

Creation & Fall

TIMOTHY J. KELLER, D. MIN.

The First Wedding Day

Genesis 2:18-25

¹⁸The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” ¹⁹Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.

²⁰So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found. ²¹So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh.

²²Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib

he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

²³The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” ²⁴For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. ²⁵The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

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“There is no more lovely, friendly and charming relationship, communion or company than a good marriage.”

MARTIN LUTHER

We’re looking at the central story line of the Bible. We’re trying to trace out the big picture of what the whole Bible is about. Today we come to this very famous passage, the first wedding. Indeed, you can’t understand the story line of the Bible unless you understand something about marriage, because the Bible begins with this marriage, and at the end, in Revelation, it ends with a marriage, the wedding supper of the Lamb.

In some ways, you can understand what the whole Bible is about and what the gospel is about in terms of marriage too.

Now let’s start this way. There’s so much in this passage. It’s very famous. Almost everybody has heard of it or heard it or parts of it. Let’s be practical tonight. Let’s ask the text a question. I look out there and I know a number of you are not married but you are open to it. A number of you are married.

What do we need to be successful in marriage seeking and in marriage executing? What do we

need to be successful in seeking out marriage and/or actually being well-married? How can we seek or be married well?

There are three things the text tells us you really need if you’re going to be married well: *attentiveness to idolatry, patience for a very long journey, and supernatural humility.*

Attentiveness to Idolatry

This is a wedding. *You know how the father brings the bride down the aisle to the groom?* In this case, the father is God. God is doing the honors, and he’s bringing the wife to the husband. When Adam sees Eve, he literally explodes into art. This is the first piece of art in the history of the world, according to the Bible. This is Hebrew poetry using parallelism, assonance, word play, and a chiasmic structure. It’s a song. He’s exploding into poetry and song, and he’s saying two things.

First of all, the first Hebrew word in the poem is *at last*. I know it comes out in the English here

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as “This is now,” but that word *now*, which can be translated *at last* or *finally*, means Adam is saying, “This is what I’ve been looking for all my life.” *Some of you might say, “Well it hasn’t been a very long life, has it?”* All right, all right, but the point is he’s saying, “At last,” meaning, “This is the thing I’ve been looking for. This is what I’ve been looking for all my life.”

Well what is it? “Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” That’s weird. *What is that?* It’s a poetic way of saying, “As I see you, I now know who I am. I have found myself in you. I’m not just coming to another; I’m coming to someone who is helping me see who I am. At last, finally, by discovering you I have found out who I am.” That’s what he’s saying. That is powerful.

Let’s just spend a moment noticing that here we are in paradise, where Adam has a perfect relationship with God, yet he’s responding to romance and marriage like this.

What that means is that John Newton, whom you probably know as a hymn writer (he wrote “Amazing Grace”), but who was actually a great pastor in eighteenth-century Britain, was right when he said (which he regularly did to newlyweds), “You may think your biggest problem, spiritually speaking, is the prospect of a bad marriage.” He says, “Every bit as big a spiritual danger is the prospect of a good marriage.”

In one of his letters he wrote to this young couple who had just been married. I’ll read it to you, but it’s eighteenth-century English. He uses jargon. I’ll have to explain it. To paraphrase, he says, “Permit me to say to both of you with regard to marriage, ‘Beware of idolatry.’ I have smarted for it. I have found my choicest mercies have been the principal occasions of drawing out the evils of my heart and causing me to walk heavily and in darkness, because the old leaven, a tendency toward the covenant of works, still cleaves to me.”

What? Here’s what he’s saying. What is “covenant of works”? It’s a theological term for a system in which you earn your salvation through

perfect performance. In other words, “The reason I go to heaven and get blessed is that I’m living this good life. I’m doing everything perfectly, and therefore I get blessed.” That’s called the covenant of works.

What is he saying? He says his biggest problem, practically, in his life has been idolatry with regard to his wife and his marriage, which helps him slip back into a covenant of works.

