

The Marriage Mystery

Foundation

Genesis 2:18-25

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“Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’ Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” (Genesis 2:18–25, ESV)

When I say the word “marriage” what other words come to mind?

For some of you, I would imagine the word “marriage” creates an association with words like commitment, vows, wedding, and a ring. Others of you may think of words like joy, happiness, and togetherness. Perhaps you thought of words like intimacy, sex, and oneness. Those would be some helpful ways to think positively about marriage.

But there are some who hear the word “marriage,” and there is some pain. You might associate marriage with words like hard, challenging, and a lot of work. Maybe you connect “marriage” to words like painful and disappointing. Or maybe it opens up a personal sore spot because unfaithfulness, abuse, or divorce.

For those of you who are single, maybe the word “marriage” is annoying because it’s talked about too much or isolating because you feel like church is mostly for married people.

If you are an engaged couple the word “marriage” is probably filled with excitement and anticipation.

No matter what your status in life, how old you are, or what you’ve walked through, “marriage” is a loaded term. There are good perspectives on marriage. And there are challenging experiences when it comes to marriage.

Marriage can be beautiful. Marriage can be hard.

When you put a man and a woman in a covenantal relationship where they say something like: "...to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God's holy ordinance; I pledge myself to you," it will surely be interesting. I've said to pre-marital counseling couples, "You will never know how selfish you are until you get married.

And yet there is something "other-worldly" about marriage. When a husband and wife are united in heart, mind, and body marriage is life-giving and deeply fulfilling. And it points to something beyond marriage. One of my favorite verses about marriage served as the impetus for our series title:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." (Ephesians 5:31–32, ESV)

Marriage is a Mystery.

For the month of August we are going to try to unpack the marriage mystery. Let me give you a few reasons why we are taking time to talk about marriage:

1. The institution of marriage is foundational to culture, the church, and the family. Healthy marriages are essential.
2. Marriage is ground-zero for spiritual development and sin issues.
3. Good marriages portray something powerful about the gospel
4. However, marriage is not ultimate. Heaven will not include marriage. Even now we need to be careful that we don't over-emphasize marriage, make it an idol, and neglect to express the value of our singles.

If you are not married, I hope this series will help you understand the biblical message about marriage and what it says about gospel. If you have a good marriage, I hope you'll celebrate God's grace to you and keep working to make it even better. And if you have a struggling marriage, I hope this series will give you hope and encourage you to take some steps to get some help.

Today we are going to look at the foundation of marriage. We are going to start in the beginning – with the book of Genesis. Then we'll examine roles in marriage. Next we'll talk about sexuality. And we'll end with a message about the grace God has for us as we take some next steps.

Let's start with looking at the foundation of marriage.

Three Foundational Truths about Marriage

The Book of Genesis is the first place that we learn about marriage. And Genesis chapter 2 is a very important text. Jesus quoted it when attempting to correct a misunderstanding of divorce (see Matt. 19:4-5). Paul quoted it when he wrote to the church at Ephesus and talked about the role of husbands and wives (see Eph. 5:22-33). He cited it when he wrote to the Corinthian church regarding their wrong

views about sexuality (see 1 Cor. 6:12-20). The first two chapters of Genesis, but especially Genesis 2:18-25 are foundational.

1. Marriage is God's Idea

The first foundational truth is that marriage was God's idea. It is part of his creative design.

The first chapter of Genesis identifies the creation of the world over six days. The days of creation feature pairs that are meant to complement one another. For example: light and darkness / day and night (1:3), the heavens above and water below and the earth (1:6), sea and land with plants and trees (1:9-11), moon and the sun (1:16), fish and birds (1:20), and creeping things and animals (1:24).

But the highlight of God's creation was the final complementary pair: male and female. *"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."* (Genesis 1:27). Along with this powerful moment, God gave them a command: *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion..."* (Gen. 1:28).

From the first chapter of Genesis we see the special nature of the creation of men and women. They bear the imprint of the creator. Both men and women are made in the image of God. This means that there is something unique about male and female which points toward God. Both men and women are vital to creation. And God's first command is essentially to image him on earth being fruitful, multiply, filling the earth. This is God's plan. It's his idea.

One of the reasons why I believe exclusively in the institution of marriage between a man and a woman is because the foundation of marriage is God's good design. Love, while essential, is not more foundational than God's design. Love doesn't create marriage. God created marriage between a man and a woman as part of his beautiful design.

