

What Is Marriage?

by Steve Zeisler

It's one of the great privileges of being in the pastorate to participate with people in their wedding. For many, the wedding day is the most eagerly anticipated day of all.

I have had the opportunity this fall to walk alongside my father-in-law, who is eighty years old, and his betrothed, who is seventy-eight. They are planning to get married at the end of this month. They have both been widowed for about four years. Between them they had ninety-eight years of marriage before they were widowed, he fifty and she forty-eight, and they're shooting for at least a hundred together. The premarital counseling in this case has been little different. We didn't talk much about leaving parents or raising children. But the joyful anticipation of a wedding remains the same.

However, in contemporary discussion the subject of marriage is not always regarded favorably. We live in a day and age when marriage as an institution, understood clearly, believed in, and sought out, is increasingly under attack. Strident voices on every hand are saying marriage means nothing. They announce that anything and everything that claims itself to be a marriage is in fact a marriage-serial marriages, open marriages, gay marriages, etc. For many young people in our culture, the possibility that they can aspire to a good marriage is receding. Many of them have given up. They have looked at the adults around them and concluded it's not possible to succeed as husband and wife; therefore, why try?

Answering such discouragement is this marvelous text in Genesis 2:24-25:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

It is simple, powerful, profound language. Verse 24 in particular gives us three phrases that are essential in understanding what marriage is at its heart. Beyond being poetic insight, this is teaching on the nature of marriage that has become for believing people, Jews and Christians, normative for every generation. This wasn't just true for the first man and woman. This is the nature of marriage as it will exist in every generation. Jesus quoted verse 24 and said this is marriage, and what God has joined man must not separate. The apostles quoted these words and said this is marriage, and believing people must hear this and trust God to live this way. It's contemporary. Every generation of believers who are faithful to God's word will define marriage this way.

A Work Of Art, A Difficult Challenge

I want to make some preliminary observations before we look at the text. I used to think when I was younger, learning the Bible and beginning to think Christianly for the first time, that all Christian marriages would be the same if they were truly Christian, and that marriage would be easy if you were given the basics early on. I no longer believe either of those things. All Christian marriages are not alike. Beautiful, intricate differences exist between them. God is making a work of art when he gives people to each other in marriage. Each work of art has its own loveliness. Some marriages are filled with energy and enthusiasm and charging off in all directions, and life often teaches these couples to slow down and savor what they're experiencing. Other marriages are deeply reflective and quiet, and many of these couples learn together to step out, taking risks of faith. Some marriages are poems, others are prose. Some are stormy, others are tranquil. There are many ways God can give people to each other and make something beautiful out of their lives.

Similarly I used to believe is that if you knew the tricks ahead of time, marriage would be easy. Of course that's foolish too. Difficulties, failures, unexpected turns in the road happen to every marriage.

And there is not guarantee that marriage will occur for all who desire it. There are many folks who wish to have a spouse, who have done everything they can to seek God and take steps toward healthy relationships, and yet with every step they take, a relationship seems to recede farther away from them. For no reason that they understand, what they long for hasn't happened. And it isn't easy. God doesn't explain why some good gift that a person longs for is withheld from them. Just knowing what the Bible teaches doesn't guarantee that things will work out the way you want them to.

Additionally, there are believers everywhere in the world who are either widowed or divorced. The memories they have of being married once color everything they think of the present and the future.

Finally, some who are currently married and who are miserable find that trusting God in the midst of a difficult marriage requires all the faith they have. Clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about marriage is a great advantage, and the Lord uses truth to shape us for our benefit and his glory. However, knowledge, by itself, does not banish life's struggles.

A Marriage Is God's Handiwork

With that in mind, let's look at the text. Verse 24 represents something completely different from what we've seen in Genesis up to this point. This is Moses' commentary on what has happened. Prior to this point, what Moses wrote was what happened—the creation of the universe, the creation of the planet, the creation of the garden, the creation of the man, the creation of the woman. But now Moses is stepping back and saying to the people who read this, "Do you know what you should conclude from this? A man should leave his father and mother and be united to his wife...." Clearly the first man and woman didn't have father and mother. Verse 24 is not about them. Moses is telling people like us what this means for us.

Further, we might notice that verse 24 begins with a prepositional phrase: "For this reason, a man will leave...." What reason? This refers back to verses 22-23:

"Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

**'This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;**

**she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man.'"**

Marriage doesn't exist to accomplish some greater good in this context. God had taken a rib from the man, fashioned the ideal partner for him, and brought them together. Overwhelmed with the gift that God had given him, the man said, "This is *'ishshah*, I am *'ÿysh*. This is my wife, the one who corresponds to me, the one with whom I will share the rest of my life, the one with whom I will know intimacy." It was this first marriage itself, with all its possibilities as a work of God, that was the reason for Moses' commentary.