He says there is (or can be) something so powerful about marriage, so fulfilling about marriage, that unless you deliberately stop it, this is what’s going to happen. You will look to your spouse to give you the things only God can really give you.

You will look to your spouse’s love, your spouse’s respect, your spouse’s affirmation, to give you meaning in life, and to give you a foundation for your own sense of value, all of the things you should only be getting from God.

In other words, you will be looking to your spouse to save you. It’ll slip you back into the covenant of works. Oh, you won’t say that. You won’t say that to yourself, and you won’t say that to other people, but you’ll be doing it.

In fact, you’ll be doing it unless you know you’re doing it and stop it, because marriage is this powerful a thing. It’s this attractive a thing. It’s this great a thing. “O Lord,” says John Newton, “save us from the wonderfulness of marriage.” If you do it (and we *will* do it, to some degree) ... In fact, as I’ll show you in a minute, the idolatry happens even if your marriage is bad. No human relationship can bear the weight of those kinds of expectations.

You will crush your marriage with those expectations. Nobody can bear the weight of the expectations and the hopes of ultimate joy. The criticism of your spouse will crush you. The problems of your spouse will crush you. They will devastate you much more than they should, because you’re looking to your spouse and to

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marriage to save you, to make everything right in your life. Now there are a whole lot of ways this plays out. Let me just give you a couple.

When you're married, the way it plays out is you just feel that your spouse isn't perfect. "My marriage isn't perfect, and I don't like it." You cannot live with imperfection. You can't ever settle for anything other than this incredible picture you have in your mind of absolute blissful love. You have to have it, because you're looking to it to give you what only God can give you. So when you're not able to actually handle mediocrity in marriage, and you get all bent out of shape about the imperfections of your spouse and your marriage and refuse to be content with the good things you have, it's idolatry.

How do unmarried people do it? There are a lot of ways. One of the ways unmarried people make an idol out of marriage and think it's going to save them and fix them is by being incredibly picky as they evaluate spousal prospects. You say, "Oh, I want a marriage, and it's going to be like this, and it's going to be like this. This person has to be so this and this." You're looking for virtually perfect spousal prospects, but there aren't any out there. And *you're* not perfect spousal prospects. Hypocrite! You want something you're not, and that's idolatry.

Or maybe the most frequent form of idolatry I know is a single person who wants to be married and who so pines after being married that they cannot enjoy their present condition. *What are we going to do?* This is just plain common sense. There's a tendency for us to say, "So are you trying to say I shouldn't love my spouse too much, or hope to love my spouse too much?"

C.S. Lewis says it is probably impossible to love any human being too much. You may love him too much in proportion to your love for God, but it is the smallness of your love for God, not the greatness of your love for the person, that constitutes the inordinacy. *Do you know what that means?* Marriage will strangle us unless we have a

really great, true, existential love relationship with God.

You must not try to demote your love for your spouse or the person you think you're going to marry. You can't at all. You have to promote your love for God. Otherwise, it'll strangle you. *Don't you see that?* So married people, you have to do that, or you are not going to be able to settle for the imperfections of your marriage and of your spouse, and single people, you have to remember Christianity is the only major religion that was started by a single person. *Do you know that?*

Traditional societies believe you're nobody unless you're somebody's spouse, but our faith was started by a single man. Another one of the great founders of Christianity, Saint Paul, has an interesting place in 2 Corinthians where he says, "You want to be married? Great. You're not married? Great." That was unique in antiquity, because in ancient times and in traditional cultures, you're nobody unless you're married.

But Paul says the relationship every single Christian has with God through Christ is so intimate and so great, and the relationship Christian brothers and sisters have inside the family of God is so great, no one who's single should be seen as being a second-class person. You are fully human as a single person. After all, the person who saved us was single. I mean, all of this works against idolatry. Use it. But that's only the first thing we need.

