

The Pain of Marriage

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[0 : 00] The reading is from the book of Genesis, chapter 3, very near the very beginning of the Bible, probably page 2 or 3, but Genesis chapter 3, and we're reading from verse 1 to 21.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. 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.

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'll 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.

[1 : 29] 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. 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 you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.

[2 : 33] 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. 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. 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. 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.

[3 : 57] 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.

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.

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the wonderful privilege we have of hearing your voice as we listen to the Bible, and we pray that you would help us to heed this warning and encouragement of your spirit that we wouldn't harden our hearts, but take it to heart.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is the third in our series of talks on marriage, and today, as Rupert said, we're looking at the pain of marriage and why marriage is hard.

[5 : 09] So far, we've seen that God's purpose for marriage is that husband and wife serve God together. In other words, marriage is outward-facing. Serving God together is not inward-facing.

And last week, we saw the pattern of marriage, that it's between a man and a woman. It is public, it is permanent, and it is physical. In other words, it's sexual. And yet, the Bible also speaks of the pain of marriage, because the Bible's about real life, and the assumption that perhaps some people have that the Bible is a kind of a book of fairy tales for people who can't really cope with real life is very far from the truth.

So today, we're looking at Genesis chapter 3. It not only speaks about the pain of marriage, but also helps us to engage with and understand the kind of bigger picture, if you like, of what is wrong with our world.

It's best summarised in this cartoon, which hopefully is about to appear on the screen. Guess when it appears? Of course, in the week following Oprah Winfrey's interview with the Duchess of Sussex, in which she was invited to tell her truth.

I promise to tell my truth, my whole truth, and nothing but my truth. And you'll remember, the following week, Piers Morgan expressed his truth on Breakfast TV as well.

[6 : 32] And of course, that spat and the cartoon expresses beautifully, doesn't it, the fact that actually we can't live in a world like this, where you have your version of the truth, and I have my version of the truth, and everyone else has their version of the truth.

We simply, the world simply doesn't work like that. Certainly it doesn't work in the law court like that. Actually, it doesn't work in the rest of life either. And of course, that is one reason why it's so brilliant that we have the teaching of the Bible on marriage, because it's not simply kind of your truth or my truth.

It's God's truth. It's God's blueprint for marriage, which means we're not at the mercy of different cultural interpretations or traditions when it comes to thinking about marriage.

But Genesis chapter 3 also explains for us what is wrong with the world, which is that each one of us by nature believes our own truth and not God's truth.

Let me read for us again, Genesis chapter 3, verses 1 to 5. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

[7 : 50] 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's in the midst of the garden, neither should you touch it, lest you die.

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. Notice, will you, in verses 2 and 3, the temptation to doubt God's word.

You can't trust God's words. Then verse 4, the temptation to doubt that there will be a judgment. God isn't serious about judgments.

And then verse 5, you'll be free. Doubting God's words, distorting God's words, you'll be free. May I just say, if you're someone who is looking in on the Christian faith, this is the very heart of the Bible's answer to what is wrong with our world.

We've each turned our backs on God, and instead we live by our own truth and not God's truth. And for those of us who are followers of Jesus, of course this explains why God's pattern for marriage is so often rejected by those around us.

[9 : 14] There was a very moving article in Evangelicals Now, I think not this month, but last month, written by a 16-year-old girl about the isolation that she feels as someone who believes the Bible's teaching about marriage.

She wrote this, one misstep on Twitter and your counsels, publicly rebuked, dismissed, and made carrion for digital vultures. I felt as if I was the only Bible-following Christian in the world.

It is isolating, because how can you feel strong in your faith when the entire internet hates Christians like you? And it may well be that some of us here this morning or some of us online feel exactly the same way.

And that is why part of this, the aim of this series on marriage is to give us real confidence in what the Bible teaches. Well, firstly, this morning, we're going to think about the conflict of marriage, the conflict of marriage.

Because back in Genesis chapter 3, just ask the question, what was the man doing while the woman was being tempted by the serpent? Well, verse 6 makes clear, if you have a look at it, that he was there all along.

[10 : 35] And yet he said nothing, and he did nothing. Because remember that men and women are created in marriage equally in God's image.

And yet they're also created different. He has the position of leadership with responsibility. It's why when we come to verse 9, God addresses the man, calling him to account.

