

*Short Studies in*  
**BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**



# **MARRIAGE**

**AND THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL**

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**RAY ORTLUND**

“In this movement through Scripture, Ray gave me more reason to love and nurture my wife, and I will borrow some of his words as I speak with her. He also let me gaze at even bigger matters. He took my marital story and revealed how it is by Jesus, for him, and to him.”

**Ed Welch**, counselor and faculty, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation

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“Ray Ortlund brilliantly enables you to carefully examine your marriage through the lenses of creation, fall, law, and gospel. In so doing, he helps us deepen our understanding of marriage, know why it is a struggle for us all, diagnose the marriage confusion in our culture, be clear where marriage help is to be found, and fall in love all over again with our God of amazing love, wisdom, and grace.”

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“*Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel* lifts our eyes above the contemporary debates over complementarianism and egalitarianism, feminism and patriarchy, same-sex unions, and divorce and remarriage. Ortlund places our focus on the glory of the cosmic love story and the joy-filled hope this story offers for finding true romantic love in a fallen world. This is biblical theology at its best.”

**Eric C. Redmond**, Assistant Professor of Bible, Moody Bible Institute

“There is no one alive I would rather read than Ray Ortlund. This book will show you why. It shows us how marriage is a metaphor for the gospel itself, the one-flesh union of Christ to his church. This book will help you see both the gospel and marriage in a clearer light, in the light of an unveiled mystery.”

**Russell Moore**, President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Robert Wolgemuth and I asked Ray Ortlund to preach on marriage as a picture of redemption at our wedding. We know him to be a pastor with a scholar’s head and a lover’s heart. And we admire his marriage as a beautiful picture of the passionate, tender love relationship between Christ and his church. For the same reasons, I commend to you this book. It will deepen your understanding of the divine mystery of marriage and why it matters, and it will inflame your heart to pursue greater love and oneness with Christ and with your mate.”

**Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth**, author; Radio Host, *Revive Our Hearts*

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# Marriage

*and the Mystery of the Gospel*

Ray Ortlund

Dane C. Ortlund and Miles Van Pelt,  
series editors

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For my wife





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# Preface

Marriage is not a human invention; it is a divine revelation. Its design never was our own made-up arrangement of infinite malleability. It was given to us, at the beginning of all things, as a brightly shining fixity of eternal significance. We might not always live up to its true grandeur. None of us does so perfectly. But we have no right to redefine it, and we have every reason to revere it.

Only the Bible imparts to us a vision of marriage so transcendent and glorious, far beyond human variation and even human failure. Marriage is of God and reveals a wonderful truth about God. And we have no right to change the face of God in the world. All we can rightly do is receive what God has revealed with gladness and humility.

This is a book about the biblical view of marriage. But that does not mean this book limits its interest to the roles of husbands and wives. That is a valid consideration, and many books have been written about it. But what I mean by “the biblical view of marriage” lifts our thoughts far above even urgently important questions being debated today. The Bible has its eye primarily on the ultimate marriage between the Son of God and his redeemed bride. That eternal romance is the biblical view of marriage, offering both instruction and hope for our own marriages today.

The classical Christian understanding of human marriage was long accepted throughout Western civilization. The traditional wedding service of the Book of Common Prayer, for example, begins:

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church; which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee, and is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men; and therefore is not by any to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God.

But now we are told that this God-centered vision of marriage is mistaken, and worse than mistaken, even oppressive. Now we are told that we will never be a free and just society unless everyone, arranging their sexuality however they wish, may demand formal validation from the state and therefore from us all. Overlook the fact that no class or group has been denied marriage, as it has been understood within the long-held consensus—one man with one woman. That was not withheld, so no one was being discriminated against. But now our collective better future requires civil rights status for the infinite spin-off redefinitions of marriage as baseline civility expected of us all, and failure to comply with the new order is a punishable bigotry.

Clearly we all have the freedom to do what we choose with our own God-given humanity. But we do not have the freedom to escape the consequences of our choices, nor may we rightly demand

that others support our choices. As our society departs increasingly from the ways of God, more misery will deeply injure and depress human experience. May the Christian church be ready always to care for sinners and sufferers without a self-righteous “I told you so.” May we who follow Christ receive all penitents with tenderness and practical helps. But we need more than an emergency room for people wounded by the sexual revolution. We also need a widespread return to the ancient wisdom we all have foolishly disobeyed.

I wrote this book with two yearnings in my heart. First, I yearn for a recovery of joyful confidence in marriage as God originally gave it to us. This requires a humble, thoughtful return to biblical teachings. We will never see human sexuality restored without a rediscovery of Scripture as the consensus of our culture. Second, I yearn for more men and women to experience enduring marital romance. We will never live in the human richness we all desire without our hearts strengthened by divine grace. So I am sending this book into the world as one more effort in my lifelong desire for reformation and revival in our generation. Reformation is the recovery of biblical truth in its redemptive claim on the whole of life. Revival is the renewal of human flourishing by the Holy Spirit according to the gospel. Marriage is one of the primary flashpoints of controversy where we most need both reformation and revival in our times.

My pledge to you, the reader, is that I will try to stay true to the Bible throughout this book. I want to lead you on a brief journey of discovery from the beginning of the Bible to its end, because the Bible is a love story. It is not a hodgepodge of religious thoughts. The Bible unfolds as a complex but coherent narrative of God gathering a bride for his Son—and he found her on the wrong side of town, too. What a story!

My request of you, the reader, is simply that you will stay open to the surprising things the Bible says about marriage. Our willingness to moderate our personal reactions long enough to keep tracking with the Bible until the story is fully told will be rewarded with satisfying new insights. So why not listen to the story as if for the first time?

Finally, I thank Dane Ortlund and Miles Van Pelt for the privilege of contributing this volume to their series, *Short Studies in Biblical Theology*. I thank my friends at Crossway for their expert assistance. I thank the elders and members of Immanuel Church, Nashville, for their prayers and partnership. And I thank my wife, Jani, for her sacrificial patience and support while I wrote this book.

May the Lamb receive the reward of his suffering!

## Marriage in Genesis

If the Bible is telling us the truth about reality, then we have a way to account for the whole of our human experience—both our grandeur and our squalor. The Bible explains both at a radical level. All our personal stories, with both our glory and our shame, began in the garden of Eden. We are all rooted that deeply. The book of Genesis gives us the categories we need if we are going to understand how we went so wrong and whether we have any future worth living for. I agree with Francis Schaeffer:

In some ways these chapters [in Genesis] are the most important ones in the Bible, for they put man in his cosmic setting and show him his peculiar uniqueness. They explain man's wonder and yet his flaw.<sup>1</sup>

We have good reason, therefore, to consider carefully the early insights of Genesis into ourselves in general and marriage in particular.

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1. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 9.



## **Genesis 1**

The biblical love story begins on a grand scale: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The story ends on an even grander scale: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Rev. 21:1). The first cosmos was created as the home of a young couple named Adam and Eve. The new cosmos will be created as the eternal home of the Son and his bride. It is not as though marriage is just one theme among others in the Bible. Instead, marriage is the wraparound concept for the entire Bible, within which the other themes find their places. And if the Bible is telling a story of married romance, no wonder that the demonic powers would forbid marriage (1 Tim. 4:1–5). Every happy marriage whispers their doom and proclaims Christ’s triumph.

