

PAUL GRIMMOND

Water FOR MY Camels

Navigating the space between
singleness and **marriage**
when the **Bible** doesn't talk about **dating**



At last, a thoroughly biblical book on dating that acknowledges how little the Bible speaks about it! If you want to know the why and how of dating through a gospel-saturated framework that dares to explore the impact of everything from Jane Austen to pornography, then this book is for you. So much biblical wisdom from an author who has spent his lifetime serving young adults.

Richard Chin

National Director, Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students
Author, *How to Read the Bible Better* and *Captivated by Christ*

Many Christians are confused about dating, and this excellent little book will help them to have greater clarity and joy about it. For the past couple of decades, Paul Grimmond has pastorally helped countless men and women understand dating. His wisdom and experience are seen on every page of this book. If you're considering dating either now or in the future, then I highly recommend reading this yourself. It would also work well as a gift or for parents to read with their older teens.

Jane Tooher

Lecturer, Ministry and Church History, Moore Theological
College, Sydney
Director, The Priscilla & Aquila Centre

A careful, considered theological treatment of dating, spliced together with a rich mine of pastoral insights. This is such a helpful book to hand out to youth and young adults at church!

Ben Warren

Ministry Apprentice, Campus Bible Study, University of
New South Wales

Paul Grimmond has written an excellent book to help Christians navigate the precarious cultural phenomenon of dating. He clearly derives wisdom from Scripture, while humbly opening space for liberty when it comes to the diversity of influences and approaches to dating in the West. His cultural observations on the impact of smartphones and pornography are worth the price of the book alone!

Mike Dicker

Principal, Youthworks College, Sydney

Dating has always had its joys and challenges. But in a world that has become confused about gender and sexuality, dating today can be a minefield. As I watch university students picking their way through the minefield, I am constantly reminded of the huge advantage it is to listen to Jesus in this area. Paul Grimmond has distilled the wisdom of the Bible into an easily readable book that will help Christians to avoid some of the damage and find more of the joy.

Carl Matthei

Senior Minister and Chaplain, Campus Bible Study, University of New South Wales

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CONTENTS



1. The mystery of attraction	5
2. Biblical principles	13
3. The cultural context of dating	35
4. Getting practical: Who, when and how?	49
5. Frequently asked questions about dating	81
Conclusion	135
Acknowledgements	137

To Cathy

Thanks for agreeing all those years ago when I proposed, and thanks for encouraging me to serve Jesus. I owe much of the wisdom in this book to learning together with you under God.

1 | THE MYSTERY OF ATTRACTION



A LONG TIME AGO in a land far, far away lived a wealthy man and his son. As his son came of age, the wealthy man determined that he would fulfil the local proverb, “A young man of means must be in want of a wife”. He called his servant to him and asked the servant to make a promise: to return to the family’s home country and find a wife for his son. The servant dutifully agreed (as you would expect a servant to do), packed up an appealing assortment of choice gifts on his ten camels, and traipsed across the desert to the kingdom of Mesopotamia—an exotic and mysterious destination.

As he came to the city of Nahor, he caused his camels to kneel at the well on the outskirts of town and prayed a prayer: “Lord God, be pleased to grant success to my master this very day. Behold, I stand at the spring, and the daughters of the city are coming to draw water. Please show me the one you have chosen for my master’s son. When I say, ‘Please let down your jar that I may drink’, let her respond by saying, ‘Drink, and I will water your camels’.”

At once, a comely young maiden approached the well, filled her jar with water and turned to return to town. Smiling sweetly, the servant said, “My journey has been long and I am parched. May I please share some water from your jug?” The woman replied, “You do look thirsty; please drink. And let me water your camels also. I will draw water until their thirst is quenched.”

His heart now racing, the servant whipped out a half-shekel gold ring and two ten-shekel gold arm bracelets and popped the question: “Who is your dad, and is there room to stay at your place tonight?” It turned out that her father was distantly related to his master, and they had room to spare. The servant met the woman’s brother, who took him to meet her father, and the servant recounted his story. Everyone agreed that the wedding should go ahead, and so the beautiful young woman returned to the far country and met her future husband. And they all lived happily ever after ...

This is, of course, an adaptation (a somewhat loose one!) of the story of Isaac and Rebekah from Genesis 24—a strange and compelling story of two people coming together in marriage. But is this story full of dating advice for today? If we dig deeply into the details, will we discover God’s secret hints for finding the perfect partner? Or if seeking out water for your camels is not quite your thing, maybe another Old Testament matchmaking story could yield something useful. Perhaps you’d prefer to travel to a far-off land to work for your uncle for seven years in exchange

for the hand of his youngest daughter (or so you think—be prepared for a surprise the next morning).¹ Or is hiding in a vineyard near Shiloh so you can leap out and snatch yourself a young maiden when she comes out to dance more your style?²

While the Bible gives us plenty of bizarre examples of people coming together in marriage, it's obvious that none of these is God's masterclass on how to find a spouse. In fact, the Bible is remarkably silent when it comes to offering hints, tips or 'easy steps' on the topic. God doesn't prescribe a particular model for Christians to follow to work out who to marry or how to find the perfect romantic connection.

