

What is the place of marriage in the wide setting of God's purpose for the whole of creation? In marriage we are tapping into the revealed secret of God's purpose for the universe, and are giving very practical expression to it. The Bible says the story of the human race culminates in a marriage. God has always regarded His relationship with us in this way, and has brought it to fruition in the love-relationship between the Bridegroom Jesus Christ and his glorious Bride—the people of God. This is the greatest marriage of all time.

In the light of this, what is marriage, and what is it for? What is the place in marriage of sexual attraction and appreciation of each other between a man and a woman? Is there a rightful ordering of relationships in a marriage? How sustainable is marriage in the 'real' world of today? What of marriage breakdown, and the alternative reconstituting of relationships? What about family life, and bringing up children?

Marriage is no longer the social norm in Australia that it once was. Many couples are managing without it, and a sizable proportion of those who marry do not stay in it for life. A majority of marriages still last a lifetime, and many of them thrive. This book seeks to set out, clearly, positively and simply, the true nature and great benefits of God's gift of marriage, to commend it to this generation. Of special interest to couples preparing for marriage, it is relevant for others—married or not—and for communities in general. For marriage impacts us all.

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Marriage and the Good News of God

Martin Bleby



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Marriage and the Good News of God

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Marriage

and the

Good News of God

Martin Bleby

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For my wife Vivien
co-parent, lover, and best friend

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Introduction

In writing a book about marriage, I need to acknowledge first of all that I am married to Vivien, and that this year we have celebrated our thirty-eighth wedding anniversary. Vivien it was whom God used to undermine and break down the fortress of my defensive isolation as a person, and open me out to another. I cannot conceive what life and ministry might have been without her. It did not stop there—we now have four grown-up children and nine grandchildren.

But it was bigger than that: as Vivien came up the aisle on our wedding day, the choir sang Psalm 122: ‘I was glad when they said unto me: we will go into the house of the Lord’. The full significance of that has only recently struck me. We were singing about how ‘Jerusalem is built as a city: that is at unity in itself’. It is where ‘the tribes of the Lord’ gather, to give thanks to the Lord, and to come for merciful judgement before ‘the seat of the house of David’—the Messiah himself. It is a prayer for peace, prosperity and plenteousness for God’s people. It is a promise to seek the good of this city, because it is the dwelling-place of God. It is a Psalm that has its ultimate fulfilment not in the physical city of Jerusalem but in the dwelling of God with His people through the cleansing and forgiveness that we have in Jesus Christ. Certainly our

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married life would be spent together seeking the good of the people of God. But more than that: as my bride came towards me up the aisle, we were being told of our final destination: ‘the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’—of which our marriage was to be a reflection and a foretaste.

In writing a book about marriage, I also need to say that I have officiated at over three hundred weddings, and have helped to prepare many couples for marriage. To help with this, we did attend various marriage preparation courses, which were helpful in some practical ways. But the best help I found in some books by my late friend and colleague Geoffrey Bingham—a shorter one called *Man, Woman and Sexuality* (1980, 1986), a larger work entitled *God’s Glory, Man’s Sexuality* (1988), and a later one, *The Profound Mystery: Marriage Love, Divine and Human* (1995).¹ Here he maintained that marriage is not just a more or less convenient arrangement between two people. As Christians, we know God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the dynamic unity of the Father’s purposeful love. We as men and women have been designed and made to reflect and participate in this unity and love of God in our relationships with each other. In particular, the joining of man and woman in marriage is intended to reflect and participate in the ultimate unity of God with His people in what the Bible calls ‘the marriage of the Lamb’ with his Bride—the fruitful union of Christ with his people the Church. To be truly understood and practised, marriage must be seen and experienced in these biblical terms. I knew that any complete marriage preparation would need to be structured along these lines.

¹ All available from New Creation Publications.

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The opportunity came when I was appointed to a local church whose beautiful building attracted many weddings. We set up a regular four-week Saturday morning course with the catchy title, 'What the Bible Has to Say about Marriage', which most couples coming to get married attended. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 of this book are based on the four sessions of that course. Chapter 1 contains material I would share during interviews with each couple. No consideration of the biblical view of marriage would be complete without an examination of what the apostle Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians chapters 6 and 7—this comes in chapter 6, 'You Are Not Your Own'. During my ministry I needed to wrestle with the vexed matter of divorce and remarriage—my conclusions are in chapter 7. The final chapter 8 trawls through the rich biblical materials on having children and bringing them up, in the context of the whole Family of God.

My desire is that this book be used by individuals contemplating marriage, by couples preparing for marriage, by those already married—whether their marriage is going well or not—and by any in the community, married or not, who are interested in discovering more. In this, I hope to commend the goodness and benefits of God's great gift of marriage to this generation.

Martin Bleby
Coromandel East
March 2010

Chapter 1

Why Marriage?

WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

Marriage is ‘the legal union of a man with a woman for life’. The word is also used for ‘the legal or religious ceremony that sanctions or formalises the decision of a man and a woman to live as husband and wife’.¹ Elements that make it a marriage, as distinct from other forms of union or relationship, are that it is between a man and a woman, by the consent and decision of both parties; it is recognised and affirmed by the wider community according to the law of the land, and it is witnessed to in a formal ceremony. These elements are common to humanity across most cultures.

In Australia, before a marriage is solemnised, an authorised marriage celebrant is required to say to the parties, in the presence of the witnesses:

‘Before you are joined in marriage in my presence and in the presence of these witnesses, I am to remind you of the solemn and binding nature of the relationship into which you are now about to enter.

¹ *The Macquarie Dictionary*, Macquarie University, NSW, second edition, 1991, p. 1091.

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‘Marriage, according to law in Australia, is the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life.’, or words to that effect.²

This definition of marriage as ‘the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’ was enshrined in the Act itself in an amendment passed by the Commonwealth Parliament in August 2004.³ This had the effect of forestalling attempts to include other relationships, such as those of same-sex couples, in the official definition of marriage.

This understanding of marriage has been influenced by Christian belief and practice, in that, for instance, it does not allow for polygamy or forced marriage. The introduction, in the 1975 Family Law Act, of ‘irretrievable breakdown’ (measured as a twelve months separation) as the single ground for divorce,⁴ put the law of the land at variance with a number of Christian positions on the lifelong nature of marriage. Nevertheless, Christian churches have generally seen marriage as a creational gift to the whole of humanity, believers and non-believers alike, and have recognised legal marriages whether solemnised in a Christian ceremony or not.

Questions for reflection:

- *How is marriage distinct from other forms of union or relationship?*

² *Marriage Act 1961–1966*, 46 (1), Commonwealth of Australia, *Handbook for Marriage Celebrants*, Canberra, c. 1970, p. 71.

³ David Phillips, ‘Marriage versus Civil Unions’, Festival of Light Australia Resource Paper, *Light*, August 2006, p. 8.

⁴ *Marriage, Divorce and the Family: New Rules for Australians: Questions and Answers on the 1975 Family Law Act*, CCH Australia Limited, 1975, p. 15.

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- *What is the significance of the relationship between marriage and the law of the land?*
- *What makes marriage more than 'just a piece of paper'?*

GOD AND MARRIAGE

In the Bible, marriage is seen in direct relationship with God. It is God who has created human beings male and female, and it is God who first brought the woman to be one with the man.⁵ Marriage is referred to as a 'sacred covenant' or 'the covenant of . . . God'.⁶ Jesus declared that God is directly involved in the joining of a man and a woman in marriage:

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; quoting Genesis 1:27; 2:24).

Not only that, but marriage is seen to be a reflection of the very purpose of God for His creation. The creation is to culminate in a union of Jesus Christ with his people, as of a husband with his bride. When Paul the apostle quotes Genesis 2:24, we expect him to say that it is referring to a husband and wife coming together in marriage. Paul, however, comes up with something much larger than that:

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32).

⁵ Genesis 1:27; 2:7, 21–22.

⁶ Proverbs 2:17, NRSV and RSV.

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Paul is saying that when God in the beginning instituted marriage between a man and a woman, what God had in view was the relationship that would come to be in the end between Christ and his people. Every marriage is to be a reflection of, and a participation in, that great reality to come.

This could be why Jesus indicated that marriage between a man and a woman is for this life only, and not for the life to come:

For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage (Matthew 22:30).

Marriage is only 'as long as we both shall live' and 'until we are parted by death'.⁷ It does not go on after that (which is why the remaining marriage partner is free to marry another when one of them dies), because God has got something even better than marriage lined up for us there, which our earthly marriages can in some measure reflect, participate in, and prepare us for here.

Given the vast dimensions of this understanding of marriage, it is little wonder that the Bible sees marriage as a wonderful mystery that is beyond our present understanding:

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

How does an eagle fly in mid air? How does a snake move without legs? How does a ship float and sail? None of these,

⁷ *An Australian Prayer Book*, Anglican Information Office, Sydney, 1978, pp. 563, 550.

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after they have passed, leave a pathway that can be traced. Even more wonderful, and untraceable, is the relationship between women and men, especially in marriage.

Couples who have been married for many years can still discover depths in each other and in their relationship that they have not known before. ‘We’ve been married fifty-five years’, a friend said to me. ‘That’s wonderful’, I said. ‘My wife has dementia’, he said. ‘Even as it was coming on, I was given a new kind of love for her that no longer depends on what we are able to do together.’ I said, ‘You are being shown new dimensions of the love of God!’⁸

A ‘mystery’ in the Bible is a hidden truth, which is opened by God’s revelation to those humbly willing to receive and respond. The ‘great mystery’ of marriage, then, is not a puzzle to be solved, but a reality to be lived in.⁹

Questions for reflection:

- *Marriage—a ‘wonderful mystery’, or a more or less convenient arrangement?*
- *How does marriage relate to God’s purpose for the universe?*
- *What kind of love would it be ‘that no longer depends on what we are able to do together’?*

⁸ Used with permission.

⁹ See Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Profound Mystery: Marriage Love, Divine and Human* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1995), p. 7; *The Glory of the Mystery and the Mystery of the Glory* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1998), pp. 1–5.

MARRIAGE IN AUSTRALIA

Big changes have happened in Australia over the last thirty years in the way marriage is appreciated and practiced. An obvious answer to the question, 'Why marriage?' can no longer be assumed. Thirty years ago, nearly 90% of Australians were married by the age of thirty; today more than half the people that age still have not committed to marriage. Some 76% of couples start off living together, up from only 16% thirty years ago. By the end of five years only half of those get married, and the rest go their separate ways. Over 40% of contemporary marriages are likely to end in divorce. Nearly 9% of marriages break down in the first five years. Second or later marriages now amount to 34%.¹⁰ Only 40% of marriages now happen in a religious ceremony.¹¹

While the legal definition of marriage still stands at the Commonwealth level, there is a concerted effort to gain marriage-type legal recognition for other forms of relationship, such as same-sex unions: to develop 'nationally consistent state-based relationship recognition legislation that will include the opportunity for couples who have mutual commitment to a shared life to have those relationships registered and certified'.¹²

¹⁰ See Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia . . . Where?* (Hachette Australia, Sydney, 2007), p. 163; Professor Alan Hayes, Australian Institute of Family Studies, *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 20 Feb. 2008, p. 4.

¹¹ 'Commencing in 1999, the proportion of marriages performed by civil celebrants has been greater than the proportion celebrated by ministers of religion. In 2004, 59% of all marriages were performed by civil celebrants. This compares to 40% back in 1984. The proportion of civil ceremonies was greatest in the Northern Territory at 75% and lowest in South Australia at 55%' (Relationships Australia, *The Rest: Relationship Statistics*, vol. 52, October 2005, accessed 27 Feb. 2008 from: <<http://www.relationships.com.au/resources/pdfs/rest/trvol52.pdf>>).

¹² Australian Labor Party National Conference 2007; see 'Myths and facts about relationship registers', prepared by Festival of Light Australia, *Life News* (Nollamara WA, no. 98, June/July 2007 AD), p. 2. Such legislation was passed in Tasmania with

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Lamentable as all this may be from the churches' point of view, this is the situation as it is in Australia today, and people are getting used to it. To mount a rearguard action may be to close the door after the horse has bolted. To deplore the situation, and to castigate people for reasons they no longer understand, may not get much of a hearing. We need rather to be able to set out, clearly, positively and simply, the true nature and great benefits of God's gift of marriage, to commend it to this generation. This we seek to do here.

Questions for reflection:

- *What has been our experience among friends and family, or in our personal lives, of couples living together without being married, or of the prevalence of divorce?*
- *How might the nature and benefits of marriage be best commended in our day?*

MARRIAGE AND THE PURPOSE OF GOD

God's purpose in making the universe is most succinctly set out at the beginning of the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will (Ephesians 1:3–5).

the Relationships Act 2003 and, temporarily, in the Australian Capital Territory with the Civil Unions Act 2006, that was disallowed by the Commonwealth Government (David Phillips, *Light*, August 2006, p. 8).

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The words ‘adoption as his children’ signify family; ‘holy and blameless before him’ promises a purity matching God’s own; this all comes from and issues ‘in love’. **Family, purity and love**, then, are God’s purpose for us in creation, in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

When we look at traditional Christian forms of the wedding service, we find that these match the reasons given there as to why God instituted marriage. We consider each of these in turn.

Family

God, as the one ‘for whom and through whom all things exist’, has the ultimate intention of ‘bringing many children to glory’ (Hebrews 2:10), as ‘a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’, of whom God can say: ‘I will be their God and they will be my children’ (Revelation 7:9; 21:7). Those ‘who are called according to his purpose’ are ‘predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family’ (Romans 8:28–29). After his death and rising to life again, Jesus indicated that we can now know God as Father in the way he does (see John 20:17). In the end, the Son will be able to stand before the Father and say: ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me’ (Hebrews 2:13).

God as eternal Father already has an eternal Son and an eternal Spirit, in full and wonderful relationship. But God was not content just to remain that way, full of Himself—that’s not the way God is. God took the way of making a whole universe that is not Himself, so that there could be others that He could relate with, and who could relate with Him—who could come in on the wonderful family life that God already has in Himself, and be part of that glorious action.

Why Marriage?

In the marriage service, the first of the three purposes for which marriage was instituted by God is:¹³

for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name.¹⁴

A more recent marriage service expresses it this way:

In marriage a new family is established in accordance with God's purpose, so that children may be born and nurtured in secure and loving care, for their well-being and instruction, and for the good order of society, to the glory of God.¹⁵

Married couples who launch into having a family find that life can't be simple any more, and it can get messy. They are no longer in absolute control of everything. There are other persons, with wills of their own, that they now have to reckon with. The couple can no longer live just full of themselves—there are other people that they need to give themselves out to.

God was happy to live that way when He created others beside Himself. That is how God is. That is part of what being a family is all about. The 'solid joys and lasting treasure'¹⁶ of good family relationships make it all worthwhile.

¹³ These three 'purposes' were commonplaces of mediaeval scholastic theology, and were expounded at length in early Calvinistic services. They were introduced into the English prayer book in 1549, and so were included in the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 (see Francis Procter and Walter Howard Frere, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer with a Rationale of Its Offices*, Macmillan, London, 1965, pp. 612–13). From there they have made their way, in various forms, into later marriage services. Here they are given in the original order: family, sexual purity, and loving companionship. More recent services have reversed this order, giving priority to loving companionship and the sexual relationship, with family issuing from that.

¹⁴ 'The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony' in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

¹⁵ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 561.

¹⁶ John Newton, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken', *New Creation Hymn Book*

Purity

God's purpose is that 'in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless' (Philippians 1:10). This purity will match that of Christ himself:

What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 John 3:2–3).

'Holiness' denotes the strong and substantial purity of God Himself. Those who belong in relationship with God are enjoined:

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy (Leviticus 19:2).

As the rest of Leviticus 19 shows, this issues in very thoughtful care and practical service of God and others.

The intention of the Father in Ephesians 1:4 that we should be 'holy and blameless before him' is matched by the determined action of the Son in Ephesians 5:25–27 that we 'may be holy and without blemish' as his Bride.

Purity does not mean that we just keep ourselves from being tainted or defiled. It is much more positive than that. Purity is being single-minded towards the one thing that is good, to the exclusion of other lesser things. This operates in our relationship with God first of all: God has said, 'I am the LORD your God . . . you shall have no other gods before [or *besides*] me' (Exodus 20:2–3). So Jesus said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart'—those who are single-minded towards God—'for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8).

(NCPI, Blackwood, 2001), no. 162, v. 4. Compare Proverbs 17:17: 'A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity'. Also Hebrews 12:2, where 'Jesus . . . for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross'.

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In the area of sexuality, then, purity means we keep ourselves only for the person we are going to marry, to be able to give ourselves wholly to that one person. Marriage gives us that focus on the one other person with whom we are going to share this unique and special relationship, and keeps us in it, to discover more of the depths and the amazing wonder of being in relationship with another human being at this profound level. The Bible is clear on the importance of this single-minded focus, both before and during marriage:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:3–7).

Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers (Hebrews 13:4).

This then opens and holds the way clear for a married couple in freedom to plumb the depths of a constant, faithful and life-long relationship:

Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
may you be intoxicated always by her love
(Proverbs 5:15–19).

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Marriage, gladly accepted and engaged in, also holds us secure from the perils of undisciplined foolishness:

Why should you be intoxicated, my son, by another
woman
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?
For human ways are under the eyes of the LORD,
and he examines all their paths.
The iniquities of the wicked ensnare them,
and they are caught in the toils of their sin.
They die for lack of discipline,
and because of their great folly they are lost
(Proverbs 5:20–23).

Many wonder these days not only at the wisdom but also at the possibility of anyone remaining sexually chaste outside of marriage, or even within it. Christian churches are tempted to abandon the biblical standards to accommodate these views. However, the situation today with regard to sexual morality would appear to be little different from that which prevailed in the first century of the Christian era, against which this apparently new and strange morality of purity and holiness was established. The churches would do well to acknowledge gladly that the biblical standards are different from those that prevail around us, and we should be content to be cheerfully counter-cultural.

The second purpose given in the marriage service picks up the matter of sexual purity. ‘Marriage is . . . a lifelong union in which a man and a woman are called . . . to give themselves [to each other] in body, mind and spirit’—that is, wholly. Modern marriage services are strangely coy in giving expression to this. They speak of ‘the proper expression of natural instincts and affections’ with which God has endowed us, or of living ‘a chaste and holy life, as befits members of Christ’s body’.¹⁷

¹⁷ *An Australian Prayer Book*, pp. 560, 548.

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and will issue in us loving. The Bible is also clear that the love of which we are speaking, including the love with which we love, comes from God, and does not originate in us:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 John 4:7–8).

It is this love for which we have been made: to be loved by God, to love God who loves, and so to love one another as God loves:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matthew 22:37–39).

It is in this love that God gave of Himself to judge and redeem a world that had turned against His love:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:9–10).

This love came to us while we were still opposed to God:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Romans 5:6, 8, 10).

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The love of God with which we love, then, includes love for those opposed to us:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matthew 5:44–45).

This love is especially pertinent to marriage. Without a love like that, how can two different persons—both of them sinners—sustain a lifelong relationship at depth? Marriage is the prime testing ground where these key matters of forgiveness and reconciliation in love are to be worked through in practical ways. And they are:

Almost 60 percent of marriages will never trouble the Family Court. Although this is a smaller proportion than it used to be, it's a relatively stable majority: the official divorce rate does not appear to be rising, and may yet fall as a consequence of the falling marriage rate. Many of those marriages don't merely survive; they thrive. Some couples find that if it wasn't quite 'happily ever after' for them, their marriage has brought benefits, joys and gratifications that come very close to that. When it works brilliantly, marriage can be experienced as blissful human harmony. When it works even tolerably well, it can be a source of deep physical and emotional comfort, reliable friendship and shared experience that creates the powerful bond of a common history and the prospect of companionship into old age. A couple committed to their marriage running its full course (and that's the expectation of most married people) draw strength from the security of knowing they can rely on each other, trust each other and be open and relaxed with each other.

Only a dreamer would ask for a stress-free marriage (or, indeed, a stress-free life). Only a fool would expect perfection in human affairs, including marriage. But those in long-term committed marriages typically report that when the romance fades and the relationship settles down to the long haul of conjugal love characterised by mutual support, encouragement, respect and affection, the rewards are incalculable. Minor irritations? Yes, often. Occasional strong words? Yes.

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Disagreements? Of course. Even murderous fury, sometimes. But a stable, fulfilling marriage remains, for most Australians, a dream that either has, or might, come true.¹⁹

The third purpose given in the marriage service speaks of the lifelong outworking of this practical love:

It was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.²⁰

Marriage is: ‘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, as long as we both shall live’—a true reflection of God’s love for us all.²¹

Thus a Christian description of marriage could fill out the bare requirements of the legal definition by adding significantly: ‘the union *in mutual love* of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’.

Questions for reflection:

- *Having children and bringing them up; a special and exclusive sexual relationship; and lifelong companionship—what have we seen and known of these three aspects of marriage?*
- *How do these aspects relate to the family of God; the purity and holiness of God and His people; and the love that comes from God?*

¹⁹ Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia . . . Where?*, pp. 182–3.

²⁰ ‘The Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony’ in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

²¹ *An Australian Prayer Book*, pp. 563, 562.

GOD'S PURPOSE UNDER ATTACK

Marriage, then, relates to the purpose of God for His creation at these fundamental levels: family, purity and love. The Bible says that God's purpose for the creation has come under attack from the beginning of the human race. Beguiled by 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Revelation 12:9), we have taken it upon ourselves to formulate and enact our own purposes, deciding for ourselves what is right or wrong, without reference to God (see Genesis 3; compare Isaiah 14:12–15; Ezekiel 28:1–2, 11–19).

Since marriage is so closely aligned with the purpose of God, a central consequence of this is that marriage itself comes under attack. Marriage stands as a constant practical witness to the glorious purpose of God. For those who are still intent on their own purposes, this is a constant affront. Those who are opposed to going God's way will particularly find ways of avoiding, getting around, or perverting marriage, to remove or do despite to this offence. The apostle Paul points out that this is indeed the case, when he speaks of 'those who by their wickedness suppress the truth', such that sexual immorality and homosexual practice—anything that is *not* marriage—come to be favoured in preference to the real thing:

though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools . . . God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men

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committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done . . . They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Romans 1:21–22, 24–28, 32).

From this it is apparent that the desire for 'options' may not be as neutral or as innocent as it seems to be, but may, even unconsciously, be operating from a more sinister agenda.

The heartening thing—though it may not appear to be so—is that those who attempt to operate this way are still not in final control of their own destiny. Paul says that those who indulge in these things do so because they have been given over to these things by God, in the action of God's wrath (see Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28). God's wrath is the pressure of God's holy love against evil and sin. And we know that the love of God that judges is also the love that saves, cleanses, purifies and redeems.

Questions for reflection:

- *What connection might there be between a dislike of God and a distaste for marriage?*
- *If it is God who gives people over to lifestyles contrary to marriage, how does this hold hope for the survival and prevalence of marriage?*

WE NEED ALL THE HELP WE CAN GET

As a result of both our own shortcomings and the attacks that are mounted from other quarters, marriage is not always easy,

Why Marriage?

and we do not always get it right. With regard to family: I know a young wife who once said, 'I used to think I was a nice person—until I had children!' Sometimes they bring out the worst in us. What about purity? Being married does not stop temptation from coming our way and, in our thoughts at least, faithfulness is not something we are always good at. As for love: it is not hard to see that our own so-called love can run out. It can even turn to hatred. Staying married is a real triumph in these days of a 40% divorce rate. It is not easy. We need all the help we can get.

That is why it is good to see couples still asking the churches for a Christian marriage ceremony. Then they have not just the help and support of family and friends, but also of the church as, together with them, we ask God for the help they need in their marriage. Especially since the church prays in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. For when God designed marriage to fit with His purposes for the universe, it was our Lord Jesus Christ that He especially had in mind. His eternal Son, Jesus Christ, in God our Father's great love for us, has become one with us—our own flesh and bone. In that love of God, Jesus has embraced us into himself, with all the worst that is in us: all the offences we have committed against each other; all our selfish unfaithfulness; all the sins that mostly we can do nothing to put right; all our lack of love. He has taken us with all of that to the death on the cross that we rightly deserve, but which he has borne for us. He has taken us with him out the other side of death when he mightily rose from death to bring us back to God our Father in the family, the purity and the love for which we have been made.

What God has done there in Jesus, and being in that ourselves, is what marriage is all about. Jesus is our true husband, and we who belong to him are his glorious Bride. A husband is to love his wife like Jesus loves us. A wife is to love her husband as we would love our Lord Jesus Christ. They can

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both do that by belonging to Jesus by faith—now, and in the age to come. This is where we see God’s ultimate purpose for the universe.

Question for reflection:

- *What help do we have from God for our marriages in knowing the Lord Jesus Christ?*

JESUS AT A MARRIAGE

One of the older marriage services reminds us that ‘Christ adorned and beautified matrimony with his presence, and with the first sign by which he revealed his glory, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee’.²² Here is the account of it:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him (John 2:1–11).

²² *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 548.

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On the face of it, this was a caring and generous provision to save the family from shame and help the wedding to be a good one. It is indeed a miracle, but one that happens all the time: God is constantly turning water into wine—every time rain falls on the vineyards of the Barossa Valley! Here the process was simply short-circuited or speeded up. The Creator of all things is at work in Jesus. We are impressed by the amount of wine: 160–180 gallons (730–820 litres)! This testifies to the abundant generosity of God. Jesus is no party-pooper. It is real wine, that is given ‘to gladden the human heart’ (Psalm 104:15), and is of excellent quality.

Jesus never did something just for the sake of doing it, but always as a ‘sign’ to point to something else: the coming of God’s kingdom. We can give a spiritualised interpretation of this event, such as: ‘Jesus takes our lives which are dull and flat and tasteless like water and turns them into something rich and fruity and full-bodied like wine’! So have I preached, but that may not be the point of it at all. We can make the connections with the ‘new wine’ that is the fruit of Jesus’ ministry, that does not fit into the old wineskins (see Luke 5:33–39), or with the ‘cup’ of his death and the wine of the kingdom-banquet that will follow (see Matthew 26:27–29). But these connections may be a little ingenious and far-fetched. John simply says that in this happening Jesus ‘revealed his glory’ to those who were able to see it and believe. This ‘glory’, John has said in John 1:14, is ‘the glory as of the Father’s only Son’ (RSV). Here is the Son, coming to do the Father’s will (see Hebrews 10:5, 7). What has he come for? It is not by coincidence that John the Baptist shortly says of Jesus: ‘He who has the bride is the bridegroom’ (John 3:29), or that Jesus later told stories about ‘a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son’ (Matthew 22:2). Jesus has come for a wedding! The Bridegroom is coming for his Bride—ready or not! This is God’s ultimate purpose for

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His universe. So Jesus began his ministry with this 'sign'—at a wedding. What a way to start!