Grandeur sets the tone of the first creation in Genesis 1. God speaks, and light springs into existence out of nothing but vast darkness. God speaks into reality, into shape and fullness and color and life, both heaven and earth, lands and seas, plants and animals. As the creation account concludes, a new universe sparkles through God’s creative word. But the whole would have been incomplete without this climactic act of divine goodness:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

And 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 heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–28)

The Genesis account of human origins dignifies us all. In the ancient Babylonian creation story, man is degraded. The god Marduk addresses his father Ea:

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be,  
I will establish a savage, “man” shall be his name.  
Verily, savage-man I will create.  
He shall be charged with the service of the gods  
That they might be at ease!<sup>2</sup>

As the lackey of minor gods who are discontented with their lot, man exists to perform their menial tasks for them “that they might be at ease.” But in the biblical vision, man is lifted into both royal activity (Gen. 1:26–28) and Sabbath rest (Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 20:8–11).

Genesis 1:26–28 makes three assertions about humanity. *First, God created man as uniquely qualified to rule over his creation.* In verse 26, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” means that God made us for the exalted purpose of representing him. We are images of God—but not in a literal, physical way, as little statues of God. God is spirit, not limited by a body (Deut. 4:12; John 4:24). So God has no edges, no bulk. But we do image God in that we were created to stand for God and to advance his purposes here in his world:

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2. James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 68.

Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem.<sup>3</sup>

The animals are to be identified "according to their kinds" (Gen. 1:21, 24–25). But mankind, and mankind alone, stands tall as royalty "in the image of God." We find our identity not downward in relation to the creation but upward in relation to God. And the glory of the divine image extends to every one of us: "In ancient Near Eastern texts only the king is in the image of God. But in the Hebrew perspective this is democratized to all humanity."<sup>4</sup> All mankind, equally together, was created for the high and holy purpose of bringing the glorious rule of God into the world.

*Second, God created man in the dual modality of male and female.* Verse 27 is the first poetry in the Bible, rhapsodizing on God's creation of mankind. And the verse's joy comes to a focal point here: "*male and female* he created them." Nowhere else does the creation account of Genesis 1 refer explicitly to sexuality. Animal reproduction is *assumed*, but human sexuality is *celebrated*, though its deeper meaning is not yet explained. The Babylonian version of creation does not even mention the creation of the two sexes, but the Genesis account glories in "male and female he created them." To Genesis and to Jesus, it was highly meaningful that "he who created them from the beginning made them male and female" (Matt. 19:4). The rest of the Bible will explain that meaning with increasing clarity, taking us into the very heart of the story.

*Third, God created man under divine blessing, actively promoting*

3. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 60.

4. Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 66.

*man's glorious destiny.* The introductory “And God blessed them,” heading verse 28, covers all that God declares in the rest of the verse about humanity fruitfully multiplying and universally ruling. In verse 22, God spoke blessing out over the lower creation: “And God blessed them, saying . . .” But here in verse 28, God speaks his blessing *to us* personally and directly: “And God blessed them. And God said *to them* . . .,” authorizing both male and female to rule, to develop successful human cultures, to leave a mark on the world for the glory of God, all under the smile of God’s blessing.

To sum up: Genesis 1 presents the newly fashioned world in its pristine beauty, with mankind as male and female, robed in royal dignity, together stewarding God’s wondrous creation for the display of his glory. The Old Testament asserts the greatness of the trust we received: “The earth he has given to the children of man” (Ps. 115:16). The first claim of the Bible, then, setting the stage for marriage, is that manhood and womanhood are not our own cultural constructs. Human concepts are too small and artificial a context for the glory of our sexuality. Manhood and womanhood find their true meaning in the context of nothing less than the heavens and the earth, the cosmos, the universe, the entire creation. That is the first claim of the biblical love story.

Now, if we were reading the Bible for the first time, what question might we ask, as Genesis 1 concludes? Turning the page to chapter 2, we might wonder what kind of sequel could match or exceed the glories of the first chapter. But, in fact, what happens next in the biblical story? After the heavens and the earth come together in the first creation, a man and a woman come together in the first marriage. Surprisingly, the Bible moves from cosmic majesty in Genesis 1 to a common everyday reality in Genesis 2: a young couple falling in love. So we might wonder if marriage is out

of its depth here alongside the creation of the universe. Or could it be that the Bible sees in marriage more than we typically do? For now, we will put that question on hold, as we attend first to what Genesis 2:15–25 clearly teaches about marriage.

## Genesis 2

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely 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 surely die.” (Gen. 2:15–17)

Now the Bible’s range of vision narrows to a localized focal point: the garden of Eden, where the “male and female” of Genesis 1:27 appear as Adam and Eve.<sup>5</sup> As for Adam, on the one hand, we can see here that he was not a caveman. Verses 15–17 show that his world was not crude and primitive. God put him in an environment rich with potential, available for enjoyment and worthy of his thoughtful effort. God’s first commandment, emphatically stated, was strikingly open and generous, in keeping with Adam’s royal status over the lower creation: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden.” But on the other hand, Adam was not a god. God defined him as responsible to his Creator. Adam was charged by God to develop the garden—“to work it,” presumably until the entire world would grow to become an Edenic kingdom of God’s glory. Moreover, Adam was to guard the garden from all evil: “. . . and keep it.” That Hebrew verb reappears in Genesis 3:24: “. . . to *guard* the way to the tree of life.” God did not explain what kind of threats evil and death are.

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5. Adam does not name his wife “Eve” until Gen. 3:20, but we will allow ourselves to use her name now for our own convenience.

Rather, the divine warning stands in verse 15 “like a door whose name announces only what lies beyond it,”<sup>6</sup> so that Adam had to obey God’s command as a matter of trust. Adam’s role was to assert and enjoy his sovereignty under God, cultivating the garden into an expanding paradise and protecting it from all harm.

But, surprisingly, in this Eden of rich resources and splendid potential, in this paradise unharmed by evil and death, God puts his finger on something that is wrong:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man and, while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called Woman,  
because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And

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6. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 63.

the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.  
(Gen. 2:18–25)

Out of something “not good,” God creates something very good. This is how the Bible begins to explain the meaning of marriage. God’s assessment in verse 18, “It is not good that the man should be alone,” is not what we expect in the perfect garden. But his assertion is blunt. “Not good” is stronger in force than a neutral lack of goodness; “not good” is emphatic, definitely bad, a minus factor.<sup>7</sup> But how could it be otherwise? “Love is God’s nature, a fundamental characterization of his Trinitarian being.”<sup>8</sup> The Bible helps us see that we live in a universe where ultimate reality is relational. For this man to be alone in a world created and ruled by the God who is love—the very fact that it *is* a perfect world makes his aloneness unthinkable. Therefore, God says, “I will make him a helper fit for him.”

“A helper fit for him” is a delicately nuanced, two-sided statement about the man and the woman as originally created by God. On the one hand, the woman is the man’s helper. But the word *helper* cannot imply inferiority, for God himself is our helper: “Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life” (Ps. 54:4). Nor can the word *helper* suggest dependence, for man and woman are obviously interdependent (1 Cor. 11:11–12). But the word *helper* does cohere with the fact that God created the woman for the man (1 Cor. 11:9). Verse 18 literally says, “I will make *for him* a helper fit for him.” The woman was made to complement and support the man and to strengthen his exertions for God in this world. The man needed a companion like himself, and yet unlike himself, as the friend and ally he could absolutely depend on. The woman completed the man,

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7. See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972), 126–27.

8. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 416.

and he knew it, for he greeted her with relief: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). The New Testament will go on clearly to name the man as “head” (1 Cor. 11:3). But his impact for God would be diminished if he were to remain alone without the strong help of a strong woman. He needed her high-capacity contribution. Unified as head and helper, the man and the woman together can prosper as noble servants of their Creator.

The insight offered here by the Bible is bold. It is saying that the delicate interplay between male head and female helper is not a mutation in human social evolution, to be replaced by later developments; it is a stroke of divine genius, original to our existence. Rightly understood and beautifully lived out, God’s wise creation of head with helper is a permanent and glorious reality, not arbitrary or eccentric but traceable even up into ultimacy: “The head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3). Headship did not come down to us historically as an artifact of oppressive patriarchy; it began in heaven and came down into this world creationally as a pathway to human flourishing. The evils of domination and slavery we invented (Ex. 1:13; 2:23). But the head-with-helper dance of complementarity sprang from deep within the intuitions of God himself. We men and women today do not automatically know the steps to this dance. We must learn. But if we will receive it by faith, trusting in the goodness and wisdom of God, we can then explore its potentialities for joyful human magnificence.

At our moment in time and culture, far advanced in the downward slide of Adam’s fall, we today might find the head-with-helper arrangement between husband and wife incomprehensibly foreign. We might desire to replace it with strict mutuality, as if man and woman were interchangeable. But a forced blending of gender



identities and roles tends toward a more calculating, hair-splitting, political settlement. Biblical complementarity is the arrangement most conducive to being swept away into a wildly glorious romance. Moreover, before we give up on God's design as unworkable, we must understand that all aspects of manhood and womanhood, with marriage and sex and intimacy—these now fragile glories of human existence, were not created for this broken world. They were created for a perfect world, a safe world, far from our own, and are now brutalized and vandalized, partly by being misjudged. My iPhone, for example, is amazing communications technology. And that is what human sexuality is—amazingly sophisticated communications technology. But if I use my iPhone to hammer nails, I will damage it. It was never built to hammer nails. It was built for something far more gentle, and the more effective for being gentle. The only arrangement for sex and marriage that has any chance of working today is that which moves toward restoring our Edenic origins. If we modern Western egalitarians can hold our emotional horses long enough to imagine how a woman might be dignified by helping a worthy man who loves her sacrificially, as both the man and the woman humbly pursue the glory of God together, the profile of man and woman that blessed us in Eden will start looking more plausible as an approach to human happiness today.

On the other hand, “a helper fit for him” asserts the equal worth of the woman. She is *fit for him*, that is, corresponding to him, on his level, eye-to-eye as his equal, since both equally bear the divine image. The woman is not the man's property or prize of war or political pawn or even, yet, the mother of his children. The woman matters in her own right as the man's unique counterpart, the only one in all the creation who corresponds to him. The man and the woman need and benefit from each other mutually. Their gifts and

abilities differ, even widely, but to the advantage of both. The totality of each one's full potential nets out as equal with the other in its capacity to reflect the glory of God, the man in his own way, the woman in her own way. Therefore, between the man and the woman as created by God, personal worth is not stratified to the diminishing of either. Sam Andreaes articulates a biblical understanding with wise nuance:

Gender comes in specialties. Specialties are things we all might do sometimes, but the specialist focuses on especially doing them. We may do many things for each other that are the same, but the gender magic happens when we lean into the asymmetries. Just as, physically, both males and females need both androgen and estrogen hormones, and it is the relative amounts that differ in the sexes, so the gender distinctives are things that both men and women may be able to do, and *do* do, but when done as specialties to one another, they propel relationship.<sup>9</sup>

When we trust God enough to accept his account of manhood and womanhood, the relational quality of our marriages today can open up to deeper possibilities than we could ever create out of our own personal or cultural narratives.

The story unfolding in Genesis 2:18–25 takes another surprising turn when God does not immediately create this helper fit for Adam. Instead, God parades the animals before the man for him to name them. And we know, from his final act of naming in verse 23, that Adam was not slapping an arbitrary label on each animal but observing it thoughtfully and identifying it meaningfully. But why did God put Adam to this task before providing Eve? Because God

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9. Sam A. Andreaes, *enGendered: God's Gift of Gender Difference in Relationship* (Wooster, OH: Weaver, 2015), 132; emphasis original.

wanted to prepare the man, awakening his sense of need, lest God's precious gift be squandered on an uncomprehending and ungrateful man. The not-good aloneness that God perceived, in verse 18, Adam himself did not yet sense. So the thoughtful discovery involved in naming the animals is how God alerts the man to his isolation amid the beauty and plenty of an otherwise perfect world. In fact, verse 20 can be literally translated, "But as for Adam, *he* did not find a helper fit for him." The man now *feels* his isolation and is prepared for the greatest gift, under God, he will ever receive, greater than all the creation itself.

The biblical story now becomes lovingly tender. Verses 21 and 22 suggest the following scene. We can imagine God saying to the man, "Son, I want you to lie down here. That's right. Now, just go to sleep. I want to bless you with a friend such as you cannot imagine. These animals are interesting. But I have a new and better companion in mind for you. But you must rest." Adam falls into a deep sleep. God then opens his side, takes out a rib with its flesh, closes and heals the wound, and creates the woman. She is not refined from the dust of the ground, as was Adam (Gen. 2:7). She comes from Adam himself, doubly refined. Like Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish (Matt. 14:13–21), God the Creator increases the very bone and flesh of the man to build the first woman. As Matthew Henry commented centuries ago, the woman was "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."<sup>10</sup> There she stands, the first woman—pure, lovely, dear to God.

So God bends down, touches the man, and says, "Son, you can wake up now. I have one more creature for you to name. I'm very

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10. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 1:20.

interested to see your response to this one.” And like the father of the bride, God “brought her to the man,” according to verse 22. And for the man, it is a case of love at first sight. In verse 23, he rejoices over the woman with the first recorded human words, and they are poetry, moved by love:

This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh . . .

The man is not threatened by the woman’s obvious equality with him. That heartwarming reality is the very thing that pleases him. With relief (“at last”), he greets her as his unique counterpart within the whole of creation. He intuitively identifies with her. His heart is drawn toward her. He prizes her. He rejoices over her. He praises God for her. And in thanking God for her, he perceives her as intimate with himself:

. . . she shall be called Woman,  
because she was taken out of Man.

With his last act as duly authorized namer in the garden, the man identifies himself and the woman as of one kind, yet distinct from each other. The ultimate human relationship is presented to us as a complementarity of differences, not a duplication of sameness. To quote N. T. Wright in a recent interview on the definition of marriage:

If you believe in what it says in Genesis 1 about God making heaven and earth—and the binaries in Genesis are so important—heaven and earth, and sea and dry land, and so on, and you end up with male and female. It’s all about God making complementary pairs, which are meant to work together. The last scene in the Bible is the new heaven and the new earth

and . . . the marriage of Christ and his church. It's not just one or two verses here and there which say this or that. It's an entire narrative which works with this complementarity, so that a male-plus-female marriage is a signpost or a signal about the goodness of the original creation and God's intention for the eventual new heavens and new earth.<sup>11</sup>

Faithful Christians, married and single, will join with the Bible in its celebration of human complementarity from original creation to eternal destiny by the hand of a wise and good Creator. At the same time, faithful Christians will have serious reservations about the symmetry of sexual sameness. This twofold conviction sets the Christian worldview apart, and that is nothing new. For example, in the introduction to a standard edition of Plato's *Symposium*, the translators write, "It is, actually, a remarkable fact that the *Symposium*, the first explicit discussion of love in western literature and philosophy, begins with a discussion of homosexual love."<sup>12</sup> Since antiquity, the Bible has been speaking a prophetic word into the long-standing sexual confusion of our post-Eden world.

