

The Mystery of Marriage

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning everyone. I've not met you before, my name's Steve.! Lee passed here at St. Paul's and we're starting a series, as we've said, on marriage.

! Marriage is finding that one special person that you want to annoy for the rest of your life. That's one definition of marriage. Love is blind, but marriage is the great eye-opener.

Love is one long, sweet dream, and marriage is the alarm clock. My husband and I have agreed to never go to bed angry with each other, and so far we've been awake for the last three days.

If you're married, you'll resonate with some of those sort of short quips, if you like. The interesting thing is, though, you don't need to be married for that, to see some of it from that perspective, because we all see marriage through a distorted lens.

And that distorted lens is our own experience of it. If your experience is parents who had a fantastic marriage, that may cause you to see marriage as something that is relatively easy.

[1 : 22] And you may get a profound shock when yourself are married and discover how hard it is to forge a great marriage.

If you have experienced a troubled marriage or a divorce, either as a child or now as an adult, your view of marriage may be wary, pessimistic even.

You may be entering marriage, particularly if you grew up in a bad marriage, you may be entering marriage expecting of relationship problems, or when they appear, you're very quickly to go, ah, here we go, this is exactly what I anticipated.

You see, any experience of marriage we've had would cause us, in one way or another, to be unprepared for it. Marriage, as we see there in verse 32 of Ephesians 5, is a profound mystery. It's unlike any other relationship in the world. And so we're going to spend this term trying to unravel, if you like, this profound mystery.

[2 : 38] The plan is to give both the married and the unmarried people amongst us here a biblical vision of marriage according to the Bible, according to Christianity.

And so this series is for the approximately 59% of us who are married in our church family. And the hope will be it will correct mistaken views and mistaken views that may be right now harming your marriage and hopefully bring you to a perspective of grace.

When Nat and I got married 9,962 days ago today, not that anyone's counting, we were like most young modern couples.

We found marriage to be much harder than we expected it to be. Marriage is, in reality, the union of two people who come together with life's baggage.

And so marriage is glorious, but it's also profoundly hard. It is a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears.

[4 : 07] There are multitudes of humbling defeats and exhausting victories at the same time. No marriage, I know, that is more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairy trail come true.

Often, however, in the church, we don't talk like that. We project an unhelpful view of marriage.

The thing is, I don't recall anyone saying to Nat and I how hard it will be until one young couple said to us about, asked us about 12 months into marriage, how's your first 12 months been?

Because for us, it was a nightmare. And you've been now married 20-odd years, and it's like no one had ever said that to us.

Everyone talked about the honeymoon period. That's all they talked about. So it's for the marriage amongst us. Secondly, we're doing this series for the 41% approximately of unmarried people in our church family, and hoping it will deal with any unhelpful over-desiring of marriage or deal with any unhelpful, pessimistic dismissing of marriage.

[5 : 33] Hopefully going to do that as well. You see, single people need to... They need a brutally realistic and yet glorious vision of what marriage actually is and also what it can be.

And thirdly, we're doing this series, and I must say primarily because of what we discovered in Ephesians' last term. We're actually doing this series because Ash said we should, told me we should.

And he was right in that we got to the series in Ephesians and we skipped over this one in one sermon, and there's so much to unpack here because the book of Ephesians reveals the position and job description of the church in affecting God's grand plan for all time and eternity.

And all of God's plans for eternity, to make a people for himself, to enjoy forever in his presence, in unity through the Lord Jesus Christ, is worked out in time and space through the church, which the Bible describes as the bride of Christ.

I mentioned it many times last term. The American pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards said that God created the entire universe that the eternal Son of God might attain a spouse.

[7 : 04] And so therefore, marriage, as we see it in the Bible, is deeply connected to God's purposes for all things and all time.

It's not a side point here. It's not just a change of subject in Ephesians. In Ephesians 5, we have the longest, most famous, and, dare I say, controversial passage in the Bible on marriage.

And it's one that we can't just skip over. And so I'm thankful to Ash for pushing me on this one. And so the primary purpose, as we unpack this series, is not tips on marriage.

