

The Meaning of Marriage

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[0 : 00] He's my sunshine in the morning. He's my fireworks at the end of the day. He's the warmest chord I ever heard.! Play that warm chord, play and stay, baby.

We don't need no piece of paper from the City Hall, keeping us tied and true. There's some of the lyrics from the song My Old Man, released in 1971 in the album Blue by Johnny Mitchell. The song was written by her very soon after her divorce of her first marriage. And the song was written about her new partner living together in California, a guy named Graham Nash, another musician.

And the song reflects their choice as a couple to live together, bound together by a strong, emotional passion and love for one another, connection, rather than being bound together through legal marriage.

And so the words, we don't need a piece of paper from City Hall to keep us together and true. In other words, to keep our romance true.

[1 : 19] And so that relationship lasted less than two years. And she's famous for the multiple, multiple relationships she had and failed relationships.

So if you've just joined us, we're partway through, as Asha said, this series on what the Bible teaches about marriage. It's for everyone, whether you're married or whether you're not. Ephesians 5, 21 to 33 is our text that we're using throughout the term.

It's the longest, most famous, and most controversial passage in the Bible about marriage. What we've seen so far in the first two, and we're building and building and building throughout the course of this series, is that the institution of marriage was invented by God to be a picture to represent, if you like, the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church.

And so there are things about the gospel, things about the good news of Jesus Christ that we would not know without the human institution, the institution of marriage.

And there are things we would not know about marriage were it not for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was the first week, and then we saw last week that fundamentally that self-centeredness is the main problem in every marriage and why we need the power of God's Spirit in order to be selfless and how being selfless, actually living a life of selflessness, is in fact in line with God's design for humanity because it reflects ultimate reality in God and who God is, and we're being made in his image.

[3 : 10] And so while selflessness feels entirely unnatural, it's because of sin. And so we're building on those two, and we're now unpacking today what therefore is the meaning of marriage according to the Bible.

And so there's the three points. It's on the St. Paul's app if you've got the app and you can take some notes as you cruise along. So first of all, marriage, law or love. The biblical meaning of marriage, verse 31, it's in there.

For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. Now Paul is quoting there Genesis 2.24, which we saw in the first message in this series.

It's the first ever marriage ceremony, and it's officiated by God. God brings the man and the woman together, he officiates the coming together in marriage.

And the meaning of marriage, from a biblical perspective, is captured in that term, united to his wife. united to his wife.

[4 : 26] Now that's a modern translation, if you like, a version of a much more of an archaic English term, but the archaic English term is much stronger than united to his wife, and it's much closer to what the Hebrew verb is in Genesis 2.

It's the word cleaving. Cleaving. A man will cleave to his wife. And so the Hebrew verb literally means to be glued to something.

To be glued to something. Elsewhere in the Bible, the word cleave means to unite to someone through a covenant.

And a covenant, in biblical terms, a covenant is a public, binding, legal contract between two parties.

And the Bible defines marriage as a covenant relationship. A binding, legal, public contract between two parties.

[5 : 49] And every Old Testament covenant has four elements to it. Firstly, the parties associated with the covenant are identified.

Secondly, the stipulations of the covenant are stated. What are the ground rules, if you like? Every contract has a set of conditions, obligations, duties, and regulations between the parties.

The third thing is, there's a list of blessings and curses depending on your faithfulness or unfaithfulness to those duties and obligations and regulations.

And fourthly, there are public vows, declarations, and signs given to each other as signs of commitment.

And so, in various ways, the parties would publicly agree to the covenant in front of witnesses, and then they would do things like exchange vows, sorry, exchange sandals, or something like that.

[7 : 01] You know? One of the main ways that covenants happen in the Bible, particularly covenants with God and people, were that there were sacrifices were made.

You know? Animals were cut in half, and they'd walk between the two animals, that sort of stuff. It's a little extreme nowadays, and a little bit messy for wedding ceremonies.

