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THIS
MOMENTARY MARRIAGE
A Parable of Permanence

JOHN PIPER

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This Momentary Marriage

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To

RUTH and BILL PIPER

PAMELA and GEORGE HENRY

whose marriages were broken only by death

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INTRODUCTION: MARRIAGE AND MARTYRDOM

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was engaged to be married to Maria von Wedemeyer when he was hanged at dawn on April 9, 1945, at the age of thirty-nine. As a young pastor in Germany, he had been opposed to Nazism and was finally arrested on April 5, 1943, for his involvement in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

So he never married. He skipped the shadow on the way to the Reality. Some are called to one kind of display of the worth of Christ, some to another. Martyrdom, not marriage, was his calling.

Being married in the moment of death is both a sweet and bitter providence. Sweet because at the precipice of eternity the air is crystal-clear, and you see more plainly than ever the precious things that really matter about your imperfect lover. But being married at death is also bitter, because the suffering is doubled as one watches the other die, or even quadrupled if both are dying. And more if there is a child.

ONE FLESH EVEN IN DEATH

That was the case with John and Betty Stam. They were missionaries with China Inland Mission. Having met each other at Moody Bible Institute, they sailed for China separately—she in 1931, he a year later. They were married by Reuben A. Torrey on October 25, 1933, in Tsinan. John was twenty-six; Betty was twenty-seven.

The region was already dangerous because of the civil war between the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party. On September 11, 1934, Helen Priscilla was born. Three months later, her parents were beheaded by the Communists on a hill outside Miaosheo, while tiny Helen lay hidden where her mother left her with ten dollars in her blanket.

Geraldine Taylor, the daughter-in-law of Hudson Taylor (the founder of the China Inland Mission), published the story of the Stams' martyrdom two years after their death. Every time I read it, the compounding of the preciousness and the pain by the marriage and the baby make me weep.

Never was that little one more precious than when they looked their last on her baby sweetness, as they were roughly summoned the next morning and led out to die. . . . Painfully bound with ropes, their hands behind them, stripped of their outer garments, and John barefooted (he had given Betty his socks to wear), they passed down the street where he was known to many, while the Reds shouted their ridicule and called the people to come and see the execution.

Like their Master, they were led up a little hill outside the town. There, in a clump of pine trees, the Communists harangued the unwilling onlookers, too terror-stricken to utter protest—But no, one broke the ranks! The doctor of the place and a Christian, he expressed the feelings of many when he fell on his knees and pleaded for the life of his friends. Angrily repulsed by the Reds, he still persisted, until he was dragged away as a prisoner, to suffer death when it appeared that he too was a follower of Christ.

John had turned to the leader of the band, asking mercy for this man. When he was sharply ordered to kneel—and the look of joy on his face, afterwards, told of the unseen Presence with them as his spirit was released—Betty was seen to quiver, but only for a moment. Bound as she was, she fell on her knees beside him. A quick command, the flash of a sword which mercifully she did not see—and they were reunited.¹

NOTHING IS LOST

Yes, they were reunited, but not as husband and wife. For Jesus said, “When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). There is no human marriage after death. The shadow of covenant-keeping between husband and wife gives way to the reality of covenant-keeping between

¹Mrs. Howard Taylor, *The Triumph of John and Betty Stam* (Philadelphia: China Inland Mission, 1936), 107–108. The child had been hidden and was found by Christians and saved.

Christ and his glorified Church. Nothing is lost. The music of every pleasure is transposed into an infinitely higher key.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John and Betty Stam today are closer to each other in love than John and Betty Stam were, or Dietrich and Maria would have been, in marriage. They “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43). Their magnificent perfection points to the glory of Christ. And in the age to come, their bodies will be restored, and all creation will join with the children of God in everlasting joy (Rom. 8:21).

AS THE CROWN MAKES THE KING, MARRIAGE MAKES ONE

The month after Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment, and two years before his death, Bonhoeffer wrote from the military section of the prison at Tegel, Berlin, “A Wedding Sermon from a Prison Cell.” His text was Ephesians 1:12: “. . . so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.”