Patience for the Long Journey

A very long journey. Verse 18: "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" This little word, "a *helper* suitable ..." Let's look at this, and let me show you why I'm saying this is telling us marriage is a long journey.

The Hebrew word used here that's translated to the word *helper* is regularly used in the Bible in Hebrew to refer to military reinforcements. So here's an overwhelmed little army. You're

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outnumbered five to one, and you're about to be destroyed, and in come reinforcements. That's help: military reinforcements. In fact, several times God uses that term for himself and says, "You were about to be wiped out, O Israelite army, but I came in and smote everybody with blindness, or I knocked them out, and I saved you. You would have been destroyed without my help."

Help is a military word, *help* is a strong word, *help* is a divine word, and God has the audacity to use it to refer to Eve. What the woman brings into the man's life is a strength, but here's a certain kind of strength. *Do you see that word* suitable? Some translations try to translate it "I will make a helper *fit* for him." "I will make a helper *meet* for him." That's the old King James, a *helpmeet*. "I will make a helper that is *suitable* for him."

There are actually two Hebrew words there the word *suitable* is trying to translate. The Hebrew word literally says, "I will make a helper *like* opposite him." *Like opposite*? Wait a minute. Make up your mind here. *Is it like or is it opposite*?

You can't be like and opposite. Oh yes, it can, if it's a complement. See, two pieces of a puzzle fit together not if they're identical. If they're identical, they don't fit. *Right*? On the other hand, they can't just be different in general. They have to be rightly different. They have to be like opposite. They have to be perfectly complementary.

Now here's what we're being told. God is sending into Adam's life (and therefore, God is sending into Eve's life by definition) somebody with enormous power but power that is very different. Like opposite. This help does what? The poem tells you what's happening. Into your life in marriage comes a person of a different gender, a person with mysteriously profound differences that are really almost impossible to define.

As soon as you start to try to define the difference between male and female, it never quite fits. Yet there it is, and it's irreducible, and it's inexorable. In marriage, into your life comes a person with a very radically different view of you,

of the world, a person of different gender, of equal power, equal resources, but incredibly different, and you're thrown into an incredibly tight, close relationship.

Do you know how close? One flesh. "A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. The two shall become one flesh." That word *flesh* is not what you think. It's not talking about the bodies. When God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh," he's not saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on all bodies." He's saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on all persons."

What it is saying is marriage puts you into the same space. You literally occupy the same space. You hold things in common. You're raising your family together. Two people, very different, like you, not you, opposite you, put together in the same tight location. *What's going to happen?* Constantly butting heads. It has to be. This is a military word. Let me put it like this. I've used this illustration before, but I hope this'll be even more illuminating under these circumstances.

My wife and I have had 34 years of marriage¹. Neither my wife nor I are particularly gender-stereotyped. I'm not a particularly masculine-type guy. My wife is not a particularly feminine kind of girl. Yet you get into marriage, and you find you see the world differently, and you see each other differently. She sees things in me I would never see, but she sees because she's a different gender and she's in close, and I see things in her, and I see things in the world.

After 34 years of conflict, of arguing, of head-butting (it's military, you know), now every single day when I get out into the world and things happen to me, I have a split second to react. *What am I going to say? What am I going to do? What am I going to think?* For years, even halfway through my marriage, I only thought like a man, but now, after years and years of head-butting, here's what happens.

¹ As of January 4, 2009

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Something happens, and for a split second, I not only know what I would do, what I would think, how I would respond, but I know how Kathy would think, and I know what Kathy would do. For a split second, because it's so instilled in me, I actually have a choice. *Which of these approaches would probably work better?* You see, my wisdom portfolio has been permanently diversified. I'm a different person, and yet I'm me. I haven't become more feminine. In fact, probably in many ways I've become more masculine as time has gone on.

What's going on?

