

The Purpose of Marriage

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[0 : 00] Genesis 1, 26-31 And God said to them, And to every bird of the heavens, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 2, 15-25 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. Then the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper fit for him.

So out of the ground the Lord God 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.

[2 : 04] 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 the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

We read the beginning of Genesis chapter 1. And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the enormous privilege we have of hearing the voice of the living God this morning, as we hear your words read and preached.

[3 : 26] Thank you that that is the same voice, amazingly, that spoke at the beginning of creation. And we pray, therefore, please would you grant us hearts and minds to believe it, and to be shaped and changed by it.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I guess we've all had the experience of getting to the point where, frankly, there was no option but to go back to the maker's instructions.

So it may have been a culinary disaster. Just what did the recipe say I should have done? It may have been a botched DIY job. Back to the instructions to see what I got wrong.

It may be, we're lost. What did the sat-nav say we should have done half an hour ago? Well, we're starting a new series of talks today, and I've called the series Marriage and the Maker's Instructions. Over the next four weeks, we're going to go back and have a look at the maker's instructions for marriage. In part, the series is prompted by the fact that the Church of England has embarked on an exercise, I mentioned this a few weeks ago, called Living in Love and Faith, debating same-sex marriage.

[4 : 44] Submissions will be invited from local churches in the autumn, and then next summer, a vote will be taken in General Synod. But I think primarily the series has been prompted by the failure of the 1960s sexual revolution.

The 1960s, of course, marked a shift in attitudes to marriage, gender, and relationships, which continues to this day. It was a revolution based on radical individualism.

My body is mine. I'm free to be me, to define who I am, and what I'm going to do with myself. And the fruit of that is, 40, 50 years on, all around us.

An epidemic of family breakdown, mental health problems, pornography, and youth crime. And all too often, of course, it is women who have paid the price.

Witness the Me Too movement, followed by the Everyone's Invited website, highlighting the rape culture in many schools, and most recently, of course, the national outpouring of grief and anger in the light of Sarah Everard's murder.

[6 : 00] Rebecca McLaughlin, in her excellent book, *Confronting Christianity*, asks, is it possible that what women have gained in freedom and professional opportunity, many have lost in the sexual revolution that cloaked what many men wanted, commitment-free sex, under the mantle of liberating women?

In other words, the sexual revolution has given men what they wanted, commitment-free sex, and women all too often have paid the price.

Our society is crying out for an alternative. And so my aim over these next four weeks is to go back to the maker's instructions.

Please don't confuse what I'm doing with, you know, I'm not saying we need to go back to the 1950s. We're not going back to the kind of Victorian patriarchal society when men were in charge of everything.

No, instead we're going back to God's original blueprint design for marriage. Just to say it's very much a series for everyone.

[7 : 12] It's for the married as well as the unmarried. After all, those who aren't married may be married one day. And in the meantime, we'll want to know how best to encourage those of our friends who are married.

It's a series as well for the Christian, but also for those who are looking in on the Christian faith, as we see that what God says about marriage is wonderfully attractive and compelling.

In fact, what the Bible says about marriage makes far more sense of who we are and what we feel and how we experience things to other alternative versions of marriage which are presented to us in the world around us.

Now, if you've seen the outline, you'll see today we're simply thinking firstly about foundations for marriage and then we're going to think secondly about the purpose of marriage. So firstly, Genesis chapter 1, verses 26 to 31 and the foundations for marriage.

Genesis chapter 1 is the account of creation with mankind created on the sixth day as the very pinnacle of creation. At the end of every other day of creation, we're told, and God saw that it was good, but the sixth day, verse 31, ends, we're told, it was very good.

[8 : 30] And although Genesis 1, 26 to 31 doesn't mention marriage, it does give us two vital foundations for marriage. The first of which is that male and female are created equal.

Male and female are created equal. Verse 26. Then God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness.

Now, the word man there is the generic term, so really it should be translated mankind. It continues, 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. God creates mankind as male and female, both equally created in his image.