How then does the Bible define marriage? Genesis 2:24 provides the answer. This verse declares the ongoing relevance of the original creation of man and woman. At the fall of Adam in Genesis 3, we did not lose everything of Eden. We still retain, even in our broken world of today, the privilege of marriage. That is what Genesis 2:24 explains:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

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11. <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2014/06/n-t-wrights-argument-against-same-sex-marriage>.

12. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Symposium* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), xiv.

It is not true that the Bible endorses multiple forms of marriage, and therefore that the Bible fails to provide one clear definition of marriage. The Bible does record, for example, that “Lamech took two wives” (Gen. 4:19). But that biblical statement does not validate polygamy. Nowhere does the Bible’s mere mention of a practice amount to approval of that practice. Indeed, Genesis 4:19 is casting doubt on polygamy. The role of Lamech in the Genesis narrative is to show “a progressive hardening in sin.”<sup>13</sup> We invented polygamy as a distortion of marriage; but marriage, as created and blessed by God, is defined in Genesis 2:24. What then is this monumental verse saying?

“Therefore.” This word signals that Moses is drawing an inference from the Eden narrative for our lives in the world today. It’s as if we are sitting in Moses’s living room, watching his DVD of the creation of the universe (Genesis 1) and of man and woman (Genesis 2). At this point in the DVD, he hits the pause button on the remote, the screen freezes, he turns to us post-fall people watching these amazing primeval events, and he says to us, “I want you to know how God’s original design remains normative for us today. Every marriage now should follow the precedent of God’s pattern established back then.”

“. . . a man shall leave his father and his mother.” If even parental claims must yield to the primacy of marriage, so must all other bonds, however strong. A man’s primary human relationship should be with his wife alone, as they start a new family together. In a culture that venerated ancestral ties, this was a radical departure from custom and expectation. And it is not the woman who makes all the sacrifices to get the marriage going. “A man shall leave his father and his mother.”

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13. Waltke, *Genesis*, 100.

“. . . and hold fast to his wife.” The Hebrew root translated “hold fast” is used elsewhere for soldering two parts of metal together (Isa. 41:7). In marrying, a man joins himself to his wife at a profound level. He does not ask her to move his way, to do all the adjusting toward him. But he takes the initiative to move toward his wife, enfolding her into his heart, bonding with her as with no other human being, not even his children. He *rejoices* to identify with his wife, as Adam did with Eve: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” At every level of his being, a husband should be wholeheartedly devoted to his wife, loyal to his wife, steadfast toward his wife, as toward no other.

“. . . and they shall become one flesh.” “One flesh” is the biblical definition of marriage in two brief but freighted words. This expression names marriage as *one mortal life fully shared*. The word *one* bespeaks a life fully shared, and the word *flesh* suggests the transient mortality of this life (Gen. 6:3; Ps. 78:39). So in the one-flesh union of marriage, all the boundaries between a man and a woman fall away, and the married couple comes together completely, as long as they both shall live. In real terms, two selfish me’s start learning to think like one unified us, building a new life together with one total everything: one story, one purpose, one reputation, one bed, one suffering, one budget, one family, and so forth. Marriage removes all barriers and replaces them with a comprehensive oneness. It is this all-encompassing unity that sets marriage apart *as marriage*, more profound than even the most intense friendship. As Girgis, Anderson, and George cogently argue,

A critical point here is that marriage and ordinary friendship do not simply offer different degrees of the same type of human good, like two checks written in different amounts. Nor are they simply varieties of the same good, like the en-

joyment of a Matisse and the enjoyment of a Van Gogh. Each is its own kind of good, a way of thriving that is different in kind from the other.<sup>14</sup>

Friends have much in common, but wise friends also have boundaries. They do not share *everything*. And there is much good in friendship, limited as it is. But what distinguishes marriage is the all-inclusive scope of its claims upon both the man and the woman. The two become “one flesh”—one mortal life fully shared—with total openness, total access, total solidarity, for the rest of their earthly days.

Here then is the biblical claim. Marriage did not arise from historical forces. It came down by heavenly grace as a permanent good for mankind. God gave it, and God gives it. It was, and it is, his to define. And he did define it in Genesis 2:24 as *one mortal life fully shared between one man and one woman*. This is marriage, according to the Bible, because the whole point of Genesis 2:24 is to define marriage for all time, beyond the garden of Eden. We must admit that by this standard, there is no perfect marriage today. Husbands and wives all fall short of the total abandon, the total trust, the total surrender, entailed in real marriage. But the standard still exists, and we diminish our future if we discard it. Moreover, even our imperfect marriages still bear witness to the glory God originally gave. A less than Edenic marriage is still a true marriage, as defined by God, and worthy of personal devotion and legal protection in the world today.

Genesis 2 concludes with one final brushstroke of beauty. In the demandingly all-encompassing context of biblical marriage we also find our greatest earthly comfort:

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14. Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter, 2012), 14.



And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (v. 25)

After his significant aside in verse 24, Moses takes us readers back again into the garden of Eden. In the closing scene of original human innocence, the man and the woman—not the woman only—are naked, face-to-face in a relationship of complete belonging and total vulnerability, where they experience full acceptance, with no shaming. Even so, a biblical marriage today offers the comfort of being known intimately by another and not embarrassed or ridiculed for any reason, but only welcomed and put at ease and embraced. Married couples still experience this aftertaste of Eden's perfect shalom in their gentle intimacy today.

So Genesis 1 and 2 honor marriage as nothing less than the crowning glory of the creation of the universe. For us modern people who may see marriage as a product of human preference driving social evolution, that is a stunning claim. Moreover, the Genesis account honors marriage as both sacred and safe, where a man and a woman can flourish as nowhere else.

But if marriage occupies this exalted place in human reality, how does the Bible account for the tears and betrayals and injuries—in addition to the sheer boredom—within our own marriages today? We must turn the biblical page to the next scene in the story. Genesis 3 explains why we who marry in happiness and hope get our hearts so deeply broken. Why are there so many among us whose joyous romance dissolved into bitter alienation? It is not as though our sexuality itself is at fault or that falling in love is inherently fraudulent, and it is certainly not the case that God overlooked a flaw in his original design for marriage. Something more profound has gone wrong with us. That is where the biblical story goes next.

