

LETTER FROM THE PASTOR – February 2023

5 Surprising Things That the Bible Says about Marriage

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The Bible is not a book about marriage – at least not mainly or directly. The Bible is a book about God and about people and how God saves people through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Even still, the Bible does have a lot to say about marriage and a great deal of what it has to say runs contrary to our assumptions and values as modern people.

Amongst the most surprising revelations would be the following:

1. It is about friendship first and foremost

That's the immediate need that marriage was created to address in [Genesis 2](#). The text says:

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." ([Genesis 2:18](#) ESV)

It is not good for the man to be alone – therefore God invented marriage.

Marriage is about friendship before it is about anything else.

The sort of friendship that God had in mind is indicated through the use of an often misunderstood phrase: "a helper fit for him".

The Hebrew word in question carries the idea of complementarity. It does not imply inferiority. In fact, the Book of Hosea uses this word to God in relationship with Israel. [Hosea 13:9](#) says:

"He destroys you, O Israel, for you are against me, against your helper." ([Hosea 13:9](#) ESV)

Here God describes himself as Israel's helper – his *ezer* – clearly then the helper is no way inferior to one who is helped; that is not what the word is communicating. Rather it appears to be communicating intimate correspondence. God is the helper that corresponds perfectly to our

need as human beings – just as Eve was the helper that corresponded perfectly to Adam’s need as a human being.

That is the sort of friendship that is being pictured here.

It is a friendship of co-equal others.

Understanding this puts to bed two lies that our culture would press upon us. The first is the lie that men and women must be understood as being the same in order to be understood as being equal.

But that clearly isn’t the case.

[Genesis 1:27](#) states plainly that the man and the woman are co-equal in value and dignity:

“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](#) ESV)

Previous to these words in Genesis only the Pharaoh of Egypt had been described in such exalted terms – but now here every man and woman is being included in this glorious taxonomy. Every man and every woman is uniquely the representative and resemblance of God on planet earth.

They are equal in value and dignity – and yet they are not the same.

Eve corresponds to Adam.

She is strong where he weak.

He is strong where she is weak.

Together – in love, appreciation and unity – they are more than the sum of their individual parts.

This confronts another lie in our culture – the lie that to need another human being is a sign of weakness.

No it isn’t.

Needing another person is a sign of self-awareness.

According to the story in Genesis human beings are deficient by design. The need of Adam was not the result of the fall – it was the result of God’s design. God made Adam with a built in lean that would cause him to seek out intimate community.

Human beings are inherently social creatures. We were quite literally made for one another. All of those phrases we smile at, “You complete me”; “This is my better half”; these sayings actually speak to an oft forgotten reality. We are indeed better together than we are apart. As the Bible says:

“It is not good that the man should be alone”

It is not good that the woman should be alone either – and that was the original reason given for the gift and blessing of marriage.

2. It is supposed to last a lifetime

In a culture of disposable everything it is surprising to discover that some things are supposed to last a lifetime. While the Bible implies this on the very first page, it was not a common belief within the Jewish community at the time of Jesus. In fact, this is one of the things that the disciples found most surprising about their Master. Jesus stated his view on the matter succinctly:

“I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.” ([Matthew 19:9](#) ESV)

Matthew records the reaction of the disciples – a group to which he himself belonged:

“The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” ([Matthew 19:10](#) ESV)

Clearly the disciples were not used to hearing this kind of talk about marriage! Divorce was remarkably common in the Roman world and also in the Jewish world in the time of Jesus. Josephus, a Roman Jewish historian and himself a divorced man wrote in *The Antiquities Of The Jews* that he believed that a man was permitted to divorce his wife “for any reason whatsoever”.

Thus the Christian view on the permanence of marriage represented a significant departure from the culture of the day. According to Jesus a marriage is supposed to last forever. The only exception he mentioned had to do with sexual immorality – a catch all phrase likely denoting any kind of sexual behaviour outside the bonds of covenant marriage.

Most Bible readers recognize one further exception to the general rule of marital permanence. In [1 Corinthians 7:12-16](#) the Apostle Paul writes as follows:

“To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. 13 And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified

through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. 16 How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?” ([1 Corinthians 7:12–16](#) NIV11-GK)

In street level English we might label Paul’s second grounds for divorce as “religiously motivated abandonment.”