Sociologists will tell us that the institution of marriage grew up in our evolutionary history because rogue males needed to be domesticated. In order for a female to capture the attention of a wild male and keep him interested long enough to raise the children who would be born to her, some sort of religious ceremony had to be invented. So marriage was really a means to another end—to civilize men. Another theory is that marriage was created in order for families to be able to pass on their property to the next generation. Another proposes it as a way of gaining tribal status.

Modern individuals sometimes approach marriage in a similar fashion. They are tired of having a low status,

and they want to marry someone of higher status in the culture. Or they're tired of not having a reliable sexual partner, and sex becomes an end to which marriage is the means. Or people marry for money or security or something else that they want to achieve.

But Moses said the reason for marriage is that it is God's work, God's gift of a woman or man in your life, the possibility of entering into this creative work of God, of something that is unique and marvelous and that will display his character. The marriage *is* something before it is *for* something.

Another point we could note is that verse 24 says a man will leave his father and mother. Certainly in patriarchal cultures (virtually all), it is familiar for a woman to leave her home of origin and be united to her husband, joining his tribe or family or village. It is significant that here it is the man who does so. By focusing on the man, Moses makes the case that leaving occurs for both the man and the woman.

A Matter Of Growing Up

Let's spend some time now on the three defining phrases in verse 24 that I would suggest are the bedrock components of marriage. What does it mean to be married? First of all, one must leave father and mother to establish a marriage. What does the phrase "leave father and mother" have in mind? We might say in modern parlance that it means to grow up, to become an adult. The fledgling that is kicked out of the nest by the mother bird must grow up. Whether it thinks it's ready or not, suddenly it's pushed out of the nest, it must learn to fly, it's on its own. But human beings need to be persuaded to grow up. We're not like birds that either can fly or cannot. We need to cooperate with God in becoming adults. That takes place over a long period of time. None of the three components-leaving, being united, becoming one flesh-happen in a moment. The marriage is accomplished through a process.

There are some who are given the very good gift from God of fine parents. If you were allowed to have fine parents, then your responsibility is to learn from their character-their honesty, humility, courage, hard work, and love for God. It is to take from your parents what made them good people and make it your own. Thus, you are no longer dependent on your parents' courage, wisdom, or strength. As a grown-up, you don't have the presence of God mediated to you through your parents anymore, you are in God's presence yourself. You are not a child dependent on your parents anymore, you are now a child of God, directly learning from your heavenly Father how to engage the world. Those of us who had the privilege of being raised by good parents have much to be thankful for. It's a marvelous gift.

Now the opposite possibility also exists, of course. Some people have terrible parents. They were raised in a chaotic, abusive, hurtful home in which the rules changed every day, in which they were disapproved of at every turn. If you were raised in that kind of home, you need to leave your parents, too. You need to reject a great deal of the way you were raised, to choose to be different. You need to look at the immaturity, violence, control by alcohol or drugs, deception-whatever made up a chaotic home life-and leave that and become a child of God. What parents in these cases have done is mostly display how not to be, and you need to decide not to be that way. But in either case the opportunity to enter marriage has to come with some determination to leave father and mother, to let God teach us to depend on him.

Joined By Choices

The second phrase is to be united or joined to your spouse. This too is a lifetime process. Being united to your spouse is choosing to invest your best emotional energy in strengthening the relationship. It's choosing to spend your time in a way that enhances the partnership rather than detracting from it. It's choosing to listen, to be vulnerable, to open up things on the inside that are embarrassing and difficult. It's choosing to let your beloved be vulnerable without rejection or laughter or put-downs. It's choosing over and over again to be united and stay united, to be joined tightly by choice over a lifetime.

I have a knee brace that I sometimes wear when I exercise. It has three velcro straps, and on one of the straps the velcro has gotten worn out. I can use two straps and ignore the third, treating the wear as if it were of no effect. Or I can fix what needs fixing so that the bond is tight and the brace is effective.

That is similar to the kind of choices that husbands and wives need to make in relation to each other. When things are loosening up; when emotional distance is growing; when there is no communication, bad communication, or harsh communication-whatever it is that is weakening the unity-we can actively "be joined" or see the marriage dissipate.

Becoming One Flesh

The last phrase is "become one flesh." The reference to flesh, or bodies, is clearly a reference to the physical act of love-making. But this has been taken by Moses, the New Testament writers, and every other thoughtful commentator as a picture of something much greater than just physical oneness. The oneness that happens between bodies should happen on every level of human experience. Your souls become one, your spirits become one. Your thinking is joined, your memories are joined. It is God's work to make two into one in this remarkable way.

