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What is Marriage?

Rev 21:1-4

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

The coming together of Christians in eternity with Jesus speaks of hope, intimacy, nearness, union, presence, and comfort beyond any earthly experience. Whether married or not it's important to study what the Bible says about marriage:

1. "Earthly marriage" is a pale reflection of this cosmic reality that we seek to understand better.
2. It is important that we understand the pressures of life in community for married people.
3. It is important we inform ourselves about possible future life choices.

Our understanding of marriage is informed by:

- **Our upbringing through parents;** how our parents showed/didn't show love or persevere in marriage. (we're called to leave parental influence behind when we marry).
- **Society/Culture.** Our culture is largely individualistic which makes people tend to

think of marriage for what they get out of it. This creates massive pressure when becoming a spouse to entirely meet your spouses needs. "Soul mate culture".

- **Personal Experience.** We are marred or helped by experience of failure, divorce, unfaithfulness, harshness, and self-centredness.
- **God's Word.** Truth sets us free. Build your house on rock not sand. It is not always easy. The Bible, including the teaching of Jesus on marriage says things that you may find provocative, unpalatable, and even offensive.

Statistics:

- We seem to invest financially more in wedding days than in marriages. The average wedding costs £29,904 in Scotland.
- We are choosing to marry later and later.
 - The average age of men getting married is 33 and increasing.
 - The average age of women marrying is 31 and increasing (in 1981 it was 23).
- Fewer of us marry.
 - The marriage rate has dropped 23% in 20 years (40,000 down to 29,000).
 - 51% of the adult population is married.
 - 35% are single (increased 5% in 12 years).
 - Those choosing to cohabit rather than marry rose from 7% to 10% in 12 years.
- Decline in marriage is impacting family life. 50% of children are now born to unmarried parents. (8% in 1971). Parents in cohabiting couples are more likely to break up. That's our culture that we live in and were raised in.

We all fail in God's plans for our lives; in both singleness and marriage. We need grace. The Bible is full of examples of marriage that was far from ideal, yet God worked through messy situations.

We are not saying that:

- Marriage is for everyone (Jesus, Paul etc.) *1 Cor 7:7* each has own gift.
- Marriage is "better" than singleness. Both have unique benefits and unique challenges.
- Christian view must be endorsed by society.

We are saying that:

- Marriage is a godly desire. (Reformers: Luther, Calvin, Zwingli abandoned catholic

teaching that celibacy was more spiritual).

- Marriage is a blessing, and favour from God. Prov.18 *"He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favour from the LORD."*

Ephesians 5:21-33 *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, 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. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

This is a pattern for all cultures. Paul quotes Genesis 3. Jesus also does in Matthew 19. That covers thousands of years and diverse cultures. Cultures where marriage had many other definitions. Moses, who compiled Genesis, was surrounded by cultures where polygamy, paedophilia, and sex with family members and animals was acceptable. Yet God's definition of marriage is unchanged. Male and female coming together in covenant love.

Marriage definition

Tim Keller: *"a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman. According to the bible, God devised marriage to reflect the saving love for us in Christ, to refine our character, to create stable human community for the birth and nurture of children, and to accomplish all this by bringing the complementary sexes into an enduring whole life union."*

Marriage is:

1. **A Total change of life; two becoming one flesh.**

- Changes the priority of all other things: jobs, friendship circles, hobbies, holidays.
- Public not personal.
- Changes the primary roles we have in life and the primary ways we worship Jesus with our life.
- Hard work. The Bible is full of instruction for it as it is not natural.

2. **Covenantal intimate love.**

- The place where intimacy and sex is beautiful and worshipful and acceptable.
- Marriage is the only safe and secure bond where sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed, within that faithful exclusive commitment. Sex outside of these boundaries is dangerous and destructive and often self-centred.
- Love in New testament language can be understood from 4 words, meaning Affection, Familial love, Romance, and Unconditional love. Marriage is all of these things, but especially a covenant of unconditional love.

3. **Basis for family life.** Genesis 1:27-28 *So God created mankind in his own image. In the image of God he created them. Male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over every living creature".* Marriage is a covenant between 2 people. But it's this place that provides the unique stable environment for children to grow and flourish. If you choose to marry, God's general will for you is to have children. To love and care for them. A significant part of married life is about the raising of children. Human offspring are, I think, the slowest to develop emotionally, physically, and mentally of any creature. It needs long term commitment. In early years of marriage or where a couple may not be able to naturally have children, this command is fulfilled in other ways, such as opening up your home, hospitality, and fostering or adoption.

4. **A partnership of equals.** Eve was created from Adam's side as his equal, but the husband and wife were given different roles. These roles are unique to marriage (not describing how men and women are to generally relate to each other). Both roles speak first and foremost of "reverence to Christ".

The husband is given an incredibly difficult task! *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."* The husband's role is one of servant leadership. To so value his wife and consider her present and future interest

(beyond what she herself might consider), that he lays down his life for her and for their marriage. He works hard to see the image of God fully restored in her.

The wife's role needs to be understood carefully. In our culture historically women have been, and continue to be frequently, overlooked, undervalued, and underpaid; often at the expense of men. This verse may be wrongly understood to uphold chauvinism and inequality. Husbands (who can have a tendency to self interest) are being asked to self-sacrifice for their wife's benefit. Her role reciprocates that servant leadership through intelligent submission. Just as Christ (who is equal to God), took the role of submission to his Father's will, so the wife models Christ-likeness to her husband. She is never simply to be merely compliant but is to use her resources to empower him and their marriage. She is her husband's most trusted friend and counsellor, and he is hers.

Marriage requires give and take. If he doesn't listen to her he is not loving her. If he acts superior in things she clearly knows more about he is not loving her. But her role is to empower him to godly leadership and to trust that leadership, respecting the role God has given him in making final decisions when all opinions have been heard and exhausted.

In Genesis 2 the "Helper" role given to Eve must not be confused with inferiority. In John 14:16 the Holy Spirit (who is equal to God the Father and the Son) is called the Helper.

Marrying someone who is your equal is vital to a healthy marriage. Paul advises in 2 Cor 6 not to be "unequally yoked". The picture is of two oxen needing to be equal in strength or they pull the cart in circles. Someone who is your match mentally, emotionally, and spiritually is the ideal.

Some pastoral comments in pursuing potential marriage:

1. Take time to figure this out.
2. Give space to others, Christian community is often the most pressured place to work this out.
3. Find ways to pursue this in non-threatening ways. E.g. Ruth in Boaz's field.
4. Take disappointment to God, it's part of the journey.
5. Know that God will never hold back from you what is ultimately for your best.

If married.

1. Be filled with the Spirit.
 2. Know that you will fall short of Christ's servant and submission example. You need to receive grace and to give grace.
 3. Focus on your role, not your spouse's. Ask your spouse how you're doing.
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Questions:

- **Marriage in decline.** Why do you think marriage is in decline in our culture? Do you think as Christians we are in danger of following this cultural drift?
 - What wrong thinking does our culture portray about marriage/singleness? How can we keep ourselves correctly shaped by God's plan for marriage/singleness?
 - **You can have it all.** Sometimes people try to "add marriage on" to their lives without being willing to change. Why is this a disastrous approach? If single, how can we support newly married people into this change of life? If married, how can we ensure we give correct priority to this change without becoming detached and insular from our friends?
 - **Covenant love.** How does this idea differ from cultural views of marriage?
 - **Equal but different roles.** Why do you think God gives different roles to the husband and wife? What are some of the dangers of a sinful husband and sinful wife in these roles? What are some of the benefits of these roles?
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