### Genesis 3

What we find in the biblical narrative now is not only how our first parents, Adam and Eve, unleashed hell into the garden of Eden but also how every married couple since has done the same in their own Eden. Reading this account in Genesis 3, it appears that “the fall”—how we tumbled from our original glory down into our present sin and misery and death—the crucial events of the fall of mankind could have taken place in maybe five minutes. But every marriage is always just five minutes away from disaster. We today keep telling the same story over and over again. We can be oblivious to the true magnitude of our choices, the real issues at stake in our moment-by-moment lives. We realize too late how fateful our steps have been. We therefore turn to Genesis 3 with an awareness—a broken-hearted awareness—that this text is perennial in its relevance. This story has a familiar feel, because we really are present here.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. (Gen. 3:1a)

The narrative begins with a play on words, invisible in the English text. The Hebrew word translated “naked” in Genesis 2:25—“And the man and his wife were both naked . . .”—and the Hebrew word translated “crafty” here in Genesis 3:1 are similarly formed: *‘arôm* and *‘arûm*. The man and the woman were nude, but the Serpent was shrewd, we might say. And the point is, the object of the Serpent’s cunning was the man and woman’s marital bliss. It was in marriage, and marriage at its best, marriage at its most delicate and beautiful—it was precisely there that the human race came under brilliantly evil attack and fell into all the miseries of our present condition. Our original sin was not political or economic or philosophical or psychological, valid as those considerations are. Our original

and fateful misstep was our catastrophic betrayal of our marital innocence. We must grasp the magnitude of this. If we misunderstand the root cause of all our sufferings, we will never embrace our eventual remedy, no matter how sincere we are. How then does the destruction of marriage unfold in the Genesis narrative?

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And 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 midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” (Gen. 3:1b–3)

The tempter, who is Satan (Rev. 12:9), makes a bold move. He repositions the woman’s angle of vision on all of reality by casting doubt on God. What the Serpent understood, and what we modern people tend not to see, is that *everything* in human existence, including marriage, is most deeply a God issue. If God is good, then we should trust him and obey him *in everything*. If God is not good, then we have to find our own way *in everything*. But either way, we cannot think piecemeal. Whatever we may believe or not believe about God, our attitude toward him must be all or nothing. Satan wants God to become nothing to us. He knows that if he can destroy devotion to God in our marriages, then the future of the human race is his, and Bedford Falls will stay Pottersville forever.

God had commanded Adam, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden” (Gen. 2:16), emphasizing the abundance of his generous provision. But Satan deftly twists God’s positive command into an insulting and confining prohibition: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” He may be speaking with a tone of concern in his voice: “Royal Lady, is it really true what I’ve

heard, that God is refusing to share all this with you and Adam? Didn't God himself pronounce all things good? I don't understand how our loving Creator could impose on you, the nobility of this world, such a limitation. Garden Queen, would you please explain this problem to me?" The woman did not know there was a problem. But the question puts her on the defensive. A new thought enters her mind, a sense of confinement, even of injury. Already the Devil has drawn her into a reconsideration of everything on his own terms.

The woman replies, in effect, "We *are* allowed to eat of these trees. But now that you mention it, there is that one tree in the center of the garden—God said, 'Don't eat from it, and don't even touch it, lest you die.'" We readers can see her worldview changing already. God's strongly generous "You may surely eat" is weakened in her mind to bare permission with "We may eat." And although the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil really was there in the midst of the garden (Gen. 2:9), the Tree of Life was also right there; but the woman does not mention the Tree of Life or, presumably, even notice it. Her mental focus is on the little that is forbidden rather than on the much that is provided. She even enlarges the prohibition by saying that the tree may not be touched, though God had not said that. The confinement she feels is spreading, becoming intolerable, because in a hostile mind limitations grow to a maddening degree. Moreover, God had strongly warned, "You shall surely die." But the woman now softens it to ". . . lest you die." Now that her view of the consequences is less alarming, Satan springs on that very point:

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely 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." 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. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Gen. 3:4-7)

The Serpent's open denial of God's warning reveals that his original question in verse 1 was insincere. He knows exactly what God had said. He simply contradicts it: "You will not surely die." With the woman's confidence shaken, the Serpent pretends to let her in on a secret: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." To paraphrase the message, "I hate to tell you this, Royal Lady, but you deserve to know. God is holding out on you, and for good reason. He fears your potential. He knows very well the powers that will be yours if you eat this fruit. He obviously has regrets about creating you and empowering you. It may come as a shock, Honored One, but God has become your enemy. I know this garden seems pleasant enough. But, in fact, it is a giant ploy to hold you back. So don't be fooled. Reach out and seize life on your own terms. After all, don't you and Adam wield sovereign dominion over all this? Shouldn't you two have the right to decide for yourselves what's good and evil, what's beneficial and harmful? How can someone else know that for you? This tree, Noble Lady, is your only chance to achieve your potential. Far from deadly, *this* tree is in fact the tree of life. Don't you see? If you *obey* God, you will surely die!"

It was a lie big enough to reinterpret her entire existence, and to this day it colors how we perceive everything. We think we can and must understand reality from our own freely assumed standpoint. But if God really is the wise and good Creator of Genesis 1 and 2, then any consideration of life that discredits or marginalizes him

must be false to him and tilted to our own inevitable disadvantage. What's more, if God is really there, then objectivity from God is simply impossible. John Milbank, taking into account the full Christian revelation, asserts a claim as wise as it is bold:

In the face of the resurrection it becomes finally impossible to think of our Christian narrative as only “our point of view,” our perspective on a world that really exists in a different, “secular” way. There is no independently available “real world” against which we must test our Christian convictions, because these convictions are the most final, and at the same time the most basic, *seeing* of what the world is.<sup>15</sup>

What hung in the balance here at our primal temptation, and what hangs in the balance in every marriage day by day, is not a petty rule about this or that; what really hangs in the balance is nothing less than *what reality is*. Whose narrative are we believing and living by, moment by moment?

Having poisoned the woman's mind about God, Satan falls silent and allows the deception to run its course from there. She seems to forget about him as she stands there fascinated by that tree. When verse 6 says, “So when the woman saw . . .,” it is not as though she had not seen the tree before. But now it seems to her that she had never seen it, or anything like it, before. It captivates her. What is filling her thoughts now?

First, the tree is good for food. Its fruit hangs there, tantalizingly delicious. “It doesn't look deadly to me,” she must have thought. Second, the tree is a delight to the eyes, offering aesthetic appeal, inviting deeper experience. Third, the tree is to be desired to make

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15. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), 250; emphasis original.

one wise. She can then be her own judge of truth and right. But good things—truly good things, and good at multiple levels—even good things go bad, if we have to disobey God to get them.

After the carefully laid trap of Satan, the actual act of sin is stated briefly, as a matter of simple fact, without a hint of shock. The woman passes the point of no return without even realizing it: “She took of its fruit and ate.” She didn’t take it all, just some of it. But what her act says to God about God is titanic.

And where is her husband, Adam, in all of this? The second-person verbs in the dialogue of verses 1–5 are all plural in the Hebrew text. Verse 1, for example, says, “Did God actually say, ‘*You [plural]* shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And in verse 2 the woman refers to herself and her husband with the first-person plural: “*We* may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden.” The Serpent drew Eve into speaking for her husband, and she presumed to do so. The man was relevant to the entire matter, naturally. But God held Adam primarily responsible as Eve’s head. When God eventually confronted them both, it was Adam whom God called to account: “But the LORD God called *to the man* and said to him, ‘Where are *you [singular]*?’ . . . Have *you [singular]* eaten of the tree of which I commanded *you [singular]* not to eat?’” (Gen. 3:9, 11). If God was to be obeyed in his Edenic kingdom, it was Adam whom God held responsible to make sure of it. But as the temptation actually unfolded, verse 6 reveals that Adam was present right there, doing nothing, but then giving in: “. . . and she also gave some to her husband *who was with her*, and he ate.” The woman was authorized to exercise dominion with the man (Gen. 1:26–28); but her royalty was never meant to be exercised apart from her husband’s headship, any more than apart from God’s command. Nor was Adam ever meant to abdicate his responsibility to guard the garden (Gen. 2:15)

or to treat God's command with passive detachment (Gen. 2:16–17). In fact, according to verse 17, when God as judge explains Adam's guilt, he says that Adam's sin includes obeying his wife rather than God: "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it' . . ." That Hebrew construction—"listen to the voice of"—means to obey (Ex. 15:26; Judg. 2:20). So Adam was standing there, watching the evil progress without intervening. By his failure to exercise his headship, by his failure to live out his one-flesh union with his wife, he advanced the evil he could have stopped. It is one thing to be taken in by a lie; it is another to allow that lie to take over.