Marriage is more than your love for each other. . . . In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal—it is a status, and office. Just as it is the crown, and not merely the will to rule, that makes the king, so it is marriage, and not merely your love for each other, that joins you together in the sight of God and man.²

The aim of this book is to enlarge your vision of what marriage is. As Bonhoeffer says, it is more than your love for each other. Vastly more. Its meaning is infinitely great. I say that with care. The meaning of marriage is the display of the covenant-keeping love between Christ and his people.

This covenant-keeping love reached its climax in the death of

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 27. All the quotes from Bonhoeffer on the facing pages of each chapter of this book were taken from *Letters and Papers from Prison*; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press, 1954); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

Christ for his church, his bride. That death was the ultimate expression of grace, which is the ultimate expression of God's glory, which is of infinite value. Therefore, when Paul says that our great and final destiny is "the praise of [God's] glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6), he elevates marriage beyond measure, for here, uniquely, God displays the apex of the glory of his grace: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25).

A STRANGE WAY TO START A BOOK ON MARRIAGE

Thinking about martyrdom may seem like a strange way to begin a book on marriage. If we lived in a different world, and had a different Bible, I might think it strange. But here is what I read.

Let those who have wives live as though they had none.
(1 Cor. 7:29)

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

"Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." (Luke 18:29–30)

I take those verses to mean: Marriage is a good gift of God, but the world is fallen, and sin abounds, and obedience is costly, and suffering is to be expected, and "a person's enemies will be those of his own household" (Matt. 10:36). High romance and passionate sexual intimacy and precious children may come. But hold them loosely—as though you were not holding them. This is what Bonhoeffer represents. To keep his life and meaning before us throughout this book, I will let him speak briefly on the facing pages at the beginning of each chapter.

Romance, sex, and childbearing are temporary gifts of God. They are not part of the next life. And they are not guaranteed even for this

life. They are one possible path along the narrow way to Paradise. Marriage passes through breathtaking heights and through swamps with choking vapors. It makes many things sweeter, and with it come bitter providences.

WE MADE IT

Marriage is a momentary gift. I have only scratched the surface of its wonders and its wounds. I hope that you will go farther and deeper and higher. As this book is published, Noël and I are passing our fortieth anniversary of marriage. She is God's gift to me—far better than I deserve. We speak often of the wonder of being married till one of us dies. It has not been trouble-free. So we imagine ourselves in our seventies or eighties—when divorce is not only sin, but socially silly—sitting across from each other, perhaps at Old Country Buffet, and smiling at each other's wrinkled faces, and saying with the deepest gratitude for God's grace: "We made it."

To those who are just beginning, I simply join Dietrich Bonhoeffer in saying,

"Welcome one another . . . for the glory of God." That is God's word for your marriage. Thank him for it; thank him for leading you thus far; ask him to establish your marriage, to confirm it, sanctify it, and preserve it. So your marriage will be "for the praise of his glory." Amen.³

³*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 32.

As you gave the ring to one another and have now
received it a second time from the hand of the pastor,
so love comes from you, but marriage from above,
from God. As high as God is above man,
so high are the sanctity, the rights, and the promise of love.

It is not your love that sustains the marriage,
but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER,
Letters and Papers from Prison, 27–28

CHAPTER ONE

STAYING MARRIED IS NOT MAINLY ABOUT STAYING IN LOVE

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

GENESIS 2:18-25

There never has been a generation whose general view of marriage is high enough. The chasm between the biblical vision of marriage and the common human vision is now, and has always been, gargantuan. Some cultures in history respect the importance and the permanence of marriage more than others. Some, like our own, have such low, casual, take-it-or-leave-it attitudes toward marriage as to make the biblical vision seem ludicrous to most people.

AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE VISION OF MARRIAGE

That was the case in Jesus' day as well. But ours is worse. When Jesus gave a glimpse of the magnificent view of marriage that God willed for his people, the disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry" (Matt. 19:10). In other words, Christ's vision of the meaning of marriage was so enormously different from the disciples', they could not even imagine it to be a good thing. That such a vision could be good news was simply outside their categories.