Question for reflection:

- *How does the big wedding Jesus has come for relate to our individual marriages?*
- *What difference does it make to have Jesus in your marriage?*

Chapter 2

Marriage and the Love of God

PREPARING FOR A WEDDING DAY

Many couples coming to marriage are heavily focussed on the day of the marriage ceremony, and the arrangements for the wedding. Enormous energy and cost can be expended on clothing and jewellery, invitations, flowers and decorations, cars or other forms of transport, photography and video, besides the ceremony venue, the wedding reception, and the honeymoon trip.¹ Important as it is to mark the occasion as special, such arrangements can go beyond that to indulge the couple, and especially the bride, as the centre of adoring attention. The glamour may be an attempt to mask or compensate for a certain underlying drabness or seaminess of life. The whole procedure may be little more than a complying

¹ 'On average, U.S. couples spend \$28,800 for their wedding. This does not include cost for a honeymoon, engagement ring, bridal consultant or wedding planner', source <<http://www.costofwedding.com/>> accessed 8th April 2008. In Australia, the average cost of a wedding, including the honeymoon, is \$28,700 in Australian dollars—an annual spending of \$3.5 billion (Angela Cuming, The Sun-Herald, October 31, 2004:

<<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/10/30/1099028262537.html>> accessed 8th April 2008).

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with cultural or family expectations. Or it may be just an excuse for an expensive party.

All of this can overshadow what is at heart a simple yet wonderful happening: the public undertaking of a man and a woman to come together as husband and wife for the rest of their lives. Churches do well to encourage couples not to feel bound by customary expectations above and beyond this. Churches ministering with the poor have been known to facilitate simple, cheap and joyful communal weddings that avoid the prohibitive costs.

Questions for Reflection:

- *What preparations have been made, or can you recall, for your own wedding day, or for a wedding you have attended?*
- *How did these enhance or detract from the central significance of the occasion?*

PREPARING FOR MARRIED LIFE

Undue focus on the day of the wedding can also be a distraction from the larger ongoing issues of this lifelong relationship. Where the couple will live and work, what number of children they will have and when, and how they will relate with each other in the daily practical outworking of that, are issues of greater ongoing import than just what happens on the day of the wedding. Churches and other agencies provide helpful and necessary marriage preparation resources and courses to assist couples to work together through many of these arrangements.

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In particular, couples may be helped to think and talk with each other about their particular hopes and expectations for their married life together. It is good when the hopes and expectations of the husband and wife match each other, and can be shared. Sometimes these can be a bit idealistic, drawn more from stories in magazines and movies than from real life. For a marriage to continue, and even to grow and deepen, it will need something more substantial than the glamour and excitement of the initial romance.

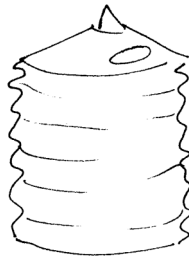
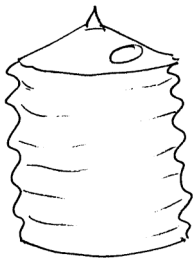
In this study we take it a step further to look at these issues in the even wider setting of God's purpose for the whole of creation.

Questions for Reflection:

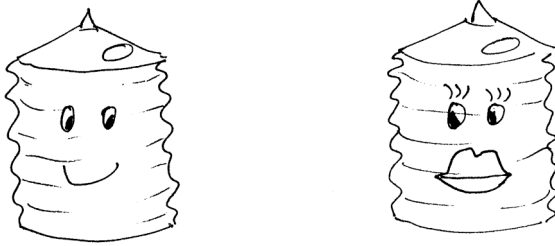
- *What have been the hopes and expectations for your own marriage, or a marriage that you have observed?*
- *How have these hopes and expectations been fulfilled, or disappointed?*

A STORY OF TWO WATER TANKS

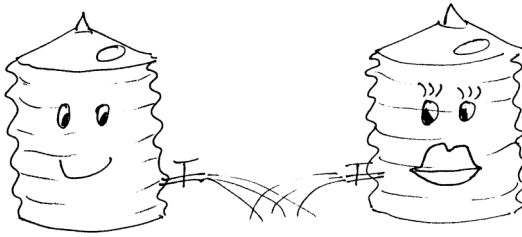
Once upon a time, there were two water tanks.



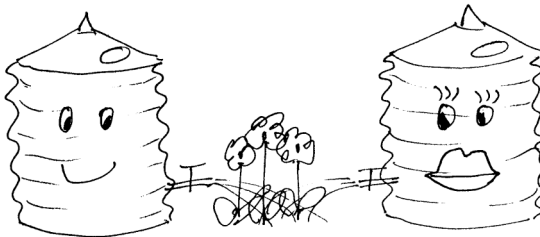
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A man water tank, and a lady water tank. And they decided to get together to make a garden.

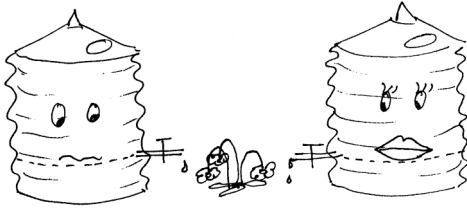


So they turned on their taps towards each other, and the water flowed freely . . .



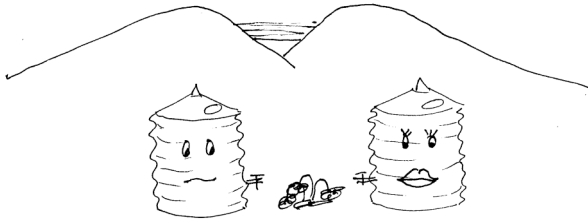
. . .and very soon a beautiful garden sprang up! And everything in the garden was lovely.

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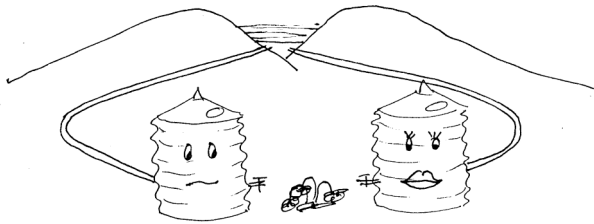


Sadly, after a while, the water level in each of the tanks became low, and the flow was reduced to a trickle. The garden began to look a bit dry and droopy, and there wasn't much hope of its recovery.

Fortunately, that was not the end of the story.

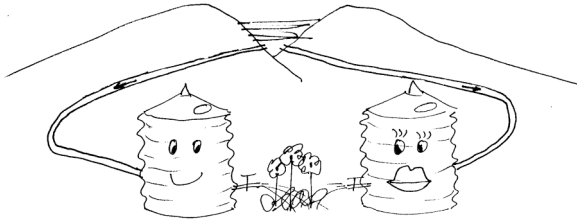


In the hills behind the water tanks, there was a great reservoir that was always full-to-overflowing with bright sparkling water.



So they got themselves linked up with the great reservoir that was always full-to-overflowing with bright sparkling water. Pipelines were laid to each water tank from the great reservoir.

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As the water flowed through the pipelines from the great reservoir in a never-ending supply, the water tanks were able to keep their taps on towards each other full bore, knowing that they would never run out of water. In fact, the more they poured out towards each other, the more there was for them both.

So the water flowed freely. And everything in the garden was lovely.

In case we haven't guessed already, this story is a parable about marriage. A man and a woman come together, pour out their love towards one another, and make a family. Their own resources of love, however, can quickly run out. They need to be constantly replenished with the true love from outside themselves, that never runs out.

Human beings were never designed to be self-sufficient. We are dependent every moment on what is outside ourselves: the air we breathe, the food we eat, the love of others. Our whole purpose and direction and way of life is not determined by ourselves:

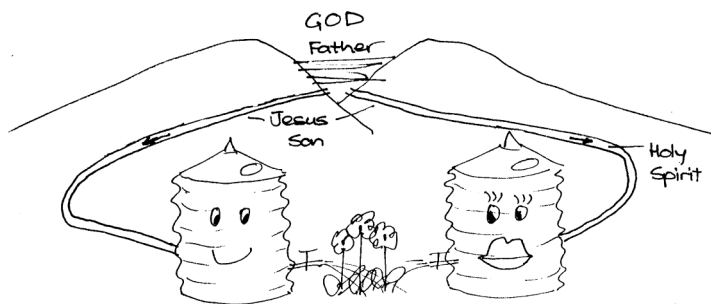
... people's lives are not their own
[literally: *The way of persons is not in themselves*];
it is not for them to direct their steps
(Jeremiah 10:23, TNIV).

The Bible depicts God as breathing into us 'the breath of life' from the very beginning (Genesis 2:7), and says that God gives to all people 'life and breath and everything' (Acts

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17:25, RSV). God is for us ‘the fountain of living water’ (Jeremiah 2:13)—we are dependent upon God at every moment for every breath we take and every move we make. How did we ever think that we could sustain something as demanding and wonderful as a marriage out of our ‘own’ unaided resources?

Hence ‘the great reservoir that was always full-to-over-flowing with bright sparkling water’, and the pipelines connected to the water tanks, and the water flowing through them. No picture can ever rightly represent the dynamic and personal reality of God—certainly not anything as static and impersonal as a reservoir or pipelines (any more than human beings, made in the image of the living God, can be represented as fixed corrugated-iron water tanks!)—but we get the point. All of life is a gift, and is not from ourselves. We have been made, in our marriages as in everything else, to rely on God at all times for all things—to have faith in the one Jesus knew as ‘Father’—to be linked with Him by the ‘one mediator’, Jesus Christ God’s Son (1 Timothy 2:5), and so to have the love of God ‘poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5). Only in that way can ‘rivers of living water’ flow from us into the lives of others (John 7:37–39)—the way it was meant to be.



Questions for Reflection:

- *What has been your experience of running out of love?*
- *What has been your experience of being replenished?*

IN THE BEGINNING

Let us go back to the beginning, when God made everything and, in making us male and female, inaugurated marriage:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind [Heb. *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

So God created humankind [Heb. *adam*] in his image,
in the image of God he created them [Heb. *him*];
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Genesis 1:26–28).

Rather than us going our own way, this gets us to think about what God wants us to do as human beings, in marriage and in life. We are to ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’. This has been called ‘the creational mandate’. It covers pretty well every conceivable human activity.

‘Be fruitful and multiply’ doesn’t mean just have lots of children. It means to do this in a way that bears much fruit. What children end up doing and achieving in their lives is part of the fruit that their parents are producing. Every human

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activity that is involved in having and raising and caring and providing for and feeding and clothing and sheltering children and families, and keeping them in health and wellbeing, and teaching and training and taking them on to adult occupations, is included in this part of the mandate.

To ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ is to occupy the whole earth in an ordered and useful way. We practically can’t help doing that. We move onto patches of ground and turn them into homes and farms and gardens. Driving north-east of Coober Pedy on the Oodnadatta road in the hot dry centre of Australia, I crossed the ‘moon plain’—as dry and dusty and stony as the surface of the moon—then came to a slight rise with a dry watercourse flowing round it, where there was the homestead of an old run-down cattle station. Some young brothers had moved in, and were taking charge of the place: renewing the fences and cattle yards, building machinery sheds, training their horses for stock work. Whether they knew it or not, they were fulfilling the creational mandate, even in that desolate region. It was as if it had been built into them. They later married wives and brought them to the homes they had prepared. Children were born, and started their schooling, and the families gathered with neighbours from near and far for gymkhanas and social events.

In a more settled agricultural area, a farmer took me round the bounds of his property, proudly showing me how he cared for the soil, and how well his crops were doing.

Nor is this activity restricted to what happens on the surface of the ground:

Miners put an end to darkness,
and search out to the farthest bound
the ore in gloom and deep darkness.
They open shafts in a valley away from human habitation;
they are forgotten by travelers,
they sway suspended, remote from people.

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As for the earth, out of it comes bread;
but underneath it is turned up as by fire.
Its stones are the place of sapphires,
and its dust contains gold (Job 28:3–6).

Why did God put opal under the ground at such a desert place as Coober Pedy? Perhaps because, without that incentive, no one would come to fill and subdue that particular part of the earth, as He had told us to do! And, when they did, they would be provided for. Even the wilderness areas we take in hand to preserve and care for, to help keep them in their pristine condition.

Then there are our dealings with the animal creatures, both domestic and wild: ‘have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’. That dominion is real—we can be responsible for the extinction or survival of whole species of creatures. All living creatures have been given into our care, and much human activity is devoted to this exercise.

Much of the earth we fill with cities and business premises and transport corridors, so that all this vast range of activity and its commerce can be managed and facilitated. Even lawyers, accountants and bank managers, along with road workers and truck drivers, are helping to fulfill the creational mandate!

Whether we acknowledge it or not, all our lives we are engaged in carrying out what God gave the human race to do from the beginning:

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with . . . I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God’s gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil (Ecclesiastes 3:10, 12–13).

Marriage and the Love of God

Marriages and families are involved at the heart of all this business of living, and can be said to be essential to it. But we can still ask the question: Is that all there is to it—just getting on with the business of living? What is it all for? Is there more to it than that?

Questions for Reflection:

- *How does your occupation fit into the creational mandate?*
- *What place does marriage and family have in that?*

MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES IN THE BIBLE

The Bible has a lot to say about getting on with the business of living. Much space is devoted to genealogies and family trees—who married who, and what children they had, over many generations. Attention is given to details of daily life—caring for animals, planting and harvesting crops, eating food, building houses, religious observances, and business dealings. Interest is taken in the movement of peoples, and the territories they occupied.

One such slice of life is found in the book of Ruth, dating from sometime before 1000 BC. Set in disordered and violent times, it is a story of tender care and love. Under pressure of famine, Naomi, with her husband and two sons, left the town of Bethlehem in the land of Israel and moved to the neighbouring country of Moab, where her husband died. Her two sons married Moabite women, and the sons also died, leaving Naomi, widowed herself, with two widowed daughters-in-law. Hearing that the famine in Israel was over, she decided to

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return home to Bethlehem. Ruth, one of the daughters-in-law, in a show of great affection and loyalty, insisted on coming with her:

Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1:16–17, NRSV).

It so happened that Ruth was able to gather grain for food in the field of Boaz, a rich relative of Naomi's husband, where Boaz saw to it that she was protected and provided for. Naomi encouraged Ruth to continue there. We pick up the story in chapter 3:

Some time later Naomi said to Ruth, 'I must find a husband for you, so that you will have a home of your own. Remember that this man Boaz, whose women you have been working with, is our relative. Now listen. This evening he will be threshing the barley. So wash yourself, put on some perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go where he is threshing, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. Be sure to notice where he lies down, and after he falls asleep, go and lift the covers and lie down at his feet. He will tell you what to do.'

Naomi clearly has some plan in mind!

Ruth answered, 'I will do everything you say.'

So Ruth went to the threshing-place and did just what her mother-in-law had told her. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking, he was

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in a good mood. He went to the pile of barley and lay down to sleep. Ruth slipped over quietly, lifted the covers and lay down at his feet. During the night he woke up suddenly, turned over, and was surprised to find a woman lying at his feet.

As young hot-blooded theological college students reading this story, we thought, ‘Yeah, right—they didn’t touch each other all night—as if!’ But that is how it was:

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘It’s Ruth, sir,’ she answered. ‘Because you are a close relative, you are responsible for taking care of me. So please marry me.’

Even today, it is generally the custom for the man to propose to the woman, but here it is the other way round. And we say that women in the Bible are put down!

Boaz, as an older man, was deeply touched by this:

‘The Lord bless you,’ he said. ‘You are showing even greater family loyalty in what you are doing now than in what you did for your mother-in-law. You might have gone looking for a young man, either rich or poor, but you haven’t. Now don’t worry, Ruth. I will do everything you ask; as everyone in town knows, you are a fine woman. It is true that I am a close relative and am responsible for you, but there is a man who is a closer relative than I am. Stay here the rest of the night, and in the morning we will find out whether or not he will take responsibility for you. If so, well and good; if not, then I swear by the living GOD that I will take the responsibility. Now lie down and stay here till morning.’

Again, nothing untoward happened between them. Boaz’s deep respect for Ruth, and care for her good reputation, is evident:

So she lay there at his feet, but she got up before it was light enough for her to be seen, because Boaz did not want anyone to know that she

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had been there. Boaz said to her, 'Take off your cloak and spread it out here.' She did, and he poured out almost fifty pounds [nearly twenty kilograms] of barley and helped her lift it to her shoulder. Then she returned to the town with it. When she arrived home, her mother-in-law asked her, 'How did you get along, daughter?'

Ruth told her everything that Boaz had done for her. She added, 'He told me I must not come back to you empty-handed, so he gave me all this barley.'

Naomi said to her, 'Now be patient, Ruth, until you see how this all turns out. Boaz will not rest today until he settles the matter' (Ruth 3:1–18, GNB).

Boaz negotiated with the nearer relative, and took Ruth to be his wife, and they had a son called Obed, Naomi's first grandchild.

On the face of it, a simple story of love and marriage and family in the midst of the business of living. Right at the end of the story, however, we find that there is more to it than just that. Obed, we are told, became the father of Jesse, and Jesse, as was well known, was the father of David, Israel's greatest king. That possibly explains how the book of Ruth came to be included in the Bible: David no doubt made sure that this story of his great-great-grandmother was not forgotten!

The Holy Spirit of God had an even larger reason for including it in the Bible. Who do we know that was born into David's family, in Bethlehem, one thousand years later? Jesus, who turned out to be the Son of God, through whom God saved the world and brought us back to Himself! Matthew, right at the beginning of his account of the life of Jesus, set out Jesus' family tree, where Ruth holds an honoured place among Jesus' forbears (Matthew 1:5). Suddenly we see that the ordinary business of living depicted in this story—of marrying and having families, and all that goes with that—is part of a much larger purpose of God.

Question for Reflection:

- *Have you ever had a sense of your ordinary life being part of a larger purpose?*

IS THERE MORE TO LIFE?

A believer asked a young man what he expected in life.

He answered: 'First I want to matriculate and go to a university'.

And then?

'Then I want to get a well-paid job, buy a nice house, relax and enjoy myself.'

And then?

'Then I want to marry and have some nice children.'

And then?

'Then I want to make a career and to be something.'

And then?

'Then I will be old and become a pensioner.'

And then?

'Yes—I'll die in the end' (he said, hesitating).

And then?

'I don't usually think about it.'²

This may not be everyone's chosen career path, but we get the picture. Enjoying life and getting on with the business of living is all very well, but death raises a big question mark over it all. Is that all there is? Is there more to it than that?

If there is a larger purpose that we are a part of, and we have a careless disregard for it, we could be missing the bus, or worse. Jesus spoke to his disciples about the end of the world:

² Adapted from Anders Åkerlund & Michael Proctor, *Go, Know, Live: A Presentation of the Christian Faith for Young People* (SCM Press, London, 1970), p. 40.

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The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, 'Look there!' or 'Look here!' Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them—it will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed (Luke 17:22–30; referring to Genesis 6:1–7:24; 19:1–29).

Jesus was saying that, in the end, we will be face to face with him. For all our getting on with the business of living, the question will be asked: What part have you played in the larger purpose for which Jesus has come?

We would do well to know what that larger purpose is, and how to be a part of it.

Questions for Reflection:

- *'I don't usually think about it.' What is it that keeps us from wanting to think about these larger questions of life? What are we afraid of?*
- *If Jesus is there at the end, how well do we know him now?*

THE FAMILY OF GOD

We return to God's creation of us, and what that tells us about the larger purpose that we are here for:

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Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind [Heb. *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

So God created humankind [Heb. *adam*] in his image,
in the image of God he created them [Heb. *him*];
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Genesis 1:26–28).

This time we look particularly at how we human beings have been made ‘in the image of God’. That means that we are not God, but we are like God—we reflect somehow the way God is. Later it says that ‘Adam’—the human person—already in the ‘likeness’ and ‘image’ of God, ‘became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image’ (Genesis 5:3). So being in someone’s image and likeness has to do with being related with that person as a son to a father. Children are related intimately to their parents, and take after them. We are related to God as children to our Father. That is how Jesus taught us to address God: ‘Pray then in this way: Our Father . . .’ (Matthew 6:9). We have been made to be related closely to God, and to take after Him. God says this is how it will be in the end with the ‘great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’ (Revelation 7:9):

I will be their God and they will be my children (Revelation 21:7).

Part of being in that image of God is being male and female:

. . . God created humankind [Heb. *adam*] in his image,
in the image of God he created them [Heb. *him*];
male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

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We are not all the same. We are different, but in ways that fit with one another. Men and women, in their complementary relationships with each other, reflect something of the way God is.

This may be reflected in the way God speaks about Himself when He makes us:

Let *us* make humankind [Heb. *adam*] in *our* image, according to *our* likeness (Genesis 1:26).

God does not say, ‘Let *me* make humankind in *my* image’—He refers to Himself as ‘us’ and ‘our’. There is an ‘us-ness’ about God—something relational in God Himself—that perhaps requires that we be different-and-relational, as male and female, to truly reflect something of the way God is. The New Testament makes the statement, ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8, 16). God’s very nature is relational. We have been made to image God as relational ourselves, in our relationships with God and with each other.

We have already touched on this in the story of the water tanks. From the New Testament we now know God to be Father, Son and Holy Spirit—in full and intimate relationship with each other, and with us:



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Once again, no picture or diagram can rightly represent the dynamic reality of the personal living God, but this may serve to illustrate something of what the Scriptures tell us. The God and Father of us all—above all, and through all, and in all—is the one from whom and for whom we exist. Jesus, the only Son of the Father, with the Father from before the beginning, the one through whom we have come to be and through whom we exist, has come from the Father, to be one with us in our human flesh, to enter into our judgement and take away our sins by bearing them in his death, to rise again, and return to the Father, taking us with him! The Holy Spirit of God, present from the beginning in the very act of creation, the one through whom Jesus was conceived, who came on Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove, and on the followers of Jesus at Pentecost like tongues of fire, comes from the Father, points us to Jesus and brings us to belong to him, pours the love of God into our hearts, and brings us to know God as Father. At the heart of God is the mighty action of the cross, planned from before the beginning, by which the great love of God is made known to us, and to the whole creation. All who belong to Christ have been baptised into this life and action of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.³

This opens up the full dimensions of God's original command:

... God created humankind [Heb. *adam*] in his image,
in the image of God he created them [Heb. *him*];
male and female he created them.

³ Scripture references include: Ephesians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 8:6; John 1:18; 17:5; 16:28; 1:14; Romans 8:3; John 12:31–33; 1:29; 1 Peter 2:24; Mark 16:6; Acts 2:24; John 17:24, 26; 1 Peter 3:18; Ephesians 2:18; Genesis 1:2; Matthew 1:20; 3:16; Acts 2:1–4; John 15:26; 1 Corinthians 12:3, 13; Romans 5:5; 8:15–16; 1 Peter 1:18–21; Revelation 13:8; Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:9–10; Romans 8:19–21; Matthew 28:19. Sustained reflection on these Scriptures will be richly rewarded.

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God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Genesis 1:27–28).

The ones God was telling to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ were those already in this relationship with God, enjoying His blessing. So when they moved out to fill the earth, what were they to fill it with? Not just with themselves, but with this relationship and blessing of God! Until, as another Scripture says, ‘the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea’ (Habakkuk 2:14).

Questions for Reflection:

- *When God told us to fill the earth, what are we to fill it with?*
- *What have we filled it with instead (see Genesis 6:5, 11)?*

MARRIAGE AND THE GLORY OF GOD

In making us male and female, not only was God making us to reflect something of how He is in Himself. In bringing the man and the woman together in marriage, God was also giving us a reflection of, and a participation in, the way we are related with Him, and of how in the end His people will be united with Christ—as a bride with her husband.

Every marriage, then, consciously or unconsciously, is to be part of that larger purpose of making God’s glory known—of taking that relationship and blessing—to the ends of the earth. One of the Psalms appointed to be said or sung in some forms of the marriage service is Psalm 67:

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Let God be gracious to us and bless us:
and make his face to shine upon us,
That your ways may be known on earth:
your liberating power among all nations.
Let the peoples praise you, O God:
let all the peoples praise you.
Let the nations be glad and sing:
for you judge the peoples with integrity,
and govern the nations upon earth.
Let the peoples praise you, O God:
let all the peoples praise you.
Then the earth will yield its fruitfulness:
and God, our God, will bless us.
God shall bless us:
and all the ends of the earth will fear him.⁴

On the face of it, this psalm would appear to have little to do specifically with marriage. But in the light of the larger purpose, it has everything to do with it. Every marriage, in one way or another, is to be part of the making known of God's nature and glory in all the earth—God's graciousness and liberating power, His just judgements and good governance, His blessing and fruitfulness. People should be able to look at a married couple and say: 'God must be a great God, if He can give two people like you a marriage as good as that!'

No marriage is confined just to the couple who have come together in marriage. Ripples go out from them to affect the lives of other people: their children, and friends, visitors to the home, and people in the wider community. Imagine that a husband and wife have had a fierce unresolved argument first thing in the morning. They go off to work grumpy and angry; maybe they drive dangerously, even cause an accident; and

⁴ The Anglican Church of Australia, *A Prayer Book for Australia*, Broughton Books, Alexandria, 1995, p. 287.

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when they get to work they spread nothing but irritation and grief among their work colleagues. If, on the other hand, they are secure in each other's love, knowing the great grace of forgiveness and peace with each other in love and affection, what goes out from that home and relationship is more likely to be ripples of joy and good cheer. Psalm 67 speaks of this second scenario.

An opal-mining friend of mine, formerly opposed to the church and Christianity, but converted to Christ when he went to church and heard God speaking to him through the preaching, stood up at his daughter's wedding and said: 'The main reason you two are getting married, is so more people can know the love of God'. What a wonderful thing for a father to say to his daughter and new son-in-law!

Question for Reflection:

- *What have we known of bad or good ripples going out from a marriage?*

Chapter 3

The Greatest Love-Song Ever Written

SEXUAL ATTRACTION AND APPRECIATION

Built in to the way God has made human beings as male and female is the natural attraction and delight that exists between women and men. This can be purely at the physical level—the shapes of our bodies, the expressions on our faces, the sounds of our voices, the feel of touch and caress, even of taste and smell—and our physiological responses to these. It can extend to appreciation of personality, shared humour, intellectual stimulation, caring words and actions, and enjoyment of common occupations, activities and experiences. The ever-present reality that a person is male or female is a constant factor that deeply affects our relationships with each other across the human scene. When one such relationship between a man and a woman becomes close and intimate, issuing in marriage, this attraction and appreciation reaches profound levels.

Something of this is reflected in the Bible's account of the creation of man and woman:

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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;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken’ (Genesis 2:22–23).

The man and the woman are different, but they have affinity—they are made of the same stuff, they fit with one another, they are created from one to be one with each other—they belong together. And so they come together:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

There is a freedom, an openness and a natural delight in one another’s company:

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:25).