The wife acting as the head, but not a wise head, and the husband acting as the helper, but not a wise helper—*it was the breakdown of marriage that broke everything*. The greatest glory in the universe (Genesis 1–2) became the greatest tragedy in the world (Genesis 3). And only the greatest love can restore us (Rev. 21:1–5).

The immediate consequence for the man and the woman is a painful new self-awareness: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths" (Gen. 3:7). What had been immeasurable comfort (Gen. 2:25) suddenly becomes intolerable pain. They reached for their own autonomous interpretation of good and evil, beneficial and harmful. But far from attaining Godlike enlightenment and control, the man and the woman just feel dirty. And the sadness every reader senses here is that the very nakedness God had given them for intimacy now only exposes their shame.

God had warned Adam, "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). But Adam and Eve do not drop dead right then and there. Why not? The insight Augustine offers is that we can be both dead and alive at the same time, and thus endlessly dying.



When Augustine asks what God meant by his warning, “whether it was death of the soul or of the body or of the whole man or that which is called the second death,” he concludes, “We must answer, ‘All of them.’” God’s threat to Adam “included every kind of death, down to the very last.”<sup>16</sup> Guilty shame pierced the human conscience that day with a prophetic cry that cannot be fully silenced, alerting us to emotional and relational death now as a warning against extreme, total death yet to come. We too cover our sadness over with our own self-invented loincloth remedies. We too face an enemy every day—the truth about ourselves—and we cannot bear the sight of it. But God’s eventual remedy will prove better than ours, when he clothes his own with eternal glory (2 Cor. 5:4).

The Bible is not saying that the new human consciousness of shame was neurotic or illusory. Quite the opposite: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew . . .” Not all our feelings of disgrace are wise, but what Adam and Eve saw about themselves was real. C. S. Lewis helps us rebuild a part of the wisdom we need when he writes:

The second cause [of our modern loss of a sense of personal wickedness] is the effect of Psychoanalysis on the public mind, and, in particular, the doctrine of repressions and inhibitions. Whatever these doctrines really mean, the impression they have actually left on most people is that the sense of Shame is a dangerous and mischievous thing. We have labored to overcome that sense of shrinking, that desire to conceal, which either Nature herself or the tradition of almost all mankind has attached to cowardice, unchastity, falsehood, and envy. We are told to “get things out into

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16. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Philip Levine (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 13.11–12.

the open,” not for the sake of self-humiliation, but on the grounds that these “things” are very natural and we need not be ashamed of them. But unless Christianity is wholly false, the perception of ourselves which we have in moments of shame must be the only true one; and even Pagan society has usually recognized “shamelessness” as the nadir of the soul. . . . A recovery of the old sense of sin is essential to Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

The first step in every marriage back toward an imperfect but real taste of Eden is not to cover our anguish with loincloths of self-approval. That is a false remedy. Our first step is rather to face our failures, deceits, and sins with utter honesty before God and each other. For us all, there is nothing more painful and humiliating than self-awareness. But honestly admitting how wickedly we have mistreated God, that is when our hearts start cracking open to his redemption. That is where God waits for us with open arms. And any marriage, however troubled, can have hope when God enters in.

Adam and Eve hide not only from one another behind their pathetic coverings, but both together are hiding from God:

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And 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 of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom

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17. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 56–57.

you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Gen. 3:8–13)

Nothing is more natural in our fallen world today than trying to build a happy marriage on a foundation of God avoidance. But it cannot work. Without peace with God, we inevitably shatter the peace we desire with one another. And the root of it all is deeper than our personal capacity for choice; we are handicapped by this rootedness in the history we all share in Adam and Eve. Their running from God in the garden was the beginning of all broken families that leave God out. Martin Luther comments, “It is the utmost stupidity for us to imagine that our cure lies in flight from God rather than in our return to God, and yet our sinful nature cannot return to God.”<sup>18</sup> Nakedness before one another Adam and Eve can manage—in their own ridiculous way. But the presence of the Lord they find too terrifying to face. Clearly, something more than a single misstep has befallen our parents. Their hearts have changed toward God at a profound and permanent level. This human flaw—the way we break out in a rash at the approach of God—our allergy toward God is natural to us now the way a birth defect is natural and unchosen (Ps. 51:5). We chose our way into sin in the garden of Eden, but we cannot choose our way out today. The controlling dynamic now is the human spirit deep within, oscillating between proud autonomy and crippling shame. We see it in Adam and Eve evading God here in the garden, and we see it in the God-hating people screaming to the mountains and rocks at the end of time, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the

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18. Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis*, vol. 1, *Chapters 1–5* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 174.

throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16). But the broken who are given a new heart by grace will, in the end, experience God’s presence as heavenly: “They will see his face” (Rev. 22:4), and God himself will wipe every tear from their eyes (Rev. 21:4). That redeeming grace begins to appear even now in the garden of Eden. God does not abandon Adam and Eve, though they forsook him.

The Lord pursues Adam first—“Where are you [singular]?”—because the man is the head and therefore bears the primary responsibility. But the fragmenting power of sin is already obvious in his cowardly response: “I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” How differently it might have gone if Adam had simply owned up: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21). But Adam shows no awareness of his real moral guilt before God. He is absorbed in his own emotions of whiney self-pity: “I was afraid, because I was naked.” Even a lost little boy knows better, when his father finally shows up. But Adam slinks around like a victim, unable to trust God and face himself and comfort his brokenhearted wife: “I hid myself.”

But when we resist God’s grace, he often presses in with yet more grace, as here in the garden. God graciously, frankly confronts Adam, “Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Although Adam now admits the truth, he shifts the blame to Eve and implies it is God’s fault to begin with: “The woman *whom you gave to be with me*, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” In other words, “God, I don’t recall ever asking you for this woman. And look what *she’s* done.” Eve, for her part, can only hang her head in shame: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

The deceitfulness of sin is this. Up front, it sparkles with promise. But once we commit, when it is too late to back out, it entangles us in repercussions we did not foresee and consequences we cannot

evade. Only God sees the full impact of our fall. Only God can absorb into himself the final penalty of it. And he will, through Jesus Christ. But in the meantime, with three “oracles of destiny,”<sup>19</sup> God redefines the future of Eden, changing from prose to poetry in keeping with the solemnity of the moment. First:

The LORD God said to the serpent,  
 “Because you have done this,  
     cursed are you above all livestock  
     and above all beasts of the field;  
 on 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 her offspring;  
 he shall bruise your head,  
     and you shall bruise his heel.” (Gen. 3:14–15)

God is the only one who speaks. Satan listens in silence as God pronounces his sentence, and there is nothing Satan can do about it. What then is God saying here to the enemy of our love and romance and joy and intimacy and tenderness and every echo of Eden we cherish to this day? Three things. First, Satan is doomed. The word “cursed” (*ʿarûr*) in verse 14 plays on the word “crafty” (*ʿarûm*) in verse 1. The Serpent was devious but is now damned. Satan thought he was so clever, but all his works and ways are condemned, because the garden still belongs to God and a great destiny still awaits the man and the woman.

