

"Love Is Eternal"

Written by Jerry Johnson

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On Friday evening, November 4, 1842, Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd were married. Although they had planned otherwise, Mary's guardian (her brother-in-law) objected to the place of marriage, insisting, "No, I am Mary's guardian and if she is married at all it must be from my house."

Neither Mary nor Abraham wanted a big wedding; just a small, quiet ceremony. In the midst of this exchange of vows, Mr. Lincoln took a small gold band from his pocket and placed it on Mary's finger. At some earlier date, Abraham had a jeweler inscribe the tender words, "Love is eternal" on the inside of the band. This truth proved to be so between the two as long as life would have it.

Many years later, April 14, 1865, Mary was sitting at Mr. Lincoln's side holding his hand when John Wilkes Booth entered the State Box and fired the single shot that took the president's life. Some 17 years later in July of 1882, she was buried with the ring Abraham had given her 40 years earlier. It was quite thin from wear, but the words "Love is Eternal" were still visible.

So, what is our message? Our message is that such an inscription would ill fit the vast majority of marriages in our unfortunate country today. There is no doubt that love is as eternal as it was when John announced that "God IS love"... thus, because God is eternal, love is eternal. Regardless of the moral drift of humanity and the malice, envy and ill will that curses us, love does not change in its core, its essence. Humanity may change; love does not.

But likely, the broad significance of "love is eternal" was not intended by Mr. Lincoln's inscription. Certainly love is everlasting and will outlive every human; that is only too obvious. But Mr. Lincoln likely had his marriage in mind; his blessed relationship with Mary. The love of their union would be lasting. They were together vowing that hardships and heartache, sickness and sorrow, would not erode their love. When mere tarnish on the tinsel of American prosperity is enough to separate couples in this present day, when the slightest disagreement will so irritate as to bring division to the home, when not even parental love for children, nor concern for a long established good name about to be destroyed will stop the unrest and separation proceeding out of it all—no, in our selfish time, marital love is not very lasting, much less eternal. The vows to remain together "as long as you both shall live," are too easily erased in

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our courts. Countless are the times God has been violated when couples, who promised before His witnessing ear to remain together, go their separate ways. 'When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in foo/s'(EccL5:4').

Prior to the assassination, the Lincolns were sitting together watching a play. Sharing the box with them was a young couple, Major Henry Rathbone and Miss Clara Harris. As the play pro-gressed, history says Mary sat very close to her husband of 23 years, her hand in his. She whispered to him, "What will Miss Harris think of my hanging on to you so?" The President replied, "She won't think anything about it." Those are the last recorded words of Abraham Lincoln. Here, at the very door of death, in the affectionate closeness of Mary, Abraham was enjoying the pleasant fruit of "love is eternal."

The good people in our fellowship are, on every hand, critici2ed for our unqualified opposition to divorce and remarriage. Even this periodical is severely critici2ed. But we believe "love is eternal," and that even in the face of such a horrible thing as infidelity to the marriage commitment, or whatever other evil assaults home and family, love can remain—even flourish—where there is true repentance and true forgiveness.

Here we stand, the bride of our Lord, but often sinners above measure. Everyone of us. How many times do we violate our suitor, our lover, our husband Jesus Christ. Yet he forgives our penitent heart, and receives us back from our spiritual adultery. He does that because "love is eternal."

Why, then, do a great number of our brethren preach that upon such a trespass physically—even a wrong repented of and forgiven by God—no wife or husband is obligated to maintain the mar-riage? With that single infraction, the "innocent" (are there any such?) may lay aside every vow made, disregard the penitence and pleading of the spouse, ignore the pleas of even the children of the union, and not only divorce, but even take another into the marital bed. And all of this with impunity. God forbid! Divorce may have suited the hardened hearts of an imperfect era, but it is without place in a day of grace and forgiveness, under a perfect law.

It is claimed that Jesus subscribed to and endorsed divorce in his sermon on the mount and his admonition in Matthew 19. How could it be so, when Jesus himself plainly said that the only reason divorce was ever permitted was because of the guilty and stony hearts of Israel (Matt. 19:8)? He further, twice over, took his hypocritical querists of Matthew 19 back to the very beginning of the human race, when for then and 2500 years thereafter, there was no such evil

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as divorce named in the plan of God. . ."from the beginning of time until Moses' concession 2500 years later it was not so." This perfect marriage law was instigated by God Himself in the Genesis Garden for a young couple who were intended to someday live in a populated earth (Gen. 1:28). But notice!.. .a divorce concession was never named for that dispensation. Never. Not even after our fore-parents were driven from the Garden.

We live in an era of grace and forgiveness under the "perfect law" named earlier (James 1:25). Notice, ours is a law without fault or flaw—a perfect law. Divorce was only once granted, and that because God's people were hardhearted. How then could it be possible that something so flawed and offensive to God as is divorce—how could such an imperfect concession find its way into our perfect law, but the perfect marriage law of the beginning (without a divorce concession), be rejected? "But adultery is a horrible evil against a spouse." Certainly it is—a hideous offense! But like other ugly spousal offenses, it can be forgiven.

Here is the adulterer, humbly penitent, begging forgiveness for a single, stupid infraction, but sent away from home and family by a wife who is told by our brethren she may lawfully do so, taking to her marital bed a second husband. But here is a drunkard, a drug addict, a family abuser, mean and caustic, lazy and indolent, not penitent at all, his sin ongoing—what shall we do with him? Yes, there is a difference in adultery and drunkenness or abuse, but there is no difference in the area of God's forgiveness where there is penitence. Neither should there be in ours.

There is a great parallel between the church and marriage. If the Lord will receive the penitent adulterer back, openly, freely, why would he give a law to His people in this great era of grace which, upon a single foolish and sinful act, force a spouse from his/her home and children, and allow divorce that was never allowed save under Moses and his hard-hearted charge? "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, suffered you to put away your wives; but from the beginning, it was not so" (Matt.19:8).

"Love is eternal." Mr. Lincoln believed that when he had the words inscribed on the inside of Mary's wedding band. Like most of our readers, I believe that too—to the very core of my being. I have seen just enough of divorce and remarriage to despise it without reservation. I and the brethren I work with hate divorce—its cause, its action, its consequences—just as the Lord said he hated it, and likely for the same reasons (Mal. 2:16). I repeat, I hate the cause that brings it into the family. I hate the very action of it in our courts. I hate the horrible horrible consequences of it... heartache, heartbreak, alienation, and the devastation of all the innocent—the wife or husband, the parents and grandparents, but most especially the pitiful, devastated children. Yes, I hate it. And if you don't, when it comes in to ravage your family, to shatter your peace, to

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destroy your tranquility.. .when that dear son or daughter, mother or father, or close friend suffers its ravages, dear reader, you will hate it then.

The church bears the image of our Father. I have no interest adulterating this Bible concept by joining affinity with, or subjecting my children or grandchildren to the influence of any brother, any pulpit, any congregation, who would lighten the happy yoke of marital commitment to which we all agreed the day we were wed. We have no business having fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness—our obligation is to "reprove them" (Eph. 5:11). —Jerry