As he says, but the Lord God called to the man and said to him, where are you? And she is in a position as helper.

He is the leader with responsibility. She is the helper. Together, it's a wonderfully complementary partnership. And yet, we're bound to ask, aren't we, why didn't the man step up and lead in verses 1 to 5 and say no?

And why did she usurp his leadership and his authority as heads, his role? In verse 12, why does he then blame her rather than to admit his failure to lead?

[11 : 46] In fact, this failure of a husband to lead is widely recognized, isn't it, in our culture. So if you're into Peppa Pig or you have been at some stage, think of Daddy Pig who is overweight and incompetent.

Or perhaps if you're at a slightly later stage in life, then outnumbered might be your thing. Think in that case of Clueless Pete and the dad who is always at least two laps behind everyone else in his family.

Or if modern family is your thing, then just think how it's the wives who lead while the husbands are happy to be led. In fact, this conflict between the sexes is something that Genesis 3 shows us will now be part of married life.

That's made clear in verses 16 to 19 where God explains the consequences of their sin and rebellion. As verse 16, he tells the woman, your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.

Now, I think it's easy to read that and think to ourselves, well, surely that sounds like a good thing. You know, she'll find him sexually attractive. But actually, it's a bad thing because it's talking about a very different kind of desire.

[13 : 04] That word for, as the footnote shows, could equally well be translated as against. In fact, we have exactly the same phrase that's repeated with Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter 4.

Both Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, they make an offering to God. God has no regard for Cain's offering and in verse 5, we're told that Cain is angry.

God then warns him in verse 7, sin is crouching at the door, its desire, same word, its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.

You see, it's the idea of seizing control, of ruling. Sin wants to seize control of Cain. The woman wants to seize control of her husband and rule over him.

In turn, we're told he will no longer simply lead, but will rule. As one author puts it, that the battle between the sexes, so to speak, has begun.

[14 : 13] And of course, that is reflected in countless squabbles and arguments and disagreements within marriages. It's why next week, when we think about the renewal of marriage, that's going to be such good news.

And yet, of course, the fact is that until the Lord Jesus returns, you and I will live in this post-Genesis 3 world. It's why couples have arguments and irritate each other and can be unkind to each other.

That's true of my marriage and it's true of every marriage in this room. It's why, as we saw last week, the Bible protects husbands and wives from abuse or being cheated on by the other partner by making provision for divorce.

It's not part of God's original blueprint, but in a world where everyone is living by their own truth, that provision nonetheless is made. Now, I mentioned this book, Christopher Ash, Married for God, a couple of weeks ago.

It's an excellent book if you've never read it. By way of summary, Christopher talks about the four ways, and they're up on the screen, the four ways in which God's pattern for marriage becomes distorted.

[15 : 33] And I wonder, those of us who are married, which we most naturally drift towards. Firstly, the abdicator husband who finds the call to sacrificial leadership too costly and looks to ways to avoid it.

Perhaps by excessive time being spent on his favorite projects or hobbies or down at the gym or the sports club or walking the dog, or perhaps his needlessly long hours spent at work or simply stuck in front of a screen, whichever screen it happens to be, abdicating his responsibility to lead and serve his family.

Or the bossy wife, the wife who, like the woman in the garden, seeks to take the lead and to exercise her own autonomy.

Far from a gentle and quiet spirit, she insists on the interchangeability of husband and wife roles in every way. The result, of course, is likely to be conflict within the home.

Or there's the tyrannical husband, domineering and oppressive, throwing his weight around. I guess it's all too easy for a tired and short-tempered husband to justify this behavior by saying, well, I'm just giving a strong lead.

[17:00] And yet, that is not a lead that's modeled on the gentle leadership of the Lord Jesus. It's tyranny. The result, of course, resentment, tension, and conflict.

Fourthly, the mousy wife who behaves like a doormat. In doing so, of course, she's abdicating the dignity she's been given as her husband's equal partner in serving God together, working alongside him as a fellow worker.

And, of course, that does include challenging him when she thinks he's got it wrong. the abdicator husband, the bossy wife, the tyrannical husband, the mousy wife.

I wonder, those who are married, which best describes your marriage? Or perhaps, different, in different times and in different situations.