It was God's idea to create complementary humans. It was God's idea to make them different but similar. It was God's idea to embed the creation of other human beings within their capacity. And by their complementary union, God intends to communicate something vital about himself, about self-sacrifice, about obedience, about the gospel, and even about Christ's relationship with the church. As Ray Ortlund says, "Marriage is not a human invention; it is a divine revelation."¹

In other words, there is something powerful about the message of marriage. If you have a thriving, other-centered, Christ-honoring marriage in which intimacy thrives, children are born, reared, and instructed, that relationship says something powerful to the world and even the devil. That would also explain why the enemy loves to destroy marriages, and why false teachers would forbid marriage (see 1 Tim. 4:1-3).

Marriage is divine institution where God's creation plan is fulfilled. And we see this more clearly in Genesis 2. Now I want to be clear what I'm not saying. I'm not inferring that singleness is not part of

¹ Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 11.

God's plan. The New Testament clearly commends singleness (see 1 Cor. 7:25-35). But I don't think you can understand the unique role of singleness if you don't understand and value biblical marriage.

The second chapter of Genesis gives us further detail about this relationship between man and woman. In verses 18-25 it spotlights the creation of woman and the marriage relationship. We'll unpack this more in the following points. But just look at verse 24:

"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24)

This "one flesh" union is part of God's design, and marriage points to him. This is important because if you don't start from this foundational perspective than two things happen.

First, the cultural norms begin to shape your view of marriage, not God's design as communicated in the Bible. Tim and Kathy Keller, in their book *The Meaning of Marriage*, trace the cultural shift in Western culture in how marriage is viewed. In the 18th and 19th Centuries, the view of marriage changed. "Instead of finding meaning through self-denial, through giving up one's freedoms and binding oneself to the duties of marriage and family, marriage was redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfillment and self-actualization."² The Kellers identify something extremely important: "Marriage used to be a public institution for the common good, and not it is a private arrangement for the satisfaction of the individuals. Marriage used to be about us, but now it's about me."³

I wonder how many of us operate from this kind of thinking about marriage? Our modern culture has made this kind of thinking not just common but heroic. Self-expression and self-actualization are foundational values in our society. And they are ruining marriages – even Christian marriages. Now I'm not saying that marriage should be dissatisfying or unfulfilling. But if you make your satisfaction, fulfillment, and happiness the foundation, you will put crushing burdens on your spouse. This leads to hopeless because when you expect someone else to fulfill and satisfy you, they never measure up.

This may lead some singles to be deeply nervous about getting married. Or they are perpetually looking for the perfect spouse. But the real challenge is not the dating field; it's in their understanding of the foundation of marriage.

Why is this hopeful? Well, if God is the designer of marriage, he knew what he was doing. And if two people are committed to following his design, then there's hope. Marriage doesn't work because people are perfect or even compatible. It works because God helps them image him as they cherish him above all things, including their expectations. It works as they image the Designer through their marriage. When they consider others more important than themselves and serve a spouse not because of what they get but because of the joy of giving, that's when marriage makes a powerful statement.

In fact that's exactly why God designed marriage. It shows us what God is like. But that's not all.

² Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 21.

³ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 23.

2. Marriage is Good

Beginning in verse 18 of chapter two we get a glimpse into the back-story behind the relationship between man and woman. The section begins with a summary statement from God: “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him” (2:18).

From the beginning of time, God ordained human beings to live in relationship. God exists in community with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Genesis 1:26 said, “Let us make man in our own image and after our likeness.” Being alone may be comforting for some of us for a time, but a life of total isolation is hard and abnormal. God creates a longing for companionship. And it begins with marriage in Genesis 2.

Now relationship is certainly not limited to marriage. You can and should have good friends. You don’t need to be married to be in community. But it’s important to note that a marriage between a man and a woman was the first relationship of this sort. Marriage isn’t the only community, but it is an essential place for relationship.

What we immediately learn here is that marriage is the “good” that was missing in verse 18, and the rest of the text unpacks this truth. It appears that God gives Adam and education of sorts. He’s given the task of taking stock of all the animals and giving them names (1:19-20). However, the text is very clear that this survey did not identify a “helper.”

Some of you may wince at this word because it sounds inferior. It doesn’t mean that. After all, God is called our helper in Psalm 54:4. The idea is that she complements the man. “The man needed a companion like himself, and yet unlike himself, as the friend and ally he could absolutely depend on.”⁴ And while they will have different roles, she is an equal image bearer. She will be made from him, and she will be different than him. But Eve is not inferior to Adam.

The brokenness of our humanity tends toward making value judgments over differences. You see two things that are not same, you are inclined to judge one as superior to another. It’s one thing when you take a taste test of ice cream, and you choose Moose Tracks over Blue Moon. But it’s another (sinfully so) to equate differences as value statements. It happens at work with management treating blue collar workers as inferior. It happens at school when kids compare clothes and technology. It happens ethnically when one ethnicity views themselves as superior. And it also can happen in marriage.