An older form of the Marriage Service has the man saying these words to the woman as he puts a ring on the woman’s finger:

with my body I thee worship.¹

‘Worship’ there means to ‘honour’, and he does it in no abstract way, but in a practical way—with his body.²

¹ The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

² Just as the apostle Paul tells us as to how we are to give ‘spiritual worship’ to God: ‘present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Romans 12:1)—that is, through everything we do with our bodies.

THE SONG OF SONGS

This attraction and appreciation between women and men has been the subject of countless love songs. Some songs are little more than coarse and lustful, many are sweet, simple and homely, some soar to heights of passion—all of them draw forth from us some resonating emotional response.

The greatest of all love songs is found in the Bible. Known as *The Song of Songs* or *The Song of Solomon*, written nearly 3,000 years ago, it is an ancient Hebrew marriage song that was probably used at weddings.

It is a collection of a number of songs or poems.³ As such, it uses the ‘picture-language’ of poetry. This may sound strange to many modern ears in this prosaic age but, once we get used to the impressions it conveys, we will not find it difficult to work out what it is saying. The songs are made up mostly of words spoken by a woman to a man, and by the man to the woman, with occasional other voices joining in.

The title is given as:

The most beautiful of songs, by Solomon (Song of Songs 1:1).

Solomon, son of king David and Bathsheba, was the wisest and wealthiest king in Israel’s history (970–930 BC; see 1 Kings 3 and 4). The title may mean that the Song of Songs is written by Solomon, or about him, or that it was dedicated to Solomon.⁴ There are references to Solomon in the Song, but

³ There is great variation among translators and commentators as to how many such songs or poems there are in this Song, and who says what in the course of them. We use here the text and layout of the *Good News Bible*, as a translation that is accessible, and makes good sense (*Good News Bible: Today’s English Version*, The Bible Society in Australia, Canberra, 1987).

⁴ See footnote to Song of Songs 1:1 in the *Good News Bible*.

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the position we take here is that the Song is not about Solomon himself. The woman in the Song is of peasant stock, and the man is a shepherd (see Song 1:6–8). They are also in an exclusive relationship with each other (see Song 8:6: ‘Close your heart to every love but mine; hold no one in your arms but me’), whereas Solomon among his wives had ‘seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines’, who also turned his heart away from a faithful relationship with God (see 1 Kings 11:3, NRSV). So we take it that the references to Solomon in the Song are by way of comparison rather than identification.

Any understanding of marriage based on the Bible must take into account the Song of Songs. We will read it right through, and see what comes to us from it.

The First Song—1:2–2:7

The Woman

Your lips cover me with kisses;
your love is better than wine.
There is a fragrance about you;
the sound of your name recalls it.
No woman could keep from loving you.
Take me with you, and we’ll run away;
be my king and take me to your room.
We will be happy together,
drink deep, and lose ourselves in love.
No wonder all women love you! (1:2–4).

The woman is clearly smitten with love for this man. He is very special to her. There is a ‘chemistry’ operating between them. She cannot imagine that all women do not feel the same way about him as she does. She wants to be special to him, exclusively: for him to be her ‘king’, and she his queen. His

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kisses please and satisfy her, and she is filled with pleasurable anticipation of their union in love.

As another person becomes important to us in our lives, so we become more aware of ourselves, and how we may appear to others. The woman's thoughts turn to herself and her looks:

Women of Jerusalem, I am dark but beautiful,
dark as the desert tents of Kedar,
but beautiful as the draperies in Solomon's palace.
Don't look down on me because of my color,
because the sun has tanned me.
My brothers were angry with me
and made me work in the vineyard.
I had no time to care for myself (1:5–6).

It appears that she has suffered from some kind of male chauvinism on the part of her brothers. No such thing is present, as we shall see, in her relationship with the man. She is keen to make arrangements to be with him. There is perhaps, however, at this stage a certain shyness and uncertainty on her part at their being seen together:

Tell me, my love,
Where will you lead your flock to graze?
Where will they rest from the noonday sun?
Why should I need to look for you
among the flocks of the other shepherds? (1:7).

The man reassures and encourages her, and confirms the arrangements for their rendezvous:

The Man

Don't you know the place, loveliest of women?
Go and follow the flock;
find pasture for your goats
near the tents of the shepherds (1:8).

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We then hear from the man how he feels about the woman. Clearly the attraction is mutual, and the man can see no reason why all men would not be attracted by her beauty:

You, my love, excite men
as a mare excites the stallions of Pharaoh's
chariots (1:9).

Anyone who has witnessed the distracted friskiness of a stallion in the presence of a mare will know what that is like. This, however, is not a case of seeking 'to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding', as one of the old marriage services put it.⁵ The man is deeply respectful. Such is her beauty to him that he desires to adorn and honour her:

Your hair is beautiful upon your cheeks
and falls along your neck like jewels.
But we will make for you a chain of gold
with ornaments of silver (1:10–11).

In the face of her shy and uncertain self-awareness, the man thus gives the woman gentle encouragement.

In her musings the woman now anticipates the pleasures of being with her man.⁶ In her total devotion to him, he is her 'king'—and she is his queen:

⁵ Solemnization of Matrimony, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

⁶ We adopt here an interpretation of the Song of Songs that sees it as consistent with the law of Israel's God, which upheld chastity and was against sexual union outside of marriage (see on fornication, Deuteronomy 22:13–29 and 2 Samuel 13:12: 'such a thing is not done in Israel'; compare 1 Thessalonians 4:3. On adultery, Exodus 20:14 and Genesis 39:7–10, 'sin against God'; compare Matthew 5:27–28). This interpretation sees the songs as chronologically sequential, with the marriage occurring in the third song from 3:6, with its consummation in 5:1. Not all commentators take this position. There are those who take it that 'These two people are

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The Woman

My king was lying on his couch,
and my perfume filled the air with fragrance.
My lover has the scent of myrrh
as he lies upon my breasts.
My lover is like the wild flowers
that bloom in the vineyards at Engedi (1:12–14).

There is a pleasurable and restful contentment here in one another's presence, with rich promise of greater fulfilment to come. The couple are full of admiration for each other, and have eyes only for each other. They are able to give free expression to this with each other:

The Man

How beautiful you are, my love;
how your eyes shine with love!

The Woman

How handsome you are, my dearest;
how you delight me! (1:15–16a).

In reality, her 'king' is not yet 'lying on his couch' with her. They are meeting out-of-doors (see 1:7–8), catching some time together while they go about their daily work. Perhaps they have taken seclusion together in a forested area. The woman imagines the grass below as the bed and the branches above as the roof beams of the home they will share together:

simply in love with one another, and are planning to sleep together without anyone else's permission, without benefit of marriage license or church ceremony' (H. Gollwitzer, *Song of Love: A Biblical Understanding of Sex*, Fortress Press, 1979, p. 29; quoted in G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1984, p. 46)—no doubt advocating that it is all right to do the same today.

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The green grass will be our bed;
the cedars will be the beams of our house,
and the cypress trees the ceiling (1:16b–17).

(The cedar trees are tall and strong; the cypress trees are softer and lower.) Once again, in this intimate situation, she becomes self-conscious, and aware of her lack of sophistication as a country girl, albeit one with a coy and wild beauty of her own:

I am only a wild flower in Sharon,
a lily in a mountain valley (2:1).

Once again, he encourages her: as far as he is concerned, her beauty outshines that of all other women:

The Man
Like a lily among thorns
is my darling among women (2:2).

This emboldens her to express how, for her, he also is incomparable, and that she can't get enough of him:

The Woman
Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest,
so is my dearest compared to other men.
I love to sit in its shadow,
and its fruit is sweet to my taste (2:3).

So again, she anticipates their love-making in her imagination:

He brought me to his banqueting hall
and raised the banner of love over me.
Restore my strength with raisins and refresh me with apples!
I am weak from passion.
His left hand is under my head,
and his right hand caresses me (2:4–6).

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Then comes an admonition, addressed to the ‘women of Jerusalem’—perhaps those attending the wedding ceremony, where this poem is being recited. It is a refrain that is repeated through the book, and it rounds off this part of the Song:

Promise me, women of Jerusalem;
swear by the swift deer and the gazelles
that you will not interrupt our love (2:7).

The interpretation ‘that you will not interrupt our love’ belongs to the *Good News Bible* translation. This suggests something that has already started, that is not to be stopped. The more literal translation is: ‘do not stir up or awaken love until it is ready’ (*New Revised Standard Version*). This applies to something that is yet to happen: ‘first the act of awakening or *summoning* something, and then doing what is necessary to *sustain* the activity already begun’.⁷ This awakening is not to happen until there is a willing readiness and desire for it. This suggests that there is an appropriate timeliness about love-making, that is not to be forced, hurried, or pressed in advance.⁸ Restraint in the interests of deep respect and love for the other person lies at its heart.

Questions for Reflection:

- *How are we going with this so far? How does it relate to some of our own experiences?*

⁷ Carr, *Song of Solomon*, p. 94.

⁸ While this has implications for pre-marital sexual relations and fondling—couples should not ‘jump the gun’, and ‘petting’ should stop short of foreplay that would normally lead to sexual union—it applies no less in the context of married love-making.

The Second Song—2:8–3:5

The second song has to do with how the couple feel and think about each other while they are eagerly waiting. It also begins to anticipate some of the impediments that could get in the way of their relationship and cause damage.

First we hear what each one does for the other in terms of the feelings that are aroused for each other. The woman experiences the excitement of anticipating his approach:

The Woman

I hear my lover's voice.
He comes running over the mountains,
racing across the hills to me.
My lover is like a gazelle,
like a young stag.
There he stands beside the wall.
He looks in through the window and glances
through the lattice (2:8–9).

He is obviously keen to get to her, and to catch a glimpse of her beauty. She thrills to hear his voice:

My lover speaks to me.

The Man

Come then, my love;
my darling, come with me.
The winter is over; the rains have stopped;
in the countryside the flowers are in bloom.
This is the time for singing;
the song of doves is heard in the fields.
Figs are beginning to ripen;
the air is fragrant with blossoming vines (2:10–13a).

What time of year is this referring to? It is Spring, when the sap begins to flow again in the plants and growth is vibrant,

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all is fresh and new, the birds are sending out mating calls, and it is the season for love. This is a good example of how poetic picture-language is used to speak of the exciting early stages of their relationship, just as further on a later time of the year is spoken of to signify their love coming to maturity (see 7:12). So the man issues his ardent invitation:

Come then, my love;
my darling, come with me (2:13b).

With this, there is so much more to get to know of each other, and still a shy yet attractive reticence in sharing it openly. He says to her:

You are like a dove that hides
in the crevice of a rock.
Let me see your lovely face
and hear your enchanting voice (2:14).

Another note then intrudes:

Catch the foxes, the little foxes,
before they ruin our vineyard in bloom (2:15).

What are ‘the little foxes’, and what is ‘our vineyard’? The picture-language of poetry again: the ‘vineyard’ is their relationship, and ‘the little foxes’ are the things that can get in the way of their relationship and do it harm—the little annoyances, the pickiness, the unthinking selfishnesses. The man sees that these intrusions need to be identified and dispatched as they arise, before they do permanent damage. All this is part of coming to know each other, and of putting their relationship on a sound footing.

Reassured, the woman is glad to be in the place of fully belonging to each other, in enduring contentment and peace, eager for their next encounter:

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The Woman

My lover is mine, and I am his.
He feeds his flock among the lilies
until the morning breezes blow
and the darkness disappears.
Return, my darling, like a gazelle,
like a stag on the mountains of Bether (2:16–17).

But now to her also come anxious misgivings as to what might go wrong. When someone has become important to us, the thought of losing them is unbearable. The suggestion, and fear, of this possibility comes to her at night in a dream:

Asleep on my bed, night after night
I dreamed of the one I love;
I was looking for him, but couldn't find him.
I went wandering through the city,
through its streets and alleys.
I looked for the one I love.
I looked, but couldn't find him.
The watchmen patrolling the city saw me.
I asked them, 'Have you found my lover?' (3:1–3).

Haven't we all had dreams like that: when we are trying to get to a particular place or person or activity and never quite make it? This particular dream, on this occasion, much to her relief, has a happy ending:

As soon as I left them, I found him.
I held him and wouldn't let him go
until I took him to my mother's house,
to the room where I was born (3:4).

In her dream she finds him, hangs on to him, and takes him home to her place. Once again comes the refrain of tender yet restrained passion:

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Promise me, women of Jerusalem;
swear by the swift deer and the gazelles
that you will not interrupt our love
[Literally: do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready] (3:5).

Questions for Reflection:

- *What have we known of ‘the little foxes’, or of the fear of loss, in our relationships? How well, or poorly, have we coped with them?*

The Third Song—3:6–5:1

In this song, the marriage ceremony takes place, and the couple consummate their union.

For the bride, the coming of her bridegroom is strong and regal:

The Woman

What is this coming from the desert
like a column of smoke,
fragrant with incense and myrrh,
the incense sold by the traders?
Solomon is coming, carried on his throne;
sixty soldiers form the bodyguard,
the finest soldiers in Israel.
All of them are skillful with the sword;
they are battle-hardened veterans.
Each of them is armed with a sword,
on guard against a night attack.
King Solomon is carried on a throne
made of the finest wood.
Its posts are covered with silver;
over it is cloth embroidered with gold.

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Its cushions are covered with purple cloth,
lovingly woven by the women of Jerusalem.
Women of Zion, come and see King Solomon.
He is wearing the crown that his mother
placed on his head on his wedding day,
on the day of his gladness and joy (3:6–11).

An entourage is pictured, approaching across the desert, kicking up a cloud of dust. As it comes near, a heady fragrance is discerned. The bridegroom is like a king on his wedding-day. His attendants are like the soldiers of a king's bodyguard. All the appurtenances and adornments of kingship honour the bridegroom, even to a special crown that he wears for the occasion. So taken is the bride with her bridegroom that she wants all the other women to see and admire him.

Is this really King Solomon coming to get married, or is this again the picture-language of poetry, that invests the wedding with something of the deep significance that it holds? We have already seen that this couple are in fact a shepherd and a peasant-girl, and that King Solomon, with his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, could never have known the intimate one-on-one relationship, to the exclusion of all others, that these two have. The truth is that every wedding, however humble, has a royal quality about it. For the bride, the bridegroom is her one-and-only—her 'king'—and she is his queen. What is so special about a royal wedding such as was witnessed by millions between Prince Charles and the Lady Diana? What attracted people to that occasion, and drew them to participate in it? Was it not, in some sense, everybody's wedding: every prospective bride and bridegroom, every parent's daughter or son? In an Orthodox wedding, there is an elaborate ceremony of placing crowns on the heads of the bridegroom and bride. And are they not regarded, in some

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sense, as indeed king and queen for a day? Such may well be the significance of what is being said here.

The bridegroom eyes his bride as, in a modern wedding, he might watch her coming towards him up the aisle:

The Man

How beautiful you are, my love!
How your eyes shine with love behind your veil (4:1a).

His eyes begin at the top of her head, and move on downwards:

Your hair dances like a flock of goats
bounding down the hills of Gilead.
Your teeth are as white as sheep
that have just been shorn and washed.
Not one of them is missing;
they are all perfectly matched (4:1b–2).

This is not the comparison that others of us might make, but he is, after all, a shepherd, and these are the things that make his day. Her lips are what attract him next—not so much for kissing as for the words that come to him from them:

Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
how lovely they are when you speak.
Your cheeks glow behind your veil (4:3).

Her neck is adorned, it would seem, with a full necklace, possibly made up of the coins of her dowry. To him it makes her appear as an upright woman, a tower of strength:

Your neck is like the tower of David,
round and smooth,
with a necklace like a thousand shields
hung around it (4:4).

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Moving down, beautifully:

Your breasts are like gazelles,
twin deer feeding among lilies (4:5).

There he stops. Her whole being and presence with him is like
a mountain of fragrance—more than he can take in:

I will stay on the hill of myrrh,
the hill of incense,
until the morning breezes blow
and the darkness disappears.
How beautiful you are, my love;
how perfect you are! (4:6–7).

There is an eager wildness about her that evokes the names of
far-off rugged heights frequented by untamed beasts. All he
wants is to have her with him:

Come with me from the Lebanon Mountains, my bride;
come with me from Lebanon.
Come down from the top of Mount Amana,
from Mount Senir and Mount Hermon,
where the lions and leopards live.
The look in your eyes, my sweetheart and bride,
and the necklace you are wearing
have stolen my heart.
Your love delights me,
my sweetheart and bride.
Your love is better than wine;
your perfume more fragrant than any spice.
The taste of honey is on your lips, my darling;
your tongue is milk and honey for me.
Your clothing has all the fragrance of Lebanon
(4:8–11).

He is close enough to touch her clothing. We may take it that
they now retire to the bridal chamber, and are alone there, in

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full appreciation and readiness for each other. The man is aware of treasured hidden depths within her that she is about to open to him:

My sweetheart, my bride, is a secret garden,
a walled garden, a private spring (4:12).

This could be a way of saying that she is a virgin, and that she has kept herself just for him—a precious gift, lovely to see.⁹ He senses some of the delights that are in store:

there the plants flourish.
They grow like an orchard of pomegranate trees
and bear the finest fruits.
There is no lack of henna and nard,
of saffron, calamus, and cinnamon,
or incense of every kind.
Myrrh and aloes grow there
with all the most fragrant perfumes.
Fountains water the garden,
streams of flowing water,
brooks gushing down from the Lebanon Mountains
(4:13–15).

These are not just sexual delights, but the rich delights of her whole personality, in the profound mystery of what it is to be a human being in the image of God. God speaks of Himself as ‘the fountain of living water’ (Jeremiah 2:13), and tells us: ‘Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life’ (Proverbs 4:23). All of this is now wafting towards him from her ‘secret garden’. She then issues a fresh and lovely invitation to him:

⁹ What of those who do not come to their marriages this way? In the next study we will see how it is possible to come even so as if it was this way.

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The Woman

Wake up, North Wind.
South Wind, blow on my garden;
fill the air with fragrance.
Let my lover come to his garden
and eat the best of its fruits (4:16).

This tender and open invitation the man gladly takes up:

The Man

I have entered my garden, my sweetheart, my bride.
I am gathering my spices and myrrh;
I am eating my honey and honeycomb;
I am drinking my wine and milk (5:1a).

It is about sexual union, the consummation of two whole personalities in ‘one flesh’. It is spoken of very delicately and purely.¹⁰ It is beautiful, and deeply satisfying.

Encouragement comes from those outside, still revelling in the marriage feast:

The Women

Eat, lovers, and drink
until you are drunk with love!

Question for Reflection:

- *What can we say? How does this affect our understanding and appreciation of marriage, and the importance of the wedding day?*

¹⁰ This is a world apart from the coarseness and impurity that defile God’s gift in pornography and R-rated movies, and could never be mistaken for it—unless, of course we come to it as those who are ‘corrupt and unbelieving’, for whom ‘nothing is pure’ (Titus 1:15).

The Fourth Song—5:2–6:3

Once we are married, unlike the fairy tales, we do not necessarily live ‘happily ever after’. We find we are subject to the same temptations and distractions, and the same preoccupation with self, that we had before we were married. These things are now capable of doing even more damage than before, because so much more is now at stake. But they offer opportunities for even richer and deeper union than we would have thought possible.

The fourth song opens with another of the woman’s dreams, but this time much worse than it was before:

The Woman

While I slept, my heart was awake.
I dreamed my lover knocked at the door.

The Man

Let me come in, my darling,
my sweetheart, my dove.
My head is wet with dew,
and my hair is damp from the mist (5:2).

It seems this time he has come, not from leaping across the mountains like a young stag, but from across the boggy moors.¹¹ The woman’s thoughts immediately fly to her own comfort and convenience:

The Woman

I have already undressed;
why should I get dressed again?
I have washed my feet;
why should I get them dirty again? (5:3).

¹¹ Perhaps he’s come home late from work—or from the pub!

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Why should she put herself out for him? There is no denying that the old ‘chemistry’ is still there:

My lover put his hand to the door,
and I was thrilled that he was near.
I was ready to let him come in (5:4–5a).

Yet even as she accedes to his request, she is still very conscious of herself and her perfume:

My hands were covered with myrrh,
my fingers with liquid myrrh,
as I grasped the handle of the door (5:5b).

This is where the dream turns into a nightmare:

I opened the door for my lover,
but he had already gone (5:6a).

Gone! The old fears of loss (compare 3:1) come flooding back. Sometimes, in the early stages of a marriage, the relationship can be a bit tenuous and uncertain, and so more open to doubts and fears. Sometimes the threat of relationship breakdown arises much later.

In the dream, this makes her miss him badly, and long for him:

How I wanted to hear his voice!
I looked for him, but couldn’t find him;
I called to him, but heard no answer (5:6b).

This time there is no quick resolution, as there was in the earlier dream. It gets worse before it gets better. Not only is she suffering loss, but she is also subjected to abuse:

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The watchmen patrolling the city found me;
they struck me and bruised me;
the guards at the city wall tore off my cape (5:7).

She enlists her women friends to help find him, and take him a message from her:

Promise me, women of Jerusalem,
that if you find my lover,
you will tell him I am weak from passion (5:8).

Earlier on, there had been no doubt in her mind that her man was quite outstanding compared with other men (see 2:3). Now she is called upon to recall what is so special about him:

The Women
Most beautiful of women,
is your lover different from everyone else?
What is there so wonderful about him
that we should give you our promise? (5:9).

This evokes from her a deeper appreciation of him and his masculinity than she has given expression to before:

The Woman
My lover is handsome and strong;
he is one in ten thousand.
His face is bronzed and smooth;
his hair is wavy,
black as a raven.
His eyes are as beautiful as doves by a flowing brook,
doves washed in milk and standing by the stream.
His cheeks are as lovely as a garden
that is full of herbs and spices.
His lips are like lilies,
wet with liquid myrrh.

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His hands are well-formed,
and he wears rings set with gems.
His body is like smooth ivory,
with sapphires set in it.
His thighs are columns of alabaster
set in sockets of gold.
He is majestic, like the Lebanon Mountains
with their towering cedars.
His mouth is sweet to kiss;
everything about him enchants me.
This is what my lover is like,
women of Jerusalem (5:10–16).

Informed of such a paragon, the women are keen to help look for him:

The Women

Most beautiful of women, where has your lover
gone?
Tell us which way your lover went,
so that we can help you find him (6:1).

Renewed and deepened in her appreciation and love of her man, the woman is reunited with him, now more surely than ever, and they embrace with freedom and openness:

The Woman

My lover has gone to his garden,
where the balsam trees grow.
He is feeding his flock in the garden
and gathering lilies.
My lover is mine, and I am his;
he feeds his flock among the lilies (6:2–3).

This time he is not just, as before, pasturing his flock among the lilies—a picture of peace and contentment in each other's presence. This time, he is actively 'gathering lilies': their enjoyment of one another in married love is full and unhindered.

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Questions for Reflection:

- *What have we known of relationships damaged by entrenched selfishness?*
- *What opportunities does this give for richer and deeper union?*

The Fifth Song—6:4–8:4

Following the wedding, the man is increasingly impressed by the woman's beauty, and drawn back to her again and again.

He realises first that his wife is no wimp or doormat:

The Man

My love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah,
as lovely as the city of Jerusalem,
as breathtaking as these great cities (6:4).

A city is a place of dynamism, strength and magnificence. This is woman in her proper glory!¹² He can't stop looking at her,¹³ and is captivated by her:

Turn your eyes away from me;
they are holding me captive (6:5a).

He cannot help reverting to what attracted him to her earlier:

Your hair dances like a flock of goats
bounding down the hills of Gilead.
Your teeth are as white as a flock of sheep
that have just been washed.

¹² Contrary to what some would have us believe of the Bible's view of women.

¹³ Even though we were staying along the striking scenery of the Great Ocean Road, all the photos I took on our honeymoon were of my new bride.

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Not one of them is missing;
they are all perfectly matched.
Your cheeks glow behind your veil (6:5b–7).

He is, however, also capable of coming up with something new, that expresses his exclusive attachment to her above all others:

Let the king have sixty queens, eighty concubines,
young women without number!
But I love only one,
and she is as lovely as a dove.
She is her mother's only daughter,
her mother's favourite child.
All women look at her and praise her;
queens and concubines sing her praises (6:8–9).

There are times when he suddenly sees her in a whole new light, as if he has never seen her before:

Who is this whose glance is like the dawn?
She is beautiful and bright,
as dazzling as the sun or the moon (6:10).

This is a time for checking out how their relationship is going, and taking it on to new levels of affection and trust:

I have come down among the almond trees
to see the young plants in the valley,
to see the new leaves on the vines
and the blossoms on the pomegranate trees.
I am trembling; you have made me as eager for love
as a chariot driver is for battle (6:11–12).

For the moment, however, that will have to wait. We are taken to the scene of a dance—perhaps the ancient Hebrew equivalent of the bridal waltz at a wedding reception:

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The Women

Dance, dance, girl of Shulam.
Let us watch you as you dance.

The Woman

Why do you want to watch me
as I dance between the rows of onlookers? (6:13).

The man joins in, and watches her intently. This time, he begins at her feet, and moves his eyes all the way upward, missing nothing:

The Man

What a wonderful girl you are!
How beautiful are your feet in sandals.
The curve of your thighs
is like the work of an artist.
A bowl is there,
that never runs out of spiced wine.
A sheaf of wheat is there,
surrounded by lilies.
Your breasts are like twin deer,
like two gazelles.
Your neck is like a tower of ivory.
Your eyes are like the pools in the city of Heshbon,
near the gate of that great city.
Your nose is as lovely as the tower of Lebanon
that stands guard at Damascus.
Your head is held high like Mount Carmel.
Your braided hair shines like the finest satin;
its beauty could hold a king captive (7:1–5).

Art and craft, agriculture, nature, architecture and the landscape are all called upon to provide comparisons to this strong and wonderful person. We are not sure what shape the ‘tower of Lebanon’ was, but no doubt the woman had a fine outstanding nose of the Semitic type. As he dwells on each of

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these endearing features, he looks on her now not from a distance, but as his own, known intimately to him, and even more delightfully attractive to him for that reason:

How pretty you are, how beautiful;
how complete the delights of your love.
You are as graceful as a palm tree,
and your breasts are clusters of dates.
I will climb the palm tree
and pick its fruit.
To me your breasts are like bunches of grapes,
your breath like the fragrance of apples,
and your mouth like the finest wine (7:6–9a).

The respectful restraints that were proper before they were married no longer apply—they now belong wholly to each other. His devotion to her is now expressed completely: ‘With my body I worship you’.

The woman is no less inhibited in her receiving of his affection and desire, and in the giving of herself to him:

The Woman

Then let the wine flow straight to my lover,
flowing over his lips and teeth.
I belong to my lover, and he desires me (7:9b–10).