If that was the case then—in the sober, Jewish world in which they lived—how much more will the magnificence of marriage in the mind of God seem unintelligible in a modern Western culture, where the main idol is self; and its main doctrine is autonomy; and its central act of worship is being entertained; and its three main shrines are the television, the Internet, and the cinema; and its most sacred genuflection is the uninhibited act of sexual intercourse. Such a culture will find the glory of marriage in the mind of Jesus virtually incomprehensible. Jesus would probably say to us today, when he had finished opening the mystery for us, the same thing he said in his own day: "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. . . . Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matt. 19:11–12).

WAKING UP FROM THE CULTURAL MIRAGE

So I start with the assumption that my own sin and selfishness and cultural bondage makes it almost impossible for me to feel the wonder of God's purpose for marriage. The fact that we live in a society that can defend two men or two women entering a sexual relationship and, with wild inconceivability, call it *marriage* shows that the collapse of our culture into debauchery and anarchy is probably not far away.

I mention this cultural distortion of marriage in the hopes that it might wake you up to consider a vision of marriage higher and deeper and stronger and more glorious than anything this culture—or perhaps you yourself—ever imagined. The greatness and glory of marriage is beyond our ability to think or feel without divine revelation and without the illumining and awakening work of the Holy Spirit. The world cannot know what marriage is without learning it from God. The natu-

ral man does not have the capacities to see or receive or feel the wonder of what God has designed for marriage to be. I pray that this book might be used by God to help set you free from small, worldly, culturally contaminated, self-centered, Christ-ignoring, God-neglecting, romance-intoxicated, unbiblical views of marriage.

The most foundational thing to see from the Bible about marriage is that it is God's doing. And the ultimate thing to see from the Bible about marriage is that it is for God's glory. Those are the two points I have to make. Most *foundationally*, marriage is the *doing* of God. And *ultimately*, marriage is the *display* of God.

1. MARRIAGE IS GOD'S DOING

First, most foundationally, marriage is God's doing. There are at least four ways to see this explicitly or implicitly in Genesis 2:18–25.

a) Marriage Was God's Design

Marriage is God's doing because it was his design in the creation of man as male and female. This was made plain earlier in Genesis 1:27–28: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.’”

But it is also clear here in the flow of thought in Genesis 2. In verse 18, it is God himself who decrees that man's solitude is not good, and it is God himself who sets out to complete one of the central designs of creation, namely, man and woman in marriage. “It is not good that the man should be alone; *I will make him a helper fit for him.*” Don't miss that central and all-important statement: God himself will make a being perfectly suited for him—a wife.

Then he parades the animals before Adam so that he might see there is no creature that qualifies. This creature must be made uniquely from man so that she will be of his essence—a fellow human being in God's image, just as Genesis 1:27 said. So we read in verses 21–22, “So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib

that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman.” God made her.

This text ends in verses 24–25 with the words, “They shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” In other words, this is all moving toward marriage. So the first thing to say about marriage being God’s doing is that marriage was his design in creating man male and female.

b) God Gave Away the First Bride

Marriage is also God’s doing because he took the role of being the first Father to give away the bride. Genesis 2:22: “And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and *brought her to the man.*” He didn’t hide her and make Adam seek. He made her; then he brought her. In a profound sense, he had fathered her. And now, though she was his by virtue of creation, he gave her to the man in this absolutely new kind of relationship called *marriage*, unlike every other relationship in the world.

c) God Spoke the Design of Marriage into Existence

Marriage is God’s doing because God not only created the woman with this design and brought her to the man like a father brings his daughter to her husband, but also because God spoke the design of marriage into existence. He did this in verse 24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

Who is talking in verse 24? The writer of Genesis is talking. And what did Jesus believe about the writer of Genesis? He believed it was Moses (Luke 24:44). He also believed that Moses was inspired by God, so that what Moses was saying, God was saying. We can see this if we look carefully at Matthew 19:4–5: “[Jesus] answered, ‘Have you not read that he [God] who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and *said* [Note: *God* said!], “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”?’” Jesus said that the words of Genesis 2:24 are God’s words, even though they were written by Moses.

