

# The Shape of Redemption, Part 1: From a Barren Wilderness to a Fruitful Garden: God's Design for Earthly Marriage and Sexual Union to Anticipate the Marriage Supper of the Lamb

TBC Adult Sunday School – October 13, 2019

Last week we considered how our bodies, gender, and sexuality are all good and *beautiful* gifts from God. We also considered how every part of human nature and experience (including our bodies, gender, and sexuality) is *broken* because of sin and its effects. In order to have a healthy perception of ourselves, others, and God, we need to hold these two biblical truths together. We are both beautiful and broken, and God's word helps us to *receive* what is beautiful and to *resist* what is broken.

Today, and next week, we will be focusing on the shape of God's *redemption* as it relates to our bodies, gender, and sexuality.

Let us begin by taking note of some **New Testament teachings that reaffirm the importance of our human bodies** as objects of Christ's redemptive and healing work.

- 1. The Son of God redeemed us by taking on our human nature, including a fully human body.** Christ accomplished our redemption in his body, by his faithful obedience to God throughout his entire earthly life, culminating in his atoning sacrifice on the cross.
  - a. John 1:14 "The word *became flesh* and dwelt among us"
  - b. Romans 8:3 "By sending his own Son *in the likeness of sinful flesh* and for sin, he *condemned sin in the flesh.*"
  - c. 1 Peter 2:24 "He himself bore our sins *in his body* on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. *By his wounds* you have been healed."
    - i. "For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole" (Gregory of Nazianzus, 4<sup>th</sup> c.).<sup>1</sup>
    - ii. "For the Lord touched all parts of creation, and freed and undeceived them all from every deceit" (Athanasius of Alexandria, 4<sup>th</sup> c.).<sup>2</sup>
    - iii. "Salvation involves *the redemption of the whole person*" (TBC Doctrinal Statement)
- 2. Jesus was raised bodily from the dead and ascended bodily into heaven,** where he reigns as king and intercedes for us as our high priest (Luke 24:36-43; Acts 1:9-11)
  - a. Hebrews 4:15 "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who *in every respect* has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."
  - b. "If any assert that He has now put off His holy flesh, and that His Godhead is stripped of the body, and deny that He is now with His body and will come again with it, let him not see the glory of His Coming. For where is His body now, if not with Him Who assumed it? For it is not laid by in the sun...nor was it poured forth into the air and dissolved, as is the nature of a voice or an odor or a lightning flash...Nay; He will come with His body."<sup>3</sup>
- 3. Just as the consequences of the fall are written on our bodies, our redemption in Christ is written on our bodies**
  - a. Hebrews 10:22 "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, *with our hearts sprinkled clean* from an evil conscience *and our bodies washed with pure water*"

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<sup>1</sup> Epistle 101, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson), 1994, p. 440. May be accessed online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.iv.ii.iii.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *On the Incarnation*, paragraph 45.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101, online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf207.iv.ii.iii.html>.

- i. The New Testament commands believers in Christ to be baptized in water. This outward act is a sign that our bodies are now set apart for the service of Christ.
- b. Romans 12:1-2 “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to *present your bodies as a living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*”
- c. 1 Corinthians 6:15, 19-20 “Do you not know that *your bodies are members of Christ?*...Or do you not know that *your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit* within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So *glorify God in your body.*”

**What does it look like to glorify God in our bodies, particularly as it relates to our gender and sexuality?** Of course there are many aspects of this, and many complex challenges that we may find ourselves having to navigate. But today and next week I want to focus on two paths that are clearly and repeatedly affirmed in the New Testament: namely, *faithfulness in marriage* and *celibacy in singleness*.

- In Matthew 19:4-5, Jesus begins by affirming the goodness of marriage and of God’s creational design: “He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ ...Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” However, in the same passage, Jesus also affirmed that some of his disciples will voluntarily renounce marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (19:12).
- In 1 Corinthians 7:8, the apostle Paul affirms the goodness of singleness for the sake of God’s kingdom: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am.” He even says, “I wish that all were [single] as I myself am” (7:7). But then he goes on to say, “But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.” In other words, Paul affirms both marriage and singleness as gifts from God.

Today I want to focus on God’s affirmation of marriage in both the Old and New Testaments, and next week we will look at the distinctively New Testament affirmation of singleness for the sake of God’s kingdom.

**In this beautiful and broken world, how does marriage bear witness not only to God’s original design for created humanity but also to God’s redemptive purposes for fallen humanity?**

**From the beginning, we see that God intended marriage to be *faithful, fruitful, exclusive, enduring, and full of love and wonder*.**

- Faithful – to the “one flesh” union (Genesis 2:24)
- Fruitful – blessed with offspring (Genesis 1:28)
- Exclusive – “*the man...shall be united to his wife...the two shall become one flesh*” (Genesis 2:24)
- Enduring – “holding fast” (Genesis 2:24)
- Full of love and wonder – “This at last...” (Genesis 2:23); “naked and not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25)

**In the Bible, the effects of sin are seen in marriages and spouses that are:**

- **Adulterous instead of faithful** (e.g. David and Bathsheba)
  - The assumption throughout the Bible is always that *sexual union is the bodily expression of the marriage promise*
  - The Bible unabashedly celebrates sexual love within marriage (Genesis 2:25; Proverbs 5:15-19; Song of Songs; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5)
  - The Bible warns strongly against sexual intimacy apart from marriage. In the Old Testament, adultery and other violations of the marriage covenant were punishable by death (Leviticus 20:10-16). Premarital sex also had serious consequences. If an unmarried man and woman had sex together, the man was required to pay the bride-price (given to

the woman and/or her family, a form of “life insurance” if the husband were to die or abandon the marriage) and marry the woman (Exodus 22:16-17). The point of the law was to build a culture where sex was neither cheap nor casual. In particular, the law prevented a man from taking advantage of a woman and then avoiding responsibility to her and/or children.

