

# The Story of Marriage

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The delight of marriage has been celebrated from early times. Equally, the need for it to be hedged with taboos and warnings has been recognised from the beginning.

[Proverbs 5:15–23](#); [Song of Solomon 2:3–13](#); [Hebrews 13:4](#)

But marriage is not just what happens at a wedding, or in a bedroom or around a table full of children. It is the outworking in everyday life of our being like our Creator, and is a reflection of his relationship to us. It is the opportunity to proclaim these things to the coming generation.

## The marriage story

So the mystery of marriage cannot be understood by examining what happens in one or even many marriages. The coming together of a man and a woman occurs in this life because God made us male and female—to reflect him. This is a great story—as we shall see.

It happens, especially, because God's nature is communal, and the destiny of his people is to be joined to him forever—through marriage to his Son. This also is a remarkable story involving much suffering and concluding in a great victory.

Marriage is not just for the married, the intending to be married or for the happily married but for all. The unmarried, the separated, the widowed and the divorced all have an interest and a responsibility in marriage—the marriages of those around them and the marriage to come.

If we think that a human marriage is a beautiful thing—and a very painful thing if it doesn't grow in purity and love—the story of God with his world is far more remarkable and necessary to know if we are to understand marriage in this world.

Two observations may be made at the outset. First: God's bond with us is not like a marriage on earth. Rather, it is the other way around: in knowing God we know ourselves and how to live. Second: many people in Western cultures have imbibed much of the Christian message and so may say that marriage is based on love. While this is true, the love needed for a marriage—or any other relationship—cannot be valid outside of the God who gives it. We must reject a view of marriage which places the husband and wife at the centre and uses Christian ideas to support it.

## Sure of marriage

Marriage will never die. While the human race invents new understandings of male and female relationships to suit its lostness, God is still about 'his old marriage thing'. He is not just saying that this is how it ought to be but that this is how he relates to us and how things must always be.

There are many different understandings of marriage—even within one culture. Unfortunately, it is also often the case that a marriage doesn't 'work'. A marriage breaks up. Increasingly, marriage does not even begin because people have calculated that it is not worth tying a knot that is so often untied again. But we have not finished with marriage. The whole story has not yet been told.

## Jesus qualified to speak on marriage

Jesus Christ is qualified to tell us what marriage is—for a number of reasons.

Firstly, he has come into the world, from his Father, as the exact likeness of God. All humanity has been made in the image of God, male and female. But this image has been perverted. Christ has come to us as the true image of God and to renew us in his own image. He, above anyone else, can tell us what it means to be male and female as the image of God.

Secondly, Jesus never married in this world but he has come to receive the Bride his Father prepared for him. This is the Church which Christ loves and for which he has given himself. There is no story like this story. At the end of history, Christ will appear in splendour, and those who have trusted in him will appear also in splendour to be joined to him forever.

[Revelation 19:6–9; 21:1–4](#)

Thirdly, Christ is the Mediator of the new covenant—God's eternal relation to his people—and marriage is the expression in daily life of this covenant with creation.

Fourthly, Christ knows the meaning of eternal love, not just as an idea but as the living reality of his life and as the gift he has brought to us. He is one with the Father and the Spirit in love; but he is also one with us to bring us to know the Father and himself.

Jesus Christ is the beginning and end of what it means to be human—as male and female, and what it means to be married.

## Jesus teaching about marriage

What Jesus says about marriage is given in the context of a question about divorce. His disciples were eager to know if they could divorce their wives—as was commonly presumed at the time.

He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and

mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

(Matthew 19:4–6, NRSV).

Jesus linked together the two creation stories in Genesis to tell us what had been in his Father's heart from the beginning. But he also had the steadfast love of God in his heart and he would proclaim this through his own life. The Father was about to bring to him a Bride, and he was about to lay down his life for her. To talk about breaking up marriages in Christ's hearing gave him the opportunity to make his own statement on marriage—'what God has joined together, let no one separate.'

Lifelong faithfulness is not a quality we can be sure of—given our sinfulness. We will need the whole word of Christ and the whole action of Christ in order to hear and do what he says. What follows is ordered around this statement of Jesus, but gathers together the whole story of marriage that has been revealed through Israel's prophets and by the apostles.

## Made male and female – God's image

Together, man and woman reflect all that God is. If we are the image of him, we can never understand who we are apart from him. Everything that God is, we are like that. We are like a son to God. But to reflect his image, he made us male and female, and placed us over all his creation.