It's not 10 takeaways to make your marriage a little bit healthier. This is primarily theological. It's primarily theological in understanding who God is because that is what marriage does.

It helps us understand who God is. And in understanding God, it helps us understand marriage.

That's where we're headed in the next number of weeks.

[8 : 18] And you're probably going to have a bunch of questions, and I may not answer any of them as we go through.

It's not marriage counselling, even though I dare say it should be helpful, as even in my own preparation has been helpful for me. So here's the three points for today.

We're going to look at, you know, it's really introductory, this sermon, looking at marriage, broadly speaking, as it's shifted over time, looking at the Bible's perspective, and then finally we'll land on the mystery, the profound mystery of marriage.

Okay, so first of all, marriage made over time. In Western civilisations, there's been several competing views as to what marriage is, what it should be.

Traditionally, over the centuries, there's been the Catholic and the Protestant perspectives. They're similar but different. Similar in the sense that both taught that the purpose of marriage was, or the institution of marriage, was a lifelong devotion and love between a husband and a wife.

[9 : 33] It was a solemn bond, designed to help each other, to subordinate individual impulses and interests in favour of the union.

The Catholic Church, the Roman Catholic Church, emphasised marriage as a sacrament of God's love. Protestants understood marriage to be given by God, not merely for Christians, but in fact for the benefit of the entire of humanity.

Marriage was designed to build character by bringing a male and a female together into a binding partnership.

Now, these older traditional culture views, and generally not just the Western civilisation, but more traditional cultures have a similar view on this, they taught that their members to find meaning in duty by embracing their assigned social roles and carrying them out faithfully.

So personal meaning was found through self-denial, giving up one's freedoms, and binding oneself to the duties of marriage and family and society.

[10 : 57] That's the traditional view. That started to shift in the 18th and 19th century, particularly in Western civilisation, which is now permeating most of the world because we've got Hollywood and things like that.

It started to shift, particularly being triggered during the time of the Enlightenment. The meaning of marriage in that season came to be the freedom of the individual to choose the life that most fulfills them personally.

That's the view that started to shift in the 18th, 19th century. And so marriage, with that view, was being redefined as finding emotional and sexual fulfilment and self-actualisation.

That became the purpose of marriage. And this new approach to marriage saw marriage as a contract between two parties for mutual individual growth and satisfaction.

That is, you married for yourself, not for God, not for society, not for the other.

[12 : 14] And spouses should, therefore, this is the view, be allowed to conduct their marriage in any way they consider beneficial for them personally.

And so broadly speaking, what happened in the time of the Enlightenment is this new perspective of marriage privatised marriage. It took it from the public sphere to privatising it.

And it redefined its purpose as individual gratification. I can't tell you the number of couples that are prepared for marriage and you ask the question about expectations from broader families and so on, and the vast majority say, what does it matter?

We're the ones getting married. It's our marriage after all. It privatised marriage. And so slowly but surely, this newer understanding of the meaning of marriage became the dominant view in society, which is what it is now.

It used to be a public institution for the common good and now it's a private arrangement for the satisfaction of the individual. Marriage used to be about us, now it's about me.

[13 : 32] And ironically, one of the reasons for this shift is the proponents of the new version of marriage, the new view of marriage, saw the old view of marriage as being oppressive.

It's an oppressive view of marriage and of life. And the irony is that this new view of marriage actually puts a crushing burden of expectations on marriage and on spouses in a way that more traditional understanding of marriage never did.

And the particular burden that is there nowadays in the modern view of marriage is this new idea which arose out of the enlightenment, the new idea of the compatible soulmate that out there in the world is the one.

The one. And that concept is a, the concept of compatibility and the concept of a soulmate is a very, very new development in the institution of marriage.

And it creates an extreme idealism that in turn leads to a deep pessimism. You see, the new view of marriage as self-realisation has caused people to first of all want too much out of marriage and yet also at the same time not nearly enough out of marriage.

[15 : 26] Men and women today want a marriage in which they can receive emotional and sexual satisfaction from someone who will simply let them be themselves.

They want a spouse who is fun, intellectually stimulating, sexually attractive, where you've got many common interests and who on top of all of that is entirely supportive of your personal goals and of the way you are currently living right now.