Together they go off into the country, perhaps on what we would call their honeymoon, to give attention to their growing and maturing relationship, with its promise of such fruitfulness, as the woman says:

Come, darling, let’s go out to the countryside
and spend the night in the villages.
We will get up early and look at the vines
to see whether they’ve started to grow,
whether the blossoms are opening
and the pomegranate trees are in bloom.

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There I will give you my love.
You can smell the scent of mandrakes,
and all the pleasant fruits are near our door.
Darling, I have kept for you
the old delights and the new (7:11–13).

Mandrakes are an aphrodisiac (compare Genesis 30:14–18), but these two have something going between them that needs no artificial aids or stimulants to last into the years.

Cultures vary as to how much expression of affection is appropriate before others. In this culture it appears that brother and sister were more free to show affection in public than was acceptable for husband and wife. This explains what the woman says next:

I wish that you were my brother,
that my mother had nursed you at her breast.
Then, if I met you in the street,
I could kiss you and no one would mind (8:1).

Earlier the woman had dreamed that she would bring the one she loved to her mother's house (see 3:4). No doubt it was her mother who first taught her the facts of life and prepared her for marriage by instructing her in how to love her husband (compare Titus 2:3–5). That connection is still strong in her thinking, and now she wants to take him there—perhaps to show how well she has learned her lessons (or, depending on how it is translated, to continue learning from him):

I would take you to my mother's house,
where you could teach me love.
I would give you spiced wine,
my pomegranate wine to drink (8:2).

Here, as now everywhere else, they are together:

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Your left hand is under my head,
and your right hand caresses me (8:3).

Once more (as in 2:7 and 3:5) comes the refrain:

Promise me, women of Jerusalem,
that you will not interrupt our love
[Literally: do not stir up or awaken love
until it is ready] (8:4).

The *Good News Bible* translation may be correct at this point, now that their love for each other has been fully awakened. If we still take the literal translation, the woman may be wanting it made known that this full relationship that they now have is worth waiting and keeping yourself for. Also, as we said at 2:7, restraint in love-making, out of consideration for the other person, belongs just as much in the married relationship. True love is never forced, hurried, or pressed in advance.

Question for Reflection:

- *What can we learn from this about the growth and maturing of a marriage relationship in the long term?*

The Sixth Song—8:5–14

Conclusions are now drawn from the lasting strength and durability of the relationship we have observed between these two. It begins with perhaps what we would call their return together from their honeymoon:

The Women

Who is this coming from the desert,
arm in arm with her lover? (8:5a).

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The woman then reminds the man of the time she was first in love with him (compare 2:5):

The Woman

Under the apple tree I woke you,
in the place where you were born (8:5b).

Reference to ‘the place where you were born’ may be saying that this was when he first became fully alive; or it may be saying that they were destined for each other from birth.

The climax and summary of the whole Song comes in what the woman says next:

Close your heart to every love but mine;
hold no one in your arms but me.
Love is as powerful as death;
passion is as strong as death itself.
It bursts into flame
and burns like a raging fire.
Water cannot put it out;
no flood can drown it.
But if anyone tried to buy love with his wealth,
contempt is all he would get (8:6–7).

The depth and strength of their relationship has been that it is ‘the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’.¹⁴ It is this one-on-one relationship, to the exclusion of all others, that enables a couple safely to explore and discover the height and depth and breadth and length of true love. Here they can know a love in life that is ‘for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are

¹⁴ *Handbook for Marriage Celebrants*, p. 71. See chapter 1.

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parted by death'.¹⁵ The bond of love that is forged there cannot be undone. How could anyone ever pay enough for this priceless gift? The notion that it could be haggled over or bargained for in that way is a denial of its very nature as free and total gift—from God, and on the part of the participants.

There is a message in this for those who are yet to come to marriage:

The Woman's Brothers

We have a young sister,
and her breasts are still small.
What will we do for her
when a young man comes courting?
If she is a wall,
we will build her a silver tower.
But if she is a gate,
we will protect her with panels of cedar (8:8–9).

Seeing the wholesomeness of the relationship between this woman and man, the woman's brothers are concerned that their younger sister not miss out on something so worthwhile. Her virginity is worth keeping for something as good as this. 'If she is a wall'—proof against all comers as she holds and prepares herself for her future husband—they will honour and uphold her in that. 'But if she is a gate'—likely to be open to anyone who comes—they will take steps to protect her from such folly, so that she not miss out on the real thing.

The woman, now free from all self-consciousness in her secure relationship with her husband, warmly affirms her status as his wife, and how she came to be that way:

¹⁵ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 550.

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The Woman

I am a wall,
and my breasts are its towers.
My lover knows that with him
I find contentment and peace (8:10).

The man no less rejoices in what has come to him, as surpassing in value all that a king could own:

The Man

Solomon has a vineyard
in a place called Baal Hamon.
There are farmers who rent it from him;
each one pays a thousand silver coins.
Solomon is welcome to his thousand coins,
and the farmers to two hundred as their share;
I have a vineyard of my own! (8:11–12).

Their final exchange, in the hearing of others, recalls both their early encounter, and their wedding night, in the summation of all that they now enjoy. The man calls:

Let me hear your voice from the garden, my love;
my companions are waiting to hear you speak (8:13).

And she replies:

The Woman

Come to me, my lover, like a gazelle,
like a young stag on the mountains where spices
grow (8:14).

Question for Reflection:

- *What is it that gives such a marriage its strength and durability?*

A GIFT FROM GOD

The Preface in one of the marriage services includes this statement:

Marriage is a gift from God for the well-being of mankind, and for the proper expression of natural instincts and affections with which he has endowed us.¹⁶

In traditional marriage services, before the vows are made, a preliminary question is asked requiring the free and willing consent of both parties, without which the marriage would not be a valid one. The bridegroom is asked:

. . . will you have [this person] as your wife,
to live together, as God has ordained,
in the holy state of matrimony?
Will you love her, cherish her,
honour and protect her,
in sickness and in health;
and, forsaking all others,
be faithful to her,
as long as you both shall live?¹⁷

The bride is asked a similar question. Each of them answer: ‘I will’—that is, ‘I am willing; that is my full intention; and I am doing this completely of my own free will’. True love is given freely. It cannot be forced.

These are the things to which the Song of Songs gives such rich and wonderful expression.

In preparation of couples for marriage, I have long had the practice of reading through with them the Song of Songs.

¹⁶ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 560.

¹⁷ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 549.

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Other marriage and sex manuals may have their place, but nothing comes near the Song of Songs for the range and tenderness of expression that it gives to the love of a woman and a man around marriage. One couple came in, feeling a little ragged from exchanges with family and in-laws-to-be over the wedding arrangements. Once we had been through the Song of Songs they breathed a sigh of relief, saying: ‘Ah, yes! That’s the way it is!’ They found peace in this most beautiful, exciting, deeply settling and most satisfying collection of love poems. Married couples would do well from time to time to read it to each other in bed.¹⁸

A note in the *Good News Bible* adds this:

These songs have often been interpreted by Jews as a picture of the relationship between God and his people, and by Christians as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

That opens up a whole new dimension—which we will look at in our next chapter.

¹⁸ This advice came from Geoffrey Bingham. One of my friends responded, ‘That’s all very well, but what if they never get past the end of the first song?’ Oh well, then they can pick it up next time from where they left off!

Chapter 4

The Greatest Marriage of All Time

THE SECRET OF THE UNIVERSE

A number of years ago in January we were staying at Victor Harbor for the annual New Creation Teaching Ministry Summer School. One afternoon we went for a walk to Granite Island across the causeway. At that time there was a chairlift from the end of the causeway to the highest point on the island. Our youngest son wanted a ride on the chairlift, so we put him and his mate on the chairlift, to go up to the top of the hill and down again, and we stayed chatting with the chairlift operator, who seemed to want to talk with us. A very interesting fellow. He was sitting there, getting rather bored, but watching the people come across the causeway, and thinking deeply. Called himself quite a spiritual person, and told us of one or two experiences that made him think this was so. Told us how he had been in and out of churches, but how he believed in God. I had not identified myself as a minister—he just came out with all this. He ended up telling us about his marriage. How, when he met his wife, this was one relationship that did not chill off after a while, like all the others had, but remained and grew, and drew

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him out of himself into the life of another person. And he said, ‘Do you know why I think we get married? It’s not just to have children and raise a family. It is to discover the secret of the universe. I really mean, of God.’ Not bad for a chairlift operator! He had not been to our Summer School, and did not seem particularly interested when I mentioned it to him. But he had put into a few words what it had taken some of us speakers at Summer School several lectures to spell out.

Many of the great stories of folklore and literature end with a marriage. It could be something to do with what is built into us as human beings. The Bible says that the story of the human race culminates in a marriage. We will see how God in His faithfulness has always regarded His relationship with us in this way. We will look at the wedding at the end of the universe in Revelation 19:5–9. We will see who the Bride is, in all her glory, and who the Bridegroom is, and why he is called ‘the Lamb’. And what that means for us now—in our lives and in our marriages.

Question for Reflection:

- *What have we seen, or known in our own experience, of the connection between marriage and the secret of the universe—that is, of God?*

FAITHFUL GOD

At the end of the last chapter, we looked at a note on the Song of Songs in the Good News Bible:

These songs have often been interpreted by Jews as a picture of the relationship between God and his people, and by Christians as a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

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God has often seen His relationship with Israel in terms of a marriage covenant. God looked fondly back to the early days of His relationship with Israel in this parable-like picture-story:

As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.

I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood. As you lay in your blood, I said to you, 'Live! and grow up like a plant of the field.' You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.

I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine (Ezekiel 16:4–8).

The prophet Jeremiah was called upon to remind Israel of their relationship with God in similar terms:

Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD: I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown (Jeremiah 2:2).

This was at a time (around 600 BC) when Israel had clearly turned away from God, as He spoke of:

the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD (Jeremiah 31:32).

God promised through Jeremiah 'a new covenant' that was not like that earlier one. Before this, in the northern kingdom

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of Israel, the prophet Hosea had been called upon to witness, through the difficult circumstances of his own life and marriage, to God's faithfulness in the face of Israel's unfaithfulness:

When the LORD first spoke to Israel through Hosea, he said to Hosea, 'Go and get married; your wife will be unfaithful, and your children will be just like her. In the same way my people have left me and become unfaithful' (Hosea 1:2, *Good News Bible*).

The *Good News Bible* has this introduction to the book of Hosea:

The prophet Hosea preached in the northern kingdom of Israel, after the prophet Amos, during the troubled times before the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. He was especially concerned about the idolatry of the people and their faithlessness toward God. Hosea boldly pictured this faithlessness in terms of his own disastrous marriage to an unfaithful woman. Just as his wife Gomer turned out to be unfaithful to him, so God's people had deserted the Lord. For this, judgment would fall on Israel. Yet in the end God's constant love for his people would prevail, and he would win the nation back to himself and restore the relationship. This love is expressed in the moving words: 'How can I give you up, Israel? How can I abandon you? . . . My heart will not let me do it! My love for you is too strong' (11:8).

Isaiah prophesied the glorious restoration of this relationship between God and His people:

For your Maker is your husband,
the LORD of hosts is his name;
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.
For the LORD has called you
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,
says your God.

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For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the LORD, your Redeemer (Isaiah 54:5–8).

So God was also able to say to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you
(Jeremiah 31:3).

Question for Reflection:

- *If God sees His relationship with us in terms of marriage, what are some of the implications of that for our own marriages?*

THE MARRIAGE OF THE LAMB AND HIS BRIDE

The New Testament sees the glorious restoration of this relationship between God and His people as happening in Christ, culminating in a great marriage celebration:

And from the throne came a voice saying,
‘Praise our God,
all you his servants,
and all who fear him,
small and great.’

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

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‘Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure’—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.
And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are
invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These
are true words of God’ (Revelation 19:5–9).

Who is this ‘bride’? She is obviously well-dressed, in ‘fine linen, bright and pure’, which is equivalent to ‘the righteous deeds’ of God’s holy people. She has ‘made herself ready’ by being ‘clothed’ in what has been ‘granted’ to her. The passage goes on to depict the Bridegroom as a warrior king, called ‘Faithful and True’, who is victorious over all evil (see Revelation 19:11–16). But why here is he called ‘the Lamb’? Whoever these two are, there are lots of people at this wedding—‘a great multitude’. They are all in great gladness, and God must have done a wonderful thing, for they are all praising God.

A Bride Adorned for Her Husband

To find out more about the Bride, we turn to a vision of the end times given in the final chapters of the Bible:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

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‘See, the home of God is among the people.¹
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away’ (Revelation 21:1–4).

This is set in a new era, in a whole new order of things. The things to do with sin—sorrow, death, sadness and suffering—have been wholly removed. The relationship of God with His people is secured for ever. Featured in this glorious vision is the ‘bride adorned for her husband’. We saw from Revelation 19 that she has ‘made herself ready’ by being ‘clothed’ in what has been ‘granted’ to her. Here we see that she and her preparation as a Bride are the work of God: she is ‘coming down out of heaven from God’; not coming up from the earth.

Why is she called ‘the holy city, the new Jerusalem’? We recall what the husband said to his bride in the Song of Songs:

My love, you are as beautiful as Tirzah,
as lovely as the city of Jerusalem,
as breathtaking as these great cities (Song 6:4, GNB).

We saw that she was being described there as a person of great dynamism, strength and magnificence. We also know that a city is a place made up of very many people. It appears that this Bride is made up not just of one person but of many. And what was distinctive about the city of Jerusalem is that it was the chosen dwelling place of God. The picture-language

¹ Where the *New Revised Standard Version* has ‘mortals’, *Today’s New International Version* has ‘the people’ (Greek *anthrōpōn*, human persons). This is the more preferable translation, especially in a situation where ‘Death [mortality] will be no more’!

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used of this ‘bride’ indicates the reality of ‘the dwelling place of God is with His people’, in a permanent and unsullied union—the true marriage.

This we find in the more detailed description of the Bride that follows:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (Revelation 21:9–10).

This exalted one shines with a glory that is not from herself, by which a rare beauty, of crystal clear purity, is bestowed on her:

It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal (Revelation 21:11).

Further details link her with the history of God’s people Israel:

It has a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates (Revelation 21:12–13).

Having a number of gates means that lots of people can come in. We find there is also a link with God’s New Testament people:

And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:14).

The reference to ‘twelve apostles’ may give us a clue as to the identity of ‘the Lamb’.

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The city itself is of vast dimensions, beyond any city known on earth:

The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal (Revelation 21:15–16).

The distance ‘fifteen hundred miles’ (Greek: twelve thousand stadia, equivalent to nearly 2,500 kilometres) is roughly the length of a straight line between Melbourne and Alice Springs: imagine a square going out from that into Queensland and out into the Pacific ocean, and a cube going up from that 2,500 kilometres out into space. There is room there for a great number of people! All of this is, of course, picture-language, trying to imagine the unimaginable.

The different elements of the vision describe aspects of the reality, without necessarily trying to fit with each other, as we see when we are shown the wall:

He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using (Revelation 21:17).

Its height, literally equivalent to 216 feet or 65 metres (towering compared with normal city walls), does not fit with the dimensions of the city that have just been given, but speaks nevertheless of impregnable strength and unassailable security. Language is stretched to breaking point to convey the preciousness and purity of this incomparable reality:

The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass (Revelation 21:18).

Who has ever seen ‘gold, clear as glass’? But together these words convey the impression, and describe the indescribable.

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A similar attempt is made to convey the multifaceted sheer beauty of the Bride:

The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass (Revelation 21:19–21).

It is customary for a bride to wear some jewellery on her wedding day, but no bride was ever adorned like this!

We return to the city as the dwelling place of God. It was the temple, with its graded levels of access, that made the earthly Jerusalem God's dwelling place in Israel. Such is the immediate, full and directly accessible presence of God here, however, that the need for any such structure is dispensed with:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb (Revelation 21:22).

No temple in the city! Elsewhere in the New Testament, we who belong to Christ are described as God's temple, both corporately as the church and individually in our bodies (see 1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21). We are the temple, but there is no temple here because God Himself with the Lamb is the temple! Our whole and complete union with God cannot be spoken of in more intimate terms than this.

The glory of this love-union, outshining all else, will encompass nations of peoples, all purified and cleansed from every trace of evil:

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And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:23–27).

Who can envisage the ongoing life of this glorious existence, which God planned for us in His love for us from before the foundation of the world, and which He will see through to its full completion by His saving love-action in Christ:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river, is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:1–5).

Question for Reflection:

- *If we are part of the reality of this Bride, saved for it through believing in Christ, what then does this tell us about the nature of our own marriage relationships?*

A Lamb Slaughtered Yet Standing

Prominent in this depiction of the holy city are repeated references to 'the Lamb', who is the Bridegroom of Revelation 19:7. We now look elsewhere in the book of the Revelation to

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discover the nature and identity of this one who is called ‘the Lamb’. Who is he, and what has he done? He first appears in a vision that describes what is going on in the heavenly throne-room of God, where he is given a most unusual description:

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered . . . (Revelation 5:6).

I pulled up outside Dave’s farmhouse just after he had slaughtered a sheep for their home use. The sheep’s carcase was hanging by its hind legs under a gum tree down by the shed. The head was dangling where its throat had been cut, and the blood was still dripping into the dirt. Dave began to dress the carcase by slitting it up its front. He removed the ‘lights’ or lungs of the sheep and threw them to the dog, who was eagerly waiting to devour them. City people who enjoy lamb chops are usually at one remove from this process by which the meat ends up on the table. Truckloads of animals that we pass on the highways are often headed for the abattoirs. In the ancient world, people would have been much more familiar with the slaughtering of animals for food. Especially in the temple at Jerusalem, where the lambs were sacrificed.

This Lamb in the heavenly vision is one that has been slaughtered. Yet here he is standing alive—he has defeated death. In the picture-language used in the vision he has ‘seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth’ (Revelation 5:6)—he is all-powerful and all-seeing. He is given authority and responsibility over the unfolding of all history, and over the releasing of God’s judgements upon the evil of the earth, with a view to the bringing in of ‘new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home’ (2 Peter 3:13).

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The 'Lamb' is clearly identified as Jesus, who was put to death and raised to life. We turn now from the picture-language of the heavenly vision to the actual events in history and in our personal lives that this vision-language is really all about.

Questions for Reflection:

- *What do we find confronting about seeing Jesus as a slaughtered Lamb? Especially when we are talking about marriage? Why is this so, and what does this tell us about ourselves?*

THE TRUE BRIDEGROOM

We pick up the story on a Friday morning in Jerusalem in April around the year 33 AD. 'Pilate' is the name of the Roman governor Pontius Pilatus:

Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. I will therefore have him flogged and release him.'

Then they all shouted out together, 'Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!' (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city, and for murder.) Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; but they kept shouting, 'Crucify, crucify him!' A third time he said to them, 'Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.' But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison

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for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished (Luke 23:13–25).

What do we notice about this? Three times the Roman governor, the highest authority in the land, protests that Jesus is innocent, and not deserving of death. Yet in the end, Jesus is handed over to be executed. Jesus had said that this is what would happen, and that this was God's will as spoken through the prophets in the Old Testament (see Luke 18:31–33). The question arises: If Jesus is going to his death for no sin of his own, who is he going to death for?

We find that Jesus is already in a weakened condition from the flogging that he had received, from the all-night unjust trial he had endured, and from a heavy burden that had come upon his spirit as he prayed the night before that had crushed him almost to death (see Luke 22:41–44), such that he needs someone else's help to carry his own instrument of death to the place of execution:

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, 'Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed." Then they will begin to say to the mountains, "Fall on us"; and to the hills, "Cover us." For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' (Luke 23:26–31).

We sense that something terrible is happening here, way beyond anything that the onlookers can take in, that has to do with the judgement of God coming on our evil like a fierce bushfire.

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Crucifixion—hanging a person up on a cross until they died of pain, exposure, blood loss and asphyxiation—was a particularly brutal form of execution practised by the Romans, reserved for the worst kind of criminals:

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left (Luke 23:32–33).

What was Jesus' reaction to this?

Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34).

That anyone should pray for the forgiveness of those who were doing such a terrible thing to him is remarkable enough. Jesus was doing more than that. He was praying to God, whom he knew as his own Father, asking the Father to do in him whatever was necessary for those who were doing this to him to be completely forgiven. That is not something that happens lightly. Something must happen to sin, and to sinners, for forgiveness to come. We are told that Christ 'himself carried up our sins in his body to the tree' (1 Peter 2:24, NRSV footnote), where he suffered the curse of God that is on sinful humanity (see Galatians 3:13–14) and the condemnation that was due to us in our sins (see Romans 8:3), such that he was even made 'to be sin' for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), so that we might come out into righteousness. The words, 'they do not know what they are doing' emphasise the terrible thing that is being perpetrated here. This is not a plea that they be excused on the basis of ignorance. Jesus is saying that they are so far gone in evil that they do not even realise the horrific nature of what they are doing—Father, bring forgiveness to them even for that! And do in me whatever is necessary for this to be so.

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Unaware of all this, the soldiers on duty coldly continued their gruesome task:

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' (Luke 23:34–39).

Three times, Jesus was mockingly called upon to save himself. It is not as if he could not do that. He knew that at any time he could call to his Father who would immediately send 'more than twelve legions of angels' to rescue him (Matthew 26:53). Why did he refuse? It was because there was someone more important to him than himself that he was determined to save: you, and me, and the rest of sinful humankind.

Other gospel accounts tell us that both the criminals crucified with Jesus taunted him (see Matthew 27:44; Mark 15:32). Luke tells us that one of them then had a change of heart:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:39–43).

What would bring a criminal, who had been violently anti-authority, to say such a thing? We would expect him to go to his death railing against his fate and saying it was unfair. But

here he is now, in the fear of God, saying that he is getting just what he deserves, and that the man hanging next to him has done nothing wrong to deserve what is happening to him. Not only that, but he sees in this bedraggled figure next to him no one less than God's own king, coming into his kingdom. And in that kingdom this criminal fully expects to be able to take his place. He would have known that no thief or robber could expect to inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–11). Yet here he is asking, not to be able to sneak in the back door, but to stand in front of the king and be fully acknowledged by him! How has this come about? Well, what has this criminal heard coming from the lips of Jesus? He has heard Jesus call God 'Father'—this one is the Son of the Creator of the universe, the heir of all things. And he has heard those words, 'forgive them', and has known that he was included in that: he was 'de-thiefed'—totally cleansed, forgiven, made righteous and fit for God's kingdom. This was the only Son of the Father of all, given over to an undeserved death as 'the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18, RSV). Jesus immediately confirmed his request by saying, 'today you will be with me in Paradise'—in the immediate presence of God, just as it was in the garden of Eden, and more and better even than that.

Luke tells us next:

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed (Luke 23:44–45).

None of us can fathom what happened in those three hours of terrifying darkness. Other gospel writers tell us that at the end of that time Jesus cried out, 'My God, my God, why did you abandon me?' (Mark 15:34, GNB). God's final judgement on us as sinners must be to abandon us to our sin. Jesus went to

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that fearful place for us so that we now need never go there ourselves. As a result of this we are told:

and the curtain of the temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45).

At the heart the old temple in Jerusalem was the most holy chamber, where God was known to dwell, separated off from the rest of the temple and the outside world by a big thick heavy curtain. No one could go inside that curtain, on pain of death, except the high priest, once a year, carrying the blood of a special sacrifice (see Leviticus 16). Now, as a result of what had happened on this cross just outside Jerusalem, the curtain was ripped open ‘from top to bottom’ (Mark 15:38)—by no human hand. All of God’s glory could now come streaming out, and we all could now go with free unhindered access right in to God.

Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’ Having said this, he breathed his last (Luke 23:46).

True to his Father’s love for us right to the end, Jesus’ mighty work of taking away the sins of the world was now completed. He offered his life to the Father as a pleasing sacrifice, and was fully accepted.

That was on the Friday afternoon. Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross, and laid in a tomb. It remained there all Saturday. First thing on Sunday morning, some women friends of Jesus came to the tomb to pay their last respects—the tomb was open, and the body was gone! Some angels told them that Jesus was risen from death, as he had said he would. The women went to tell the others, but no one believed them.

Luke then tells of two followers of Jesus who were walking along a country road, and Jesus himself joined them! When

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they finally recognised him, and that he was alive, he was gone from them. They raced back and told the others in Jerusalem:

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you' (Luke 24:36).

Not, 'Where were you lot when I needed you most?' but 'Peace be with you'. The peace of total forgiveness of all our sins: peace with God, peace within ourselves, and so peace also with each other. Not surprisingly, they took some convincing:

They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence (Luke 24:37–43),

and they did not see it going down, as they might have if he was a ghost. He was solid and real.

Jesus then explained to them what had happened, and what was to follow:

Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:44–49).

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So, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God promised by the Father, the followers of Jesus have taken the good news of ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins’, through believing in Jesus and in what God did in him on the cross, out into all the world, down to the present day, even to what we are doing here right now.

Questions for Reflection:

- *How do I relate to what happened in Jesus on the cross, and in his rising to life again?*
- *Have I received the forgiveness of all my sins?*
- *Is my faith and hope for living and succeeding in life fixed on Christ alone?*
- *What difference does that make now in my relationships?*

MARRIAGE IN CHRIST

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ, in this cleansing action of the forgiveness of sins, is shown to be the true husband of the body of people who belong to him in the church:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25–27).

We have all been made for this incredibly close relationship with God. We haven’t lived up to it—rather we have gone off away from God in the opposite direction. This shows itself in

all sorts of mean and nasty ways. In our own relationships we tend to think more of ourselves than of the other person. When we are in relationships for ourselves first of all, we end up using and manipulating other people. This causes hurt and damage. We carry this with us—it does not go away. We bring this into our marriages, where it can get in the way of true relationship. It needs to have somewhere to go. None of us come to our marriages pure. We need to be put through a process of cleansing and redirecting. Incredibly this is what we see here for us in Jesus on the cross.

A young woman whose life was already sexually complicated and messy was listening to a preacher expounding what happened on the cross, and its meaning for us who believe. She came up to him afterwards: ‘If what you say about the cross is true’, she said, ‘then I am a virgin again!’² She had now by faith become part of the holy city, the glorious Bride of Christ.

One version of the marriage service begins with these words:

We have come together here in the sight of God, and in the presence of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honourable state of life, instituted from the beginning by God himself, signifying to us the spiritual union that is between Christ and his Church.³

Every marriage is intended to reflect and participate in this glorious marriage of Christ and his church. The vows themselves reflect something of the extent to which Christ has gone in his love for us:

² Incident recounted by Geoffrey Bingham on Tapes for Life Series TLS 1.

³ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 548.

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for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
until we are parted by death.⁴

It is Christ's love, then, that will see a married couple through all these things, remaining faithful and fulfilled to the end.