[Genesis 1:27](#)

It has now been revealed, through Jesus Christ, that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His very being is communal and it has pleased him to make us in his image as man and woman—one answering to the other, being two but one, one being incomplete without the other. As each honours, and gives to, and receives from, and serves each other in the vocation they have in the earth, God's own nature is reflected in their being and action.

[John 15:15–21](#)

It has been suggested that marriage is the most explicit example of 'interpersonal trust'. 'There, man is summoned from his isolation through the call of another person; there, he "relies" on someone else; he comes to belong to someone else without losing himself, but in fact finding himself. The most explicit example of such trust is marriage. ... It is certain that we have nothing of an I-it relationship here—wherever such was the case, the relationship between man and wife, wife and man would be incurably poisoned' (Otto Weber in *Foundation of Dogmatics*, 2/266).

The whole Bible shows that God has always related to us in the light of his own nature and this is covenant faithfulness. He is bonded to us in eternal love. We will see more of this later. But the relationship between a husband and wife is an expression of this covenant faithfulness of God. In a contract, each party is only bound as long as the other meets certain conditions. In a covenant, either party is bound, not by the faithfulness of the other but by the nature of what God has made each to be—covenantally faithful.

[Matthew 5:43–48](#)

What makes woman woman and man man? This will continue to intrigue us and may never be resolved. It is more than biology; more than social conditioning. It is God's creation that has made it so. It can only be known in the larger story of the true Man and the true Woman.

The call to enjoy and to rule over the creation is given to man and woman together. In the second creation story, no suitable helper was found for the man—so that his vocation could be fulfilled—until God created the woman from him and brought her to him as this helper.

[Genesis 1:28; 2:18–25](#)

Dominion does not mean that we are free to exploit the earth but that we have responsibility with a view to ensuring that it comes to its goal. This goal is that the whole creation glorify God and enjoy him forever. This includes all the tasks involved in filling out the humanity we have with good works that provide for ourselves and others. This task cannot be truly fulfilled apart from a man loving his wife and a wife being a helper to her husband.

If marriage is only seen for what it can provide for the couple, it has no context and no true purpose. It may very well be the occasion of its collapse because the husband and wife are trying to 'use' marriage as an end in itself. Anything turned in on itself will die.

[Luke 9:24](#)

There is an undeniable beauty about a man and woman being joined in marriage. It is wonderful for those involved but it is also a wonder and delight to those who observe and share in its joy—especially the children of that marriage. The reason for this is not in the marriage itself or in either of the persons involved but in what is being represented in it—nothing less than God creating us in his image.

## Headship and submission

The creation story describes man being made first, and then woman from man and for man. Her being for man does not mean she exists for his pleasure but for the purpose God gave to them.

[Genesis 2:18–24; I Corinthians 11:3, 8–11; I Timothy 2:12–14](#)

*'[The] second account shows that it is by a sort of death to himself that the man can receive the help of the woman which God designs and provides for him, and that their encounter takes place in wonder and innocence' (J. -J. Von Allmen in *Vocabulary of the Bible*, p. 253).*

The man is head of his wife, signifying that he is to love, give leadership to, provide for, accept responsibility for his wife. He is to sacrifice himself for her so that she may come to the fullness God has purposed for her—just as Christ did for his Bride, the Church.

[Ephesians 5:21–33](#)

It is not possible to reason this out, or justify it, or condemn it, or to make a law of it. In many cases, wives seem more able to lead than their husbands. It is best understood as a responsibility (and certainly not as a right) which sends a man to his God so that he knows who he is and what he is to be about and is not threatened by the ability and advice and encouragement—the help—that God has ordained that he have.

Wives are to submit to their husbands. Surely, submission is impossible in this world! How can one person entrust themselves to another when the other is so obviously liable to error and unable to see all that the other party wants to be? Surely, the freedoms of the modern world have been gained through limiting the powers of those over us.

But, as with headship, we are talking about love, and, about reflecting the image of God. Submission is the acknowledgment in everyday life that life comes not from ourselves but from God. This means God is above us, but also that he serves us, as it were, from below. He sent his Son to serve us. Where a woman understands this, she may see the gift of her husband as a service to her and respond as best she may—given the difficulties which always arise. Whatever, a wife has a high calling as helper of her husband.

This does not mean that her relationship with God is mediated to her through her husband; she is a joint heir with him of the gift of life.

[1 Peter 3:7](#)

## **The image perverted**

The Bible tells the story of our first parents rebelling against God—seeking to establish themselves, together, outside of God's word to them. The man listened to his wife above listening to God. The union of love which reflected God was immediately changed into fear, shame and separation. They began to accuse—to cover the shame they felt.