Conflict. Secondly, pain. Notice, will you, in chapter 3, verses 16 to 19, how both the man and the woman experience the pain and frustration of marriage in their primary areas of responsibility.

[18:27] Let me read these verses for us. Again, Genesis 3, 16. To the woman, God said, I'll 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. And to Adam, he said, because you've 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 fields. 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. Notice in verse 16, the wife's primary area of responsibility is as a mother.

Now, that doesn't preclude her from having a job. It doesn't preclude her from earning more than her husband earned. It doesn't preclude her from serving in a whole multitude of ways outside the home.

[19:32] but the primary area of her responsibility within the marriage is the bearing and bringing up of children if, as a couple, they are able to have them.

In fact, that phrase, childbearing, probably includes not just physically the act of birth but also child-rearing as well. So yes, the pain of physical childbirth itself that is followed by the exhaustion of sleepless nights all the way through to the emotional and relational pain of a moody, bolshie teenager.

Likewise, the husband experiences the effects of God's curse in his primary area of responsibility as the provider in verses 17 to 19.

Now, again, that doesn't mean he isn't to help at home or with the children but he does have primary responsibility as the provider for the family. Now, I doubt many of us have real thorns and thistles growing where we work although, of course, it's quite possible if you haven't been to your place of work for last year who knows what may be growing up through the floor of your office block. And yet, of course, every one of us who is working we know, don't we, exactly what these verses are talking about. Work is burdensome, it's toilsome, it's frustrating, it's exhausting.

[21:02] Now, may I say it is a great blessing to our marriages once we've discovered this because it stops us investing so much time and energy and resources in our work that we don't have time and space and energy for our wives, for our children or for serving Jesus at church or more widely.

Seems to me that one of the great disadvantages of having the kind of big job that many of you have is that it can take a long time to discover this and yet talk to someone who is in a more

mundane kind of work, someone who's working on a production line, for example, or someone who's working in the care sector and actually they've worked it out ages ago.

I remember talking to a friend of mine a while back who told me that he thought he had reached the kind of stage of his career as he put it where essentially he had peaked and he had worked out in fact he had been told that he wouldn't get any further than he had done already.

And of course although that was a painful thing to hear on reflection he saw it as God's kindness because actually it had shattered his idol and it had put work in its place for him.

So then this is why marriage is hard. Conflicts between husband and wife, the pain and stresses of bringing up children, the exhaustion and hard work of providing for the family and then of course end of verse 19 you are dust and to dust you shall return death itself.

[22 : 49] In other words there is our own sin but also the sin of others our children those we work with all these feed in together into pain and stress in married life and family life.

Now I wonder if you're familiar with the church car park miracle. I wonder if you've seen the church car park miracle.

There's been a battle to get every member of the family ready for church. There are squabbles in the car at who's sitting in which seat. Perhaps we arrive feeling angry stressed out simmering barely under the surface.

We get out of the car in the car park. We're greeted by that lovely warm welcoming smiley person on the welcome team. How are you?

Good we say. Very well thank you. See the church car park miracle. Seems to me that one of the wonderful things about knowing Jesus is that we understand each other.

[24 : 00] None of us have perfect marriages. many of us have periods in our marriages which are difficult. We can be open and honest about that.

It shouldn't take us by surprise. We can pray with each other about it. It doesn't mean that marriage isn't good. Marriage is good. But it does mean that marriage is not the answer as Rupert reminded us earlier to the pain and frustration of living in a fallen world.

It needs a much bigger solution. It's why Jesus came to die on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and bring us back into right relationship with God.

And therefore for those who aren't married, those in jam, others who aren't married, don't make an idol out of marriage. have realistic expectations for marriage.

I remember as a single person finding it very hard to look beyond the kind of they lived happily ever after Hollywood view of marriage. Now Hollywood assumes, doesn't it, that once they're married life is going to be brilliant.

[25 : 14] You see all the ups and downs beforehand, you're asking yourself, will they, won't you, perhaps they split up for a bit and then they get back together. But once they're married, it's the end of the film.

Because we all know that they're going to live happily ever after. Except of course, they're not going to do that except in Hollywood. So don't make an idol out of marriage.

So conflict, pain, thirdly, clarity. Because as we think about Genesis chapter three in the context of the whole Bible, it gives us great clarity about two things.