Second, Satan is humiliated. The proud author of “Invictus” vowed he would die defiantly, his head “bloody but unbowed.”<sup>20</sup> But

19. Kidner, *Genesis*, 71.

20. William Ernest Henley, *Poems* (London: David Nutt, 1919), 119.

God is saying that Satan will not have the satisfaction of going down in defeat with his head held high: “On your belly you shall go” every moment of his wretched existence.

Third, Satan is crushed. Satan declared war on God, he recruited Eve, and she joined him in trying to shove God aside. Now God declares war on Satan. But at the same time, in grace, God declares peace with Eve when he says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.” This takes some explaining.

Augustine helps us understand that God’s decree here in the garden is creating two opposing human communities—Augustine calls them “cities”—that will now develop in the course of history:

Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greater glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, “You are my glory, and the lifter up of my head.”<sup>21</sup>

Augustine’s metaphor of the city is a good one, because Cain, an offspring of the Serpent, built the first city (Gen. 4:17). God created a garden to share his joy with man, but Cain invented the city to shut God out. And in this world, Cain’s purpose succeeds. The rest of the Bible tells the story of the offspring of the Serpent dominating human affairs, as insecure fugitives gather together, convinced that this world they control is all that matters. They pool their talents

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21. Augustine, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo: The City of God*, ed. and trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872), 2:49.

to build entire cultures of self-exalting rebellion against God, as if he were our worst nightmare; and their purpose often succeeds. Moreover, that human collectivity, divided in many ways but united against God, also stands opposed to the offspring of the woman (1 John 3:8–15). But the true offspring of the woman are distinguished by newly rehumanized hearts, created by the grace of God. They bow in surrender to him and luxuriate by faith in his promises of a redeemed world only God can build, and will build, in the future (Rev. 21:1–4). This human collectivity is traceable through the biblical narrative of history and culminates in Jesus, the only unfallen man, wounded by the Serpent at the cross but by that very wounding the conqueror of the Serpent. Jesus is nothing less than a second Adam and head of the redeemed human race, who will live forever (1 Cor. 15:22). What God decrees here in the garden, then, is this new reality: by the gentle force of his one-way love, he sets Eve and her offspring apart to himself, creating in them a bitter loathing for Satan and his empty promises and a yearning for God and his glorious promises of the new Adam, through whom they will crush the Serpent (Rom. 16:20).

For us, the first divine oracle gives us an insight into our experience. Not only must every married couple today choose sides in this great conflict tearing human history apart, but we also need God's help to choose wisely. Left to ourselves, we will never stop replaying the drama of the fall in Genesis 3. We will compulsively keep trying to make God avoidance successful, and we will die in that folly and futility, because our wills are no longer free to trust God. We literally need God to put into us enmity and hostility toward Satan, or we will serve our enemy forever.

The second oracle of destiny addresses Eve and all women who follow, in verse 16, while the third addresses Adam and all men who

follow, in verses 17–19. We will be better positioned to understand what God is accomplishing by these declarations, if we bear in mind what C. S. Lewis wrote:

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the “wisdom” of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious.<sup>22</sup>

What God says in verses 16–19 shapes our reality in ways we cannot overrule, no matter how clever our magic or advanced our science. By his massive words in the garden, God our judge confines all of human experience thereafter to enfeebling pain and final death. And wisdom counsels us to bow in deep acceptance and find eternal life right there in our pain, where we least expect it. How we respond personally to God’s decrees is filled with consequence. If we hate God for imposing these limits on us, if we strive to re-create reality more to our liking, we will trend not toward freedom and hope but toward disgusting and impious degradations, and there is no depth to which we will not fall even further. But if we humbly bend to the sorrows and buffetings of this life, trusting God, we will be surprised to discover beauty where God has hidden it—not in our fantasies but in his realities. God’s wise purpose in these solemn oracles of destiny is to draw us all back to his loving heart. Therefore, as we embrace the brokenness of life, we begin our journey back to

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22. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 87–88.



God and healing. What God says here explains, in particular, the brokenness of sex and marriage throughout history down to the present day. So then, as for the woman:

To the woman he said,  
 “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;  
     in pain you shall bring forth children.  
 Your desire shall be for your husband,  
     and he shall rule over you.” (Gen. 3:16)

Two realities now define the woman’s experience. First, as a mother, she will suffer in childbirth. Children are not a death sentence for any woman, but quite the opposite. A mother’s influence contributes to God’s final victory over all evil and misery through her children, if they go on to serve the Lord in their generation (1 Tim. 2:15). But she does pay a price for her children in many ways. Eve’s paradise is marred, but the woman still gives birth to the future of the world.

Second, as a wife, she will clash with her husband. But two questions stand out here. (1) What is the nature of the woman’s “desire”? (2) In what sense does the man “rule” over her?<sup>23</sup> Similar language appears in Genesis 4:7, where God warns Cain about his sinful inclinations: “Its *desire* is for you, but you must *rule* over it.” Clearly, sin’s desire is to control Cain; but his willpower must push back to gain the mastery over sin. The Hebrew wording behind our English version of Genesis 3:16 is similar: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Applying the logic of Genesis 4:7 to our text, then, God is saying that Eve’s created role as a helper fit for him will now be distorted into a desire to control Adam. During

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23. See Susan T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1974/75): 376–83.

the temptation she stepped into her husband's role of headship, and now that momentary impulse will become a broader pattern. Adam, for his part, will no longer serve and defend the woman with the noble headship God designed for him. Adam will dominate his wife unkindly, even cruelly, for his own selfish gratification and convenience, more a master than a lover, more a critic than an admirer. This is why the New Testament admonishes husbands, "Husbands, love your wives, *and do not be harsh with them*" (Col. 3:19). The point here in Genesis is that the gentle harmony of Eden now dissolves into "the battle of the sexes" infamous throughout history. Our beautiful wedding vow "to love and to cherish" is now shattered by the opposing forces of her grasping desire and his oppressive rule, leading to countless stories of marital heartache. Only the gospel of Jesus can free us from this endless power struggle and restore the romance, the beauty, the joy, the harmony God intended—manly initiative cherishing and defending the woman, womanly support affirming and empowering the man.

Here, then, is the ultimate reason for our broken promises, shouting matches, resentments, abuses, separations, divorces, and all marital tragedies: God gave us up to the powers of our own sinful confusion. These sad words he declared in Genesis 3:16 predict our cycle of dysfunction whenever a wife steps in to fill the void created by her husband's failure to care and provide, with the husband resenting his wife for the implied criticism of his own passivity and silently or aggressively punishing her for it. Each one aggravates the weakness of the other, as they spiral down into mutual incomprehension, bitterness, alienation. Both defiant feminism and arrogant patriarchy fall short of the glory of Eden. And we husbands and wives will never get ourselves back to the garden by pointing an accusing finger at the other. According to the Bible, all

restoration begins with merciful redemption coming down from God above. But what we must never forget is this: when we forsook our Father in the garden, it is not as though we offended him only; we jeopardized everything that we ourselves long for in our own deepest intentions. Whenever we walk away from God, we walk toward something inhumane, unsafe, life-depleting. To put it yet another way, the only alternative to heaven is hell. There is no neutral ground of our own making, under our own control. That world exists nowhere.