[Genesis 3:6–19](#)

Enormous pain was released into this remarkable relationship of man with woman. Rather than being one, they were rivals. Rather than being innocently naked, they were guiltily looking for covering—in more ways than in clothing. (It would be very helpful if were realised that the dynamic of nakedness is shame. Those who flaunt their nakedness are making a thing of glory out of their shame.) Rather than being co-workers in the creation they were seeking to establish themselves as being the one in the right.

Into this situation, God spoke again, ordering their life in such a way that they could live as the image of God in hope for the restoration of all things. The fact of our rebellion has not altered what marriage is—though it must now be worked out in our sinful situation. God said that the man would have difficulty in his work and the woman in child bearing. They were told that the woman would seek to be master over her husband and that he would rule over her.

But they were also given hope. From the woman would come a son to destroy the evil one by whom temptation had come. And God made them skin clothing to hide their nakedness. They were not separated from God's kindness by their sin.

[Genesis 3:21–22](#)

When Jesus was asked about divorce, he said that a law had been made to govern this in Israel because of their hardness of heart. It was not so from the beginning. Something unyielding, unresponsive and evasive had come into the human situation that not only closed people off to God but to one another and particularly to their spouses. The resources of grace which God had opened up to Israel to enable them to live as his image were rejected and, still distant from God, they severed their husband-wife relationships.

[Deuteronomy 24:1–4; Malachi 2:13–16](#)

## **Christ among us as the image**

Now, Jesus has come. He has stood in Israel, and in the world, as the image of God, the true man. Everything that God is has been proclaimed to us in God's Son—God himself, but now in flesh. What had become marred almost beyond recognition has now been proclaimed to us by God's Son.

Jesus never sought to be anything of himself. He lived by the word of his Father. He was the image of his Father—completely so. There is nothing of God that is not proclaimed to us and in action among us in him.

[John 5:18–20; Hebrews 1:3](#)

As with Adam, it was not good that Jesus remained alone. God would bring him a wife as his helper—in the task of bringing all things to their goal. So the Father brought to him those who would make up his Bride, his Church.

This Bridegroom loved us as himself, he laid down his life for us, he purified us so that we could be his true helper in the vocation of bringing this creation to its goal. In this, Christ has shown us what marriage is. It is Christ loving his Church and his church being gratefully submissive to him.

[Ephesians 5:21–33](#)

Adam and Eve, and all the married couples since then, could not fulfil what was in view in the creation of man and woman. The image of God must be the reflection and action of all that God is. Our present marriages last only for this life, but they are a reflection of this true marriage which is eternal.

[Mark 12:19–25](#)

## **One flesh**

Jesus said a husband and wife become one flesh—a new family. One flesh can signify being a family unit. So, it is important that a man leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife. The new couple have a primary obligation to one another in fulfilling their calling. This does not dishonour parents.

[Genesis 2:24; 29:14; Matthew 19:5–6](#)

The act of leaving one family to establish another takes place before God—who joins them together, and within the whole community, because what is being done is of community importance. One family is being left behind in order to commence another. In a private agreement or *de facto* marriage or temporary liaison, these things are forgotten.

One flesh also assumes sexual union—so much so that sex outside of marriage effectively joins the two in one flesh. Sexual union is uniquely the marriage act, an expression of one-ness. God calls it ‘knowing’ one’s spouse. Where it occurs outside of marriage—in action or thought—it is called adultery if the person is married, or fornication if the person is unmarried. The parties concerned are then unable to give themselves cleanly to their spouses and their bonding is not pure. But Christ has come to purify us from all uncleanness and to restore true humanity and marriage.

[I Corinthians 6:9–11, 16](#)

One flesh means that the bodies of husband and wife belong to each other. A husband should treat his wife as if she were his own body.

[Ephesians 5:28–29](#)

When God said that a man should leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife and become one flesh with her, the apostle Paul said this was a great mystery. He understood that it meant Christ and his Church. He read the creation story in the light of Christ’s coming and could see that marriage was instituted for him. This is what marriage is ‘all about’. Within that, husbands should love their wives and wives respect their husbands.

[Ephesians 5:31](#)

## **What God has joined, let no one separate**

Here is the particular teaching of Jesus to his own day. One flesh means that God has joined one man and one woman together. They should not undo what is a work of God.

[Mark 10:8](#)

This could be seen simply as a law but there is far more to it than that. Certainly, Jesus said that if someone divorces their spouse and marries another, they commit adultery. A person who commits adultery or fornication is outside of God’s covenant people and will not enter the kingdom. They need the washing and renewal of Christ and his gospel.