- The New Testament also contains strong warnings against sexual intimacy apart from the marriage covenant (Hebrews 13:4; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20).
- **Infertile instead of fruitful** (e.g. Elkanah and Hannah, Samson’s parents)
  - Infertility is not itself a sin, though in the Old Testament, it is seen as a curse, because God’s covenant promise was established with Abraham and his physical descendants. Often God’s blessing is seen in giving a child to a previously infertile couple (Psalm 113:9).
  - Intentional childlessness was not a permissible option for married couples in the Old Testament (Genesis 38:8-9), and the New Testament continues to see children as a gift and blessing from God and as an appropriate fruit of Christian married life. However, the emphasis shifts from expanding God’s kingdom primarily through the physical descendants of Abraham, to expanding God’s kingdom through the spiritual descendants of Jesus. In other words, we seek to expand God’s kingdom not just by having lots of biological children, but by proclaiming the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ and by showing hospitality to children, to neighbors, and even to enemies. This shift influences the distinctly New Testament vision of singleness for the sake of God’s kingdom (more on that next week).
- **Polygamous instead of exclusive**
  - Even though several prominent characters (including Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon) had multiple wives or concubines, this is presented as a deviation from God’s original plan with clearly negative effects
    - Polygamy begins within the line of Cain (Genesis 4:19, 23-24); the first polygamist, Lamech, is also characterized by violence and vengeance
    - Polygamy’s negative effects/associations are evident (it leads to rivalry, jealousy, conflict, neglect, etc.) – e.g. Genesis 29-30 (Jacob & Rachel & Leah)
  - The New Testament excludes polygamous men from church leadership (1 Timothy 3:1, 8). This has the effect of marginalizing the practice of polygamy over the course of time.
- **Ending in divorce, instead of enduring till death**
  - Divorce is always a result of sin (even if, in some circumstances such as one spouse engaging in unrepentant adultery, pursuing divorce is not in itself a sin) – Matthew 19:6
- **Characterized by complacency and contempt instead of love and wonder** (e.g. Nabal in 1 Samuel 25; Michal in 2 Samuel 6:16-23)

Despite these distortions of God’s design, and despite the pain and sorrow caused by sin and its effects, God does not get rid of marriage or replace it with some other arrangement in this fallen world.

**Throughout the Bible, marriage is seen as a gift of God to the entire human race.** Both believers and unbelievers can participate in marriage and enjoy many of its practical benefits.

- Marriage is a creational ordinance, instituted by God in Genesis 1-2. It is not like circumcision and the Passover in the Old Testament, or baptism and the Lord’s Supper in the New Testament (all of which are covenant signs, given by God to be enjoyed only within the community of believers).
- Even non-believers can recognize and experience some of the good effects of marriage (such as, lifelong companionship, a stable context for raising children, economic benefits, etc.).
- If a married couple from another religious background or no religious background become Christians, they do not need to get married again within the church in order for their marriage to be seen as fully legitimate before God (e.g. 1 Cor 7:17-24).

**However, among God's redeemed people, marriage is also a covenant sign.** Marriage is intended to point to something greater than itself. Marriage is a sacred picture of the covenant union between God and his people.

- In the Old Testament, God is the husband and Israel is the wife (Hosea 1-3; Jeremiah 2; Isaiah 54)
- In the New Testament, Christ is the husband and the Church is his bride (Ephesians 5:21-33; Revelation 19:6-9, 21:1-10)
- The "great mystery" of marriage as the union of male and female bears witness to the far more staggering and awe-inspiring union of God and his people, and of heaven and earth for all eternity.

**This is the main difference between the biblical vision of marriage, and other understandings of marriage.**

- In some traditional societies, marriage is primarily the union of two families for the sake of social cohesion and family honor.
- In individualistic societies like ours, marriage is primarily a means of promoting the happiness of the two people involved, however those two people might define it.
- However, the Biblical view of marriage is distinctly God-centered rather than human-centered.

Why is marriage intended to be faithful, fruitful, exclusive, enduring, and full of joy and wonder? Because such a relationship between husband and wife reflects the character of God's relationship with his own people.

- Faithful – God unwaveringly follows through on every one of his promises to us
- Fruitful – God's word produces the spiritual fruit of godly character, good works, transformed relationships, and spiritual children (other people coming to know Christ and grow in him)
- Exclusive – no idols, no rivals, no third parties are permitted
- Enduring – not just for a lifetime but for all eternity
- Full of love and wonder – that only increases as we come to know Christ better (Ephesians 3:17-21)

When Adam and Eve sinned, they were sent out of the garden to wander in the wilderness. Marriage in this fallen world is a picture of God's mercy in bringing his people back into a temple of intimate fellowship, into a garden of delight, under the shadow of his wings, resting in his promises. This is what all human beings truly long for! To be very clear, salvation is not found in getting married. If you look for salvation in marriage, you will inevitably be disappointed (all idols eventually disappoint). Rather, in its most ecstatic moments and in its most enduring legacies, as well as in its deepest struggles and disappointments, marriage is intended to point us to God's unchanging, redeeming, and eternally satisfying love. (See Bible Project video, "Song of Songs")

Marriage is temporary, but it is a picture of a relationship with our covenant-keeping God that will last for all eternity.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

- 1) What difference does it make for you (either as a married or single person) that marriage is intended to point beyond itself to the reality of a faithful, fruitful, exclusive, and everlasting relationship with Christ?
- 2) How can we promote a God-centered rather than human-centered vision of marriage within the Christian church?
- 3) Can you think of any examples of Christian marriages through which non-Christians have seen God's character or Christ's gospel displayed?