So important is this, that some churches insist that couples, or at least one of the two, should belong to Christ through faith and baptism, if the church is going to be involved in officiating at their marriage ceremony. Some see this as the church saying they are not good enough to get married in the church without this. Believers in Christ see it otherwise. Some Christians, when they gather in the church fellowship, say words such as these:

We do not presume
to come to your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy . . .
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy.⁵

It is Christ's action in cleansing us from all our sins that qualifies us to come to God. Without this, we will always be trying to prove ourselves, and we will never succeed or get it right.

The one thing I have needed to know, to be a good husband to my wife and a good father to my children, is the total forgiveness of sins from God—for myself first of all, and then

⁴ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 550.

⁵ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 125.

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also for my wife and my children. That way, neither I nor my wife or my children are stuck with the selfish mistakes I and they have made in our relationships—we are at every moment wondrously clean and free from them all, and able to live anew, as children together of our heavenly Father.

In the light of this, here is a prayer that can be prayed for the blessing of mutual love and faithfulness between a husband and a wife:

Almighty God,
who by joining man and woman together
taught us from the beginning
that we should not separate what you have joined as one;
we praise you that you have consecrated the state of matrimony
to such an excellent purpose
that in it is signified the spiritual marriage and unity between
Christ and his Church.
Look mercifully on these your servants,
that this man may love his wife, according to your word,
as Christ loved his bride the Church
and gave himself for it,
cherishing it as himself;
and also that this woman may be loving and generous,
responsive and faithful to her husband.
O Lord, bless them both,
and grant them to inherit your everlasting kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen. ⁶

Question for Reflection:

- *What one thing do we need to know to be good husbands and wives, parents and children?*

⁶ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 557.

Chapter 5

Being Good Husbands and Wives

A RIGHTLY-ORDERED RELATIONSHIP

For a body to function well, it needs to be well-ordered and in unity. Many of us will have experienced being part of an organisation or a workplace that runs well and does what it is supposed to do in a cheerful and efficient manner. Much of that will come back to having in place good leadership that is uncontested. Many of us may also have had the frustrating experience of being part of an organisation or workplace where there is an absence of good leadership, where others, sometimes at cross-purposes with each other, feel obliged to try and fill the vacuum, or where there is a rivalry that divides and dissipates the energies of the organisation. Most of us would have in mind desirable qualities that we would look for, or may have experienced, in a good leader that we would be happy to work with.

The same may well apply to marriage. Yet, because it is such a close one-on-one relationship, we may be more hesitant to think of it in these terms. Such a close relationship can be fraught with perils, and we don't want to upset anyone. Bad experiences of the use of power in relationships may have

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put us on our guard. Better to try and muddle through without raising issues that could be counterproductive. Yet few of us may really enjoy the struggle, or the balancing-act, that ensues when expectations differ over the ordering of relationships in a marriage. Could it be that there is a right ordering of relationships in a marriage that, like the gift of marriage itself, is part of what is given? How could we find and follow that?

Questions for reflection:

- *What kinds of leadership, good or bad, have we experienced in our workplaces or other organisations?*
- *What sort of qualities do we look for in a good leader that we would be happy to work with?*
- *How have we seen differences resolved, or not resolved, in a marriage, especially when important decisions are to be made?*

MAN AND WOMAN AS CREATED

We return to how God made us in the beginning:¹

the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being (Genesis 2:7).

What does that tell us about the man? First of all, we are of the earth. We are made up of the same chemicals as the rest of

¹ Some take the Genesis accounts of the creation of human beings as picture language; others as literal history. Either way, they tell us truth about God, the world, and ourselves. Here we seek to discern the meaning of what is said for relationships with God and each other.

creation. This also means that, of ourselves, we are not worth much.² It also tells us we are much more than that: God has breathed into us the priceless gift of ‘the breath of life’, in a way that sets us apart from all other creatures. Without this breath from God, we are nothing. One of the apostles said: ‘he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things’ (Acts 17:25). As human beings, we are entirely dependent on God for every breath we take and every move we make.

This breathing into us the breath of life also indicates how we are in intimate relationship with God—it is like a kiss, or mouth-to-mouth resuscitation! The apostle went on to say: ‘In him we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). We are reminded of what was said in Genesis 1 about us being in God’s image and likeness: as children of God our Father, we have been made to be related closely with God, and to take after Him.

The Genesis account goes on:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:8–9).

We will come back to what ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ means. We note for the time being that there is no shortage of beautiful provision for the man in the garden. It goes on to say that the garden was well-watered by a

² The human body is made up mostly of oxygen, carbon and hydrogen, with small amounts of nitrogen, calcium and phosphorous, miniscule amounts of potassium, sulphur, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, iron and chlorine, and traces of fluorine, silicon, manganese, zinc, copper, aluminium and arsenic. The monetary value of all of these amounts to less than one dollar. Source: U.S. Bureau of Chemistry and Soils. < <http://www.coolquiz.com/trivia/explain/docs/worth.asp> > accessed 8th July 2008.

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wonderful river, which then flowed out to the whole earth, and that precious stones and minerals were there (Genesis 2:10–14).

The man was given good work to do:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Genesis 2:15).

While this means that the man was to cultivate and care for the garden, there are hints elsewhere in the Bible that this also has overtones of heading up the worship of God in His garden–sanctuary³—which means showing forth the glory of God in everything we do.⁴ This includes knowing who we are as human beings, and knowing who God is, and not confusing the two. God gave the man a command as to what he should and should not do:

And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Genesis 2:16–17).

What is the significance of ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’? It is not something evil in itself, since it is part of everything that God had made that was ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31). Sometimes it is translated ‘the tree of the knowledge of everything’⁵—perhaps the knowledge that God has to be able

³ See Ezekiel 28:13–14, where ‘Eden’ is called ‘the garden of God’ and ‘the holy mountain of God’; and Numbers 3:5–8, where for the Levites in the tabernacle to ‘do service’ and ‘be in charge’ are the same words used of the man in the garden to ‘till’ and ‘keep’.

⁴ Romans 12:1 indicates that our ‘spiritual worship’ is everything we do in our living bodies.

⁵ *Good News Bible*, Genesis 2:17, footnote.

to run the universe. This is knowledge we do not need to have, because we are not God, and we can get directly from God everything we need to know to do what we need to be doing, without having to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong.⁶ To want to have that knowledge would be to want to be God ourselves—without God, and over against Him. Why would we want to do that, especially when God has given us all the other trees in the garden, and commanded us to eat of them freely?

God was aware that the man should not be left to do all this on his own:

Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, 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 cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner (Genesis 2:18–20).

None of the animals are satisfactory as a life-partner for the man, since they are not of the same order as he is: he is in the image and likeness of God, and has been given dominion over all of them (see Genesis 1:26–28). God engages in a special act of creation to provide a suitable companion for the man:

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he 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 (Genesis 2:21–22).

⁶ Deuteronomy 29:29 says: 'The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law'.

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We will come back to the significance of the rib being a rib and not some other part of the man's body. The main point is that the woman, unlike the animals, is made of the same stuff as the man—they have a belonging, a oneness, a total affinity with each other:

Then the man said,
 'This at last is bone of my bones
 and flesh of my flesh;
 this one shall be called Woman,
 for out of Man this one was taken' (Genesis 2:23).

The man is delighted that the woman is inseparably part of him: they are made from one to be one with each other. So they want nothing more than to be with each other as one:

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife,
and they become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

This union of the man and the woman is total, open, uninhibited, and free—they have nothing to hide, and there is nothing that comes between them:

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:25).

Questions for reflection:

- *When have we sensed our total dependence on God, and His determination to be intimately related with us?*
- *Woman and man are 'of the same stuff' and 'made from one to be one with each other'. What are the implications of this for such statements as 'women are from Venus and men are from Mars'—different planets—or for the so-called 'battle of the sexes'?*

A PROFOUND MYSTERY

When Jesus quoted Genesis 2:24, he said that these were the very words of God:

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 (Matthew 19:4–6).

We have seen that when He said this God had more in mind than just the setting up of the arrangement of marriage between male and female. The apostle Paul calls it ‘a profound mystery’, that points to the very goal of the purpose of God in creation:

‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31–32).

The one-flesh union of a husband and wife is a sign pointing to the oneness that God purposed from the beginning that would be between Christ and his people. It tells us how closely God intends to be related with us, above all other relationships. Every marriage between a man and a woman is to be a reflection of, and a participation in, that great reality to come.

Question for reflection:

- *What differences might it make to our marriages to know them not just as a convenient arrangement but as a foretaste of the great union of God with His people in Christ?*

THE ONENESS, THE HEADSHIP, AND THE GLORY

Why in this account of the making of the woman did God make her out of a rib of the man, and not some other part of his body? We are not told. But one commentator has come up with an explanation that reflects accurately the subtle and tender way in which the Bible understands men and women to be related with each other:

the woman was *made of a rib out of the side of Adam*; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.⁷

There is a profound equality and mutuality here, which includes a particular ordering of responsibility within the relationship. The woman comes from ‘under his arm to be protected’ by the man, indicating that there is a responsibility that the man has for the woman that the woman does not have in the same way for the man. We could call this the responsibility of leadership, or of heading up the relationship.

When we think back to what we said before about ‘the greatest marriage of all time’—between Christ and us—does not this reflect the reality of our relationship with him? He is one flesh with us—we are a part of him—and yet as our Lord and Saviour he takes a responsibility for us that we could never take on for him in the same way. It could be that the sort of qualities we look for in a good leader that we would be happy to work with are what we find supremely in Christ.

In one of his letters, the apostle Paul sets the relationship of husband and wife firmly in the context of Christ and of God:

⁷ Matthew Henry (1662–1714), *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1991, p. 10.

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I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3).

We see here how the relationship of husband and wife is bracketed within the relationship of Christ with us, and of God with Christ. When we know how ‘Christ is the head of every man’, and how ‘God is the head of Christ’, then—and not otherwise—will we begin to understand what it means that ‘the husband is the head of his wife’.

How is God ‘the head’ of Christ? The Father gives all He is and all He has to the Son, holding nothing back:

just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (John 5:26).

The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing (John 5:20).

The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands (John 3:35).

he gives the Spirit without measure (John 3:34).

We see this coming out in Jesus’ earthly life, but Jesus spoke of himself as having been ‘sent’ from the Father (John 5:30; 20:21; compare 16:28), and he looked to the Father for ‘the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed’ (John 17:1, 5). What we see in Jesus’ earthly life characterises his eternal relationship with the Father.

How did Jesus relate to having the Father as his ‘head’? He fully and gladly received and lived in all that the Father gave him to be and to do:

the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19).

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My Father is still working, and I also am working (John 5:17).

the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him (John 8:29).

when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘ . . . I have come to do your will, O God’ (Hebrews 10:5, 7).

Jesus was able to say both ‘The Father and I are one’ (John 10:30) and ‘the Father is greater than I’ (John 14:28). The oneness was governed and made possible and workable by the Son having the Father as his ‘head’.

How then is Christ the ‘head’ of us? He does only what he sees the Father doing; so he acts towards us as the Father acts towards him: he gives all that he is and all that he has for us:

He [the Father] who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? (Romans 8:32).

I am the good shepherd . . . I lay down my life for the sheep . . . I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father (John 10:11, 15, 18).

Jesus . . . said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30).

Jesus saw the Father giving all He had—His only Son—in His love for us. So Jesus, in that same love for us, gave all he had—his very life. That is how in love he exercised his headship of us.

How then is a husband to be ‘head’ of his wife? It is determined by the way God is the head of Christ, and Christ of us:

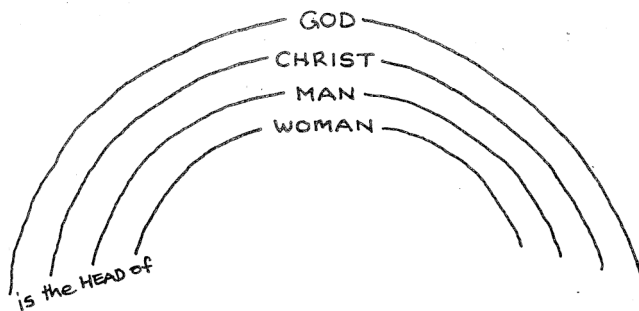
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the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior . . . Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:23, 25).

This self-giving is expressed in the marriage service when the bridegroom says to his bride:

with all that I am and all that I have
I honour you.⁸

What we have seen so far may be depicted as follows:



God is the head of Christ, who is the head of the man, who is the head of the woman. Each provides to the next this wonderful covering of love and wholesome self-giving.

The result of this, as we might expect, is great glory all round. We have seen Jesus looking to the Father to give him the glory he had with the Father before the world existed (see John 17:5). The Father has indeed given to the Son all that the Father Himself is and has—all His glory—‘so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father’ (John 5:23).

⁸ *An Australian Prayer Book*, p. 551.

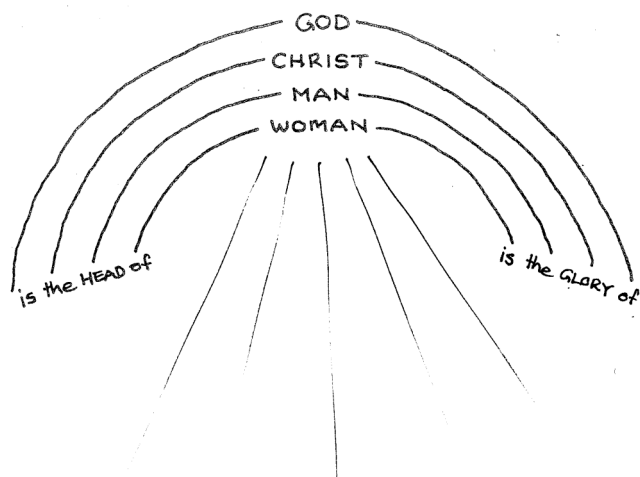
And so we see ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 4:6). This comes to us as ‘the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God’ (2 Corinthians 4:4). Because of all that God has done in and for Christ, we can say of him: ‘He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (Hebrews 1:3). God is the head of Christ, and Christ is the glory of God.

Jesus prayed to the Father for us, as he was about to lay down his life for us: ‘The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one’ (John 17:22)—the oneness and the glory. So Paul is able to say of a man: ‘he is the image and glory of God’ (1 Corinthians 11:7, RSV)—just as we were created in the beginning to be in God’s image, according to God’s likeness (see Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1–3). Christ is the head of a man, and the man is the glory of Christ who is the glory of God.

What then does Paul go on to say about the woman? In the context of the man being head of the woman, he says: ‘woman is the glory of man’ (1 Corinthians 11:7, RSV; compare Proverbs 12:4: ‘A good wife is the crown of her husband’). Thus the man, in self-giving love, is the head of the woman, and so the woman is the glory of the man who is the glory of Christ who is the glory of God. Where, then, on all the earth, are we most likely to see the glory of God shining out? In the woman!⁹ The full picture of the oneness, the headship and the glory, then, is as follows:

⁹ Perhaps there is some justice in this message seen on a fridge magnet: ‘Sure God created Man before Woman, but then you always make a rough draft before the Final Masterpiece’!

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God is the head of Christ, who is the head of the man, who is the head of the woman. The woman is the glory of the man, who is the glory of Christ, who is the glory of God. All of this is without any diminution of the interdependent mutuality and equality between the woman and the man. Paul goes on to say, referring to the account of the creation of woman in Genesis chapter 2:

man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man . . . Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman . . . (1 Corinthians 11:8–9, 11–12).¹⁰

¹⁰ While this appears to be saying that everyone, male or female, is born of a woman, there may also be an oblique reference here to the promise in Genesis 3:15 that the true man, who would crush the serpent's head—finally deal with all evil—would come as the offspring of the woman, bringing salvation to women and men alike.

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This interdependent mutuality and equality is maintained because, as Paul concludes, ‘all things [that is, including the woman and the man together] come from God’ (1 Corinthians 11:12).

Questions for reflection:

- *What does the relationship between the Father and Christ, and between Christ and us, teach us about the relationship between a wife and a husband?*
- *What is the relationship between the oneness, the headship, and the glory? What would be the result of trying to have any one of those without the other?*

THE GLORY OF A WOMAN

Let us look at how this can work out in practice, by reading the description of ‘a capable wife’ that comes at the end of the book of Proverbs:

- ¹⁰ A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
- ¹¹ The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
- ¹² She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
- ¹³ She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
- ¹⁴ She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
- ¹⁵ She rises while it is still night
and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.

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- ¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
¹⁷ She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
¹⁸ She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
²⁰ She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
²¹ She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
²² She makes herself coverings;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.
²³ Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
²⁵ Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
²⁸ Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
²⁹ 'Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.'
³⁰ Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
³¹ Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates
(Proverbs 31:10–31).

She is a remarkable woman. She respects and supports her husband (v. 12), and he trusts and relies on her (11). She is clearly a key factor in his success (11, 23), and he greatly appreciates her (28, 29). She cares well and effectively for her family (14,

15, 27), and richly provides for them under all circumstances (21). No doubt her children, as well as her husband, benefit from her wise teaching (26), and they too recognise her happiness and worth (28, 29).

She is a competent, diligent and astute businesswoman: in trade (14, 18, 24), real estate (16), primary production (16), and cottage industry—manufacturing and value-adding with a view to merchandising (13, 18, 19, 24); also in small business and personnel management (15).

In addition to this, she is active in the community: in her care for the poor and needy (20), in the salutary advice she has to offer (26), and in the public recognition that is due to her (31).

She is able to do all this without neglecting herself: she keeps herself fit (17), she dresses well (22), and has an inner strength and dignity by which she faces the future with cheerful assurance. Hers is no put-on or superficial beauty: the secret of her inner strength and beauty is that she ‘fears the LORD’—she has a personal relationship of respectful trust and obedient love towards God (30).

Just reading this through is enough to make us feel exhausted! Whoever said that the Bible puts women down, or that a woman’s place is only in the kitchen or the nursery? This woman is no wimp, and no doormat. She is a person of great stature and attractiveness.

She is a woman of true glory, and her glory comes in the context of a rightly ordered relationship with God and with her husband.

Questions for reflection:

- *How surprised are we to find in the Bible such a range of highly developed skills and activities in the person of a woman?*

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- *What does this tell us of the substantial nature of a woman's glory?*
- *What connection is there between the woman's glory and her relationship with her husband, and with God?*
- *What difference might it make if these relationships were disordered?*

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

The Bible's account of how all the world's troubles began is in Genesis 3, just after what we have read of the coming together of the woman and the man:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' (Genesis 3:1–5).

The temptation is for the man and the woman to go against what God has said in order to be God themselves—to decide for themselves what is right and wrong, apart from God, and over against Him:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:6).

The fatal decision is made in a reversal of the God-given order of relationships. The man and the woman had been given dominion over all the animals—including the serpent. The man had a particular responsibility for the woman, and the task of caring for and protecting the garden from evil intrusion. Both the man and the woman were subject to their Creator—Father God, under His blessing, to serve His good purpose for the creation. Now that order has been reversed: the woman has listened to the serpent and taken him at his word. The man has listened to the woman and gone with her against what God has said. The man and the woman together seek to defy and set themselves above God.

In particular, the man has abrogated the responsibility that he had. He was there, and he should have stopped it from happening, but instead he went right along with it. Paul later says: ‘Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor’ (1 Timothy 2:14). In other words, she was vulnerable, and he did not protect her; instead he saw clearly what was happening and went right into it deliberately with his eyes wide open. Ever thereafter in the Bible, what happened there is called the sin of Adam, not the sin of the woman (see Romans 5:12–21). Though the woman initiated it, at the instigation of the serpent, the man is rightly held responsible for what they both did.

Later in the Bible ‘the serpent’ is identified as ‘that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world’ (Revelation 12:9)—a mighty angelic being, created by God, who had sought to set himself on the throne of God.¹¹ Jesus called him ‘a murderer from the beginning . . . a liar and the father of lies’ (John 8:44), one who

¹¹ Isaiah 14:12–15 and Ezekiel 28:1–2, 11–19 tell us something of the dynamic that was operating here.

came ‘only to steal and kill and destroy’ (John 10:10). This is the one we subjected ourselves to, just when we thought we were striking a blow for our own ‘freedom’.

From this came all the troubles that we are heirs to:

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Genesis 3:7).

Where before they had nothing to be ashamed of, now that they have both sinned against God, there is something displeasing about themselves which they feel obliged to keep hidden from themselves and each other. In particular their genital organs, formerly part of their one-flesh union with each other, have now become a source of potential division and harm, as we shall see:

They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden (Genesis 3:8).

Not only do they feel they must hide something from each other; they also now feel they have to hide themselves from God, against whom they have sinned. When God comes for their customary walk together in the garden, instead of rushing gladly to meet Him, they run and hide:

But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ (Genesis 3:9).

God does not say first of all to the woman, ‘What have you done?’ He says to the man, ‘Where are you?’ It’s a good question. The man is responsible for what they have both done, and he is not where he should have been:

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He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' (Genesis 3:10–11).

This is the man's opportunity to own up and confess. Instead he refuses to accept the responsibility that is his, and seeks to shift the blame—to the woman, and to God who gave her to him—to anyone but himself:

The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate' (Genesis 3:12).

We can imagine what that did for the relationship between the woman and the man. Something would have died in that moment. Nonetheless, the woman is no less accountable to God for what she has done:

Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate' (Genesis 3:13).

'The devil made me do it' is an excuse we have used ever since to evade our own responsibility for what we have done wrong.

God then brought His good judgement on us all. The serpent first:

The LORD God said to the serpent,
 'Because you have done this,
 cursed are you among all animals
 and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.
I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;

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he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel' (Genesis 3:14–15).

Inherent in this judgement is a promise of rescue and blessing. The offspring of the serpent/Satan will always be at war with the offspring of the woman. But there will come an offspring of the woman who will tread down the serpent/Satan with his heel, while at the same time suffering the venom of the serpent to enter into him. You could not find a more succinct picture of what was to happen on the cross than that: Christ, the promised offspring born of a woman, took into himself all our sin—the devil's poison—and bore it out to death, thereby disempowering Satan forever and sealing his doom. As soon as we sinned against God, God already had His rescue plan in place, 'the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago' (2 Timothy 1:9, RSV).

Meanwhile God's judgement had implications for the now-distorted relationship between the woman and the man, and their family life:

To the woman he said,
'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you' (Genesis 3:16).

Having children and bringing them up will now be a painful exercise—as the man and the woman were to find in the next chapter, when their eldest son murdered his younger brother. In their relationship with each other, the man will still be the head of the woman, and the woman will not be able to do anything about that, but she will want to control and manipulate him in any way she can ('desire' here is not so much physical desire as the desire to control; compare Genesis 4:7), and he will now try to use his position and strength to

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dominate her and put her down. This is where ‘the battle of the sexes’ began.

For the man, things will now be much harder. The earth itself will suffer and be unable to reach its full potential because of what the man has done:

And to the man he said,
‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
“You shall not eat of it,”
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return’ (Genesis 3:17–19).

God had said: ‘in the day that you eat of it you shall die’ (Genesis 2:17). Relational death towards God the Giver of life issued in death of the body.

Even so, God’s care for the human race was not over:

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living.
And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them (Genesis 3:20–21).

In the face of death, the man still knew God’s promise of life, and by faith named his wife accordingly. And God in His care for them accommodated their need for covering by providing something more substantial than fig leaves. Even so, this was now at the cost of the lives of other creatures. Furthermore, in

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His mercy, God chose not to perpetuate forever the monstrosity human beings had now become:

Then the LORD God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:22–24).

The ‘good life’ was now closed off to them. To bring them to His promised purpose of eternal life with Him, God would now need to bring them round another way—the way of the offspring who would conquer death and sin, and rise again to life, bringing us with him.

Question for reflection:

- *How much do we see this as our own story—for each one of us, and for the whole human race?*

CHRIST OUR TRUE HUSBAND

What has God done to put us right? In the face of our original failure as a husband and wife, God has given His own Son to be the True and Faithful Husband to us, His wayward Bride. Here is what Paul says about him:

Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior . . . Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and

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without blemish . . . For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body (Ephesians 5:23, 25–27, 29–30).

We are ‘one flesh’ with him—by his love in identifying with us and laying down his life for us, and by our faith and baptism into him and into what God has done for us in him.

Christ, then, models what husbands are to be in marriage:

the husband is the head of the wife *just as* Christ is the head of the church . . . Husbands, love your wives, *just as* Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . *In the same way*, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, *just as* Christ does for the church . . . ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself (Ephesians 5:23, 25, 28–29, 31–33; emphasis added).

If a husband is ‘one flesh’ with his wife, then the best thing he can do for himself is to love her!

See also what Paul says about the church in relation to Christ:

Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior . . . the church is subject to Christ . . . Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:23, 24–25).

The church then, as Christ’s Bride, becomes the model of how a wife is to conduct herself in relationship with her husband:

submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands *as you are to the Lord* . . . *Just as* the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands . . . a wife should respect her husband (Ephesians 5:21–22, 24, 33).

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Wives and husbands will not come to this of their own accord. Only by being together in relationship with Jesus Christ will they know what the reality is, and be able to live freely and gladly within it.

A young woman, whose relationship with her father had not been good, was now faced with a relationship with her fiancée, and she was struggling with this teaching. Even though she wanted to be loved in that way, she could not come at it. Then she heard about the forgiveness and cleansing that Christ effected for her on the cross. She received it and believed it, and this relationship issue was no longer a problem for her.

Question for reflection:

- *What difficulties do we have with this teaching? How much does this have to do with our willingness to know Jesus as our Saviour and Lord?*

LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST RULE IN YOUR HEARTS

In this age, which is still not the final age to come, we still live with the propensities of the judgement and the curse in Genesis 3, even when we belong to Christ. In particular, we will still find our fleshly selves wanting to revert to Genesis 3:16, where the wife wants to control her husband, and the husband wants to dominate his wife. With this in mind, Paul has some wise words to say to Christian husbands and wives:

Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly (Colossians 3:18–19).

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A wife will still have a tendency to want to make her husband do what she wants him to do, but she does not need to do that any more. A husband will find in himself a tendency to put undue pressure on his wife at her expense to suit himself, but he is to recognise this and replace it, as he can now do in Christ, with tenderness and love.

All of this is in the context of an exhortation to the whole church, which applies no less to the married state:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:12–17).

The apostle Peter similarly sets the relationship of husband and wife in the context of all that God has done for us in Christ:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Do not adorn yourselves outwardly by braiding your hair, and by wearing gold ornaments or fine clothing; rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and

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quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight. It was in this way long ago that the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by accepting the authority of their husbands. Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord. You have become her daughters as long as you do what is good and never let fears alarm you.

Husbands, in the same way, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor to the woman as the weaker sex, since they too are also heirs of the gracious gift of life—so that nothing may hinder your prayers.

Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing (1 Peter 2:24–3:9).