So here we have right at the start of the Bible the absolute equality of men and women. They are equal before God, and they are both given the mandate to rule and have dominion over creation.

[9 : 43] Now, tragically, mankind has lost sight of that fundamental equality as a result of the fall in Genesis chapter 3. And yet move into the New Testament, and Jesus treats men and women with equal dignity and honor, just as the apostle Paul does as he declares the equal status of men and women in Christ.

Galatians chapter 3, verse 28. He says, There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In other words, genuine Christianity flips the script of the marginalization of women that characterizes so many traditional cultures and instead gives them equal status before God and an equal part to play in serving him.

Just think about this question for a moment. Where does the idea of gender equality actually come from? I mean, it's not a kind of, it's not self-evident, is it, as you look at the worlds that men and women are equal.

Men are generally stronger. Many cultures have been organized along patriarchal lines. There are still far fewer women in the highest paying jobs than there are men.

[11 : 13] The abuse of women and girls has passed off as boys' banter. The way women are regarded as second-class citizens in so many cultures.

Where does it come from? This idea of equality. It comes from the Bible. It's the point that historian and Brixton resident Tom Holland makes in his excellent book, *Dominion*.

He shows that even secular progressive Westerners have in fact been deeply shaped by Christianity and in particular today's debates about gender and sexuality depend on Christian ideas. He says this, the idea that every human being possessed an equal dignity was not remotely a self-evident truth.

In the first century, a Roman would have laughed at it. To campaign against discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexuality, however, was to depend on large numbers of people sharing in a common assumption that everyone possessed an inherent worth.

[12 : 23] The origins of this principle lay not in the French Revolution nor in the American Declaration of Independence nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible. Male and female created equal.

Our second foundation for marriage is male and female created to serve God. Now we saw in verse 26 and 27 that men and women are created in the image of God after his likeness, but what does that mean to be created in the image of God?

It's clearly not physical. There's nothing about physical resemblance in these verses. Instead, it seems to be connected with their role. Have a look again at verse 26.

Let us make man in our image after our likeness and let them have dominion. It's the idea of rule. It's repeated in verse 28.

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.

[13 : 33] In other words, both men and women are given the mandate to rule and to subdue creation as God's representative rulers. God has delegated his rule of his creation to mankind.

To do so, they'll need to be fruitful and multiply so there's not just two of them, but a whole army of them. And then in chapter two, once we've been given the grand tour, so to speak, of the Garden of Eden, Adam is put to work.

Verse 15, the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. So then here is the principle.

You and I are created to serve God. We're not created to serve ourselves, but to serve the one who created us. Now, of course, you and I don't live in the Garden of Eden.

Instead, we live in a world that has turned its back on God. And those of us who heard Rupert's talk on the nature of the church back in February will remember how this creation mandate of Genesis chapter one, verse 28, to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion is now being fulfilled as the, in the Great Commission given at the end of the Gospels as the message of Jesus is proclaimed to the nations.

[14 : 59] And we'll think a little bit more again about that in a couple of weeks' time. But for now, I simply want us to grasp this point, that you and I are created not to serve ourselves, but to serve God.

Two foundations, then, for marriage. One, men and women are created equal. Two, men and women are created not to serve themselves, but to serve God.

Well, I think we're now in a position to understand the purpose of marriage. Have a look at Genesis chapter two, verse 18. Then the Lord God said, it is not good that the man should be alone.

I'll make him a helper fit for him. Would he notice that God created marriage to solve a problem? It's very striking, I think, after the refrain of chapter one at the end of every day, you'll remember God looks at his handiwork of every day and he declares it's good.

Now we have something that isn't good. And if you've just drifted off, please would you come back for this because it's so important and easy to miss. Because the problem, you see, is not that the man is lonely.

[16 : 17] It's not that he has no one to sort of cuddle up with on the sofa and watch Netflix in the evening or no one to kind of unload all the burdens of the day onto as he seeks to process his day

working in the garden.