And that search, looking for that person, goes on and on and on and on trying to find them.

It takes years. Or in Nat's case, it was pretty quick. It does lead to a deep pessimism in life and for this concept of marriage.

You see, if your desire is for a spouse who will not demand a lot of change from you, then you are looking for a spouse who is almost completely together, very low maintenance and with virtually no personal problems at all, you're looking for someone who will not require change or demand change.

[17 : 15] not only someone who is completely together themselves, but you're looking for someone who's prepared to put up with you being not completely together yourself.

You are searching therefore for the ideal person, happy, healthy, interesting, stable, wise, content, attractive, together in life, fully together in life and under 30.

Good luck with that. You see, the assumption that there is someone out there who is just right for me to marry fails to appreciate the fact that everyone who gets married always, everyone, always marries the wrong person.

They're going to be doing it. Did I just say that? Yes, I did just say that. Every single person who marries everyone, they always marry the wrong person.

And that's because we think we know the person that we are marrying on that wedding day, but we actually don't.

[18 : 47] Marriage is a journey of discovering who that person is. What you do when you say I do is you are marrying a stranger. Because even when you think you've married the right person, it is just a matter of months and they will change.

Because marriage brings you into a more intense proximity to another human being than any other relationship. And the moment you marry someone who you think you know, by its actual definition, marriage begins to change who they are in profound ways.

There's not a single person who can predict the future. There's not a single person who on their wedding day knows how their spouse will change.

And so the quest for a compatible soulmate, sorry, compatible, not compatible, you get that anyway, so compatible soulmate is an impossibility.

It's an impossibility. And so we're faced with a problem with the modern view of marriage. Our culture makes individual freedom, personal autonomy, fulfillment, the very highest values.

[20 : 24] And the reality is every single love relationship. But very specifically married relationship means the loss of those things.

And yet choosing to not lose those things and therefore not to commit yourself to another person means you lose yourself.

I think no one put it any clearer than C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Four Loves*. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken.

If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it up carefully, round with hobbies and little luxuries.

Avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or the coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change.

[21 : 25] It will not be broken, it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative is tragedy or at least to the risk of tragedy is damnation.

So which do we choose? This brings me to the biblical view, what the Bible says of our marriage. The Bible begins with the wedding of Adam and Eve.

It ends in the book of Revelation with the wedding of Christ and his church. And there's an awful lot of teaching in the pages in between and examples in the pages in between of marriage.

And so the beginning of the Bible records God creating the universe and towards the end of that process of creation, we have God saying this, let us make man in our image.

This is the, if you like, the earliest glimpse of what is the Christian teaching on the Trinity of God. That is, there is one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[22 : 39] God's God's plurality is the thing that's It was St. Augustine who said that the Trinity is the only version of God and the only version of God and the only version of ultimate reality that has personal relationship, intimate personal relationship at its very core.

Only the God of Christianity is a God of community. God is a, in himself, a self-sufficient, self-sustaining community.

The technical term is perichoresis, a mutual indwelling of mutual sacrificial love. That is at the core of ultimate reality.

unity. Three persons delighting in and loving each other. You see, if God were a singular being, monotheistic view, then love and relationship would be entirely secondary to God.

It would be secondary to ultimate reality. That is, love, relationship, community would be derived from, not at the center of.

[24 : 01] And that's the only way that we can come to terms with Genesis chapter 2 verse 18 which says, the Lord God said, it is not good for the man to be alone.

Every single thing in the creation account up to this point, God said is good. This is the only time where he says something is not good. God. And the missing piece is Adam, the man, is made in the image of a God who is us, not me.

He was made in the image of an eternal community. And so personal relationships are the essence of humanity. Deep relationship with God, deep relationship with other human beings and particularly deep relationship with other human beings who are different than us.

And so God creates woman. And the last thing we see in the creation account is that God officiates at the first wedding in Genesis chapter 2.

And when the man sees the woman, like him but different than him, he breaks out in poetry and exclaims, oh boy, wow, wow, at last, this is it.

[25 : 40] And so we are meant to conclude that marriage to our relationship with God is the most profound relationship in all of created order. It reflects the God who made us.