There are parallels here with what we saw of the 'capable wife' in Proverbs 31. Even though she may be in a 'weaker' position than the man perhaps physically, she has no shortage of inner strength and beauty. In the mutuality of their 'unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind', they are indeed a couple under the blessing of God.

Question for reflection:

- *How can we encourage one another to be realistic about our fleshly tendencies while living together in the fullness of the blessing of Christ?*

Chapter 6

You Are Not Your Own

MARRIAGE IN A SINFUL WORLD

So far we have looked at marriage within itself: what it is and what it is for, the sexual attraction and appreciation of each other, and the right ordering of relationships within marriage. In this, we have seen how marriage is linked with the high and holy purpose of God for His whole creation, and the implications of this for being married.

Even so, for those who are looking towards or have entered into marriage in the real world of today, all this may appear theoretical or idealistic. How can we keep ourselves and our marriages strong and pure in a sex-charged world where relationships are easy-come and easy-go? How do we come to workable living arrangements between persons who are different from each other, perhaps even in fundamental values and beliefs? What about a relationship that has become intolerable? What if we have already tried and failed in our experiences of relationships and sexuality? What of those who are not yet married, or who remain ‘single’—perhaps for the rest of their lives? Is it better to eschew marriage altogether and live a life of celibate abstinence?

You Are Not Your Own

These are issues that the apostle Paul addresses in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 6 and 7. Of all the letters in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians answers most directly and fully questions that have arisen from the impact of the gospel of God upon people's real-life situations. No covering of what the Bible has to say about marriage would be complete without a consideration of 1 Corinthians 6 and 7.

The apostle Paul never approached such matters piecemeal, but always from a gospel base that rested securely in God's salvation of us sinners in Jesus Christ, and our belonging to him in the kingdom-rule of God. This, rather than any application of general principles or laying down of the law, is what determines in each instance what he says.

However much we may have lived our lives to please ourselves, in a marriage and family relationship we find that our lives are not our own to do what we like with—consideration of others is now in view. If it is just a question of ourselves and other people, however, it may end up being a conflict of interests, needs and preferences. Paul establishes that it goes back further than just our necessary consideration of other people. When Jesus died on the cross, and we accepted by faith that he was there for us and for our salvation, then we came to belong to God through him, and we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. So Paul says:

you are not your own . . . you were bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).

We do not belong just to ourselves. We do not even belong to each other. We belong to God—and only to ourselves and to each other in Him.

What are some of the practical implications of this for marriage and what surrounds it in the real world?

Questions for reflection:

- *What questions arise in our own minds regarding the practice of being married in the context of the 'real world' of today?*
- *What is the difference between addressing an issue from the standpoint of our salvation in Christ, and applying general principles or laying down the law?*
- *When has it come through to us: 'you are not your own'?*

WASHED, SANCTIFIED, JUSTIFIED

The 'real world' of Corinth in Paul's day was in many ways much like our own:¹

The city to which Paul came preaching the gospel was . . . a very cosmopolitan place. It was an important city. It was intellectually alert. It was materially prosperous. It was morally corrupt. There was a pronounced tendency for its inhabitants to indulge their desires of whatever sort. In the words of von Dobschütz: 'The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types: in a word the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires.'²

In particular, the cult of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, promoted the glorification of sex; and the worship of Apollo, the ideal of male beauty, fired homosexual practices.³

¹ From Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1958), pp. 16–17.

² Quote by von Dobschütz from the commentary on 1 Corinthians by R. St. J. Parry in *The Cambridge Greek Testament*, 1926, p. x.

³ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, second edition (with study guide) 1993, pp. 11, 12.

You Are Not Your Own

Most of the Corinthian believers came from less than ideal circumstances:

not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth . . . foolish in the world . . . weak in the world . . . low and despised in the world (1 Corinthians 1:26, 27, 28).

This helps us to understand what Paul was addressing when he wrote to them. Paul reminded the Corinthian believers what some of them used to be:

Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers . . . this is what some of you used to be (1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 11).

Sexual sins feature prominently here—fornication, adultery, and homosexual practice—along with false worship, stealing, alcoholism, slander and violence. All of these some of the Corinthian believers have been involved in. But something has happened to them:

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Purity, holiness and righteousness have come to them from God. These Corinthian believers are no longer what they were. Previously outside and opposed to God's rule and reign, they have now come to 'inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 6:10)—they have gladly come into God's reign and rule, and they belong to Him there.

This is good news for married couples. Whether we have been involved in sexual sin or not, none of us come to our marriages pure. All of us bring into them the taint of sin, which can end up barricading us against each other. How

much, then, we need to be those who have been washed, sanctified and justified!

Questions for reflection:

- *What stops ‘fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers’ from inheriting the kingdom of God?*
- *If people who have been these things end up inheriting the kingdom of God, what then must have happened to them?*
- *How does this relate to those of us who have already failed in the area of sexuality and relationships?*

SHUN FORNICATION! ⁴

Even so, the Corinthians need to be reminded that this is what has happened to them. There was great danger in being where they used to be: ‘wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God’ (1 Corinthians 6:9). A clear distinction needs to be made between their new-found freedom in Christ and their former licentiousness, lest these become confused in their own minds. It is not freedom to sin, but freedom to live in Christ as pure, holy and righteous. It appears that some of them have said, ‘All things are lawful for me’—I can now do whatever I like.

⁴ Compare Hebrews 13:4: ‘Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers’. Fornication is a sexual relationship outside of any marriage bond; adultery is a sexual relationship that intrudes on an already existing marriage. It has been wisely said that in the Bible there is no such thing as ‘sex’—only marriage. This is worth pondering.

Paul picks up what they say, and warns against what is not beneficial, and against what will end up dominating us:

‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ but I will not be dominated by anything (1 Corinthians 6:12).

It appears that some of them have excused sexual laxity on the basis of sex being a natural appetite that needs to be satisfied, like hunger with food: ‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food’. What is wrong with simply satisfying the sexual ‘appetite’, in whatever way? Paul counters this by saying that the time will come when both food and the stomach will be rendered inoperative, but our bodies will go on to be raised from death eternally, like Jesus was. Our bodies are not designed for the sin of fornication in the way our stomachs are designed for food. God has made us—our bodies—for Himself:

‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food,’ and God will destroy both one and the other.⁵ The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power (1 Corinthians 6:13–14).

Paul does not say only, ‘The body is meant . . . for the Lord’—by which we are to be devoted to Him—but he also says, ‘and the Lord for the body’. God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is determined to come and make His home in us (see John 14:16–18, 20, 23)! This has significant implications for what we do, and do not do, with our bodies.

⁵ ‘The quotation may extend to the word *other*’ (NRSV footnote)—in which case the point the Corinthians are making would be: What does it matter what we do with our bodies, since they are going to die anyway (compare 1 Corinthians 15:32). Paul counters this with his reference to the resurrection of the body.

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Even now, our bodies are part of Christ's body, and will be one with him eternally. We have been baptised into Christ, and have been united with him in a death like his, so that we will be united with him in a resurrection like his (see Romans 6:3–5). A body that is united with Christ in this way is not to be given over to the sin of fornication:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall be one flesh.' But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him (1 Corinthians 6:15–17).

An illicit sexual union is incompatible with this spiritual union with Christ. The 'one flesh' union, according to God's good purpose in Christ, is for husband and wife. To take your body and join it to a prostitute runs counter to this good purpose of God, and is a profane travesty of it.⁶ Some take this text to mean that any sexual union virtually constitutes a marriage. I believe Paul is here saying exactly the opposite: no way does such an illicit union of bodies match true one-flesh marriage that reflects and participates in our union with Christ.

Far from replicating or being on a par with proper marriage, the bonding of bodies in sexual union outside of marriage actually harms the participants:

Shun fornication!⁷ Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself (1 Corinthians 6:18).

⁶ This would be highlighted even more if, as is likely, the prostitutes worked from the false religion of the pagan temples. This would make it comparable with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:14–22 about mixing worship of Christ with idolatrous worship (note the quoting again of the catchcry, 'All things are lawful', in 10:23).

⁷ This reiterates the warning given at length in Proverbs 7.

Some translations supply the word ‘other’, that is not there in the text—‘Every *other* sin’—to make it that sexual sin is worse or more body-related than other sins (a distinction that is not made elsewhere in the Bible—sin is sin).⁸ This sentence may be another of the quotes from the Corinthians that Paul was refuting: ‘Every sin that a person commits is outside the body’, meaning that sin has got nothing to do with what happens in the body.⁹ There was a view current in Greek thinking that the body was a lesser ‘cage’ for the true person which was the divine spark of the spirit, which would eventually be released from its cage into true freedom, and that what we did with our bodies could not touch the essential person of the spirit, and so we could do what we like with our bodies and it would not matter. A good excuse!¹⁰ Such thinking is incompatible with the Scriptures, which see God as making us a single and undividable body-soul-spirit entity, all of which God will resurrect after death (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24). Paul makes the point that the fornicator fully sins with and against this whole bodily entity. Any unredeemed sin affects our relationship with God, and the eternal destiny of our resurrected body. On the wider scale of this purpose of God, the body that is Christ himself, as well as the community that is joined to Christ as his body, may also be in view.¹¹ No

⁸ See back in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, where sexual sins are lumped in among the rest.

⁹ Suggested by C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge Uni. Pr., Cambridge 1953), pp. 196 ff.; see Morris, *1 Corinthians*, p. 103. See also Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997), pp. 105ff.

¹⁰ Such a mindset also denied that Christ could have come actually in the flesh, let alone died on a cross—see 1 John 2:22; 4:2, 10, 14; with its accompanying immorality in 2:4. See Martin Bleby, *Life, Light and Love in the Letters of John* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2007), pp. 31–32, 45, 70–72.

¹¹ Compare 1 Corinthians 10:16–17; 11:20–29.

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sin affects only ourselves: it is an offence against God and His Christ, and impacts others.

Questions for reflection:

- *What similarities do we see between what Paul was addressing and attitudes in our own day?*
- *What does it mean to say: ‘The body is meant . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body’?*

A TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Paul then emphasises the outcome of being ‘washed . . . sanctified . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’, and says more about what it means to say, ‘The body is meant . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body’:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

A heavy price—the life of God’s own Son—has been paid to set us free from being slaves to sin. This does not mean we are now our own masters. God has bought and paid for us—our bodies belong to Him. Such is His love for us that He has made our bodies His own dwelling-place: each one of us ‘a temple of the Holy Spirit’. We are not our own—we are His. God’s intimate indwelling presence, and our belonging to Him, is to govern everything we do. We are to glorify God in

our bodies—in ways that display and participate in God's great plan and purpose for us in His creation.

This has implications for how we relate with each other, particularly in marriage. A husband and wife are not just alone with each other, and they cannot relate with each other just one-on-one. God is in the midst of them. They relate rightly with each other only through Him. The presence of our Saviour Christ places a relationship that otherwise would have been full of sin into the pure, clear, sun-filled air of forgiveness and love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. Among men there is strife.¹² 'He is our peace,' says Paul of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:14). Without Christ there is discord between God and man and between man and man. Christ became the Mediator and made peace with God and among men. Without Christ we should not know God and could not call upon Him, nor come to Him. But without Christ we would also not know our brother, nor could we come to him. The way is blocked by our own ego. Christ opened up the way to God and to our brother. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ are we one, only through him are we bound together. To eternity he remains the one Mediator.¹³

Jonathan spoke of his friendship-covenant with David in these terms: 'The LORD shall be between me and you' (1 Samuel 20:42; see also 20:16). This was their bond, as strong as death.¹⁴

¹² For 'men' read human beings; for 'man' read man or woman; for 'brother' read brother or sister.

¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, SCM Press, London, 1954, pp. 13–14.

¹⁴ See further: Martin Bleby, *Power in Relationships: Issues of Love and Control* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2008), especially ch. 9.

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This is different from its pagan substitute, sometimes read out at weddings:

But let there be spaces in your togetherness.
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond of love:
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.
Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.
Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each of you be
alone,
Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with
the same music.¹⁵

In a sinful world, where people may hurt each other, this makes a studied virtue of separateness, as a kind of protection. In Christ there is a one-flesh union where people can be free and safe and secure. That many believers in Christ still need to learn this is borne out by the fact that Paul had to write to the Corinthian believers on this very matter. This leads us on into 1 Corinthians 7.

Questions for reflection:

- *What difference does it make in practice to be able to say in a relationship: 'The Lord shall be between me and you'? What are we left with if this is not the case?*

¹⁵ Kahil Gibran, *The Prophet*, Heinemann, London, 1976, pp. 16–19.

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Paul continues to address the matters that the Corinthian believers have raised:

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman' (1 Corinthians 7:1).

In some translations the words 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman', meaning it is better to refrain from sexual relations altogether, are taken to be the words of Paul. This, however, would not fit with what Paul goes on to say. Most likely it is a position held by some of the Corinthians themselves, possibly in reaction to the widespread sexual immorality of the time. We find a similar quasi-religious stance referred to in another of Paul's letters:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer (1 Timothy 4:1–5).

This is true of marriage, as it is of food. Paul refers to the sexual immorality of the time to draw an opposite conclusion from these ascetic Corinthians:

But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband (1 Corinthians 7:2).

Marriage between a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others for life is proof against sexual immorality in a

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sex-charged world. Within this marriage, the sexual relationship should be free and mutual:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband (1 Corinthians 7:3).

Note here, and throughout the chapter, the careful emphasis on full equality and mutuality between woman and man in these matters. Here there is no reference to headship and submission that we find elsewhere—that does not come into it in this intimate context:

For 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 (1 Corinthians 7:4).

Here is absolute trust, openness, and delighted freedom. We hear echoes of what Paul has just said in the previous chapter: ‘you are not your own’. Just as we are not our own because we belong to Christ, so from him we can learn to trust that we are not our own because we belong to each other.

Paul acknowledges that there are times when it may be good to refrain from sexual union, but not in such a way as would play into the hands of the promoters of total abstinence. Christ remains at the centre, and Satan is not to be given any ground:

Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:5).

There are other reasons why sexual union may be refrained from in a marriage, as Barry Chant says:

You Are Not Your Own

Marriage is not an open go to satisfy sexual urge . . . On an average, most married couples probably engage in sexual intercourse about twice a week. Some do so more frequently; some less. It depends on the couple themselves; the kind of work they are doing, the hours they keep, and so on. It's not just 'open go'. But let me take it a little further. What happens within marriage?

Often, the answer is tiredness, sickness, busyness, pregnancies, and sometimes separations. In all of these cases, there is some time of enforced abstinence from intercourse—and the necessary self-control . . . we have three children, and even though my wife had wonderfully healthy pregnancies, she has still been unable to enjoy intercourse during the latter months and the first few months after child-birth . . . I am often away from home on ministry tours for periods of days or weeks at a time. I don't enjoy these separations very much. But I do have opportunity to practise the self-control that I enjoin on others!

Even within marriage, then, there is often the need for personal integrity and victory in the sexual realm.¹⁶

The Old Testament also required abstinence from sexual union during the woman's menstrual period:

You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness (Leviticus 18:19; compare 20:18; Ezekiel 18:6; 22:10).

Whatever this meant for ritual cleanness in connection with tabernacle or temple worship (see Leviticus 15:19, 24), it also gave the woman a break from needing to fulfil expectations that she was not in a position to meet, and gave the man an opportunity to care for her by waiting. Orthodox Jewish couples today during this time take to separate beds for a period of days.¹⁷

¹⁶ Barry Chant, *Straight Talk about Sex: A Guidebook to Sexual Attitudes for Teenagers*, Luke Publications, Adelaide, 1975, pp. 95–96.

¹⁷ See Herman Wouk, *This Is My God: The Jewish Way of Life*, Fontana/Collins, Glasgow, 1976, pp. 142–5.

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Paul has said it may be appropriate for married couples to abstain from sexual union for a time of prayer.¹⁸ Lest the abstainers turn this into a law, he goes on to say that this is not obligatory:

This I say by way of concession, not of command (1 Corinthians 7:6).

The safety and freedom of this relationship in Christ is secured by its exclusive and lifelong quality. Paul gives strong emphasis to the need for marriage to be lifelong, by referring to the teaching of Jesus:¹⁹

To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife (1 Corinthians 7:10–11).

Paul reiterates this at the end of the chapter, while at the same time making the point that marriage does not continue after death—it is for this life only:

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 7:39–40).

Note the freedom accorded to the woman here, that is not subject to arrangements made by others: ‘she is free to marry

¹⁸ The Israelites were told to abstain from sexual relations over a three day period in preparation for their meeting with God at Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19:15–17). This is not because God disapproves of sex—He invented it! But it was a way of making the point that our union with God is even more wonderful—and more ultimate—than the sexual union.

¹⁹ As, for instance, in Mark 10:2–11. This will be discussed in chapter 7.

anyone she wishes'. Such is the benefit of both marriage partners belonging to Christ, that Paul says this is to be 'in the Lord'—a union between two fellow-believers in Christ. The comment about her being 'more blessed' if she remains single relates to Paul's commendation of the single state (see below). In another place, Paul encourages younger widows to marry, again in the interests of not repressing sexual desire, and for other reasons (see 1 Timothy 5:3–16).

So far, Paul has been addressing married couples who are both believers in Christ. We have seen that he does not encourage a believer to marry an unbeliever. It would seem however that there were in Corinth believers who were married to unbelievers—possibly one of them had become a believer in Christ after they were married. These he addresses now. The question may have arisen as to whether such a marriage should be retained, or is even valid. Paul's answer makes it clear that marriage, as a creational ordinance, applies to believers and unbelievers alike. Since this is not a question on which Jesus gave any teaching, Paul gives advice of his own making, which is no less authoritative as an apostle of Christ:²⁰

To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife (1 Corinthians 7:12–16).

²⁰ See 1 Corinthians 7:40; 14:37.

Note again the even-handed treatment of the equality of status for both the wife and the husband. The main point is that, where there are those who have been washed, sanctified and justified, the contagious nature of holiness or belonging to God in Christ is not to be underestimated: it can spread to your unbelieving husband or wife, and the children are included. So simply being married to an unbeliever is no reason for separation or divorce (it is likely that both words amount to the same thing in the practice of the day²¹). But neither is a believing husband or wife bound to expect that the other one will become a believer (the last two sentences could be read either way). In an intolerable situation, where separation or divorce is called for, the believing partner is not 'bound' (the word used here means 'enslaved', 'reduced to servitude', under spiritual or moral bondage).²² While lifelong marriage is seen as the creational norm, it cannot be said that the Bible, in this sinful world, forbids or makes no provision for separation or divorce.²³

Questions for reflection:

- *What are the implications of the statement, 'you are not your own', in the context of a relationship between husband and wife?*

²¹ See Barbara Roberts, *Not under Bondage: Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery and Desertion*, Maschil Press, Ballarat, 2008, p. 39.

²² *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Samuel Bagster and Sons, London, 1967, p. 107. Barbara Roberts helpfully examines the application of this to situations where a spouse who by abusive behaviour has virtually ceased to be a believer precipitates the necessity for a believing partner to separate or divorce: see Roberts, *Not under Bondage*, pp. 18–44.

²³ The remarriage of divorced persons while their former spouse is still alive is another question, which we will look at in chapter 7.

You Are Not Your Own

- *How can waiting for one another, as well as entering into sexual union, be an expression of care for one another between wife and husband?*
- *What is there about the exclusive and lifelong character of marriage in Christ that secures true safety and freedom in relationship?*
- *What does Paul's advice to believers who are married to unbelievers tell us about the peace, hope and freedom we have in Christ?*

THE UNMARRIED

It is evident that Paul himself was single. He may have been a widower, as he had been a Pharisee, and Pharisees were generally married.²⁴ He now remained single, as John the baptiser and Jesus himself had been before him, probably in the interests of serving the kingdom with unhindered devotion to the Lord as the last days press in (as indicated later in 1 Corinthians 7:26–35). He naturally commends this state, but it was not obligatory on church leaders, as ‘the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas [Peter]’ were married and travelled with their wives in ministry (1 Corinthians 9:5). Neither marriage nor celibacy is a legal requirement or a social expectation to be insisted upon, but a gift that is given from God:

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind (1 Corinthians 7:7).

²⁴ Philippians 3:5; see Noel Due, *One Corinthians*, Coromandel Valley–Hawthorndene Baptist Church SA, 1991, p. 59.

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So while Paul encourages people to remain single, he also encourages people to marry—especially if they have not been given the gift of self-control. There is no special virtue in suppressing sexual desire:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion (1 Corinthians 7:8–9).²⁵

Further on, Paul goes into more detail:

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that (1 Corinthians 7:25–28).

We are not told what the 'impending crisis' was—whether the likelihood of severe persecution, which would be of grave concern particularly for those who were married with families, or something else. Whatever it was, it was sufficient to give pause to any who might be considering a change in their situation, to spare them undue distress. Yet even this is not to prevent those who do marry from doing so.

²⁵ The word for 'unmarried' can include those who are separated or divorced, as in 7:11. Some commentators see 7:8–9 then as encouraging the marriage of divorced persons while their former spouse is still alive. B. Ward Powers, who has a needs-based view of marriage, argues this way in *Marriage and Divorce: The New Testament Teaching* (Family Life Movement of Australia, Concord, and Jordan Books, Petersham, 1987); see pp. 15–18, 24, 181–189. It is unlikely that Paul has this in mind, since he says in 7:11 that the separated wife is to 'remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband'.

You Are Not Your Own

On the larger scale, all of us at every time face the possibility of the imminent return of Jesus Christ at the end of the world, which reminds us that none of the good things of this life, marriage included, is ultimate or forever. We are to live in the midst of these things, even while we are fully engaged in them, with a healthy detachment that keeps us from making an idol of any of them, as we eagerly await the final coming of our Lord:

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:29–31).

We are not our own. Married or not, our lives, and all that make them up, belong to the Lord, for the service of His kingdom. In the light of this, Paul gives a reason for his own personal preference for single celibacy:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:32–35).

Those entering into marriage need to have a realistic estimate of the responsibilities that this will involve. Even so, Paul again makes clear that he is not imposing single celibacy as a

legal restraint. Those to whom he writes are free in Christ to make that decision as appropriate:

If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancé, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry. But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancé, he will do well. So then, he who marries his fiancé does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better (1 Corinthians 7:36–38).

The word for ‘fiancé’ is again ‘virgin’, as in 7:25. This may not be addressed to engaged couples, but rather to parents or guardians who have unmarried daughters. Especially since ‘he who marries’ is more likely to mean ‘he who gives in marriage’, and ‘if his passions are strong’ means more literally ‘if she passes the stage of being fully developed’, and ‘having his own desire under control’ can mean simply ‘having the right to give effect to his own purpose’.²⁶ Once again, we are to be free and purposeful in these important decisions, and not swayed by custom or expectation.

Once again, we hear the echo of: ‘you are not your own . . . you were bought with a price’ (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). We are no longer bound by our sin, by the desires of flesh or senses, by Satan, or by worldly expectations. We belong to God in Christ, and we serve His kingdom. In Him, in marriage or singleness as in everything else, we have great freedom to move in all the will of God, and to glorify Him in our bodies.

²⁶ Morris, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 120–2.

Questions for discussion:

- *What disadvantages do we impose on single celibate persons in the church? How does Paul's teaching encourage us to honour and support them, as we honour and support those who are married?*

Chapter 7

Marriage and Divorce

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE IN AUSTRALIA

Although ‘Marriage, according to law in Australia, is the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life’,¹ the law in Australia also makes provision for divorce or the cessation of a marriage, which then leaves the woman and the man legally able to marry someone else while their former marriage partner is still alive. Since 1975, the sole ground for divorce has been ‘irretrievable breakdown’, measured as a twelve months’ separation.² This replaced former notions of matrimonial fault, which needed to be proved in court—the law of the land no longer recognises any ‘guilty’ or ‘innocent’ parties to a divorce.

We have been seeing that marriage as the union in love of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life—‘until we are parted by death’—is very

¹ *Handbook for Marriage Celebrants*, p. 71. See also David Phillips, ‘Marriage versus Civil Unions’, Festival of Light Australia Resource Paper, *Light*, August 2006, p. 8.

² *Marriage, Divorce and the Family: New Rules for Australians: Questions and Answers on the 1975 Family Law Act*, p. 15.

much in line with the Christian understanding of marriage. How then are we as Christians to view the possibility of divorce and the marrying of another person while a former marriage partner is still alive? In particular, what does the Bible have to say about this, and how should this govern our belief and practice?

All of us will have some emotional involvement with this issue. With over 40% of contemporary marriages at present rates likely to end in divorce,³ it is probable that each of us know some among our close family members or friends who are divorced and possibly married to someone else while their former marriage partner is still alive. We may be in that situation ourselves. The emotional investment this has required of us may predetermine our approach to this issue. We look to be affirmed in an already decided course of action, and there will be no shortage of people available to tell us what we want to hear. This may affect our willingness to hear and consider anything in the Bible that may run counter to what we have already decided and approved.

We are also aware that Australia has a strong tradition of the separation of church and state. In a country like the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where church and state are related by law, the church in setting its policy must take into account the situation that prevails in the life of the nation, and the state must pay some attention to what the church says.⁴ In Australia, that connection has been largely severed. This has the benefit that the church can come to its own position untrammelled by considerations of state policy.

³ See Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia . . . Where?*, p. 163.

⁴ We see P. T. Forsyth wrestling in this position as he comes to some of his conclusions with regard to the admissibility of divorce and remarriage in his own teaching and practice; see P. T. Forsyth, *Marriage: Its Ethic and Religion* (1912), (NCPI, Blackwood, 1999), especially pp. 37–54.

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But it also means that the community in general is not bound to take any cognisance of what the church might say or do. Whatever conclusions we come to in this study, we need to face the reality that it may make little difference to what people do in their lives. Even within the church, the very Australian characteristic of having no one tell us what we may or may not do could ensure that people mostly will do what people will do anyway, whatever we may say.

Do we then give up the attempt to come to any conclusion? Can we speak and act with firmness, integrity and love in this situation? Is there a way of bearing witness to the goodness of marriage and the truth of the eternal gospel in the midst of marriage breakdown and the alternative reconstituting of relationships? We need to be humble, wise and prayerful in our consideration of these things.

Questions for reflection:

- *What experiences have we had personally of grappling with this issue?*
- *What awareness have we had of the differences, and tensions, between a Christian position on marriage and divorce, and the position of the law of the land, and general community expectations?*

IS THE BIBLE A LAW BOOK?