Now if loneliness was the problem, why we'd expect the solution, wouldn't we, to be companionship to keep him company. But as verse 18 makes clear, the solution is a helper.

And that's because the problem isn't that the man is lonely, but verse 18, that he is alone. He is alone in the task that God has given him of ruling and subduing the garden.

There's too much for him to do. And so God makes a helper for him. And notice, a helper who is both like him, but also who is different.

Have a look again at verse 18. That phrase, a helper fit for him, literally means a helper who is like opposites.

[17:24] They are both like each other. They are equally made in the image of God. And yet they're opposites. They are different. Well, the man is delighted.

And in verses 24 to 25, we have the first wedding, which we'll look at next week in more detail.

Now, this idea of equal but different is something which we see throughout the Bible and which the New Testament reinforces.

I put 1 Corinthians chapter 7, verse 3 there on the outline where the apostle Paul says, the husband should give to the wife her conjugal rights. That's the posh word for sex.

And likewise, the wife to her husband. They have equal rights. Equality in the bedroom, perhaps an area in which even our so-called progressive culture has yet to really catch up with the Bible in.

Equal and yet different roles. He is the head. It's reflected here in Genesis chapter 2, verse 23, in the fact that he names her. It's reflected in the next chapter, in chapter 3, where God holds him accountable for the fact that they together have eaten the fruit that they were forbidden from eating.

[18:37] not, of course, that her role as helper is in any way inferior or secondary.

I wonder if you remember when we looked at Psalm 118 before Easter, that the Lord God describes himself as the helper of his people. Psalm 118, verse 7, the Lord is on my side as my helper.

To be the helper, therefore, it cannot be inferior. Rather, this is about a wonderful partnership where husband and wife come together, the husband, the appointed leader with a position of responsibility and accountability, and the wife jointly alongside as the helper.

Equal and yet different. And therefore, God's purpose for marriage is this. Two people, male and female, equal but different, come together in marriage for the purpose of serving God together.

And although it's true that marriage does provide companionship, and although it's true that sexual love is a wonderful thing, they are not the purpose of marriage. Because God has far bigger purposes for marriage than simply meeting my needs.

[20:02] And that is to serve him together. Now, in his excellent book, which I know some of us have read, called Marriage for God, Christopher Ashe summarizes God's purpose for marriage in six words.

His six words are sex in the service of God. Sex being shorthand for the marriage relationship in all its fullness, friendship, partnership, intimacy, fun, faithfulness.

marriage. And yet, those six words, sex in the service of God, they remind us that at the heart of marriage, the purpose for which God has created marriage is the joyful service of God together.

Now, the alternative, of course, to marriage as sex in the service of God is marriage as sex in the service of me or us.

Marriage about my fulfillment, seeking our needs. It's brilliantly portrayed in this book, you may have read it, called A Severe Mercy by Sheldon Van Alken.

[21:11] And it tells how the author met a lady called Jean Davis, they fell in love, they believed they had the perfect relationship, friends also believed they had the perfect relationship, and apparently often commented on the quality of the relationship which they seemed to have together.

They became Christians, both of them, through their friendship with C.S. Lewis. Tragically, she was diagnosed with cancer and died in her 30s. But the book is called A Severe Mercy because their relationship was all-consuming.

It was inward-looking, not outward-looking. And it was only really through her illness that it became outward-looking. And only through her death that his life became clearly focused on serving the Lord Jesus.

He writes in the book, if her death did indeed, did in truth have these results, it was precisely a severe mercy.

In the words of Christopher Ashe, marriage and family can easily become just a respectable form of selfishness. If we marry mainly to meet our own needs, then our marriages will be just that, good-looking masks for selfishness.

[22 : 29] What's he saying? He's saying that we are not made simply to gaze forever into the eyes of another human being and to find in him or in her everything we need.