Paul is responding to a particular question that arose out of the experiences of the early church. “What if my spouse and I were both pagans when we got married but now one of us has come to faith in Christ? What if the unbelieving spouse does not wish to be identified as a Christian? What if he (in this scenario it would almost certainly have been a he) does not wish for me to identify as a Christian? What should I do now?”

Obviously such a question could not have been asked of Jesus during his earthly life and ministry which is why Paul begins by saying:

“I, not the Lord”.

There was no dominical teaching on this matter to which Paul could appeal and therefore, speaking by the Spirit, he says that if the unbeliever is willing to stay in the marriage and to live with an active and obviously Christian person, then by all means that person should stay in the marriage. Who knows but that you may win your husband? Who knows but that you might win your wife?

However, if the unbelieving spouse does not want to stay in the marriage and does not want to live with an active and obvious Christian, then the believer should let them go. In such cases the believer is not bound – that is to say they are free to leave and potentially remarry. The Pillar Commentary on [1 Corinthians 7](#) for example says:

“*Not bound* here refers to freedom to remarry. Instone-Brewer explains: “The only freedom that makes any sense in this context is the freedom to remarry ... [A]ll Jewish divorce certificates and most Greco-Roman ones contained the words ‘you are free to marry any man you wish,’ or something very similar.”

Thus the Apostle Paul adds a second reasonable exception to the general rule of marital permanence. These are the only 2 permissible grounds for divorce mentioned in the New Testament. In a culture of disposable everything, most of us find that quite surprising.

3. It is supposed to preach the Gospel

There is something special about human beings – particularly human beings as male and female together. The Bible says:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ([Genesis 1:26–27](#) ESV)

Image and likeness – those are very important words.

We sometimes forget that the first people to hear these words in Genesis were most likely the wilderness generation of Hebrews during the time of the 40 year desert wandering. Their cultural frame of reference was Egyptian – they had been living inside Egyptian culture for the last 400 years. In Egypt only one person was ever referred to as the image and likeness of God. Pharaoh was *tselem* and *demooth*; Pharaoh was image and likeness of God. He resembled God and represented God in a way that no one else did.

But here in [Genesis 1:26-27](#) Moses tells the recently liberated Egyptian slave class that they are all – each of them – male and female – the image and likeness of God. They represent him and they resemble in some way that is not true of any other creature.

Some scholars actually say that the most accurate translation of [Genesis 1:26](#) would be to say that the male and female were the “idols” of God – that’s what the word means. And that’s why idolatry was forbidden in the second commandment. Because men and women were the only authorized representatives and resemblances of God on planet earth.

When people look at you – particularly when they look at you as male and female together – they are supposed to see something about the beauty, wholeness and vitality of the Living God.

Your marriage is supposed to witness – to God’s essential nature and character and also to his saving work in Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul said that. He said:

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

According to the Apostle, the very nature of covenant marriage – the intimacy, the mutuality, the love by the husband the response from the wife – all of that – was intended to say something visually and representatively about Christ and the church.

Your marriage is a multi-point Gospel sermon.

Your marriage is a witness; whether you like it or not, your marriage is saying something about God and about the love of God in Christ for his people, and people are listening. What your kids believe about God will largely come from what they believe about you. So it matters who and how we are as married people.

4. It should be a place of permission, generosity and joy

The first marriage was a place of innocence, openness and joy:

“the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” ([Genesis 2:25](#) ESV)

After the fall that is a very difficult state to attain.

The Bible’s view on sexuality is rather straight forward. Basically the Bible says that sex is beautiful within certain boundaries; and typically brutal and dehumanizing outside of those boundaries.