Naturally, as those who accept the authority of Scripture, we look to the Bible to determine what we believe and how we should act in this matter. Sometimes we come looking for answers from the Bible as if we can apply them directly to the situations we face. If we approach the Bible that way, we are

likely to be disappointed.⁵ We find that not every eventuality or outcome is accounted for.⁶ Each of Jesus' sayings on divorce, for instance, is differently nuanced, and says something about one thing but not about another. In Matthew 19:9 Jesus says something about a man who divorces his wife and marries another, but nothing about a woman who divorces her husband. In Matthew 5:32 he says something about the consequences for a woman who is so divorced by a man, and for whoever marries her, and this is paralleled somewhat differently in what he says in Luke 16:18. In Mark 10:12 Jesus says something about both a woman who divorces her husband and a husband who divorces his wife, but nothing about whoever may marry the one who has been divorced. Other mentions of divorce and/or remarriage in the Bible are few and far between, and each one appears to be addressing a different set of circumstances. Even so, there are those who seek to put all these in order together, to come up with a comprehensive legal-like scheme of permissions or disallowances pertaining to this area. Different people using the same set of texts can come up with opposite conclusions: some in favour of divorcing and marrying again and others quite opposed to both, in varying degrees.⁷ Geoffrey Bingham comments:

⁵ A setting forth and examination of principles of biblical interpretation can be found in Martin Bleby, *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2006).

⁶ Barbara Roberts observes: 'Jesus' phraseology does not resemble precise statute law, where all possible outcomes and eventualities are carefully accounted for' (*Not under Bondage*, p. 101).

⁷ For instance, Barbara Roberts finds that in serious situations of marital abuse, both divorce and remarriage are allowable in Scripture (*Not under Bondage*, pp. 105–113). B. Ward Powers, beginning from an understanding of marriage that sees it as a sharing of lives that meets the needs of both partners, comes to the conclusion that both divorce and remarriage can be accommodated (*Marriage and Divorce: The New Testament Teaching*, Family Life Movement of Australia, Concord, and Jordan

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The difficulty in all this is that we are faced with heavy legalism on the one hand which totally opposes a break in marriage and a remarriage. On the other hand, we have a legalism which insists that it is legally permissible to divorce and remarry.⁸

Is it appropriate to use the Bible in this way, virtually as a form of legislation? To do this may be to miss the point. Geoffrey Bingham, under the heading 'Is Divorce Permissible for Christians?' says: 'The question itself is improper'.⁹ It could be that an improper question may lead us down improper pathways, whichever fork we choose. He warns:

What we have to recognize is that the Bible is not a handbook on marriage, that it does not contain legislation in regard to the marriages of Christians. It is not written specifically, 'You shall not divorce!'. It does not say, 'You shall remain married, whatever'. It does not say, 'Get divorced', 'Don't get divorced', 'Remarry', or, 'Don't remarry'. As we have said it not a law book. People who ask the question stated at the head of this section wish to find out what is permitted and not

Books, Petersham, 1987, pp. 7–18). Andrew Cornes, as a pastor deeply concerned at the ravages that divorce and remarriage leave in the lives of individuals, families and communities, upholds the unbreakable nature of the marriage bond, strongly encourages reconciliation for those separated or divorced, and sees remarriage to be prohibited by the teaching of Christ, with answers 'quarried from the Bible' (*Questions about Divorce and Remarriage*, Monarch Books, London, 1998, pp. 11–32, 14). David J. Engelsma, seeking to impart to God's people 'a better knowledge of the Word of God' in the midst of the 'rampant godlessness of our society', concludes that marriage is not dissolvable, such that a divorced person 'may not remarry', and those who are already remarried are 'to stop living in that state' (*Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*, revised edition, Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grandville, 1998, pp. 9, 13, 227–9).

⁸ Geoffrey Bingham, *Man, Woman and Sexuality*, NCPI, Blackwood, second edition, 1986, p. 82.

⁹ Geoffrey Bingham, *God's Glory, Man's Sexuality*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1988, p. 241.

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permitted. This may have an admirable quality to it, but it takes the questioner down the path of legalism.¹⁰

Nor is this to leave us joining those who have ‘a careless view of grace which says nothing matters anyway—why fuss?’¹¹

How then are we to approach the Scriptures on these matters? We recall from the previous study that Paul the apostle, addressing some of these issues in 1 Corinthians 6 and 7, did not approach them piecemeal, by the application of general principles or by laying down the law, but from a gospel base that rested securely in God’s salvation of us sinners in Jesus Christ, and our belonging to him in the kingdom-rule of God. Central to the interpretation of any passage of Scripture must be its place in the overall saving purpose and action of God in Christ.¹² This must be in the context of a realistic assessment of where people, church and society are with regard to the purpose and will of God.

There are many things that we would like to get neatly sewn up, and then impose on others. Neither of those options is available to us. Where there is the deviousness of human sin, nothing will ever be straightforward—with others, or with ourselves.

Questions for reflection:

- *How have we sought to use the Bible as a law book to settle these questions? What advantages, or difficulties, have we encountered in this approach?*
- *What difference does it make to be aware of our own need for salvation, and to have experienced the sovereign saving grace of Christ?*

¹⁰ Bingham, *God’s Glory, Man’s Sexuality*, p. 242.

¹¹ Bingham, *Man, Woman and Sexuality*, p. 82.

¹² See Bleby, *God Speaking*, especially pp. 37–89.

DIVORCE HAPPENS

While the Bible does not legislate for divorce, it recognises that, in a sinful world, there are people married to each other who get divorced, and some who go on to marry another person while their former wife or husband is still alive. Old Testament references are invariably incidental allusions, some of which seek to place some restrictions on this practice. Priests in Israel were not to 'marry a woman divorced from her husband' (Leviticus 21:7; see also verse 14, and Ezekiel 44:22). A priest's daughter who has married someone who is not a priest, and is 'divorced, without offspring, and returns to her father's house . . . may eat of her father's food' that is reserved for the priest's family (Leviticus 22:13). A man who falsely accuses his wife of unchastity 'shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives' (Deuteronomy 22:19). A man required to marry a woman he has raped 'shall not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives' (Deuteronomy 22:29). A divorced woman who binds herself by a vow is bound by that vow (see Numbers 30:9). These references tell us that divorce happened in Israel, but could scarcely be held as the basis for any legislation on divorce and marriage as such.

There are provisions for releasing a slave-wife or a captive-wife from a marriage relationship if she is not going to be cared for rightly (see Exodus 21:7–11; Deuteronomy 21:10–14). While these relate to particular situations in Israel at that time, which will not necessarily be reproduced elsewhere, they do represent care for those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.

Ezra required the sending away of foreign wives, that Israelites had married in disobedience to God's law for Israel (see Ezra 9–10; Deuteronomy 7:1–4). This emphasised the priority in family life of God's express purpose of holiness for His people.

In a passage that denounces faithlessness towards God and each other, Malachi 2:16 is often translated: 'I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts' (NRSV). However, the verb for 'hate' is not first person ('I') but is third person singular ('he'), and so is more literally translated: 'the man who hates and divorces, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts' (ESV).¹³ Divorce is an expression of hatred, and a violent wrench.

Of particular interest in the Old Testament, because of its use in the New Testament, is Deuteronomy 24:1–4:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession.

Again, the reference to divorce is incidental, as something that happens. What this passage prohibits is the taking back of a former wife when she has since been married to someone else. Its effect would have been to prevent the use of customary divorce procedures as a form of legalised adultery.

Even though this passage did not legislate for divorce and remarriage as such, some with a legalistic mindset in Jesus' day took it as giving them licence to divorce under the law of

¹³ See Roberts, *Not under Bondage*, pp. 72–5.

God. There was a dispute amongst teachers over what constituted ‘something objectionable’ as grounds for divorce: was it unfaithfulness only (*Shammai*), or anything displeasing to the husband, such as the wife burning a meal (*Hillel*), or that the husband had found another woman more attractive than his wife (*Akiba*)? It is likely this was the background to the Pharisees’ question to Jesus: ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any cause*?’ (Matthew 19:3).¹⁴ Jesus refused to play their game by answering that specific question. Their response showed that they were using Deuteronomy 24:1–4 in a legalistic way as a licence for divorce: ‘Why then did Moses *command* us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?’ (Matthew 19:7). Jesus corrected them: ‘Moses *allowed* you to divorce your wives’ (Matthew 19:8)—there was, as we have seen, no such command, only a permissive reference to the practice.

Jesus also gave the reason for that allowance in the law of God: ‘It was because you were *so hard-hearted* that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives’ (Matthew 19:8). It was a recognition of the action of sin. Divorce happens because of hardness of heart. We all know that. If hearts of husbands and wives were always soft towards each other, there would be no such thing as divorce. Divorce is brought on by hard-heartedness on the part of one or both. We should not be surprised—none of us are immune. Jesus said:

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication . . . adultery (Mark 7:21, 22).

But, said Jesus, ‘from the beginning it was not so’ (Matthew 19:8)—this was never part of God’s will or intention for us.

¹⁴ The words in italics do not occur in Mark 10:2.

Questions for reflection:

- *Why were the Pharisees so intent on wanting to know allowable grounds for divorce?*
- *How is this perverse desire reflected in our own hearts and lives?*

MARRIAGE FROM THE BEGINNING

In responding to the Pharisees' question, Jesus took them back to God's original intention for marriage:

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 (Matthew 19:4–6).

The implications for divorce follow from this:

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate (Matthew 19:6).

This was how Paul the apostle understood God's law as given through Moses:

a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man, she is not an adulteress (Romans 7:2–3).¹⁵

¹⁵ Paul is using this in a different context, not in a prescriptive way, but as an illustration of how 'you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that

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This is also how Paul relayed the teaching of Jesus:

To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife (1 Corinthians 7:10–11).

Paul summarised it as follows:

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord (1 Corinthians 7:39).

Question for reflection:

- *What is it about God's original intention for marriage that invests it with this lifelong character?*

ANY EXCEPTIONS?

Just as an allowance was made in the Old Testament for the action of sin in bringing about divorce, so there is recognition of this also in the New Testament. The very fact that Jesus responded to the Pharisees' question on divorce indicates that he saw it as an issue that needed to be addressed. We have seen above that while Paul said 'the wife should not separate'¹⁶ from her husband', he immediately acknowledged that this

we may bear fruit for God' (Romans 7:4). But it is indicative of Paul's understanding of the law of God as upholding the lifelong character of marriage.

¹⁶ The distinction we may draw between separating and divorcing was not present in this setting: Paul uses the same word here as Jesus used in Matthew 19:6.

still might happen: ‘but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband’ (1 Corinthians 7:10). We saw in the previous chapter that Paul also envisaged a situation in which, if an unbelieving wife or husband brings about a separation, a believing partner need not contest it (see 1 Corinthians 7:15).

This is not to say that divorce is then legitimate in these situations. It is just to say that it happens.

Jesus appears to be making an exception that offers a legitimate ground for divorce in Matthew 5 and 19:

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, *except on the ground of unchastity*, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery (Matthew 5:31–32).

I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity*, and marries another commits adultery (Matthew 19:9).

The Greek word used for ‘unchastity’ here is πορνεία (*porneia*), a general word for sexual immorality. Much writing has been expended on analysis of this so-called exception. Some say that it matches a requirement of Jewish law in New Testament times that compelled a man to divorce his wife ‘when fornication before marriage was discovered . . . or adultery detected’.¹⁷ Joseph’s plan to break his engagement with Mary when she was found to be pregnant is cited as an example (see Matthew 1:18–19). Some say these words were

¹⁷ D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NCBC, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London, 1972) p. 125; quoted in William A. Heth and Gordon J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: Towards an Evangelical Understanding of New Testament Teaching* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1984), p. 124.

inserted later into Jesus' teaching, since they are not found in Mark 10:11–12 or Luke 16:18, and so can be disregarded.¹⁸ This has no textual warrant, and appears to be somewhat arbitrary. Others say these words were left out of the gospels of Mark and Luke because they did not apply in the non-Jewish settings for which these gospels were written. They have been seen as giving 'liberty and relief to the innocent party' in an abusive marriage relationship.¹⁹ Many take them as one God-given ground for divorce.²⁰

It may be, however, that these words were never intended as an exception at all. Robert Banks sees them as a reference to the 'something objectionable' in Deuteronomy 24:1, that the Pharisees were using as a ground for divorce, and supports the translation of Matthew 5:32 as 'quite apart from the matter of πορνεία', with a similar reference in Matthew 19:9:

These sayings may generally be translated: 'I say to you, whoever dismisses his wife—the permission in Deut. 24:1 notwithstanding—and marries another, commits adultery'.²¹

This would make these words consistent with Jesus' appeal to marriage as it was 'in the beginning', as that which 'God has joined together' that is not to be separated (Matthew 19:4–6), and consistent with the parallel sayings in Mark 10:11–12 and Luke 16:18.

¹⁸ The Archbishop of Adelaide, The Right Rev'd B. P. Robin, M. A., *The Position of the Church of England Regarding Divorce*, North Adelaide, 1952 [p. 2].

¹⁹ Roberts, *Not under Bondage*, pp. 83–8.

²⁰ For example, Engelsma, *Marriage*, pp. 105–6.

²¹ Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 153–9.

Questions for reflection:

- *What is the difference between divorce happening and divorce being legitimate?*
- *What is the relationship between the two?*

DOES GOD DIVORCE HIS PEOPLE?

In an earlier study, we found that God in the Old Testament often saw His relationship with Israel in terms of a marriage covenant, and that this culminates in the New Testament with the marriage of the Lamb and his Bride—Christ and his people.²² If marriage is instituted by God from the beginning to reflect and participate in that greatest marriage of all time, what place might divorce and some alternative marriage relationship have in that scenario?

We pick up the story at the time of Jeremiah the prophet, about 600 years before Christ, when Israel had gone far from God and His ways, and were about to come under judgement for indulging in the worship of other gods:

Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband,
so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel,
says the LORD (Jeremiah 3:20).

The other gods they were worshipping were human fabrications, idols of wood and stone:

Judah . . . polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree
(Jeremiah 3:8, 9).

²² See chapter 4, 'The Greatest Marriage of All Time'.

Marriage and the Good News of God

The northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated and sent into exile over one hundred years earlier in 721 BC, which God describes in these terms:

for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce (Jeremiah 3:8).

Now the time is coming for the same thing to happen to the southern kingdom of Judah. God, no doubt mindful of His law in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, indicates that the break is likely to be irreparable:

If a man divorces his wife
and she goes from him
and becomes another man's wife,
will he return to her?
Would not such a land be greatly polluted?
You have played the whore with many lovers;
and would you return to me? says the LORD (Jeremiah 3:1).

Yet here God asserts His true nature:

I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you
(Jeremiah 31:3).

And so the call goes out from God:

Return, O faithless children, says the LORD,
for I am your master . . .
Return, O faithless children,
I will heal your faithlessness (Jeremiah 3:14, 22).

God, the pure and holy One, in contradistinction to His own law that He gave to sinful Israel, out of His own resources of faithfulness, will do something to heal the faithlessness of His wayward people. And so the promise is made:

Marriage and Divorce

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

And the response of the people is prepared:

Here we come to you; for you are the LORD our God . . .
Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel
(Jeremiah 3:22, 23).

About one hundred and fifty years earlier, the prophet Hosea had been called upon by God to act this out in his own personal life:

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, ‘Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.’ So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son (Hosea 1:2–3).

Gomer then had two other children who were not his. To these children Hosea is told to say, with a message that applies no less to Israel:

Plead with your mother, plead—
for she is not my wife,
and I am not her husband—
that she put away her whoring from her face,
and her adultery from between her breasts (Hosea 2:2).

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God later speaks of a time when things will change:

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD (Hosea 2:19–20).

So also Hosea is prevailed upon to act accordingly:

The LORD said to me again, ‘Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods’ (Hosea 3:1).

This time, it appears, Hosea has to go and buy Gomer back from slavery that she has got herself into. After a time of abstinence they are to come back together—just as the people of Israel are to return to God:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take words with you
and return to the LORD;
say to him,
‘Take away all guilt;
accept that which is good,
and we will offer
the fruit of our lips . . .
we will say no more, “Our God,”
to the work of our hands’ (Hosea 14:1–2, 3).

When Jesus came, he called himself ‘the bridegroom’ (Matthew 9:15). The night before he went to die on the cross, he took a cup of wine in his hands and said:

this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28).

Marriage and Divorce

So his faithfulness moved to heal our faithlessness:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . while we still were sinners Christ died for us . . . while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son (Romans 5:5–6, 8, 10).

Reconciliation, then, is what we are about, with all the resources of God available to us:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

As Jesus stood before the questioning Pharisees, he could well have said: 'I am the bridegroom, standing before you, who has come to do all that—and you ask *me* about *divorce*?'—!

Question for reflection:

- *Have I, in my unfaithfulness, stood before the Faithful Bridegroom?*

WHAT ABOUT REMARRIAGE?

The simplest and most comprehensive statement of Jesus on marrying another person after divorce while a former husband or wife is still living is in Mark 10:11–12:

Marriage and the Good News of God

Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

In Luke 16:18 Jesus speaks of a man who divorces his wife, and of anyone who marries a woman so divorced:

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

‘Adultery’ is having a husband–wife type relationship with another person when already married to someone else. It was one of the things forbidden to God’s people in the ‘ten commandments’, given by God through Moses about 1,500 years before Christ, as being inconsistent with God’s faithful nature, and not helpful to human beings made in His image. Jesus is saying here, then, that marrying another person after divorce where a former husband or wife is still living is not God’s will for His people.

We have seen that Paul teaches consistently with what Jesus says here (see 1 Corinthians 7:10–11, 39; Romans 7:2–3).

The startlingly radical and counter-cultural nature of this teaching of Jesus is highlighted by his disciples’ reaction on hearing it:

His disciples said to him, ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry’ (Matthew 19:10).

So used were they to the common practice of divorce and remarriage—as we are today—that Jesus’ prohibition of marrying again while a former marriage partner was still alive was almost inconceivable to them, and called the whole matter of marriage into question: ‘If that is the case, surely it would be better not to marry at all!’

Is This for All?

A common response is that, while lifelong marriage, and Jesus' prohibition of remarriage that goes with it, is the ideal, yet there are those who do not live up to this ideal, and should not be expected to. Appeal is made to Jesus' words following the disciples' incredulous response:

Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given . . . Let anyone accept this who can (Matthew 19:11, 12).²³

Jesus is not saying here that it is optional but that, as with anything pertaining to the kingdom of heaven, it can be carried through only as we are given to do it by God and are willing to receive what God gives—as the disciples were, in contrast to the Pharisees. A comparison is made with what Jesus says in connection with his parables:

Let anyone with ears listen! . . . To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given . . . But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear (Matthew 13:9, 11, 16).

This is not something that can be figured out or carried through by mere human reasoning or capabilities. It is something given, gladly, by God, to those who will receive it. Greg John writes:

²³ This was the position taken by Keith Rayner, Archbishop of Adelaide, in his Pastoral Address to the Diocese on 25th September 1978 (Lutheran Publ., Adelaide, n.d.), pp. 5–6.

There is dispute over whether 'this teaching' refers to Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage, as we take it here, or to the new topic of celibacy or not marrying at all raised by the disciples' words. See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 53–68; Roberts, *Not under Bondage*, pp. 93–4.

Marriage and the Good News of God

There is a growing number of Christians around the world who are experiencing separation or divorce, but who are remaining faithful to their wedding vows and to their spouses. While they long for reconciliation, they are willing to face singleness for the rest of their lives if necessary.²⁴

They have not come to this position just by seeking to apply what Jesus said and gritting their teeth in order to see it through. God has given them a revelation of His own faithfulness, and has been ‘bringing them through the turmoil to a place of inner peace, hope, joy and trust in Him’.²⁵ Greg John adds:

I have been privileged to meet a number of these people, and though they all face many difficulties and trials, they are among the most deeply joyful believers I have ever known.²⁶

Are There Exceptions?

Even those who recognise that ‘Jesus’ divorce and remarriage teaching was different from anything the disciples had ever encountered’²⁷ still find ways by which it can be said that Jesus permits remarriage after divorce.

When Jesus said, ‘whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery’ (Matthew 19:9), he did not say, ‘But it is not adultery to marry another if unchastity is involved’. Yet there are many who use the exception clause (if that is what it is—see above) to allow the

²⁴ Greg John (ed.), *Called to Faithfulness: God at Work in Broken Marriages* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2002), p. xi. The book includes contributions from divorced and separated Christians.

²⁵ John, *Called to Faithfulness*, p. xiii.

²⁶ John, *Called to Faithfulness*, pp. xi–xii.

²⁷ Roberts, *Not under Bondage*, p. 93.

marrying of another as well as the divorcing of a wife, who insist that the text allows this, and on that basis claim exemption under these circumstances. Extensive research has shown that this is not how it was understood in the first five centuries of the Christian church, where remarriage was disallowed even in the case of an ‘innocent’ spouse where divorce had occurred by reason of adultery or fornication on the part of the other partner.²⁸ Jesus is saying here: whether unchastity is involved or not, divorce and marrying another is the equivalent of adultery.

Recourse is also made to Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7:15, when an unbelieving partner separates: ‘in such a case the brother or sister is not bound’. This is taken to be an exception to the general statement in 1 Corinthians 7:39: ‘A wife is bound as long as her husband lives’. In fact, two different words for ‘bound’ are used in these two verses. In verse 15 the word is δεδούλωται (*dedoulōtai*), which means ‘enslaved’ or ‘under bondage’, whereas in verse 39 the word is δέδεται (*dedetai*) which refers to being linked in a marriage bond. To be ‘enslaved’ to a marriage is not the same as still being bound by it. In verse 15 Paul is making the point that the believing partner can be at peace about letting the unbelieving partner separate if consent to remain living together is not present. Being ‘free’ to remarry is not mentioned, and probably not contemplated.²⁹

It is pointed out that the customary certificate of divorce given to the woman in those days included the words ‘you are free to marry any man’; so remarriage after divorce would

²⁸ See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 19–72, and Engelsma, *Marriage*, pp. 181–203.

²⁹ See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 138–44. Roberts, *Not under Bondage*, pp. 43, 47, gives ‘not bound’ in verse 15 its force of not being under subservient bondage, but also takes it to mean ‘free to marry’.

normally have been assumed by all without needing to say so. We have seen, however, that Jesus was not being normal or customary in saying what he did. Others point out that Paul's advice to the 'unmarried' in 1 Corinthians 7:8–9 includes that 'they should marry', and that the 'unmarried' in verse 11 includes the divorced—so the divorced also should marry.³⁰ This hardly seems likely, especially as in verse 11 Paul says 'let her remain unmarried'.

Nevertheless, on the basis of these two passages, known as the 'Matthean exception' and the 'Pauline privilege', an 'evangelical consensus' has been in place for the last 500 years or so by which it is said:

Divorce and remarriage are permissible (not mandatory) on two grounds. First, an innocent person may divorce his or her partner, if the latter has been guilty of serious sexual immorality. Secondly, a believer may acquiesce in the desertion of his or her unbelieving partner, if the latter refuses to go on living with him or her.³¹

Recent scholarship has shown the Reformers to have been dependent upon a misreading of the texts of these passages introduced by Erasmus in the sixteenth century. A number of writers now disallow these interpretations.³²

What about Those Already Remarried?

Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. Neither is remarriage. What of those who have remarried already? Should these marriages never have taken place?

³⁰ Powers, *Marriage and Divorce*, pp. 179–89.

³¹ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, Basingstoke, 1984, p. 272.

³² See Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, pp. 73–150, and Engelsma, *Marriage*, pp. 167–180. See also Comes, *Divorce and Remarriage*, pp. 92–119.

Whether they should or not, the fact is they have happened. God knows that. Christ has been to the bottom of all our sins, and forgiveness is full and free for all. What we must do is learn to live in that forgiveness, and not pretend that we don't need to.

Jesus once spoke to a Samaritan woman and offered her eternal life. He knew her situation. 'You have had five husbands', he said, 'and he whom you now have is not your husband' (RSV). We are not told how he might have counselled her regarding the tangled web of her marital and other relationships. Should she go back with one of the former five? Or stay with the one she has now? Or become celibate? Jesus does not say. The important thing is that he revealed himself to her as the Messiah from God, and she believed in him as the Saviour of the world (see John 4:1–42).

On another occasion, a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought to Jesus. The penalty under God's law was death. Jesus said to her accusers, 'Let the one who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her'. They all went away. Then Jesus said to the woman, 'I do not condemn you. Go, and do not sin again.' Jesus had not gone soft on God's law. He knew that on the cross he would suffer the death penalty for her—and for all of us. She was free from her sin (John 8:1–11).

All of us are sinners. We are not in a position to judge anyone. Besides, that is not our job. It is God who is Judge of all, and He is both just and merciful. That is why Jesus said, 'Judge not, and you will not be judged: condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven' (Luke 6:37, RSV). One of the difficulties I have found, in trying to apply certain criteria to decide who might 'qualify' for remarriage or not, is that we are then attempting to pass judgement on other people's private lives when we are in no

position to do so. Our job is not to judge people, but to love them with the love of the Lord, and leave them in God's good hands.

Loving and Forgiving

The only true love is the love that comes from God. That love is always in keeping with God's commandments. In God, obedience and love always go together. Any so-called 'love' which goes against God's commandments ends up not being love at all. When we try to love people with some other self-generated love of our own, we are not really loving them. In fact our 'love' ends up being more like hate and harm.

The true love from God is in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when he took our sins and loved us to the end. This is the love that people need to know—especially any who have been hurt or discouraged by the trauma of divorce. God has given us lifelong marriage as a tangible sign of His everlasting love for us. If we say that marriage is not necessarily for life (which is what we are saying in practice when we remarry in these circumstances), then are we saying also that God's love has a cut-out point? Are we not then settling for something less than the whole of God's great love, and letting others do the same? It could be that, as a church, our witness to the truth and fullness of the gospel will be only as strong as our practice regarding divorce and remarriage.

We receive this love only by repenting and believing in the Lord Jesus. This is how we know we are fully acceptable to God, whether we are single, married, divorced, remarried or whatever. Are we acceptable to God because we are married, or not married, or because we have satisfied a particular church's requirements for remarriage after divorce and received official permission? None of us are acceptable to God on the basis of

anything we or the church have done or not done. We are acceptable to God only because God loved us so much that He gave His Son to die for us, so that he could take away the sins of the world. This faithfulness of God, even to death, is what we all need to know, especially if we have been through marriage breakdown.

Forgiveness, for all who repent and believe, is immediate, total and free. No question about it, and no going back. But forgiveness and remarriage are two different things. All things are forgivable, but that does not then mean that all things are permissible. Forgiveness does not free us to go against what Jesus says. In fact the opposite—it frees us to be able to carry out his will.

Question for reflection:

- *Where have we come to in our consideration of these things?*

A PERSONAL STORY

Before 1979 (in South Australia) remarriage of a divorced person whose former spouse was still living was not permitted in the Anglican Church of Australia (then known as ‘The Church of England in Australia’).