Therefore, marriage is God's doing because God spoke the earliest design of it into existence—"A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

d) God Performs the One-Flesh Union

The fourth way that marriage is God's doing is seen in the fact that God himself performs the union referred to in the words "become one flesh." That union is at the heart of what marriage is.

Genesis 2:24 is God's word of institution for marriage. But just as it was God who took the woman from the flesh of man (Gen. 2:21), it is God who in each marriage ordains and performs a uniting called *one flesh*. Man does not create this. God does. And it is not in man's power to destroy. This is implicit here in Genesis 2:24, but Jesus makes it explicit in Mark 10:8–9. He quotes Genesis 2:24, then adds a comment that explodes like thunder with the glory of marriage. "'The two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. *What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*"

When a couple speaks their vows, it is not a man or a woman or a pastor or parent who is the main actor—the main doer. God is. God joins a husband and a wife into a one-flesh union. *God* does that. The world does not know this. Which is one of the reasons why marriage is treated so casually. And Christians often *act* like they don't know it, which is one of the reasons marriage in the church is not seen as the wonder it is. Marriage is God's doing because it is a one-flesh union that God himself performs.

So, in sum, the most foundational thing we can say about marriage is that it is God's doing. It's his doing:

- a. because it was his design in creation;
- b. because he personally gave away the first bride in marriage;
- c. because he spoke the design of marriage into existence: leave parents, hold fast to your wife, become one flesh;
- d. and because this one-flesh union is established by God himself in each marriage.

A glimpse into the magnificence of marriage comes from seeing in

God's word that God himself is the great doer. Marriage is his doing. It is *from* him and *through* him. That is the most *foundational* thing we can say about marriage.

Now we turn to the most ultimate thing we can say about marriage. It is not only *from* him and *through* him. It is also *for* him.

2. MARRIAGE IS FOR GOD'S GLORY

The *ultimate* thing to see in the Bible about marriage is that it exists for God's glory. Most foundationally, marriage is the *doing* of God. Most ultimately, marriage is the *display* of God. It is designed by God to display his glory in a way that no other event or institution does.

The way to see this most clearly is to connect Genesis 2:24 with its use in Ephesians 5:31–32. In Genesis 2:24, God says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." What kind of relationship is this? How are these two people held together? Can they walk away from this relationship? Can they go from spouse to spouse? Is this relationship rooted in romance? Sexual desire? Need for companionship? Cultural convenience? What is this? What holds it together?

THE MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE REVEALED

In Genesis 2:24, the words "*hold fast* to his wife" and the words "they shall *become one flesh*" point to something far deeper and more permanent than serial marriages and occasional adultery. What these words point to is marriage as a sacred *covenant* rooted in covenant commitments that stand against every storm "as long as we both shall live." But that is only implicit here. It becomes explicit when the mystery of marriage is more fully revealed in Ephesians 5:31–32.

Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in verse 31: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Then he gives it this all-important interpretation in verse 32: "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." In other words, marriage is patterned after Christ's covenant commitment to his church.

Christ thought of himself as the bridegroom coming for his bride,

the true people of God (Matt. 9:15; 25:1ff.; John 3:29). Paul knew his ministry was to gather the bride—the true people of God who would trust Christ. His calling was to betroth the church to her husband, Jesus. Paul puts it like this in 2 Corinthians 11:2: “I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.”

Christ knew he would have to pay for his bride with his own blood. He called this relationship the *new covenant*—“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). This is what Paul is referring to when he says that marriage is a great mystery: “I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Christ obtained the church by his blood and formed a new covenant with her, an unbreakable “marriage.”

The ultimate thing we can say about marriage is that it exists for God’s glory. That is, it exists to display God. Now we see how: Marriage is patterned after Christ’s covenant relationship to his redeemed people, the church. And therefore, the highest meaning and the most ultimate purpose of marriage is to put the covenant relationship of Christ and his church on display. That is why marriage exists. If you are married, that is why you are married. If you hope to be, that should be your dream.