[Matthew 5:31–32](#)

Opinions differ as to whether Jesus made an exception of a marriage which is already ‘dead’ through the adultery of the other party. Treatment of this must be left to longer articles. Whatever is decided there does not alter the truth that God regard marriage as a permanent union—for the reasons which follow.

Jesus had come to be God’s covenant bond in action. All of the enduring and passionate affection of God for what he had made, all of the certainty that his love knows because he has planned to redeem the creation for himself is here in Jesus.

All that God is in himself—Father, Son and Spirit, is here so as to encompass his people—his Bride. He is joined to his people. He will lose none of what the Father has given to him. Nothing could come between him and his Bride—not even her sins. These he will bear in his own body on the cross so that she is cleansed of them. 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

[John 13:1](#)

This is what he means by 'what God has joined'—not joined as a legal necessity, or a burdening inevitability. The union that joins Bridegroom to Bride is love—God's love, redeeming love, patient love, sacrificial love, covenant love.

Jesus knows the meaning of the powers that separate people from one another (in all manner of relationships) because he bore our 'separateness' as our sin. But he bore it to destroy it—and to bring to us the power of his own enduring love. Each couple must live in this as best they can. Some will separate. Some will feel they cannot do otherwise. But their view of marriage does not need to be tutored by this experience. Love can still flood their knowing and thinking and relating.

[I Corinthians 7:10–16](#)

By the time that Jesus came, Israel already had a history of this love in action. It will be helpful to review this.

## **The story of covenant love**

God's relationship with what he has made is a covenant. That is, it is a bond, forged by him. Its strength is his love. There is nothing the human race can do about this. Our Creator loves us.

[Deuteronomy 7:6–9; Isaiah 49:1–12 with Acts 13:44–48](#)

*The statements made in this section are based on the whole Bible story. The references are only pointers to what has been said.*

It must be a matter of great thanksgiving to us that God's relationship with our race is not contractual—as though God would only be as good to us as we deserved. In fact, he has revealed his own inner nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit by creating humanity in his image and relating to us covenantally.

[Matthew 11:25–30](#)

Each person of the Triune Being serves and honours and gives to and receives from the other in a never ending flow of love. He relates to us in the same way. His doing us good is not conditional on our goodness but on his own.

[Ezekiel 36:22–28; John 10:14–18; Romans 11:32–36](#)

Before the coming of Christ, God made Israel his people. He made a covenant with them—that they would be his people and he would be their God. He established this relationship by promising to make them a people, by saving them from slavery. He called them his wife. He would be husband to them. He expressed the nature of his relationship with them by giving them his law.

[Exodus 6:2–8; 19:5–6; 20:1–3; Isaiah 54:1–5](#)

The covenant spelled out to Israel included this command, that they should not commit adultery. Another command said they should not desire another man's wife or husband. God made it part of his covenant with his people that they be faithful to their 'one flesh' or new family relationship. To break this relationship with each other would be to be unfaithful to their covenant with God. In fact, their own marriage was itself a covenant.

[Exodus 20:14; Proverbs 2:17 ; Malachi 2:14–16](#)

## **Marital rivalry and God's redeeming love**

If God made Israel his wife and their personal marriage covenants were integral to his covenant relation with them all, how did it 'work out'?

Israel decided that they could live for more than one 'man'—God and their idols. They trusted other gods than him and God called it adultery. For a time, he would give them up to their 'lovers'. But although they were unfaithful to the marriage, God couldn't give Israel up. He allowed her to suffer deeply, to feel the pain of finding another way, but would not abandon his covenant of love.

[Jeremiah 3:20](#)

He regathered them. They still had adultery in their hearts and were sometimes unfaithful to their personal covenant partners. But God's promises to them remained: he would be their God and they would be his people. He had further business with them.

On many occasions, God spoke of his steadfast love, especially in times of national disgrace or personal failure. The hope of the world lies in this steadfast love of God. He will not cast off what he has purposed to have as his own.

[Hosea 11:8–9](#)

A covenant is not a mutual agreement—dependent on the faithfulness of two parties (ie. a contract). It is the bond established by God promising to take his chosen people as his own, calling them to be like him, and faithfully loving them and bringing them to inherit what he has promised to them.

[Jeremiah 31:31–36](#)

It is impossible for humans to make covenants like this themselves. Love is of God, not of us. The power to redeem is of God and not of us. Our marriage covenant is viable inside of God's covenant with us—a reflection of his relating to us and endowed with the power of his redemption to flow on into our relating.