Men and women are different. They have unique roles but that doesn’t make men superior to women or women superior to men. In order for the full goodness of marriage to be experienced, you must value one another.

In verse 21 we learn that Eve is created from the very body of Adam. They do not share the same image of God. They even share the same physical source. Verse 22 tells us that after God created the woman, he brought her to the man.

⁴ Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*, 22.

What a scene this must have been! Adam found no companionship and suddenly there appears this other person who is similar in many ways but not in others. Imagine Adam thinking, “Where did you find her?”

Notice the relief in verse 23: “This is at last is bone of my bones...” Adam is expressing one of the greatest realities about the marriage relationship – the joy and goodness of a companion like none other. In other words, when marriage reflects this kind of God-centered companionship, there is something divinely good about it.

Marriage, when it looks like this, is incredibly good. It was God’s design from the very beginning. Its why Genesis 1 says that when God looked at everything he created, the Bible says “behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

I would imagine there are a number of people who need to be reminded that marriage is this good. Perhaps you grew up in a home and you watched and lived with a really bad example of what marriage can be. Or maybe you are married right now, and your marriage is in trouble. It’s not good. I just want to remind you that part of the tension you feel is the disconnect between what marriage is supposed to be and what you are experiencing. I want to encourage you to use this series take some steps and get some help. It starts with one of you saying, “Let’s work on this.”

When marriage is not good, it’s because sin – of some kind – is creating havoc. Ungodliness makes for unhappy marriages. So if you are single and you think marriage might be in your future, then work to be godly person. And with you married friends, help them follow Jesus. Because nothing works in life without a deep commitment to Christ-likeness, especially marriage.

If your marriage is going well, praise God. Thank him for the grace that you’ve experienced together. Be resolved in your heart not to become passive. Keep working on following Jesus together, especially through the various seasons of life

3. Marriage is Special

The final foundational truth appears at the end of Genesis 2. It is the most often quoted passage in the Old Testament as it relates to marriage. The text celebrates the special relationship of marriage with the term “one flesh.”

Immediately following Adam’s “at last” statement in verse 23, verse 24 says “Therefore.” What follows is an implication of Eve being “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” The goodness of what God created leads to a special relationship.

First, this relationship involves leaving father and mother. A new relationship is formed. While a son or daughter never stops being family, marriage changes all other relationships. It is God’s multiplication strategy by which he makes his glory known on the earth. Marriage creates a new and special relationship.

Secondly, the text tells us that marriage involves “holding fast.” This word pulls in covenant language. When Israel broken their covenant with God, they “forsook” him and no longer held fast to him (see Deut. 28:20, Hosea 4:10). In Isaiah 41:7 the word is used to describe the bonding of two metals. To hold fast is enter into a sacred union.

When it comes to weddings, our modern culture and even somewhat in Christian culture, tends to place more emphasis on the reception than the wedding ceremony. But when you understand this concept, it changes how you view the vows of the couple. It is a sacred moment as they publicly mark the creation of this new relationship, and as they make promises to each other. Through the years, I’ve found it helpful to have couples not only recite historic vows, but also to write their own in order to personalize what they are saying. “Holding fast” highlights the serious and covenantal nature of the relationship between a husband and wife.

Finally, the text tells us “they shall become one flesh.” These two words – “one flesh” – create the basic definition of a biblical marriage. It images what God is like: three in one. And it points back to how Eve was created out of the flesh of Adam. To be “one flesh” means that a husband and wife’s life are united together in a way that is unique from all other relationships. Two individuals now build a life together with “one story, one purpose, one reputation, one bed, one suffering, one budget, one family...”⁵ As we’ll see in week three, this oneness is vividly expressed through sexual intimacy. And out of that oneness, another life is created.

There is no other relationship on earth that is this all-encompassing. Friendship, as deep and historic as it might be, still has boundaries. Marriage holds the exclusive claim to this special oneness.

But it is designed to point to something beyond marriage. Marriage is not just an institution; it’s revelation. It is special, and it’s designed to show us something about God.

Let’s go back to the first question I asked you. When you think of marriage, what words come to mind? I hope you now can add “God’s design, good, and special” to your list. Marriage is a mystery. Sometimes it’s confusing, hard work, and you might wonder how in the world it is going to work. At other times, it’s glorious, meaningful, and deeply fulfilling.

Regardless of the words you used, there’s something meaningful and important about marriage. It’s worth fighting for. It’s worth thinking about. It’s worth working on. Marriage is a mystery that points us toward God.

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⁵ Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and Mystery of the Gospel*, 30.