Too much white, too much carpet, that sort of stuff. And so, we've gone for rings instead. In the end, it doesn't really matter. Now, you know, it doesn't really matter, you know, whether you jump over a broom, or you stump on a glass, or you exchange rings.

What makes a covenant a covenant is all of those elements together, and primarily that it is a public declaration.

Public declaration. The couple are standing in front of family, friends, witnesses, and they are publicly declaring.

[8 : 15] There's no such thing as a covenant in the back seat of a car. At all. There are covenants everywhere in the Bible, covenants between human beings, you know, horizontal covenants.

But the most prominent covenants are the covenants that are, if you like, vertical, the covenants between God and individuals, or God and families, or nations, communities.

And the marriage covenant, as the Bible sees it, is unique because it has very strong aspects of both horizontal and vertical.

That's what makes it unique as a covenant. So Proverbs 2, 17, describes a wayward wife who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she has made before God.

In other words, she's broken relationship with her spouse and God. The covenant made between a husband and a wife is done before God and therefore with God as well as the spouse.

[9 : 36] And to break faith with your spouse is to break faith with God at the same time. Now, I'm assuming that maybe I should make this assumption that you've been to a wedding before and maybe traditional, if you like, Christian weddings are becoming less and less and less in our society.

There are only a small portion nowadays of weddings in our society. But the biblical idea of covenant is reflected in the traditional wedding service in that it has both questions and vows. I'm not sure if you've ever noticed that before. Let me just take you through it as a celebrant. I first of all ask the gathering of people that are there whether there is any legal reason as to why this marriage should not proceed.

That's the first question that's asked. Not asking you anyone got a personal opinion about this whether it should happen or not. It's a legal reason.

And if someone in case you don't realise this if someone stands up and says I've got a legal reason why they should not get married or I've got a reason why they shouldn't get married and then I've actually at that point got to stop the service I've got to pull that person aside with not the bride and the groom but with the parents of the groom pull them aside and say please explain your legal reason why it should not proceed.

[11 : 12] if they've got no legal reason why it shouldn't proceed I then ask the parents would you like at this moment to press charges and the police get called.

It's a legal ceremony. So that's the first thing and to date no one's done that by the way and then I ask the couple a set of questions each individually the bride and the bridegroom will you take to be your spouse to live together according to God's law will you give them the honour due to them as your spouse and forsaking all others love and protect them as long as your spouse shall live and each spouse says I will hopefully if they don't we don't proceed now up to this point in the service they're not facing each other they're facing me and traditionally the father of the bride is normally standing between them still last hang on to those last moments they're actually looking at the minister as I ask them the questions because I am not just a witness of their promise at this point I am representing God and the state in this legal ceremony and so what happens at the very first thing is that the couple make a promise to God before they turn to each other and each of them gets to hear each other stand up before God before their families and friends and before the authorities of structures of church and state and they swear loyalty and faithfulness things to the covenant not to each other to the covenant and it's not until they've done that do they then take one another by the hand and stumble through the rest of it and faint and all in the presence of God I take you to be my husband and wife to have and to hold from this day forward for better for worse for rich and poor in sickness and health to love and cherish as long as the best shall live this is my solemn vow and promise legal declaration now I've been to a few secular weddings and they're a little bit different I remember one wedding where the celebrant said everything today is about love this whole ceremony our gathering is a celebration of love and I went in my mind of course yes and no actually no really it's not what we're gathered here today we're actually here gathered publicly for a legal service that's why we're gathered and then I noticed something else the couples basically express because they get to write their own vows they basically express their current love for each other and it's because I currently love you

I desire to be with you in one case the promise where the couples express this is what I like about you this is what I enjoy being with you and then and then at the end of it was the promise was I will love you for however long we are together what the hell does that mean until tomorrow morning the next day I mean until I will love you and then once we're not together I don't need to love you or once I fall out of love I don't need to be with you anymore there were no words through sickness in health richer or poorer until one or both of us are dead now traditionally a wedding is not primarily a celebration of how much you love or you feel loving right now that's not it wedding vows are not a declaration of present love they are mutual binding promise of future love current love