This is, at least in part, a reflection of the hugely complex and almost mysterious way in which romantic relationships work:

Three things are too wonderful for me;
four I do not understand:
the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a serpent on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a virgin. (Prov 30:18-19)

Why are people attracted to each other? Why can the same person make a hundred people feel nothing special, and yet make one person go weak at the knees? Is it physical appearance? Sense of humour? Wisdom, grace, integrity, boldness,

1 See Genesis 29.

2 See Judges 21.

outrageousness or quirkiness? We all know that we have different tastes, different personalities and different needs—but there’s something more. It’s almost impossible to pin down this thing we call ‘chemistry’, ‘attraction’ or ‘love’. Why do some people seem to just ‘click’?

It is genuinely, gloriously, painfully mysterious.

Yet, for all the mystery, there are big questions to answer. Is there a modern equivalent of camels? Is there some metaphorical ‘watering hole’ where I can search? And are there biblically prescribed ways to move from singleness to marriage?

At least in my part of the world, the accepted way to work out the answers to these questions is a weird societal convention called *dating*. To navigate the space between singleness and marriage, to make the most of each person’s cultural freedom to choose their own marriage partner, to process the mysteries of relationships, and to answer the questions around compatibility, attraction and romance, our culture has turned to dating.

So is dating any more or less helpful than nabbing some camels and finding a watering hole? Or, perhaps more helpfully, *what does it mean to apply biblical wisdom to the process of this thing our culture calls ‘dating’?* That’s the big question that this book will seek to answer.

We’ll do this in three key steps. *First*, we’ll turn to the Bible to lay down a series of principles that should guide and shape all our thoughts about dating. *Second*, we’ll contrast the Bible’s ancient, timeless approach with the current cultural moment and with 21st-century attitudes to dating, and we’ll think about how that context affects Christians

today. *Third*, in the final two chapters, we'll get practical: we'll seek to apply the biblical commands and wisdom (and our understanding of our cultural context) to the reality of dating, and we'll explore the Bible's answers to some of the biggest questions that arise around dating.

But before we go any further, there are two preliminary issues to sort out.

We're going to attempt the impossible: defining 'dating'. This is important because, at least in some people's eyes, the fact that dating is a thing that our *world* does means that it's a thing that *Christians* should *not* do. Is dating redeemable? Or should we throw it out and start from scratch? We can't answer this question without a clear definition.

Part of the problem in attempting to define 'dating' is the sheer number of terms used to describe roughly the same thing. People can speak of 'dating', 'going out', 'court-ing', 'being in a relationship', 'going steady' (if they're characters in *The Brady Bunch*), 'coupling up', 'cuffing' and any number of other terms. These words might all mean the same thing to one person, while another person assigns slightly different meanings to each one; how you use these terms will depend on your age, your family background, your ethnicity, your church culture, your personal history, your level of education and a host of other factors.

Throughout this book, I'm using 'dating' as the blanket term to describe *the process of making some kind of commitment to another person so that together you can work out whether marriage to one another is in your future.*

This kind of relationship is typically defined by two fac-

tors. The first is some level of *exclusivity*: two people have made some sort of commitment to deal with each other in a way that's different from the way they deal with everybody else. They speak with each other in a special way; they share things with each other, spend time with each other, and do things with and for each other in a special way.

As we create that exclusive kind of relationship, there's also a second factor involved: a special kind of *intimacy*. I'm not speaking here about physical, sexual intimacy, although unfortunately some people see that as part and parcel of dating (more on that below). I'm talking about a personal, relational type of intimacy. It might involve sharing a special level of confidentiality, or a willingness to reveal our deep thoughts, feelings and inner workings in a way that we're careful not to do with other people.

This is where things become particularly complex for Christians. Because the Bible has no particular category of 'dating' and no particular description of a required pattern for courtship, we are free (to some extent) to adopt slightly different approaches to these types of relationships. There are no universal guidelines that define dating for all Christians. And yet while we have a large amount of freedom, following Jesus as Lord and Saviour and knowing God as Father means that our actions and attitudes will often be radically different from those of our non-Christian friends and family and the world around us. That's true in almost all areas of life, but there are few areas where we'll notice the difference more than how we approach sex, relationships, marriage and dating.

It's important to say this up front: some of the things

that I'm going to suggest throughout this book may sound really weird in 21st-century Western culture and society. But this is exactly what the Bible leads us to expect about the Christian life. Jesus went as far as to warn that the world would hate us for following him, just as it hated him (John 15:18-20). But no matter how strange it sounds or how much it puts us out of step with our world, we need to listen to God first and foremost, then use biblical wisdom to understand how we can function as members of our society while also thinking Christianly about dating.

The other issue to address before we get started concerns assumptions. In what follows, I'm writing as a Christian—someone who believes that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh, and therefore is uniquely worth following and trusting. I believe that Jesus' atoning death on the cross is the one means by which people can be saved from their sins, and that Jesus has been raised to life as God's king over the entire universe. I believe the Bible is the perfect word of God, and that it gives us everything we need for living the life of faith—including navigating the minefield of dating and relationships.

As you read on, you'll notice that I assume that you share these beliefs, that you've trusted Jesus as your Saviour and that you're following him as your Lord. But I know that won't be the case for everyone who picks up this book. I'm not going to spend time arguing explicitly for the truth of Christianity. Instead, here's my appeal to you if you're not a follower of Jesus yet: please don't feel excluded from the discussion that follows. On the contrary, I hope that getting a glimpse of how God wants us to think about relationships,

and of the difference that following Jesus makes to how we think about dating, will help you to see that Christianity isn't just true; Christianity *works* and is profoundly *good*. It can help us to find our way through the most challenging parts of life—even something as difficult, glorious and mysterious as dating.