[I John 4:7–12](#)

Marriage is not a contract—where failure of one party releases the other from their obligations. We are not talking about a negotiated convenience or arranged pleasure but about love. And this love does not begin and end with us but is an expression in our daily life of the covenant love God has for us. When a partner is unfaithful to their spouse, there is more at stake than our culture or our rights.

God's love took the form of sending his Son—Jesus Christ. He came as Bridegroom, to purify and to win the affection of his Father's people. He came to take them back to his Father as his Bride. This is why I say that marriage will never die—because God's love will never die. The Bridegroom is called the Lamb—because he laid down his life to gain his Bride.

[Revelation 5:1–14; 21:9–11](#)

Far from being renewed by this visitation, Israel crucified the Son. They acted more like a pagan nation than as a prepared people. It is as though the whole world ganged up on God and the Messenger of his covenant with us. But Christ had said that when he was lifted up (to die) he would draw all people to him. Strangely, in suffering like this, Jesus had drawn to himself all the awfulness of human adultery. He was on the cross because of it. But he was also there to suffer God's judgement on it.

[Matthew 26:28; John 12:31–33; Acts 3:13–15; 4:27–28; 5:29–32; I Peter 2:21–25](#)

Here was the Bridegroom doing what only a Bridegroom could do: bearing the shame that had fallen on his Bride—because he was still her Bridegroom while she was still sinful.

[Ephesians 5:25–27](#)

There is no other story like this story. We cannot make it easier to digest by comparing it to anything. It is the story of God and his relationship or bond with the world—and his Son bearing witness to this in his life and death. This Son has been raised from the dead—to be our living Head.

[Revelation 1:4–6](#)

I say 'our' because I am speaking as one who belongs to Christ. Christ died for the sins of the world because God has a bond with the world. Our believing does not make the bond. That comes from God alone and he brings us into it. The Son came to be the Messenger of the covenant. But there remains a fearful prospect. What if God loves the world, gives his Son for its restoration, and is rejected by people within his creation? The Bible talks about destruction—everlasting destruction. God's love is not weak. He is patient, self-sacrificing, restoring, but jealous too, and insistent that we know him as he is.

[Hebrews 10:26–31](#)

Here then is the true marriage, and at the end of history, Christ will come to take his complete Bride to himself. In that day, God's holy people will be a perfect Bride, suited to the Son of God, beloved by him and ready to inherit with Christ the whole of the perfected creation.

[Revelation 19:6–8; 21:1–5](#)

## Summary

Marriage is never the sum of its own parts—as if one could abolish marriage by unfaithfulness. It is to us who have been unfaithful that God's covenant love is

proclaimed. God's own covenant love is unchanging and he will bring us to the goal he has for us. In this hope, we can know the love of God in our personal marriages.

When the disciples of Jesus came to him to ask about separating from their wives, we may understand his dismay, but also the eagerness with which he put before them how marriage was from the beginning. And now, he has put before us also how things will be in the end, and is himself, the true source of love for all marriage.

So marriage is not a private arrangement between individuals, or even a bond authenticated by society, but a representation in our common life of God's relation to his people. This enables couples to live in marriage as it really is. The ultimate marriage is not our own but Christ's to the Church. Ours is a reflection of that. Knowing this means that all the riches of the relationship between Christ and his Church can flow on into earthly marriages.

[Matt. 22:30](#)

Knowing this empowers those who are not married to remain pure. If they belong to Christ, they are purified by him and, in this present life, have a concern to see the final marriage of Christ to the Church reflected in those who are married.

Knowing this enables a husband to love his wife as Christ loved the Church. If a husband thought that he could do this naturally—because his wife was lovable or attractive—he would not have understood life as it really is. Love is what God has for us. Love is what we reflect when we are loved and forgiven by God.

The form of Christ's love for the church is that he has made her clean through the offering of himself to God for her as a sin offering. A husband is to represent this to his wife in his faithful love and in always living with his wife in the light of Christ's redemption.

Living in the story of the true marriage enables wives to love and respect their husbands. It is interesting that it is older women who are regarded as being able to teach this to those who are younger. Age ripens love that is true; it does not weary it.

[Titus 2:3–4](#)

All of the Christian life is a miracle. It is lived by God's blessing and within the provisions Christ has made for our life. This is true of Christian marriage in particular. Paul says:

*'whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them' (Col. 1:17–19).*

God says: 'Be holy as I am holy', or, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'. Our own relationships are to be the overspill of his own relating to us. Through Christ and the Holy Spirit, his own covenantal faithfulness is poured out into us and through us.

[Matthew 5:48; John 7:37–39](#)