

The Real Marriage  
Genesis 1, Exodus 19-25, Ephesians 5

Turn to Ephesians 5 please. In God's mind, which comes first, human marriage in Genesis 1 and 2, or how God plans to act toward his people? Does God first design and create human marriage, and then decide that he will relate to his people as husbands and wives relate to each other?

Or does God start off knowing how he will treat his people, what kind of relationship he will have with them, and then design human marriage so that wives and husbands will have the kind of relationship with each other that God's people will have with him?

We all know that the Bible talks about human marriage. And we all know that in the New Testament, Christ is the Groom and the Church is the Bride. In in the Old Testament, sometimes God is the husband and Israel is his wife.

The question is, which is the real marriage, which comes first, and the other imitates it? The answer is that God's and Christ's relationship with the faithful comes first. Even before we have the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, God knows how he will act toward his people, and how the faithful will respond.

God designed marriage because he designed people in his image and likeness, and that image and likeness in male and female was patterned after Christ and the Church.

Today we'll go backwards through the Bible. We will start with Ephesians, and then we'll go back to God's covenant with Israel in Exodus, and we'll end in the beginning of Genesis. In each one of these, we will see that the real marriage is God and Israel, or Christ and the Bride. God intended our human marriages to imitate the real marriage.

Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5:22-33

My daughter Jana told me once that this Scripture was not about wives and husbands, it was about the Church and Christ. That had never occurred to me, so I went back and read it again. About 60% of this Scripture is about Christ and the Church, and the wives and husbands share the other 40%. This really is mostly about Christ and the Church.

*<sup>22</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. <sup>23</sup> For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. <sup>24</sup> Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

What wives need to know is how the Church treats Christ, her Savior. The mission of wives is to live out how the Church treats Christ.

<sup>25</sup> *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.* What husbands need to know is how Christ loved the church and died on the cross to save her. The mission of husbands is to love our wives in that way. Let's continue:

<sup>28</sup> *In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. <sup>29</sup> After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— <sup>30</sup> for we are members of his body. <sup>31</sup> “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

What husbands also need to know is how Christ loves his own body, the Church, which is us. The mission of husbands is to love their wives the way Christ loves his body, the Church.

And then Paul does something astonishing: he takes the Genesis 2 marriage sentence and applies it to Christ and the Church. Remember the four-part marriage sentence? “For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” In Ephesians 5, this sentence is mostly about Christ and the Church.

Christ left his Father behind, so that he could be joined to his Bride. He took on flesh, because we had flesh, and that way he could be one with us. Let me pick this up again near the end of v29: [Husbands love your wives as your own bodies] ***just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the Church.***

Christ did not have a mother, just one parent, but he left his parent to come and take on flesh and save us and be united with us, so we could be one body with him, one flesh. We first read the marriage sentence in Genesis 2, but God already has Christ coming to earth in his mind at that point. And the verse describes what the man will do, because that's what Christ will do.

The real marriage is tied to salvation. Christ courted us his bride by dying for us. That was courtship. When we hear, “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved,” that's Christ proposing marriage. When we repent and believe and are baptized, that's us saying “yes I want to be included in the Bride.”

The real marriage, Christ and the Church, is not just about our relationship with Christ after we're saved. Dying for us is how he courted us, and the gospel of Christ is him proposing marriage. We here have said “yes” to his proposal, we're engaged to him, and now we're waiting for the wedding supper of the Lamb. And so is he, my brothers and sisters, so is he.

A word to husbands: husbands, Christ is incredibly devoted to the well being of the Church. There is nothing Christ won't do for the Church. This is a steep call, husbands. We nurture and cherish our own bodies, and that's exactly what Christ does for the church.

He nurtures and cherishes the Church. Christ does not take his instructions from the Church, but he listens carefully, and there is no limit to his energy to be good to the church. The glory of Christ is the love he has shown for his Bride. It is a daunting call, men. The trouble is that we husbands can read this and not hear the call. The call to husbands is the centre of this Scripture.

#### God's Marriage Covenant with Israel – Exodus 19-25

Now turn to Exodus 19. In Exodus God covenanted with Israel. Nothing that I can find in Exodus tells us that this covenant is like marriage. But when the Old Testament prophets preach against sinning Israel, especially against Israel worshipping other gods, they repeatedly call Israel an adulterous wife.

And when they preach that way, they go back to the Exodus covenant. Israel was an adulterous wife, a promiscuous wife, like a wife having repeated affairs with other men, because Israel violated this covenant. That's how we know the Exodus covenant was a marriage between God and Israel.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all spoke of God's marriage with Israel, and so did Hosea. It's in other places, but those are the main ones. The prophets also spoke of the future kingdom of God as a restored marriage. (Ezekiel 16 is the most detailed. See also Ezekiel 23; Hosea 1 – 2; Jeremiah 3; Isaiah 61 – 62.)

#### Proposal and Engagement – Exodus 19:4-8

God has led the Israelite slaves out of Israel, across the Red Sea, and to Mt Sinai. God gave them manna and water. God says to Israel: *'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'*

God proposes. He has already saved them, shown them what he is like, and the benefits of having him on their side. These are kind, warm, inviting words, and God has earned the right to speak like that. They have seen him in action. He will make them his treasured possession.

God did not save them just to save them, not just to keep old promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God now wants a relationship, a deep and committed relationship, on both sides. He will make them his cherished treasure, they in response will be completely faithful to him.