God reflects his eternal purposes to bring humanity into relationship with himself and be united with himself through the Lord Jesus Christ forever.

So the Bible doesn't see marriage as a human institution that is shaped by culture as we choose to shape it. It sees marriage as something that is invented by God to display something of God and his purposes for humanity.

It sits above culture. Now, having said that, it's also a human institution and it reflects the character and the particular human culture in which it's embedded.

But having said that, the Bible, its teaching on marriage, does not reflect a particular perspective of any one culture at any one time.

[26 : 55] And so we will unpack this as we go through the rest of Ephesians 5 and some of the more controversial bits. Controversial bits because of culturally for our time.

We're reading it through a lens of a culture, not through God's purposes. And so the Bible challenges our contemporary Western culture's narrative of individual freedom as the only way to be happy.

It also critiques how traditional cultures perceive the unmarried adult to be less than a fully formed human being. Genesis critiques the institution of polygamy.

It records it. It doesn't endorse it. Because even in the times of Genesis, it was accepted cultural practice. and so what Genesis does for us, it records the misery and the havoc it plays in family relationships and the pain that it caused and particularly for women.

The New Testament writers lift up long term singleness as a legitimate way to live in a way that is countercultural to our day and countercultural to traditional communities and societies.

[28 : 16] And so what we can't do is we can't write off the biblical view of marriage as being one dimensional, as being regressive and culturally obsolete. You can't do that.

The Bible also tells us that sin is the source of all relational breakdown. Because straight after the first wedding of Adam and Eve, these newlyweds rejected God's rule over their life.

They disobeyed his commands, went down the path of self realisation, living for themselves. And what happened in that moment with Adam and Eve was immediately, it was profound.

They went from the wow, unity, they went from total transparency and vulnerability to immediately wanting to cover themselves up, to immediately wanting to hide themselves from the one who moments earlier they went, wow.

and so the main reason no one ever marries the right person is because all of us since that day are broken by sin and we are all profoundly self-centred.

[29 : 39] And so the Bible's view of marriage explains why it is so good and important and it teaches us sin is the reason why it makes it so hard.

That's the biblical perspective of holding both of those things together. So let's jump very quickly to Ephesians 5 and the mystery of marriage. That phrase, if you like, verse 32 is the pinnacle of Ephesians 5 and this passage on marriage.

And the one that I think many married people can relate to is verse 32. This is a profound mystery. The Greek word that Paul uses there is *mysterion* and it has a range of meanings including the idea of secret, the idea of a secret.

And in the Bible the word secret means a wondrous unlooked for truth that God is making known through his spirit.

We're not looking for it but God's revealing it through his spirit. That's what the idea is. And this is how he describes marriage. In verse 31 he quotes the final verse of the Genesis account of the first marriage.

[31 : 02] A man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. and then he adds this is a profound mystery or quite literally this is a mega *mysterion*.

It's an extraordinarily great, wonderful and profound truth that can be understood only with the help of God's spirit. what is the secret of marriage?

What is the mystery, the profound mystery? Paul immediately adds it. I am talking about Christ and the church.

That's the mystery of marriage. And when he says about that, what he's referring to is verse 25. A husband, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

See, the profound mystery is not marriage per se. The profound mystery is what husbands should do for their wives is what Jesus has already done to bring us into union with the God who's created us.

[32 : 16] That's the profound mystery. Jesus gave himself up for us. the profound mystery is that every marriage is a snapshot of the union between God and his spouse, his people, the church.

Every marriage. Jesus, God the son, though equal with the father, gave up his glory, humbled himself, took on our human nature.

He willingly lowered himself further down even still by dying on a Roman cross, paying the penalty for our sin of rejecting God and pursuing self-actualization.

And in doing so, he removes our guilt and our condemnation so that we can be united with him and take on his glorious nature. He gave up his infinite glory.

He broke an eternal relationship and became a slave. He died to his own self-interest and looked to our interests instead.

[33 : 39] Jesus' sacrificial service to us has brought us into a deep union with him and he with us. And Paul says that the key to not only understanding marriage, but living marriage, is that.

as one commentator put it, when God designed the original marriage, he already had Christ and the church in mind.