[16 : 34] I'm assumed it should be assumed I think on the day in a wedding the couple stand before God family friends the institutions of state and church in a Christian one and they promise to be loving faithful and true to their spouse in the future through all the ups and downs through all the ups and downs particularly of internal feelings of whether I feel loving or passionate or not and every single external circumstance in life biblically marriage is a covenant relationship that is public binding and legal people it's not the building it's not the service it's not the dress it's not the rings that makes a person married what makes them married is a permanent exclusive public legal commitment to share all aspects of their life together and the marriage is official the moment

I say I declare you to be husband and wife on behalf of God and the state did you know that you can run most of a wedding service as a celebrant but you cannot say those words legally unless you're licensed and the moment I declare them to be married they're married marriage is not a five by five renewable options contract even a prenuptial agreement radically cuts into the biblical definition of marriage and the Bible's teaching of marriage is why the Bible says that you should not give yourself to someone without them giving you this kind of commitment or you giving them this kind of commitment that's why the Bible's teaching on marriage is really on a collision course with the modern mindset the modern concept of covenant it just seems so oppressive to the modern person and which is why the idea of covenant relationships is almost non-existence in western civilization at the moment marriage as discipline as service as commitment as obligation as accountability is so foreign to deeply held values of self excuse me self-fulfillment and self actualization now if I left it there you'd go hang on a bit it sounds very mechanical formal where's the passion where's the romance where's the love and I suppose on one level this is the main thing that many secular the modern person brings to the idea of marriage it's just about love one of the most widely held beliefs in our culture today is that the foundation of marriage is romantic love so

you can you can buy any number of books and go to courses and stuff and articles about how to keep the sparks alive in your 80s and in that sense romantic love as it's described in our culture is it's a feeling romantic love according to our culture is like a ditch you fall into it's passive it's subjective it just happens to you it just sort of came on me and there's also wide agreement that romantic love waxes and wanes and it fades over time and then you got that combined with another widely held belief that romantic love and sexual fulfillment are absolutely important in order to have a long and fulfilled and happy personal existence in other words sexual expression is attached to my self actualization now those two convictions that I need to have romantic love to be truly me and express that sexually but the fact that romantic love waxes and wanes marriage is just in with those two ideas so the institution of marriage while we think it's declining actually isn't what's happening is people are cohabitating up to 85% I think at the moment cohabit before marriage try before you buy kind of a thing and it's because of those ideas a married man gave me some advice not long before Nat and I are married he said that over the years the partnership in life was still there but the romance and the passion it just dies off but that's okay sort of another one told me that if you put a jelly bean in a jar every time you had sex in the first year of marriage and then took one out every time you had sex after the first year of marriage the jar would never become empty joke's on him

I'm a diabetic I have jelly beans all the time I'm not don't read any more into that than that I'm just you see what it's saying there is the modern view understands love as a feeling it's about passion it's about something that happens to me I feel romantic passion for you and I don't need a piece of paper to make how I feel any better and that is absolutely correct if love is about romantic passion no piece of paper is going to help with that for sure but the Bible sees love primarily primarily as much about giving love rather than so much as feeling love or receiving love love is about giving yourself to another person how much you're willing to lose for the sake of another person how much you're willing to invest in the other person and in that sense when someone says I don't need a piece of paper to show you how much

I love you what they could potentially also be meaning is I don't love you enough to give myself to you completely you see the Bible sees marriage as a relationship that is far more durable and binding and unconditional than one that is based on mere feeling and affection and at the same time it sees marriage as far more intimate and personal than merely a legal business relationship that's convenient for economic gain or something like that so the Bible actually sees marriage as a covenant relationship that has a stunning blend of law and love and that's what I want to unpack now it was