CHRIST WILL NEVER LEAVE HIS WIFE

Staying married, therefore, is not mainly about staying in love. It is about keeping covenant. “Till death do us part” or “As long as we both shall live” is a sacred covenant promise—the same kind Jesus made with his bride when he died for her. Therefore, what makes divorce and remarriage so horrific in God’s eyes is not merely that it involves covenant-breaking to the spouse, but that it involves misrepresenting Christ and his covenant. Christ will never leave his wife. Ever. There may be times of painful distance and tragic backsliding on our part. But Christ keeps his covenant forever. Marriage is a display of that! That is the ultimate thing we can say about it. It puts the glory of Christ’s covenant-keeping love on display.

The most important implication of this conclusion is that keeping covenant with our spouse is as important as telling the truth about

God's covenant with us in Jesus Christ. Marriage is not mainly about being or staying in love. It's mainly about telling the truth with our lives. It's about portraying something true about Jesus Christ and the way he relates to his people. It is about showing in real life the glory of the gospel.

Jesus died for sinners. He forged a covenant in the white-hot heat of his suffering in our place. He made an imperfect bride his own with the price of his blood and covered her with the garments of his own righteousness. He said, "I am with you . . . to the end of the age. . . . I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). Marriage is meant by God to put that gospel reality on display in the world. That is why we are married. That is why all married people are married, even when they don't know and embrace this gospel.

Over the destiny of woman and of man lies the dark shadow of a word of God's wrath, a burden from God, which they must carry. The woman must bear her children in pain, and in providing for his family the man must reap many thorns and thistles, and labor in the sweat of his brow. This burden should cause both man and wife to call on God, and should remind them of their eternal destiny in his kingdom. Earthly society is only the beginning of the heavenly society, the earthly home an image of the heavenly home, the earthly family a symbol of the fatherhood of God.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER,
Letters and Papers from Prison, 31

CHAPTER TWO

NAKED AND NOT ASHAMED

And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

GENESIS 2:25

Marriage is more wonderful than anyone on earth knows. The reasons it is wonderful can be learned only from God's special revelation and can be cherished only by the work of the Holy Spirit to enable us to behold and embrace the wonder. The reason we need the Spirit's help is that the wonder of marriage is woven into the wonder of the gospel of the cross of Christ, and the message of the cross is foolishness to the natural man, and so the meaning of marriage is foolishness to the natural man (1 Cor. 2:14).

For example, the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins said in an interview in 2006,

I provided . . . cogent arguments against a supernatural intelligent designer. But it does seem to me to be a worthy idea. Refutable—but nevertheless grand and big enough to be worthy of respect. I don't see the Olympian gods or Jesus coming down and dying on the Cross as worthy of that grandeur. They strike me as parochial.¹

These are the tragic words of “the natural man.” Those who regard Christ and his incarnation and death and resurrection and lordship over all the universe as parochial cannot see the wonder of the gospel woven into marriage. In fact, Jesus is not parochial. He created the universe (John 1:3; Col. 1:16). He upholds it by the word of his power (Heb.

¹“God vs. Science: An Interview with Francis Collins and Richard Dawkins,” *Time*, August 5, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1555132-9,00.html>; accessed 05-05-08.

1:3). The universe was created for him (Col. 1:16), and all of reality finds its highest reason for being in relation to the greatest display of the glory of God in the universe—namely, the glory of his grace supremely manifest in the death of Christ to bring sinners to God (Eph. 1:6). Only the blind call Christ and his redeeming work parochial.

But by God's grace, even Dawkins might see the glory of Christ in the gospel and in its portrayal in marriage. It is a miracle that any of us has seen this glory in the gospel. God alone can "give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). I pray that God will reveal the glory of the gospel and the meaning of marriage to Richard Dawkins—and to you. I believe he will do so for you, if you will look steadfastly at the revelation of it in God's word and seek the help of God's Spirit to enable you to see and savor the glory of Christ and his blood-bought covenant with the church, which is reflected in marriage.