That is a simple view and a controversial view and it always has been. Sex has always been one of the main points of departure between the Christian community and the surrounding culture, and not just in the ways you might think. The caricature of Christian sexual ethics would suggest that we are prudes who say NO more than we say YES – but that isn’t actually the point of departure. In fact one of the most radical things the Bible says about anything is what Paul says about the anticipated frequency and reciprocity of sex within a marriage. In [1 Corinthians 7:3-4](#) the Apostle Paul says:

“The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. ⁵Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.” ([1 Corinthians 7:3-5](#) ESV)

Many scholars consider this the most radical thing ever written about sexuality in the ancient world. The Christian approach to sexuality ran completely against the grain of Roman culture. Roman men had sex with everybody! They had sex with their slaves, with prostitutes – many of whom were actually young boys; a Roman man was not in any way expected to be sexually faithful to his wife. A Roman man typically only had sex with his wife when he was trying to produce an heir. But Christianity said something completely different. It said that a man had a responsibility to give to his wife her sexual rights. It said that she had needs – and those needs were legitimate. It said that he needed to exercise self-control and to live with his wife with consideration.

No one had ever said that before Christianity said that.

That should be more widely known than it is.

Christianity has never been in step with the culture on sex and that has always been part of our attraction.

We offer a better way and that ought to be part of our appeal to a confused, dissatisfied and increasingly exhausted culture.

5. It isn't always God's will

Perhaps the most surprising thing the Bible says about marriage is that it should not and will not be experienced by everyone.

In the Old Testament there are many heroes of the faith who were unmarried. Some were unmarried because God forbade them to marry – we think of Jeremiah for example. Others were unmarried because they were made eunuchs by hostile foreign powers. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego come to mind in this category.

Jesus spoke about these things in [Matthew 19](#). In answer to the disciples response to his teaching on the permanence of marriage he said:

“Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given.¹² For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.” ([Matthew 19:11–12](#) ESV)

Here Jesus seems to be saying that God gives the grace to serve him in whatever capacity he calls people to. If a person is called to celibacy then God gives grace for that. If a person is called to marriage, God gives grace for that as well. The disciple must receive what God gives and do what God requires.

Whatever that it is.

The Apostle Paul was evidently influenced by that teaching. In his chapter long discussion of marriage in [1 Corinthians 7](#) he says:

“I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.” ([1 Corinthians 7:7](#) ESV)

The Apostle Paul had the gift of celibacy – whether he had been married and then widowed or whether he had never been married, we don't know. What we know is that he was living as a celibate during his ministry as an Apostle in the early church. He recommended celibacy for the purposes of dedicated ministry to those who had been given the gift. But as he says in verse 7 – not all have been given the gift. Some have been given the gift of marriage. God will give you the grace to serve him and obey him in whatever calling he assigns.

But that may not involve the experience of covenant marriage.

You don't have to be married to serve the Lord.

You don't have to be married to be fully human.

Jesus was the most human human who ever existed – and he never married.

You can be all that God has called you to be without ever experiencing the gift of marriage.

It is a good thing – but it is not the only good thing and it is not a necessary thing.

Some people will witness to the goodness and glory of God through covenant marriage.

And some people will witness to these things through their joyful embrace of celibacy and sufficiency.

“each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.” ([1 Corinthians 7:7](#) ESV)

Praise the Lord!

ANNOUNCEMENTS: WHAT'S HAPPENING AT LBC

Wednesday Evening Bible Study - We continue to work our way through the Discipleship Explored Series. This 8 week series works through the book of Philippians and addresses what living life in Christ looks like. The study starts with a video lesson and is followed by small group discussion.

What's For Dinner – This event will take place on February 18th. The night will involve several dinners held at different homes. The only thing that will be known will be the menu. The hosts will provide a menu. The guest will sign up for which meal interests them. No one will know who is coming to dinner. Quite the mystery. A great time for fun, good food and fellowship. If you are interested in being a host, please let Jeannette Bosman know!

Evening Service - Please join us on Sunday February 26th at 7pm for a time of worship, study and corporate prayer.

Men's Breakfast – Please join us on Saturday February 25th for food, fellowship and worship. The breakfast starts at 8:30 am. If you are interested in being involved in the preparation of breakfast, please let us know.

LBC Annual Business Meeting– The meeting will be held at LBC on Wednesday February 22nd at 7pm. If you are responsible for preparing a report, please be sure to pass them along to Wendy Phillips by February 3rd.