[25 : 35] British philosopher Bertrand Russell he made an early 20th century argument for the expression of sexual love outside of marriage he said it was the preferred option if you like he was an atheist and he argued that sexual activity should be marked and therefore sexual activity should be marked by intense passion and romantic delight and that can flourish to quote him as long as it is free and spontaneous he said that romantic passion and love and sex tends to be killed by the thought of duty it's an obligation and that thinking from Bertrand Russell is considered that makes a lot of sense in our day and age right now and the Bible fundamentally disagrees with that the Bible sees love needs a framework of a binding obligation to make it fully what it should be it's a relationship that is more intimate because it is legal and that actually makes common sense too to make a for example to make a binding public vow love commitment to give yourself to another person be committed to that person through every single thing that life will throw at you is an enormous act of love in itself an enormous act of love the willingness to make that kind of commitment actually enhances love another way and it builds on this is why marriage is more intimate because it is legally binding is the security that it provides you see when if you can wind your mind back for those who have been married for a while but when dating or for instance if you're a couple living together what you have to do in that moment in that relationship at that stage is you have to constantly prove your value daily to your partner by impressing and enticing and so the relationship at that point is really a consumer orientated relationship

I need to give you a cost benefit analysis as to why we should stay together you see when we first fall in love we think we love that person but we actually don't really it takes years to truly love a person what happens when we fall into the ditch of love and we feel love we fall in love with our idea of that person that's what we fall in love with there is an emotional high that comes to us when someone thinks that we're so wonderful and we're so beautiful or so handsome or so talented or so

funny and that is part of what fuels the early passion and the electricity of falling in love the other side of this is that the other person who you think is captivated by you does not really know you either and that's somewhat more troubling underneath and which is why we have to try so hard we have to put on our best versions of ourselves there are things about oneself that about ourselves that we're ashamed of that we're afraid of and we could not possibly allow those things to come out at this point otherwise it'll be over and we don't let the other person see our flaws because fundamentally what our hearts can't cope with is the possibility of rejection because we want love is what we want even deeper still we can't reveal those parts of our character that we can't in fact see ourselves and which will only be revealed to us in the course of a long long marriage so the dilemma is this the person doesn't really know us and therefore doesn't really love us not yet anyway what they love is their version of us what we think of as being head over heels in love is in large part a gusto of ego gratification and it's not until you've been together for a period of time where the all the veils and the barriers start to be removed and they start to see you over time that the real you comes out and the challenges start so it's not in your notes but did you know that 75% of couples who cohabit before marriage last less than five years last less than five years 75% the other 25% get married and their divorce rate is slightly higher than those who don't cohabit before marriage cohabitation before marriage increases the likelihood of divorce I'll get to that in a moment unbeknownst to most people that's actual statistic fact did you know that couples who marry their unhappiness levels before marriage marriage exactly the same as a couple who cohabit before marriage however every couple that describes their marriage as unhappy if they stick with it those same two thirds of those relationships will self describe as happy beyond the six year mark there is nothing quite like the profound satisfaction of being known and loved when over many years someone has seen us at our worst and knows our strengths and our flaws and still commits wholly to you that is deeply satisfying to be loved but not known is gratifying thrilling but it's superficial to be known and not loved that is our greatest fear but to be fully known and fully loved is the deepest of all loves and that's what every human heart needs more than anything else and that kind of love is not killed by legal commitment legal commitment in fact provides the environment for that love to grow in his book the marriage builder

Larry crab recounts an experience in fact as he was writing the book he's in a plane and he you know notepad in front of him and the airline steward notice that something about marriage and she asked what he was doing told he was writing a book on marriage and her words to him were I really believe in marriage after six years of living with a man I decided that I wanted to be married since the guy I was living with liked our no strings attached arrangement I found somebody else who was willing to tie the knot and we got married two months ago I asked her why she preferred a marriage commitment to merely living together she said I think it's the commitment part I wanted I married a man who seems to be really committed to loving me and working on our relationship I never felt secure enough to really open up and try to get close with a man who wouldn't make any promises that is the value of the marriage covenant the legal bond of marriage creates a space for security where we can open up and reveal our true selves we can be vulnerable vulnerable no longer having to keep up facades we don't have to keep selling ourselves we can lay the last layer of our defenses down and be completely naked not just physically but in a much deeper way of a nakedness of heart and soul of deep vulnerability with one another you see marriage actually enhances romantic love it doesn't kill it by nature as