And if we think we are, we will be disappointed. because only Jesus can meet those deepest longings we have for meaning and fulfillment and satisfaction.

He is the only person who will never let us down. So then, what are the implications? Well, let me give us three implications.

There are loads more, but here are three just to get us started. And I guess now that we're allowed to chat outside, then it would be great to perhaps tease out some more implications or develop some of these implications in our conversations later on.

First implication for those who aren't married. This should be wonderfully encouraging. Our fulfillment in life comes not from marriage, but from serving Jesus.

[23 : 37] Unlike practically every film that you've ever watched, which, you know, the whole focus is so often on the relationship, isn't it? That's the point of fulfillment. May our fulfillment comes not from marriage, but from serving Jesus.

I speak of someone who didn't get married until I was 30, and I always found it so helpful to be reminded of that. I think the danger otherwise is that we can find ourselves living in some kind of suspended animation almost, kind of waiting for the right person to come along, waiting for real life to actually start.

But we need to call that out for what it is. If I'm a follower of Jesus, my primary purpose in life, whether I'm married or unmarried, is to serve Jesus, to be an outward-looking person, not an inward-looking person.

And in that sense, marriage doesn't change anything at all. There are plenty of things, of course, that change if we get married, but that doesn't change our overall purpose and direction and priority of life.

Second implication for those considering marriage. If the purpose of marriage is to serve God, then surely the most important thing to look for in someone we might marry one day is that they are already doing just that.

[25 : 01] it's so easy to look at, to be swayed by the wrong things, a wonderful sense of humor or their looks or character or interests or background or whatever it is.

But to be in a marriage where one person is seeking to serve God while the other person is essentially seeking to serve themselves is to be in a marriage where your lives are running in two very different ways and are very essentially incompatible at their very core.

However much else we may have in common, if a marriage is like that, then essentially it is incompatible. And it may well be that one or two of us actually need to be honest with ourselves at that point because actually we are pursuing an unwise relationship at the moment.

So an implication for those who aren't married, an implication for those who are considering marriage, thirdly, an implication for those of us who are married. And I'd love us to begin to think and to discuss with our spouses what kind of partnership is your marriage.

There are plenty of alternatives. It might be a work and career partnership that is primarily focused on being successful. it might be essentially a lifestyle partnership where the focus is living the kind of lifestyle that we think we ought to be living or which we think we deserve.

[26 : 38] It may be a kind of muddling through partnership where you feel that really all you're managing to do is just about keep your head above the water. or a child rearing partnership.

Children are a good thing but they are not the overriding purpose for marriage or perhaps a serving Jesus together partnership in all the different ups and downs and seasons and difficulties of life.

Now my assumption this morning is that some of us as we hear this talk will need to repent. Each of us by nature seeks our own happiness our own self-satisfaction I do that as much as anyone and we naturally do that in the area of marriage as in every other area of life.

Perhaps if you're honest your marriage really is just about serving you or advancing your career or whatever it is in which case husbands will you take a lead and together with your wife repent of a self-centered view of marriage and ask for the Lord's forgiveness and for his help and strength to refocus your marriage so that the focus is not inwards but outwards and upwards serving the Lord

Jesus.

For others I take it this talk will be a real encouragement because actually in all the ups and downs of life in all the pressures of living in London for some of us yes as well with the challenges of children and for some of us too the challenges of elderly parents actually your focus has been all through all of that on serving the Lord Jesus you're outwardly focused and although at times you'll feel the cost of that be assured it is very beautiful and be assured too that a marriage like that is a truly fulfilled marriage because it's precisely the purpose for which God created marriage in the first place.

Let's have a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. Thank you.

[29 : 10] Amen. 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.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for the enormous privilege of living in this world that you have made. Thank you for the reminder that you are the creator. And we pray for all of us this morning, whether we are married or unmarried.

Please, would you help us this week to have our eyes very clearly focused in whatever we're doing, on serving the Lord Jesus and serving your purposes.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.