She came into my life, and now I know who I am. I've become who I'm supposed to be only through the head-butting, only through having a person who's like me, not me, opposite to me, in close. Now here's what worries me a great deal about marriage in our culture. We are consumers. We are trained to be consumers. Consumers do a cost-benefit analysis, and you do it in your head automatically. You don't even realize how much you've been trained to do it.

You want a product that satisfies. You don't want a product that fights back. You want a product that does exactly what you want, customized. You don't want someone who's like you, not you, opposite you. I'm afraid we get into our marriages and we say, "This isn't right. This is supposed to be blissful. This is supposed to be beautiful. It's supposed to be wonderful. *Why are we always having these confrontations?*" Because marriage is meant to, or you'll never become the person God wants you to be. You'll never finally get there.

It's not just Eve who's brought into Adam's life with her gender resources to help him be who he's supposed to be. Go to Ephesians 5. *Do you realize it's the same thing as Genesis 2, reversed?* "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church. Give yourself for her. Help her become who she ought to be. Make her a radiant person. Find ways of helping her overcome her flaws." It's

the same thing. He's using his gender-differentiated resources to bring her to who she should be, but it's a long journey. *Will you have the patience to stick with it?*

This is the reason one of my favorite quotes that I always read every time I can when I'm preaching on marriage ... Stanley Hauerwas² says there's an assumption out there in the culture that there's someone just right for us to marry, and if we look closely enough we will find that right person. That's the consumer mindset.

"This overlooks a crucial fact about marriage. It fails to appreciate the fact that when you get married, you always marry the wrong person. We never know who we marry; we just think we do. Even if we first marry the right person, just give it a while, and he or she will change. For marriage, being the enormous thing it is, means we are not the same person after we've entered it."

Do you get that? You know, you're looking. "Oh, I want to marry the right person." So you're trying to evaluate who that person is, but how do you know who that person is going to be when *you* get in there? Once you get in there, marriage is so incredibly powerful it's going to change the person. You *always* marry the wrong person, as it were. You always marry somebody who's going to be butting heads with you.

Where will you get the patience to stick with it and to understand what the confrontation is there for? Marriage is not designed to bring you so much into confrontation with your spouse; it's actually designed to bring you into confrontation with yourself, to show you your sins, to show you what's wrong with you, to show you ways to change that otherwise you never would find.

² **Stanley Hauerwas** (born July 24, 1940) is an American theologian, ethicist, and public intellectual. Hauerwas is a longtime professor at Duke University, serving as the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School with a joint appointment at the Duke University School of Law in the fall of 2014, he also assumed a part-time position in Theological Ethics at the University of Aberdeen. Before coming to Duke, Hauerwas taught at the University of Notre Dame.

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Remember how Ulysses during his odyssey at one point had to navigate his boat right through the center between the Scylla and the Charybdis³? The Scylla is idolatry, because that's romantic naïveté, this incredibly beautiful high view of marriage that is so unrealistic, and the Charybdis is the disillusionment of actually finding out what marriage is like and being afraid of it and being cynical about it because it's always so much work. How are we going to get what we need to have a vaccine against the idolatry but, at the same time, a patience so that marriage will pay off in the end?

A Kind of Humility Only the Gospel Can Give You

It's indicated here at the beginning where it says, "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.'" Most commentators will tell you that is a very surprising statement. It's first of all surprising because it's a departure. Up to now, everything God has been saying is, "It is good." It keeps saying, "He saw this, and it was good. He made this, and it was good."

This is the first thing to which he says, "Not good." Everything else was a benediction, a good word. This is the first malediction, a bad word. This is bad. So that's surprising.

What's *really* surprising about it is it's inexplicable. *How could you be unhappy in paradise? Why would Adam be lonely? Why would he be unhappy in paradise?* There's only one possible answer, really. God deliberately made him

to need someone besides God. Oh, don't get me wrong. We all need God. He made us to need him, and that's the foundation of a relationship, but think about this. Several theologians have put it like this.