Diogenes Allen put it the ethical! commitment to another person in marriage is precisely what enables the spontaneity of romantic love to achieve the stability and longevity that it longs for but is unable to provide by itself in other words romantic love cannot provide the stability and the longevity that every heart desires it is the covenantal commitment that enables married people to become people who love each other what does that look like in practice here it is if our this is my yeah there we go if our definition of love stresses affectionate feelings more than unselfish actions we will in fact cripple our ability to maintain and grow a great marriage let alone any any love relationship including parenting if however we stress the action of love over the feeling we enhance and establish the feelings of love that is the crucial secret of a life of love and of a great marriage and so [38 : 10] Ephesians 5 28 Paul says husbands ought to love their wives love their wives in verse 25 but here he uses a verb that very strongly stresses obligation he commands husbands to love their wives not not to feel love for your wife but to love that's because you cannot command an emotion you can't command a feeling you can only command an obligation you can only command an action

and Paul here is commanding acts of love he doesn't care how you feel on a given day he doesn't care whether the heart's racing and the blood's flowing he says you must love your wives

Action! and when we do we give love a chance I don't think many have made this point much clearer and better than C.S.

Lewis he captures it a bit in his book Mere Christianity but during World War II he did a whole heap of broadcasts on BBC radio and he made the point that in one of those broadcasts that despite feelings of indifference and even contempt for another person you can in fact change your heart over the long haul through your actions of love towards that person he says though natural likings should normally be encouraged it would be quite wrong to think that the way to become loving is to sit trying to manufacture affectionate feelings the rule for all of us is perfectly simple do not waste time bothering whether you love your neighbour act as if you do as soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets when you are behaving as if you loved someone you will presently come to love them if you injure someone you dislike you will find yourself disliking them more he made the point controversially in world war ii he said the nazis did not begin did not begin with feelings of hatred towards the jews they had they began with actions of hatred towards the jews which grew more in feelings towards the jews which grew more in actions of hatred towards the jews which grew even more in despising them and calling them less than human beings the actions shape the heart and the heart shape the actions our culture says that feelings of love are the basis for actions of love and that can be true but it is true to say that actions of love can lead consistently to feelings of love love between two people must not be identified simply with emotion or simply with dutiful action because the marriage covenant is a complex mixture of both but it is the action of love husbands wives the unmarried it is the actions of love that you have control over you don't fall into the ditch of the actions of love you determine to make them commit to them you don't have control over your feelings of love and so in the marriage ceremony we promise to maintain the actions of love every day so how do we do that how do we do that when we don't feel like it notice again what he says husbands love your this is verse 25 husbands love your wives as

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her Paul doesn't just say look be all stoic pull up your socks and just get on with actions of love just do the actions he says think while you do think while you do think this Jesus is on the cross dying for you as the atonal death atoning for your sin and it was totally unconditional it is the ultimate act of love and on the cross he didn't he didn't say I'm not gonna love you by giving my life for your life because frankly you are you don't deserve it you are so unattractive to me you don't love me you're not my body type you put on a few pounds you got a few wrinkles he was in agony and he looked down at humanity he looked down at you he looked down at me he looked down at you husband and you wife and looked down on me and he sees us denying him and abandoning him and rejecting him and betraying him and in the greatest act of love in history he surrendered his life he stayed even while they cursed him on the cross he stayed and he loved he said father forgive them they don't know what they're doing he stayed and he loved not because we were lovely to him but he stayed to make us lovely and that is the power to keep you need to be thinking about not just acting but thinking about and pushing that down into your hearts to keep loving your spouse even when you think they are unlovable it is only the gospel speaking into our hearts like that which will give us the power to fulfill the promises and to stay that that that have