In the Exodus story, God saving Israel from their misery, and God covenanting with Israel, are not separate events. They flow into each other. He saved them in order to enter into long term committed relationship, and to live with them in their midst.

So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and told them God's offer. The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said." So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. Israel accepted God's proposal, they were betrothed, engaged.

#### Wedding Vows – Exodus 24:3-8

In Exodus 24, Moses repeated God's proposal, and asked if Israel was still willing. They responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do."

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. They sacrificed young bulls to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood of the bulls and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of God's Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you." At that point, God and Israel are married.

#### Wedding Banquet to Celebrate – Exodus 24:9-11

Right after this, Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under God's feet was something like a pavement made of brilliant blue sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these Israelite leaders; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Moses and these leaders represent all of Israel. They go up God's mountain, and they see God. As usual in these biblical scenes of God, there is a transparent floor under God's throne. They are underneath this, and looking up they can see God, and for God this is not intrusion, it's good to have them there. In the Presence of God, seeing him, they eat and drink the marriage meal.

#### Cohabitation: God Moves In – Exodus 25:1,2,8

The Lord said to Moses, "*Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give... Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.*" The first thing God wants to get done after the meal, the blood of the covenant barely dry, is move in. He wants to live with them.

I remember going through Exodus carefully for the first time, years ago, and being surprised at the sequence. God has much he still wants to say to Israel, but first he wants to move in.

I have been a groom at my own wedding, hot-blooded and impatient, wondering if the lovely wedding reception in our honour will ever end. Because I have plans for what's next, along the lines of moving in. And when I read Exodus, God sounds just like that. Let's be together. One of the rare times I feel like God and I understand each other a bit. That's what heaven is, you know: the wedding night.

Notice the order of events: Courtship: God rescued them from Egypt; Proposal and acceptance: God offered the covenant and Israel accepted the offer; Wedding: the covenant was formally sealed; Reception banquet: they ate together to celebrate; lastly Marriage, God moved in.

And folks, there is no way God is moving in without these other stages first. God could just have sent Moses into Egypt to build a little worship tent in the middle of Egypt, just to see if it works out. Pharaoh would not have minded that so much. God could just live with them in Egypt. But that is not what God did, so that is not what we do.

In Ephesians 5, Christ saving the Church and taking the Church as his Bride are inseparable. The same is true in Exodus. God saving Israel from bondage in Egypt and God covenanting with Israel and living with them can't really be separated. They are different parts of the same event. Covenant language – if you will be my people, I will be your God – is also marriage language.

#### Male and Female in the Image and Likeness of God – Genesis 1

Which comes first – human marriage or God's plans about how he will live with his people? Ephesians and Exodus have aimed us toward God and Israel, Christ and the Church being in God's mind before he created people. That is, God created marriage to give us a hands-on picture of what it's like to be God's people, whether we're married or not.

Genesis 1 is clear about this. God made humans in his image and likeness, he made them male and female, and then he told them to have a lot of children. This whole picture is his image and likeness. It's not just the individual woman or individual man that's made in God's image. Male and female coming together and having children is still his image and likeness.

Already in Genesis 1, we have three fundamental family relationships. We have wives and husbands, we have parents and children, and we have siblings, brothers and sisters. Each one of these relationships is created in the image and likeness of God.

Marriage is patterned after how God's people as a single group, as a unit, relate to God. Israel is the wife, and God the husband, the Church is the Bride, and Christ is the Groom. God designed marriage in his image and likeness to show this. And we have sexual desires, wanting to come together, and the pleasure of coming together, because we are in God's image and likeness.

These are human pictures of God wanting to come together with us, and Christ with us, and pictures of our desire to finally be with Christ.

God is still waiting to have open access to his people, and Christ still waits to have open and free intimacy with his Bride. God knows all about waiting.

We don't think our sexual desires have anything to do with God and us coming together, or what happens after the wedding supper of the Lamb. We'll that our problem. All of this is the image and likeness of God. The reason adultery is so offensive to God is that God is utterly loyal to his chosen people, as Christ is to his Bride. He expects the same from us.

Each one of us individually are God's children, his daughters and his sons. God patterned family life to show how each one of us relates to him. Parents having children is part of humans made in the image and likeness of God, because it shows us our individual relationship as God's children.

Brothers and sisters are also a part of humans made in the image and likeness of God, because this is how people in God's family relate to each other. I told you in the Leviticus sermon that in the NT, we are called "believers" 16 times, and "saints," "holy ones," about four times that often, about 60. But we are called "brothers and sisters" about 160 times. In the NT it is by far the most common way believers speak to each other.

In Genesis 1, first God makes humans in his image and likeness. And immediately after that, we get into family life, marriage and parenting and children. Let's not separate those two. These family basics are all part of being made in his image and likeness, designed by God to show us different sides of being his people.

Three quick observations, and then we're done. One, we are not free to re-invent marriage. The marriage that we find in the two creation stories and that Jesus described in Matthew 19, is the way it is for a reason. Marriage imitates God.

Two, the mission of wives is to show how the Church responds to Christ, and the mission of husbands is to show how Christ loves and serves the Church.

Three, let's thank God for this. He's shown us more about himself than we thought. This is very good. This kind of ordinary family life gives us a big window into the heart and mind of God, what he wants for us, and what he hopes for in us. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, you never cease to amaze us. Thank you for showing us another side of yourself in simple family life. And God, marriage is not easy, and family life is not easy. We hear your call, but we are not good at this. Help us out here. Fill us with the fruit of the Spirit, so we can live out your ways with each other. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love, and into Christ's perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times in every way. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.