Women today, and in every age, suffer the losses decreed in Genesis 3:16 in a profound way. A wise husband will understand that his wife bears burdens he may have little awareness of, because they are bound up in the distinct experience of the woman. A wise husband will take care, therefore, to be all the more mindful of her, to listen to her and stand with her as her friend and her ally and her admirer and her defender. No wife should ever feel that she must face life alone. And as for the man:

And to Adam he said,  
“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife  
and have eaten of the tree  
of which I commanded you,  
‘You shall not eat of it,’  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in pain 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,  
till you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;

for you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.” (Gen. 3:17–19)

The new reality defining the man’s experience is not work but the painful futility of work, the inevitable failure of all earthly accomplishments, the illusion of a man making his mark by the power of his own self-exalting glory. When God says, “Cursed is the ground,” we can see the fertility and abundance of the entire earth shriveling up as a weed-infested wasteland, where a man must now strain to eke out a living—as long as he can.

The apostle Paul echoes God’s word to Adam when he writes, “The creation was subjected to futility” (Rom. 8:20). The writer of Ecclesiastes asserts, “Futility, utter futility . . . everything is futile” (Eccles. 1:2 REB). David sighs, “Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow” (Ps. 144:4). It is painful for a man to work hard and exercise intelligence and seem to gain ground in this life, only to see his carefully assembled empire shattered by a reversal of fortunes or the betrayal of a partner or the hammer blow of death. Woody Allen, in his own way, helps us face the realism of the Bible:

I always see the death’s head lurking. I could be sitting at Madison Square Garden at the most exciting basketball game, and they’re cheering and everything is thrilling, and one of the players is doing something very beautiful—and my thought will be, “He’s only twenty-eight years old and I only wish he could savor this moment in some way, because this is as good as it’s going to get for him.” . . . The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. It’s absolutely stupefying in its terror, and it renders anyone’s accomplishments meaningless. As Camus wrote, it’s not only

that he dies or that man dies but that you struggle to do a work of art that will last and then realize that the universe itself is not going to exist after a time.<sup>24</sup>

One reason we can trust the Bible is its honesty about our lot in life. It is simply undeniable that no amount of diligence or intelligence or even luck can lift us above the overwhelming powers of futility in this broken world. Our careers and degrees and club memberships and civic awards are so many sand castles on the beach, which the waves of time wash over, and soon we are utterly forgotten. This reality is hard to bear. It is hard precisely because we were created in God's image to stride through this world with lasting impact for his eternal glory. But now we are dust, and to dust we shall return. It wears a man down. It wears a married couple down. Many marriages, even if they stay together, just lose their sparkle under the crushing weight of the sheer exhaustions of this life. A wise husband faces his disillusionment, humbly confessing his fears and his needs to his wife. Then the two of them together can take these sorrows to God in prayer and find a hope beyond the curse. Or a man can live in denial—until he can't.

Adam, wisely, gave up early and found in the promises of God a hope this world cannot give and cannot destroy:

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them. Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—" therefore the LORD God sent him out from the

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24. F. Rich, "Woody Allen Wipes the Smile off his Face," *Esquire*, May 1977, 75-76.

garden of Eden to work 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 flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Gen. 3:20–24)

God's promise that the offspring of the woman will come and crush the Serpent once and for all breathes hope into Adam's heart. Adam knows by now that he is not the savior of the world. He has destroyed the world (Rom. 5:12). But a true victor is coming. And he will not just offset evil; much more, he will reign with superabounding grace toward the undeserving (Rom. 5:15–21). Therefore, Adam turns back to his wife not with hypocritical blaming, as in verse 12, but to rejoice over the greatness of her destiny in the redemptive purpose of God. He honors her now as Eve, the Living One and the mother of all those who truly live.<sup>25</sup> The future of the human race is not death only but also life, real and eternal life pulsing in the hearts of all who cherish God's promise as their only hope. True believers are truly living. And Adam sees his wife, Eve, who also believes God's promise, as the spiritual mother of this endless line of believers yet to come. His belief in God softens his heart toward his wife. Before she changes in any noticeable way, and only because God has made them a promise, Adam starts setting a new tone of hope and healing in their marriage. It is the gospel that renews a broken marriage.

We husbands and wives today can see ourselves here, as Adam and Eve turn to leave the garden. We too are exiles from Eden. But whatever we may suffer as we await the renewal of all things, the promises of God can outperform the amusements and even the

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25. The margin of the ESV comments, "Eve sounds like the Hebrew for *life-giver* and resembles the word for *living*"

therapies of this world in keeping our souls and our marriages alive. The key to a lasting romance is not endless sex but believing hearts. God has given us a wonderful promise of restoration by his grace. We most certainly will get back to the garden someday, led by one who through his suffering opened the way for Adam and Eve and us and millions more (Rev. 22:1–5).

The most remarkable thing about marriage today is not that it can be troubled but that we still have this privilege at all. When God justly expelled us from the garden of Eden, he did not take this gift back. He let us keep his priceless gift, though we sometimes misuse it. But what every married couple needs to know is that their marriage is a remnant of Eden. This is why every marriage is worth working at, worth fighting for. A marriage filled with hope in God is nothing less than an afterglow of the garden of Eden, radiant with hope until perfection is finally restored.

Whatever else the Bible has to say about marriage—and it has much to say—the sadness of Genesis 3 will linger, and so it should. Jonathan Edwards, in *The Religious Affections*, counsels us to accept, along with the joyful hope of the gospel, the tender sadness as well. The sadness saves us from being glib and shallow and pushy and proud. The sadness cracks our hearts open to the deeper things of God. Edwards wrote:

All gracious affections that are a sweet odor to Christ, and that fill the soul of a Christian with a heavenly sweetness and fragrance, are broken-hearted affections. A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is a humble broken-hearted love. The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires. Their hope is a humble hope; and their joy, even when it is unspeakable and full of glory, is a humble broken-hearted joy, and leaves the Christian more poor in spirit,

and more like a little child, and more disposed to a universal lowliness of behavior.<sup>26</sup>

To sum up, our primary takeaway from the book of Genesis is both the glory of marriage and the brokenness of marriage. The glory is built in by God: the one-flesh union of man and woman. The brokenness is what every generation keeps inheriting from Adam in his original sin, which we then keep making still worse. But the glory purposed by God will have the final say.

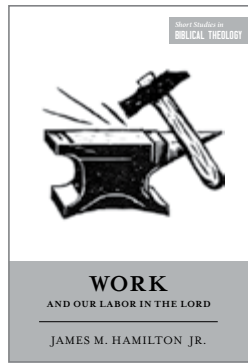
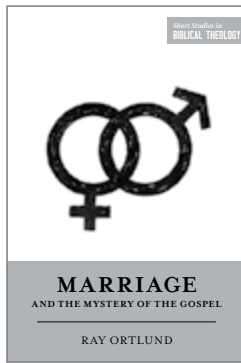
His love story has only begun.

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26. Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 266.



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