Firstly, clarity about the purpose of marriage. Because I wonder if you remember how back in Genesis chapter two, verse 18, we saw, didn't we, that marriage is not created as the answer to loneliness, but instead to aloneness.

What's not good is that the man is alone in the task that God has given him to do. The so-called creation mandate of chapter one, verse 28, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion.

[26 : 33] That means more people are needed if they are to exercise rule and dominion in the garden on God's behalf. And yet, in a post-Genesis three world, things now look very different indeed.

a multiplication of people simply means a multiplication of sinful people. Indeed, that's precisely what happened.

So don't look it up now, but I put that reference to Genesis six on the outline where we see exactly that is the case. We're told that mankind has multiplied across the face of the earth. And as that has happened, so sin and evil and wickedness has also multiplied.

And that is why the focus in the rest of the Bible is on a new people, a forgiven people, who will once again be made in the image of God.

Indeed, Romans chapter eight, and again, don't look it up now, look it up later. Romans chapter eight tells us this is the very thing that the whole of creation is longing for and groaning for.

[27 : 43] We are looking at that in our growth groups on Tuesday evening this last week. And that is why, do you remember when we thought about the purpose of church back in February, we saw that the great commission of making disciples is the work that God is committed to in his world today.

Now, that gives churches a mission statement, but it also gives marriages a mission statement. as well, a purpose statement.

This is the primary way in which we serve God in our marriages today. What do you say, what does that look like? Well, bringing up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, using our homes for hospitality, serving at church together, using our money, our time and resources for the gospel, praying together for the work of the gospel.

Do you see how the great commission gives enormous focus and purpose to Christian marriage?

Indeed, this is the most important question those of us who are married can ask.

So often, marriage enrichment programs or courses tend to focus on practical matters, how we care for each other, how to have a better sex life, how to communicate better, those kind of practical questions.

[29 : 14] But of course, the really big question that we need to address in our marriages is whether we're serving Jesus together, whether we're serving him in this great work of making disciples.

It would be a great question for those of us who are married to talk about and discuss later on today. is your marriage aligned with God's purpose for marriage?

Secondly, clarity about the value of singleness. Because once we've seen that the making of disciples is the work that God is primarily committed to, I think that explains why the New Testament is so very positive about being single.

Matthew chapter 19, the Lord Jesus speaks of those who are eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. Those who are unmarried can flourish because marriage, remember, isn't God's solution to loneliness.

But the answer to loneliness in the Bible is friendship. After all, there are plenty of people who are married and yet sadly feel very isolated and very lonely.

[30 : 30] It means it's perfectly possible to be unmarried and yet fulfilled just as the Lord Jesus was unmarried. And that is why in 1 Corinthians chapter 7, the Apostle Paul is so very positive about singleness.

The unmarried person is free to serve the Lord in a way in which those who are married can't. And yes, it's a matter of freedom. It's not a matter of restraint. As each one of us considers the very best way in which we can serve the Lord Jesus.

I take it that means that what we've looked at today should fill us with hope. Because I think that one of the great temptations for the unmarried person is to imagine that somehow we're living our lives on a kind of totally different track to those who are married.

but that is simply not the case. Because God's purpose for all of us is that we live our lives to serve the Lord Jesus in his great work of making disciples.

And that is equally true whether we are married or not married. Let me give us a few moments for reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer.

[31 : 53] Thank you.

for you are dust and to dust you shall return. Heavenly Father we thank you for the wonderful way in which you so kindly and graciously show us what life is like in a post-Genesis 3 world.

And we marvel at how closely it chimes with our own experiences. We thank you for the way in which your word clarifies for us the purpose of marriage and we pray that in our marriages as well as those who are single here this morning please would our overall focus in life be focused on what you are doing in your world the making of disciples.

And we pray Heavenly Father that in a world which is so incredibly confused about marriage about marriage. Please would you help us to have confidence in your word and we ask it in Jesus name.

Amen. Can I just say I'm very conscious that either this morning's talk or this whole series of talks will have raised lots of questions for many of us.

[33 : 32] If you'd like to chat further I'm very happy to do so. Go for a walk in the park or whatever or pray. I know Fiona likewise as well so do come and chat if you'd like to.

Thank you.