more “to the Christian moral life than the effort to protect and insulate oneself from difficulty and sorrow, or from the difficulties and sorrows of others.”

How might the specific circumstances influence our advice? What would we want to know about the resources, maturity, and Christian discipleship of our child or friend, and of his or her fiancé? What should we ask about our own resources and relationships?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.