MARRIAGE IS THE *DOING* OF GOD, TO THE *GLORY* OF GOD

In the previous chapter, we saw that the most *fundamental* thing we can say about marriage is that it is the *doing* of God. And the *ultimate* thing we can say about marriage is that it is the *display* of God. The reason it is the display of God is that in Christ, God has made a new covenant with his people. In it he promises to forgive and justify and glorify all who turn to him from sin and receive Christ as the Savior and Lord and supreme Treasure of their lives. Marriage between a man and a woman was designed from the beginning to be a reflection and display of that blood-bought covenant relationship.

That's why Paul quotes Genesis 2:24—"A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"—and then says, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31–32). Leaving parents and holding fast to a wife, forming a new one-flesh union, is meant from the beginning to display this new covenant—Christ's leaving his Father and taking the church as his bride, at the cost of his life, and holding fast to her in a one-spirit union forever.

“One spirit” is the way Paul describes the counterpart to “one flesh” in 1 Corinthians 6:16–17. He happens to be addressing the problem of prostitution, not marriage. He is arguing that our union with Christ makes union with a prostitute unthinkable. He says,

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. (1 Cor. 6:15–17)

I don’t think Paul means that a man is married to every prostitute with whom he ever had sex. Jesus said to the woman who had had “five husbands” that “the one you now have is not your husband” (John 4:18). In other words, sex by itself did not make a marriage.

Prostitution, as the name implies, is an exploitation of marriage prerogatives. As such it plays with sacred depths. Paul uses the language of “one body” and “one flesh” to show the utter betrayal of what these phrases are meant to signify.

He is saying: You are desecrating the act of sexual union. It has the meaning of “one flesh” and “one body” *in marriage*—something profound and spiritual. But you are implicitly expressing that sacred truth with a prostitute. The shell of oneness is there, but not the covenant meaning.

The main point here is simply that in Paul’s mind the covenant union between a husband and wife is designed by God to reflect and display the spiritual union between Christ and the church. So he says, “He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.”

So I argue that staying married is not mainly about staying in love. It’s about covenant-keeping. If a spouse falls in love with another person, one profoundly legitimate response from the grieved spouse and from the church is, “So what! Your being ‘in love’ with someone else is not decisive. Keeping your covenant is decisive.”

Now it is time to probe more deeply into what this covenant-keeping looks like and what it means.

NAKED AND NOT ASHAMED

To lay a deeper foundation for marriage from God's word, we turn to a key verse that we passed over in the previous chapter, namely, Genesis 2:25. After saying in verse 24, "A man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh," the writer says in verse 25, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." What is the point of that verse?

Consider these two possible reasons why they were not ashamed. First is the reason that they both had perfect bodies. Remember, this was before the fall of creation into sin and futility. These were the very bodies that God himself had made. Therefore, since their appearance was perfect, they did not have the slightest fear that their spouse would disapprove of them. In other words, their freedom from shame was because they had absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. Is that the main point?

It is certainly a true observation. When God created man, he said that his creation was "very good" (Gen. 1:31). So the man and the woman were perfectly beautiful and handsome. There was no flaw and no blemish. Is that the point of Genesis 2:25? I doubt it. For three reasons.

NOT BECAUSE OF PERFECT BODIES

First, no matter how beautiful or handsome your spouse is, if you're cranky or selfish or unkind, you can make comments in a way that shames the other person. Not being ashamed in a marriage relationship takes more than being physically perfect; the one who is looking at you must be morally upright and gracious. Otherwise he or she can find a way to shame you. So mere physical perfection would not be enough to eliminate the possibility of being shamed.

Second, Genesis 2:24–25 is intended to provide foundational wisdom for marriage long after the fall of man into sin. We can see this by the way Jesus makes use of verse 24. He makes it the basis of his statement, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:9). In other words, what God is revealing in Genesis 2:24–25 has relevance long after the Fall. So it doesn't seem that the main point