

*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*

*Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*

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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*

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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.



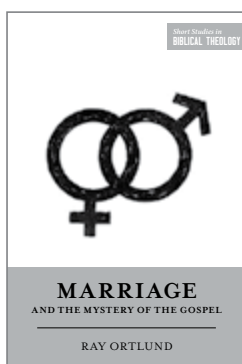
And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (v. 25)

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.

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