This is the most humble act you could imagine. This is the most un-self-centered act you could imagine. God made human beings to need not just him, but other human beings, other relationships, other selves, other hearts. How humble of God, how un-self-centered of God, how other-oriented of God, how sacrificial, in a way, of God. It's nothing compared to what we see later. Here's what we see later. When in the Bible God says repeatedly in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, "I am the bridegroom, and you, my people, are the bride," do you know what that's teaching? It's teaching two things.

You Need God in Your Life as Your Spouse

First of all, it's teaching you need to have God in your life, not just as someone you believe in, not just as someone you try to obey; you need God in your life as your spouse. He's the ultimate helpmeet you need. He's like you but not you. He's like you because you're in his image. That means you're personal and relational. He's personal and relational. But he's not like you because he's holy. There is no other helpmeet you need in your life like God.

You'll never become the person you're supposed to be unless he comes into your life, not just as a kind of abstract principle of love or somebody you kind of obey in a general way. He has to be in your life as your lover. He has to be in your life intimately. There has to be interaction. There has to be prayer. There has to be listening to his Word. All that has to be there. *Why?* You need him. That's the main help you need. He has to be in your life. He's like you and not you. You'll never become the person you ought to be unless that's the case. So we need to have that relationship. He is the ultimate spousal relationship we need.

³ Scylla and Charybdis were mythical sea monsters noted by Homer; Greek mythology sited them on opposite sides of the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the Italian mainland. Scylla was rationalized as a rock shoal (described as a six-headed sea monster) on the Italian side of the strait and Charybdis was a whirlpool off the coast of Sicily. They were regarded as a sea hazard located close enough to each other that they posed an inescapable threat to passing sailors; avoiding Charybdis meant passing too close to Scylla and vice versa. According to Homer, Odysseus was forced to choose which monster to confront while passing through the strait; he opted to pass by Scylla and lose only a few sailors, rather than risk the loss of his entire ship in the whirlpool.

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You Need to Give God Your Heart

The second thing this teaches when he says, “I am the bridegroom and you are the bride,” is he has given us his heart. A groom does not ask a woman to marry him unless he has lost his heart, as it were. His heart is bound up with her. This is God’s way of saying, “I have given you my heart, and how you act and how you live and how you treat me now hurts me.”

Think about this. The Bible says when you say, “Oh, I believe in God,” but you really live for your career, or you really live for this or you live for that, that’s called spiritual adultery. You’ve given the deepest passions and love of your heart to someone besides God. The Bible says God has a sense of betrayal and grief far greater (because he’s perfect and holy and his love is perfect) than you would feel if your human spouse was unfaithful to you.

By the way, there are people in this room that has happened to, and you know how bad it is. Therefore, you know how incredible it is for God to say, “What you have felt is nothing like the grief I feel when I look at every one of you every day.” This means we are the spouses from hell, and God is in the longest-lived, worst marriage in the history of the world. Now you can understand the whole history of the Bible.

Why did God come to earth in the form of Jesus Christ? John 1, says he came to his own, but his own received him not. He was trying to get us back. He was trying to get his wayward bride back. But we didn’t just spurn him; we nailed him to the Cross.

Some of you may be in bad marriages and you think, “Oh, my spouse is crucifying me,” but in God’s case it really happened.

When he was on the Cross looking down, realizing what it would take for him to stay and love us to the end, *guess what?* He stayed. Here’s the ultimate spousal love. Here’s the man, here’s the spouse, who has no illusions. He doesn’t

expect us to be perfect. He knows we’re not perfect. He’s loving us not because we’re lovely and not because we’re going to give him so much affirmation. He loves us to *make* us lovely. He loves us for *our* sakes, not for his sake, so he’s the perfect spouse, and he’s the perfect helpmeet.

He has come into our lives, and he has gone to the cross, and he has died on the Cross for our sins. When he did that ... Martin Luther says, “Now you understand the gospel.”