In 1979 it became possible for such a marriage to take place in church, with special permission from the bishop. The bishop needed to be assured that the previous marriage relationship was beyond retrieval, that there was proper provision for the previous spouse and their children, that there was genuine repentance and a Christian intention to enter into lifelong marriage, and an ongoing relationship with the church as shown by regular attendance at church services.

No member of the clergy was compelled to solemnise the marriage of a divorced person. In doing so the clergy person and the bishop needed to be satisfied that the teachings of Holy Scripture or the doctrines and principles of the Anglican Church were not being contravened. If conscience required the clergy person to decline all such requests, the couple was to be referred to some other member of the clergy.

Before 1979, as an Anglican minister in this situation, when people came to me with a request for remarriage after divorce, I simply applied church law. I would say, 'The church won't let me do it', and that was that.

After 1979, I did not have to say 'No' straight out. At least we could talk about it. I tried to work within the new guidelines, and I solemnised a number of such marriages with the bishop's permission.

I did have some misgivings about it, however. Especially when we came to the bits in the marriage service like 'as long as we both shall live' and 'until we are parted by death' and 'What God has joined together, let no one separate'. Having to be satisfied that what I was doing did not contravene the teachings of Holy Scripture drove me back to the Bible to be clear about what it actually said. I knew the clear teaching of Jesus, but others had said there were ways around this, and for the time being I took their word for it. I tried to apply the two so-called 'exceptions', but I found no case that fitted them exactly. I was unsettled by one or two other ministers who told me that, on the basis of biblical teaching, they now always refrained from remarrying those who were divorced. For a while I put it in the 'too hard' basket. Especially after I moved to a church which had an attractive building where many weddings were held, including a number of those who were divorced with a former spouse still living.

Marriage and Divorce

At the beginning of 1991, at a New Creation Teaching Ministry Summer School in which I was to teach on Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount', including Matthew 5:32, the Lord Jesus made it clear to me, in a gruelling but overwhelming experience of his love, that I was to withdraw from my participation in all such marriages. While still going ahead with marriages in this category that I had already agreed to take, I knew then that I would need to do the necessary study and take the appropriate steps to carry this out. After much detailed study, by the end of the year, after talking with the bishop, the parish council and the congregation (which included some who were remarried after divorce, and some whom I had remarried myself), I was able to move to the position in which I would no longer officiate at the marriage of a divorced person whose former spouse was still living. Such couples who came to me I met with and referred to other Anglican ministers who were willing to apply for the bishop's permission to solemnise the marriage in our church building.

Questions for reflection:

- *How does this personal story resonate, or jar, with my own?*
- *What is God saying to me in that?*

YOUR MAKER IS YOUR HUSBAND

How, then, are we to conduct ourselves in this situation? Can we speak and act with firmness, integrity and love? Can we bear witness to the goodness of marriage and the truth of the eternal gospel in the midst of marriage breakdown and the

alternative reconstituting of relationships? Geoffrey Bingham has wisely said:

We need, then, to recognise human sinfulness so that we may live in an imperfect world without rage or frustration which is damaging. God's demands upon the human race are total. Full obedience is required. Even so, rebellious humanity for the most part ignores the demands. The long-suffering, kindness and forbearance of God have not refused to destroy the race, but have provided the way of grace and love so that mankind may be redeemed. The redeemed find their way back to God's true order. Some of them, sadly enough, make it a tyrannous order. They fail to recognise the need of grace for human living. They legislate in the hope of conforming man to true morality. Autonomous human beings are enraged by the imposition of morality, especially where the will does not accept it. Christian and creational forms of sexuality are rejected and hence cannot be imposed. The Christian person perforce must live in the tension of seeing and knowing God's ordered creation whilst rebellious man rejects it. He must be light and salt in society in regard to true morality, yet must live without the police-like imposition of such moral law.

What the Christian must do of course is recognise the fluctuations of his society along with its changing loyalties. This era has been (wrongly) called the 'post-Christian era'. Amos might well have called his age the 'post-Covenant era', but he refused to do so. The rise and fall of morality in human history is a fact to be considered. Western nations once called themselves Christian. Now they need to be recalled to that stance. The Christian then must seek to retain the Christian morality within his culture, and enlarge it through renewal of the past and present proclamation of the grace of God in the Gospel. Basic Christian teaching on the nature of God, creation, true humanity, man's sinfulness and God's redemption should be pursued. Christ's warning of the end-times was not intended to inculcate despair of man but hope of the Gospel. Salt and light are needed penetrative elements within our current society. Hence the teaching of biblical sexuality is an urgent need.³³

As we observed at the beginning of this chapter, what we have said here may make very little difference to what people

³³ Bingham, *Man, Woman and Sexuality*, pp. 94–5.

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end up doing. On the other hand, God may use what we have said here to speak to some of us and change us. However that may be, whether we are 'single', happily or unhappily married, facing divorce or contemplating remarriage, or already divorced and remarried, all of us can come to the truth of these words:

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted . . .

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed;
do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer
disgrace . . .

For your Maker is your husband,
the LORD of hosts is his name;
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
the God of the whole earth he is called.

For the LORD has called you
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like the wife of a man's youth when she is cast off,
says your God.

For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.

In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the LORD, your Redeemer . . .

For the mountains may depart
and the hills be removed,
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
says the LORD, who has compassion on you
(Isaiah 54:11, 4, 5–8, 10).

Question for reflection:

- *How well do we know God as our faithful Husband?*

Chapter 8

Marriage and Family

FAMILY AND THE PURPOSE OF GOD

We saw in the beginning that God as Father, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, created the universe in order to have a great family of children who would be holy and blameless before Him in love, and so could participate fully with Him in all that He is doing.¹ We have been saying all along that marriage relates directly with God's purpose for His creation, to reflect and participate in it. So far we have focussed mainly on the relationship of a husband and wife with each other.² In this final chapter we consider how a husband and wife having children relates to the purpose of God, and how the families that result relate with the ultimate family of God, which is the great goal of God's purpose in all things.

Integral and essential to God's original creational mandate, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion' (Genesis 1:28), is having children and bringing

¹ See chapter 1, pp. 7–9; chapter 2, pp. 38–42.

² We may have noticed, for instance, that the *Song of Songs* makes no reference at all to having children: so much for the notion that sexual intercourse should be used for procreation only, as some Christians have held!

them up. We saw in chapter 2 that it is more than just that, as a thing in itself—which would be a rather pointless exercise—but that we are to do this in a fruitful way, that participates in and even helps to further the loving purpose of God for His whole creation. How then do we raise families that are doing that?

Questions for reflection:

- *What have we seen of the experience, on the part of ourselves or others, of having children and bringing them up? What issues has this presented to us? How does it relate to the purpose of God?*

FAMILY AND COVENANT

God is ‘Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name’ (Ephesians 3:14–15), or from whom all family-type relationships are derived. Our relationships with each other are dependent upon and are sustained by God’s own relational nature within Himself (‘God is love’) and God’s relationship with us. In the Bible, this relationship is spelled out in terms of the ‘covenant’ that God has undertaken, out of His own relational being as Father, Son and Spirit, with all that He has made, and particularly with us who are to belong to God in His family.³ Marriage is seen in the Bible as an expression of the covenant of our God (see Proverbs 2:16–17). God in His covenant relationship with us is also intent

³ See further: William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1984); Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Love’s Most Glorious Covenant: Studies in Covenant Theology* (Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 1997); *Comprehending the Covenant* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1999).

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upon generations of families. God gave a revelation of His covenant being and action to Moses at Mount Sinai:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation (Exodus 34:6–7).

In Exodus 20:4–6 God had made clear that ‘visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children’ applies to those who persist in hating or rejecting God. Those who turn to God and continue to love and obey Him will know God’s steadfast love to thousands of generations, without a break necessarily. In those generations that continue to hate God, sin and its judgement will be repeated in each generation. Even here, God in His mercy puts a limit on that: within the covenant people, hatred of God will last no longer than three or four generations. In the third or fourth generation, there will be someone who, almost inexplicably, turns back to love God.⁴ This

⁴ There is one family in the Bible we can trace to find that this is so: the royal household of David in Judah, where a distinction is made in each case between those who ‘did what is right in the eyes of the LORD’ and those who ‘did evil’. At no point did those who ‘did evil’ persist beyond the third generation:

Rehoboam	evil	(1 Kings 14:22)
Abijah	evil	(1 Kings 15:3)
Asa	right	(1 Kings 15:11)
Jehoshaphat	right	(1 Kings 22:45)
Jehoram	evil	(2 Kings 8:18)
Ahaziah	evil	(2 Kings 8:27)

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turning back, at any time, is purely by the grace-action and merciful love of God. But at any time, without waiting for the third or fourth generation, anyone who will can turn to the love of God, and know His steadfast love for thousands of unbroken generations.⁵

From the beginning, God had seen to it that there would be families of people that belong to Him. Long before God revealed himself to Israel, there were those who called on the name of the Lord:

Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, 'God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.' To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the LORD (Genesis 4:25–26).

[Athaliah]	evil	(2 Kings 11:1)
Joash	right	(2 Kings 12:2)
Amaziah	right	(2 Kings 14:3)
Azariah (Uzziah)	right	(2 Kings 15:3)
Jotham	right	(2 Kings 15:34)
Ahaz	evil	(2 Kings 16:2)
Hezekiah	right	(2 Kings 18:3)
Manasseh	evil	(2 Kings 21:2)
Amon	evil	(2 Kings 21:20)
Josiah	right	(2 Kings 22:2)
Jehoahaz	evil	(2 Kings 23:32)
Jehoiakim (Eliakim, son of Josiah)	evil	(2 Kings 23:37)
Jehoiachin	evil	(2 Kings 24:9)
Zedekiah (Mattaniah, son of Josiah)	evil	(2 Kings 24:19)

⁵ See this principle worked through also in Ezekiel 18; 33:10–20. This is the decisive answer to any who may set store by the adverse influence of so-called 'generational curses'. Our dealings are directly with God, in the fullness of His gracious and righteous mercy to us in Christ.

Marriage and the Good News of God

This was in the following of Abel, who in Hebrews 11:4 is designated a person of faith. The generations of the godly line of Seth are set out in Genesis 5, including Enoch and Noah who ‘walked with God’ (Genesis 5:22; 6:9). The ungodly line of Cain, ‘who was from the evil one and murdered his brother’ (1 John 3:12), given in Genesis 4:17–24, includes the brutal and arrogant Lamech. One interpretation of Genesis 6:4, ‘when the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans, who bore children to them’, is that this was an intermingling of these two lines, which complicated the human situation, such that ‘the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth’ (Genesis 6:5).

God’s covenant undertaking with Israel, with a view to His covenant with all the earth, is that there should be atonement for sins and a relationship with God in obedience that prevails ‘throughout your generations’. This is repeated many times. For instance, with reference to the altar of incense:

Once a year Aaron shall perform the rite of atonement on its horns. Throughout your generations he shall perform the atonement for it once a year with the blood of the atoning sin offering (Exodus 30:10).

So also, under the new covenant in Christ:

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation (Luke 1:50).

As Peter said on the day of Pentecost concerning baptism into Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit:

For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him (Acts 2:39).

Records of the generations of humanity feature prominently in the Biblical text. There are genealogies that expand to encompass whole nations,⁶ or that narrow down to particular individuals.⁷ It is as if each one is numbered by God, and of intimate concern to Him. This is the context in which we must understand having children and bringing them up.⁸

We have a wonderful picture of this in the upbringing of Timothy, son of a Hebrew mother and a Greek father (see Acts 16:1–4), to whom Paul the apostle wrote:

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord . . . But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:5–8; 3:14–15).

Timothy himself was to be caught up in that process of passing it on:

⁶ Such as the descendants of Noah in Genesis 10, or the extensive genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1–9, which helped the returned exiles from Babylon to know their place in the context of God's dealings with the whole of humanity.

⁷ Such as Abraham, Genesis 11:10–32; Moses and Aaron, Exodus 6:14–27; Jesus, Matthew 1:1–17 and Luke 3:23–38.

⁸ See Grant Thorpe, *Christian Parents and Their Children* (NCPI, Blackwood, 2004), which sets raising families firmly in the covenant of God: 'parents must know God as their Father, and as the Father of their children. Parents who know the gracious and firm dealings of God with themselves represent this to their children. In this way, children will learn that they have to do, not just with their parents but with God' (taken from the back cover). This is also available on cassette and DVD.

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You then, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus; and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well (2 Timothy 2:1–2).

This was very much in the spirit of Psalm 78:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell to the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might,
and the wonders that he has done.

He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach to their children;
that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God (Psalm 78:1–8).

Questions for reflection:

- *What are God's dealings with the generations of humanity? What difference does it make to see our family relationships and responsibilities in the context of the covenant of God?*

FAMILIES AND THE LOVE OF GOD

The solid grounding of all family life and child rearing in Israel was this:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone [or *The Lord our God, the Lord is one* (compare Mark 12:29)]. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:4–9).

This is the complete guide to child rearing. Love for God and the keeping of His commandments is to be at the centre of family life. It is to be held in the heart. It is also to be spoken of at all times, home and away, every evening and every morning. It is to characterise everything we do and think ('hand' and 'forehead'). It is to end up suffusing even the physical fabric of our homes and properties ('doorposts' and 'gates'). There is nothing more thoroughgoing in family life than that.

With this responsibility of parents towards children is the relationship children are to have with their parents:

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you (Exodus 20:12).

Length of days is promised to those who are in right relationship with their parents in this way. This may not just mean that individual persons will live longer lives—perhaps because right relationships of children with their parents will be more stress-free—but it may be a promise to the whole

nation, that these right relationships will keep the nation trouble-free as far as the judgements of God are concerned, and they would not be taken into exile as long as these right relationships were in place. Certainly one of the sins that brought on the demise of Israel was the sacrificing of children by their parents to gain some supposed advantage for themselves (see Psalm 106:37–38). This was turned back upon them as judgement in horrific ways: the helpless dismembering of families, and the fearful consuming by parents of their own children's flesh (see Deuteronomy 28:32, 53–57).⁹ No wonder a key agenda for the restoration of this exiled and subjugated people would be to 'turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse' (Malachi 4:6). These final words in the whole of the Old Testament are taken up in the New Testament to speak of the ministry of the Messiah and his precursor:

He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (Luke 1:16–17).

We are told something of Jesus' own relationship with his parents, as he was growing up:

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor (Luke 2:51–52).

⁹ Horrific as that may seem to us, how different is that from an abortion rate in Australia of 20% of all pregnancies? (2006 figures).

See: <www.johnstonsarchive.net/policy/abortion/ab-australia.html> accessed 24th November 2008.

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This was not all plain sailing for his parents, as we shall see, as Jesus put being about his heavenly Father's business before his relationship with his earthly parents (see Luke 2:48–50; compare John 2:1–5).

The command to honour parents, and the promise that goes with it, is picked up in the New Testament epistles:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'—this is the first commandment with a promise: 'so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth' (Ephesians 6:1–3).

This goes hand in hand with the parents'—in this instance particularly the father's—responsibility towards the children:

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart (Colossians 3:20–21).

Note here that fathers have a particular responsibility to see that they do not drive their children to anger or discouragement. Note also how for both children and parents the central common focus is to be their primary relationship with the Lord.¹⁰

An interesting sidelight is this comment from Paul:

children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children (2 Corinthians 12:14).

Admittedly Paul is speaking about his relationship with the Corinthians as their spiritual 'father', but he cites it as a principle. This is very counter-cultural in a world where many

¹⁰ See further Martin Bleby, *Power in Relationships*, especially chapter 9.

societies are geared towards children providing superannuation-type benefits for their parents, undergirded by the worship of forebears. Could it be that Paul is articulating a new dynamic that has come into the world with the revelation in Christ of the ‘one God and Father of all’ (Ephesians 4:6), from whom comes ‘Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift’ (James 1:17), who is now the model of true parenting? As has always been the case: ‘The good leave an inheritance to their children’s children’ (Proverbs 13:22).

This is not to say that children have no responsibility for their parents, especially in old age. Jesus rebuked those who used religious devotion as an excuse for not supporting their parents (see Matthew 15:3–5). Paul says that widows are to be assisted by their relatives (see 1 Timothy 5:16). Jesus himself saw that his mother was cared for at the time of his death (see John 19:25–27).

Questions for reflection:

- *What experiences have we had of family life suffused with the love of God?*
- *What experiences have we had of families being broken up or falling apart?*
- *What is distinctive about the ways Christian parents are to care and provide for their children?*

FAMILY LIFE IN THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

Given these few but significant references, we may think there is not much in the Bible about parenting—until we come to the book of Proverbs. The format of the whole book is teaching and advice of parents to their children:

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Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
and do not reject your mother's teaching (Proverbs 1:8).

My child, keep your father's commandment,
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.
Bind them upon your heart always;
tie them around your neck.
When you walk, they will lead you;
when you lie down, they will watch over you;
and when you awake, they will talk with you
(Proverbs 6:20–22).

Those who do violence to their father and chase
away their mother
are children who cause shame and bring reproach.
Cease straying, my child, from the words of knowledge,
in order that you may hear instruction
(Proverbs 19:26–27).

Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray (Proverbs 22:6).

Listen to your father who begot you,
and do not despise your mother when she is old.
Buy truth, and do not sell it;
buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding.
The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice;
he who begets a wise son will be glad in him.
Let your father and mother be glad;
let her who bore you rejoice (Proverbs 23:22–25).

The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him
(Proverbs 31:1).

Thus the book of Proverbs is one massive parenting manual,
and is worth reading right through as such. It covers the whole
of life, and engenders wisdom of character in both parents and
children alike, through a healthy 'fear of the LORD' (Proverbs

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1:7; 9:10). It is a practical exposition of the heart of Israel's law in Deuteronomy 6:4–9: 'love the LORD your God'.

Discipline of children is enjoined:

Those who spare the rod hate their children,
but those who love them are diligent to discipline
them (Proverbs 13:24).

Do not withhold discipline from your children;
if you beat them with a rod, they will not die.
If you beat them with the rod,
you will save their lives from Sheol.
My child, if your heart is wise,
my heart too will be glad.
My soul will rejoice
when your lips speak what is right
(Proverbs 23:13–16).

While these references to the 'rod' of discipline have been used to justify unmitigated corporal punishment, the injunction not to provoke children to anger or discouragement needs to be borne in mind. The absence of any consistent discipline, however, leads to constant tension and grief:

Discipline your children, and they will give you rest;
they will give delight to your heart
(Proverbs 29:17).

Our discipline is to be in the light of God's disciplining of us as our Father:

My child, do not despise the LORD's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
for the LORD reproves the one he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights
(Proverbs 3:11–12).

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This is picked up in the New Testament:

And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

‘My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
or lose heart when you are punished by him;
for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves,
and chastises every child whom he accepts.’

Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:5–11).

We are to parent our children as we ourselves are parented by God.

Questions for reflection:

- *How does seeing the book of Proverbs as a ‘parenting manual’ change our understanding and appreciation of it?*
- *How does knowing and living with God as our Father affect the way we parent our children?*

DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES IN THE BIBLE

Considering all this good advice and proper modelling, we may be disturbed to find that a high proportion of prominent

families in the Bible are sadly dysfunctional. Yet, given what we have already seen of ‘stubborn and rebellious’ generations, we should not be surprised. Adam and Eve’s eldest son murdered their second born (see Genesis 4:8). Noah ‘became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent’, and was subjected to lewdness on the part of one of his sons (see Genesis 9:20–27). Abraham and Sarah, through their foolishness, ended up with a mixed family, which gave rise to bullying and banishment (see Genesis 21:8–14). Abraham’s nephew Lot, rescued by God, fathered his progeny in a drunken stupor through incestuous relationships with his own daughters (see Genesis 19:30–38). Isaac’s favouring of Esau and Rebekah’s siding with Jacob occasioned bitter rivalry between the two brothers (see Genesis 25:19–34; 27:1–28:9). Jacob’s favouring of his son Joseph, along with the young Joseph’s rather insufferable superiority, led Joseph’s brothers to want to kill him, or at least dispose of him (see Genesis 37). Miriam and Aaron took exception to their brother Moses’ conduct, and sought to usurp his leadership (see Numbers 12). The priest Eli did not restrain his sons in their contemptuous treatment of the things of God, and this brought judgement on Israel (see 1 Samuel 2:12–4:22). Samuel’s own sons were little better (see 1 Samuel 8:5). The great king David’s adultery with Bathsheba and his murdering of her husband Uriah brought open shame and blood-shedding violence upon his whole family, which David was then too compromised or weak to address rightly (see 2 Samuel 11:1–19:8). And so it went on.

Yet all this tells only one part of the story. Each of these were chosen, called, and mightily used by God in His purpose, and much of what they did for evil God in his mercy turned to good (see e.g. Genesis 45:8; 50:20; 2 Samuel 12:24–25). Jesus said that even we, ‘who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children’ (Matthew 7:11). In the end, it is not how

sinful we have been, but how merciful and faithful God has been, that determines the outcome. I have said it many times, and I say it again: 'The one thing I have needed to know to be a good husband to my wife and a good father to my children is God's great forgiveness of sins in the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ'. His forgiveness for myself, first of all, then also for my wife and children, and for us always to live in that together. That way, none of us are stuck with what we have done wrong to each other, and all of us know together the great grace of God upon us all.

Even so, this very insistence upon the gospel at the heart of family life, where this is not accepted by all, may also bring grievous division to families (see Matthew 10:21, 34–38).

Questions for reflection:

- *What awareness have we had of dysfunctional relationships within our own families, and among the people of God?*
- *How in that have we known the grace and forgiveness of God?*

THE FAMILY OF GOD

What matters in the end is not our own little families, but their place in the goal of God's great purpose, which is the present and ultimate family of God. Jesus was part of an earthly family, and he had other brothers and sisters (see Mark 6:3). His brothers did not believe in him, though they were willing to take advantage of his fame (see John 7:1–10). At one point his family set out to restrain Jesus, because people were saying that Jesus had gone mad (see Mark 3:20–21). They caught

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up with him when Jesus was in a house, surrounded by a crowd of people:

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3:31–35).

Those who surrounded Jesus in the house were not related with him by kinship, but he counted them as much his 'mother and brothers' on account of their relationship with him in the will of the Father.

As Jesus hung on the cross dying, he commended his mother to the care of his disciple John:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home (John 19:25–27).

Mary and John were not related by blood, but from then on they were related to each other as mother and son. A whole new family was being formed at the foot of that cross, of those who related with Jesus in the saving will of God—all those who, through faith in Jesus and the forgiveness of sins that he has wrought, now have 'access in one Spirit to the Father'. Of this family we wrote earlier:

God, as the one 'for whom and through whom all things exist', has the ultimate intention of 'bringing many children to glory' (Hebrews 2:10), as 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from

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all tribes and peoples and languages', of whom God can say: 'I will be their God and they will be my children' (Revelation 7:9; 21:7). Those 'who are called according to his purpose' are 'predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family' (Romans 8:28–29). After his death and rising to life again, Jesus indicated that we can now know God as Father in the way he does (see John 20:17). In the end, the Son will be able to stand before the Father and say: 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me' (Hebrews 2:13).¹¹

This family had now come to be. As Mary Magdalene tried to take hold of the risen Jesus, he spoke these words to her:

Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17).

The sonship or family belonging that the Son had always known with the God and Father of us all is now ours with him. No one now need be left fatherless or without family: 'In you the orphan finds mercy' (Hosea 14:3).

Jesus had promised to those who had left everything and followed him:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:29–30).

Note that 'fathers' are not mentioned here: 'you have one Father—the one in heaven' (Matthew 23:9). Because we now have God as our Father, we are related to all the other children of God—whether we like it or not!

¹¹ Chapter 1, p. 8.

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Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child (1 John 5:1).

The believers in New Testament times most often called each other ‘brethren’—brothers and sisters, fellow family members. Family belonging now determined their relationships with each other:

Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity (1 Timothy 5:1–2).

Questions for reflection:

- *What is good about belonging to a natural family? What are its limitations?*
- *What are the differences between belonging to a natural family and belonging to the family of God?*

FAMILIES IN THE FAMILY OF GOD

It is this family, intent on being in and knowing and doing the will of God, that our little families must belong to, if they are to take their rightful place in the purpose of God for His creation. Billy Graham said once that one of the best things parents can do for their children is to get on with their own ministry as God gives it to them, and let the kids see that happening. That way, the kids get to know that they are not the centre of the universe after all—that there are other people in this world, and they can be in there serving them like Mum and Dad do.

Charles Spurgeon urged his people to pray for their children:

Never be content, my brethren in Christ, till all your children are saved. Lay the promise before your God. The promise is unto you and unto your children. The Greek word does not refer to infants,¹² but to children, grandchildren, and any descendants you may have, whether grown-up or not. Do not cease to plead till not only your children, but your great grandchildren, if you have such, are saved. I stand here today a proof that God is not untrue to his promise. I can cast my eye back through four or five generations, and see that God has been pleased to hear the prayers of our grandfather's grandfather, who used to supplicate with God that his children might live before Him to the last generation, and God has never deserted the house, but has been pleased to bring first one, and then another, to fear and love his name. So be it with you; and in asking this, you are not asking more than God is ready to give you. He cannot refuse unless he run back from his promise. He cannot refuse to give you both your own and your children's souls as an answer to the prayer of your faith. 'Ah,' says one, 'but you do not know what children mine are.' No, my dear friend, but I do know that if you are a Christian, they are children that God has promised to bless. 'Oh, but they are such unruly ones, they break my heart.' Then pray God to break their hearts, and they will not break yours any more. 'But they will bring my grey hairs with sorrow to the grave.' Pray God, then, that he may bring their eyes with sorrow to prayer, and to supplication, and to the cross, and then they will not bring you to the grave. 'But,' you say, 'my children have such hard hearts.' Look at your own. You think they cannot be saved: look at yourselves; he that saved you can save them. Go to him in prayer, and say, 'Lord, I will not let thee go except thou bless me'; and if thy child be at the point of death, and, as you think, at the point of damnation on account of sin, still plead like the nobleman, 'Lord, come down ere my child perish, and save him for thy mercy's sake.' And, oh, Thou that dwellest in the highest heavens thou wilt ne'er refuse thy people. Be it far from us to dream that thou wilt forget thy promise. In the name of

¹² Spurgeon, as a Baptist, was not in favour of infant baptism.

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all thy people, we put our hand upon thy Word most solemnly, and pledge thee to thy covenant. Thou hast said thy mercy is unto the children's children of them that fear thee and keep thy commandments. Thou hast said the promise is unto us and unto our children; Lord, thou wilt not deny thine own covenant; we challenge thy word by holy faith this morning—'Do as thou hast said.' AMEN.¹³

Subject to God's own predestinating choice, we can make that prayer our own.

¹³ Charles H. Spurgeon, 'Marks of Faith', in Helmut Thielicke, *Encounter with Spurgeon*, trans. by John W. Doberstein (James Clarke, Cambridge, 1978), pp. 264–5.