This is one of God's great purposes in marriage, to picture the relationship between Christ and his redeeming people forever. It's like God had planned out the grand plan.

The grand plan was to bring a people, unite his son to his spouse, the bride of Christ, the church, for all of eternity, in his presence, where they would enjoy the presence of God, they would enjoy a relationship, a mutual love, for all of eternity, and they're like, okay, so in the meantime, how do we reveal something of that so that people can grasp that which is profoundly ungraspable, graspable, whatever that word is.

How do we do that? Marriage, between a man or woman. That'll be the picture that will reveal the reality. Marriage, as the Bible describes it, because of Christ and what he has done for us, is not inherently oppressive at all.

[35 : 23] Paul shows us that even on earth, Jesus did not use his power to oppress us, but he sacrificed everything to bring us into union with him. This deeply, deeply impacts marriage on a practical level.

If God had the gospel of salvation through Jesus in mind when he established marriage, then marriage flourishes to the degree it follows that pattern of God's self-giving love in Christ.

What Paul is saying is that marriage is not inherently oppressive and restrictive, nor are its demands overwhelming.

Feeling stuck in your marriage? or Paul says, you do for your spouse what God did for you in Jesus and the rest will follow. The mystery of marriage is that the gospel of Jesus and marriage actually explain one another.

When God invented marriage, he already had the saving work of Jesus in mind. So is the purpose of marriage to deny your interest for the good of your family and society at large, or is it to assert your interest for the fulfillment of yourself?

[36 : 53] Which one is it? Because traditional and modern marriages puts a choice between those two things. The Bible does not present marriage as a choice between fulfillment and sacrifice.

Christianity sees marriage as mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice. Jesus humbled himself, lay aside his glory and gave himself over to death to save us and to make us his.

And now we give ourselves up. We die to ourselves first when we repent and believe the gospel and later as we submit to his will day by day.

You see when we give ourselves to Jesus completely surrender ourselves to Jesus we discover it's radically safe radically safe because he has already shown us that he is willing to go to hell and back for us.

Surrendering oneself to Jesus does not mean losing yourself at all. It means in fact gaining yourself. His love is unconditional and so what the mystery of marriage does is it reveals the beauty and the depths of the gospel to you and marriage will drive you further into reliance on it.

[38 : 26] Marriage is a major vehicle for the gospel's remaking of your heart from the inside out and of your life from the ground up.

the reason that marriage is so painful and yet so wonderful is because it reflects the gospel which is both painful and wonderful at the same time.

The gospel declares to all of us that we are more sinful and evil and selfish than we would ever ever imagine or allow us to even think of ourselves in that way.

and yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dreamed that we would ever be loved. And that's the only kind of relationship that will ultimately transform us because love without truth of who we are is actually weak.

It affirms us in all of our faults in all of our failings and there's no change. Truth without love is harsh because it gives us information we just frankly do not want to hear and can't hear.

[39 : 42] And so it crushes us. But God's saving love in Christ is marked by both radical truthfulness about who we are and yet also radical unconditional love commitment to us even though we are who we are.

The merciful commitment strengthens us to see the truth about ourselves and to change. The conviction and repentance moves us to cling to and rest in God's mercy and grace and love. And so the hard times of marriage drive us to experience more of this transforming love of God and a good marriage will always be a place where we experience this kind of transforming love. We'll experience both. The gospel can fill our hearts with God's love so that we can handle it when our spouse fails to love us as we think they should love us or when they point out the falls and the failures.

You see the security of God's love means that we can speak to our spouse's sins and flaws while also loving and accepting them fully because we are already loved and accepted fully in Jesus.

[40 : 56] And when our spouse experiences that same kind of truthfulness but also commitment to us, it enables them to show us that same kind of transforming love when it's their time for it too.

That's the profound mystery of marriage. It helps us understand the gospel in a profound and a deep way. And that's the bedrock, that's the foundation, that's the pinnacle, and that foundation then gets unpacked in profound ways in the coming weeks.

And next week we'll look at the power that is needed to live such a marriage relationship.