Martin Luther has a great little essay he wrote called “The Freedom of a Christian.” In it he tries to give the essence of what it means that you’re saved by faith, not by works. He says there’s no better way than understanding what Jesus Christ did when he died on the Cross for our sins and says, “Now believe in me.”

Listen to this paraphrase from “The Freedom of a Christian.” This is incredible. “The third incomparable grace of faith is this: it unites us to Christ as a wife and a husband are made one flesh. When two people are married, it follows that all they have becomes theirs in common, good things as well as evil things, so that whatsoever Christ possesses, that now belongs to you, and whatever belongs to you, that Christ claims as his.

“Oh, if we compare these possessions we shall see how infinite is our gain. For Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation, and we are full of sin, death, and condemnation. But let faith step in, and then sin, death, and hell belong to Christ, and grace, life, and salvation come to us. For if he is a husband, he must needs take to himself that which is his wife’s and, at the same time, impart to his wife that which is his.

“Therefore, we the believing, by the wedding ring of faith, become free from all sin, fearless of death, safe from hell, and endowed with this eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of our husband Jesus Christ. Oh, who can value highly enough these royal nuptials? Who can comprehend the riches of the glory of his grace? Do you not see the importance of faith, which is a

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wedding ring, and that it alone can fulfill the law and justify without works?”

If you know our spouse, Jesus Christ, died for us, that he had the patience to stick with us to the end, that he didn't come and love us because we were lovely but to make us lovely, that's everything you need for two reasons.

You Need Patience for the Journey

First of all, there's the patience you need for the journey. The main thing you need to really stick with a marriage is you need to over and over and over again look at your spouse and say, “You wronged me, but I wronged my great spouse, Jesus Christ, and he kept covering me and forgiving me, so I'm loved enough by him that I can offer the same thing to you.” That's the only way you'll have the patience for the journey.

You Need the Vaccine Against Idolatry

Here's the other thing. It's the vaccine against idolatry. If you look at your spouse and say, “He or she isn't very incredible, is he or she?” and if you look at your own life as an unmarried person and say, “*Why can't I be married?*” now look at *this* spouse. This spouse, Jesus Christ, is the only spouse who's really going to save you. He's the only one who can really fulfill you. The great wedding day on which we fall into his arms is the only wedding day that will really make everything right in our lives, and it awaits you if you put on the wedding ring of faith.

So don't get too upset about the flaws in your current life. Single people, here's one last thing to say. You say, “How am I ever going to become myself and figure out who I am if I don't get married?” Think about this. When you get married, it pulls you away from all of the brothers and sisters out there in the church. I mean, there are a lot of men and women out there who can be your friends, people of a different gender as well.

When you get married, it gets you into a deep relationship with one person of the other gender, and it pulls you away from all kinds of other

relationships with men and women. Therefore, there are a lot of ways in which God can get you help through the body of Christ that you can't get once you're married. It's up to God to know what you need to grow in grace and what you need to grow into the person he wants you to be. Only he knows whether you should be married. Only he knows whether you should *not* be married. So let him rule your life.

The Bible begins with a wedding, and this wedding's original purpose was to fill the world with children of God, and it failed. *Why?* Because the husband in that marriage failed to step in and help his wife when she needed him. But at the end of time there will be another wedding, the marriage supper of the Lamb, and *its* purpose is to fill the world with children of God, and *it* will succeed where the first marriage failed. *Do you know why?* Because the first husband failed, but the second husband will not. **The true Adam, Jesus Christ, will never let his wife down.** He hasn't. He won't. Let us love him for that. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for giving us insights into the gospel through the metaphor of marriage. We thank you that now, as we partake of the bread and the cup, we actually have a foretaste of that wedding feast. We just need to come closer to you and have a closer walk of love with our true spouse, Jesus Christ, so we can be, in all of our relationships, who we need to be. We ask that you would meet with us now. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

Now go and learn what this means.