Today's social theorists imagine that human beings can tear themselves apart. Some say that your body can have experiences that don't touch your soul, or you can be in a co-dependent emotional relationship and not have it affect you spiritually, or that in some other way the experiences of body and soul and spirit can be separated from each other. The Scriptures know nothing of that kind of human life. You are in all parts as God made you, and in marriage the sum of you is married to someone else. That's why the Scriptures are concerned about sexual immorality-not because there's something wrong with sex, but because to give yourself physically to someone is to give all of yourself to someone. Such a choice has enormous repercussions for the inner person, for your heart, your spirit, your future, and everything else about you.

Leslie and I were twenty-three when we were married, and we did the best we could at being twenty-three. But there was a whole lot of us that hadn't happened yet. There was insight we hadn't come to, pain that we hadn't experienced, fears that we hadn't faced, growth that we hadn't accomplished. You can't really be fully united to someone quickly, it takes a lifetime. That's why marriages are supposed to last a lifetime, because there is more and more of you to discover, more and more of your partner to discover. Raising children is the experience of most husbands and wives. And raising children together draws you near in a way that you'll never experience otherwise. Everything that goes into a lifetime's shared experience with someone is involved in making the two into one.

Jesus directly quoted the passage we're studying in a very important statement he made in Mark 10. Verses 6-8a: "...At the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'" (The first quote is Genesis 1:27, the second Genesis 2:24.) Jesus went on to say in verses 8b-9, "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Jesus declared that it is God who makes marriages.

In many respects the best biological analogy to marriage is the creation of a life. Man and woman each contribute a cell having twenty-three chromosomes. The two cells are joined together, and a new human being who has never existed, a unique individual life, is created. In marriage, when two unique individuals, known and loved by God, are given to each other, another sort of life begins. God creates a living thing that never existed before, a unique oneness. And God cares about the life that he calls into being. God made you and me and we matter to him. But if he makes marriages, they also matter to him, and we ought to regard them that way.

It's worth noting in passing that the penalty in the Old Testament for both adultery and murder is the same. Both are capital offenses, because both of them take a life that matters to God. Human individuals and human marriages are his creation, both of them have his approval, both of them are his investment, both of them are in his gaze. And we need to learn to have the same attitude toward things that God does, rather than assume marriage is some kind of throw-away experiment or vehicle for personal pampering. When a marriage dies, we should mourn as we would for the loss of a person's life.

Nakedness Without Shame

What applications should we draw from these two verses at the end of Genesis 2? Let me suggest three. The first regards what it means to be naked and not ashamed. Paradise is going to be lost in the very next verse. In 3:1 we will meet the serpent, who was craftier than any other creature. He will persuade, and the story will take an awful downturn. We look back on that story from our vantage point of having lost everything, and it breaks our heart to see what was possible and what is so difficult now to experience. But the very last phrase about Paradise before the cloud came across the sun and the darkness and the temptation process and the failure began, is "not ashamed." It speaks of life lived with real honesty, life that is open, joyful, energetic, enthusiastic, and hopeful. Nakedness without shame is a spiritual condition; it has very little to do with whether or not someone has clothing on.

The opportunity of gaining in salvation what we lost in the fall is open to all of us. We can grow toward knowing God that well, being the recipient of grace, learning to set aside the past, being healed from what was hurtful. We can do so either in the context of marriage or outside of marriage. Nakedness (honesty) without shame isn't just a description of marriage, it's a description of life.

Investing In Your Marriage

The second application I would suggest is that we can work on our marriages. Perhaps your marriage has become routine, and you've learned to live with phoniness that has grown up over the years. Perhaps your marriage is an expression of anger more than anything else. You and work on changing these patterns. If you're married, you're intertwined with someone because God called that oneness into being. It's a life that matters to him. He wants to make it beautiful, and he can. Our responsibility is to turn from pretense and discouragement, and to begin (or begin again) to put right what is falling apart.

Something To Offer The World

The last word of application I would suggest is that we have something to offer to the world. Christians are mostly perceived in the modern cultural debate as being upset about things. It's important to be outraged by the outrageous. We especially ought to speak out against the destruction of marriage and the drift from Biblical insight that used to inform our culture.

But that is not all we can offer. We're to be like a city set upon a hill. And if you're in the wilderness and it's growing dark, the lights of a city on a hill are a source of hope. Being Christians who can give away what God has given us—living and speaking of the enthusiasm we have for the good things that God has done, offering encouragement and a word of help—is part of our responsibility as well. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

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