

Marriage - God's Intent and Design

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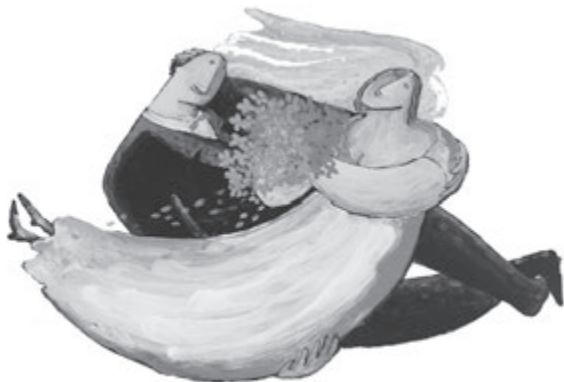
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Proklamedia

Grimerudvn. 77, 2312 Ottestad, Norway

E-mail: post@proklamedia.no

www.proklamedia.no



Marriage

God's Intent
and Design

RUNE ZAHL-OLSEN

ILLUS.: VIVIAN ZAHL OLSEN



PROKLAMEDIA

Thank You

I want to thank God for life, inspiration, zeal and perseverance. Next, I want to thank my amazing wife and our three children for putting up with a living room overflowing with printouts and notes, and with me sitting with my laptop both early mornings and late nights.

I also want to thank those who have read short or long portions and given valuable feedback during the process of writing this book. A huge thank you to my aunt Vivian for all the illustrations that are crucial in conveying the message of this book.

MAY 2018, RUNE ZAHL-OLSEN

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Introduction

One sunny day in June 1994 I pledged, in front of my pastor, family and friends, to love and honour Agnes until death do us part. We became a married couple that day, and my understanding was, like with most others, that marriage was about the two of us and our love for one another. Truth be told, I was mostly concerned with the two of us that day. Today I see a larger picture: our marriage is about so much more than just us. The Bible begins and ends with a wedding, and marriage is frequently mentioned throughout it. Jesus refers to Himself as the Bridegroom and those who believe in Him are the bride. On top of that, Jesus decided to perform His first miracle, and thus commence His ministry, at a wedding. It

can't be by chance that weddings, and by implication marriage is given such prominence in the Bible. This gives reason to ask two questions: What is God's intent with, and design for, marriage? Why is it so significant?

Having answers to these questions is crucial in a time when the understanding of what a marriage is has been greatly challenged. The influence from the number of divorces, post-modern thinking, altered legislation and also changed church liturgies, have brought much ambiguity to the understanding of marriage. I find myself compelled to write a book that doesn't just speak of the obvious, but also the deeper purposes for why God instituted marriage. I also write to show that the battle is not just about your marriage and my own, but about marriage as an institution in society.

The backbone of this book is a fundamental belief that the Bible is the Word of God given to humanity, that it is infallible, and a firm foundation regardless of its popularity in contemporary culture. If I were to base this on a post-modern view of marriage, you would be reading a completely different book. The same would be true if liberal theology were the basis. The book you are reading, however, considers the Bible as God's infallible Word and contains numerous quotations and references to Scripture. My intent is to convey what the Bible says about God's original intent by marriage to my contemporaries.

This book will not deal with what to think about before getting married. You can learn that by attending the *Becoming One* course. I will also not be writing specifically about the various challenges that most people that get married face and how they ought to handle these. To learn more about that I would recommend attending a couples workshop, couples weekend or reading literature.

In this book I want to share God's original intent with marriage, and by implication, what marriage is today. You will notice what many still haven't realised; that weddings and marriages are essential throughout the Bible and in God's redemptive story. Furthermore, you will discover that marriage is the building block of society, a collaboration, a covenant, an image, a sign and a battle. Let me begin with the first of these: the building block of society.

The Building Block of Society

Marriage is God's fundamental building block in a society. The original intent was that the marriage between a man and a woman would lead to conception and the birth of children, who would then grow up in safe and good homes where they could learn to live well. Proverbs 22:6 says: "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (KJV). God's intent was, according to my understanding, that millions of children would mature into confident and good adults in this way; carrying on the good habits, wisdom and faith into new marriages and subsequently to the

next generation. Together these families would constitute congregations, communities and nations. The centrality of marriage in the makeup of society is underlined through the creation of the man and the woman, where God consequentially institutes marriage (Genesis 1 and 2). It is later confirmed in the Bible story when we read that wickedness on earth grew to such an extent that God wanted to start over again. I'm referring to the story about Noah and the flood (Genesis 6-9).

We read that God chose eight people to start humanity all over again. If I were to have the task of picking only eight individuals through which humanity would recommence, I would make my choice based on their knowledge and skills. I would strongly consider picking a hunter so they would have meat.



A farmer who understood sowing and reaping would also be important. A carpenter would be able to pass on the skills pertaining to house building in a proper way. Seeing that there would eventually be multitudes of people, a lawyer would come in handy for conflict resolution. I believe I would use this kind of reasoning if I were to pick the eight individuals that would get the opportunity to restart all of humanity. Which qualities would you have emphasised if you were to select eight individuals to perpetuate humanity? God certainly had very different priorities than the ones I just listed. They weren't the eight strongest, most highly educated or greatest, rather they were eight human beings bonded together through family ties. They were a family consisting of four married couples! It was Noah, his wife and their three sons with their wives (Gen 6, 7). Family and marriage are obviously of great significance to God. Evidently it was of greater importance to God to establish the new society upon four marriages than upon anything else. It may seem strange, but God must have had good reasons for choosing to do it in this way. That leads us to the question: why in the world would he choose four married couples?

Let's have a look at the Ten Commandments and see if we can find any hints there. We find them in Exodus 20. As early as in the second commandment, which talks about not having any other gods, we find a hint that sheds light on the importance

of marriage. Verses 5 and 6 read as follows: “For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

The first thing we notice from this piece of scripture is that our actions impact not only ourselves, but multiple generations after us. This is a rather unusual thought in contemporary Western society. We’re used to thinking that the decisions we make affect ourselves and maybe a few of those around us. Research shows that divorce is contagious. One generation catches it from the other, which means that those of us who have divorced parents have a greater chance of choosing the same path.¹ It is also contagious among friends, neighbours and acquaintances. Researchers found that one’s risk of going through divorce increased by 33% if acquaintances (friends of friends) got divorced and increased with as much as 75% if close friends got divorced.² In our individualistic society it may be a stretch to even comprehend the scope of these far-reaching ramifications. Thinking that I am not only making a decision that affects myself and my children, but also other families, children, the Christian fellowship I attend and the community I am a member of, may be a stretch for most of us. It is certainly not common to consider consequences that follow after our death, affecting those that are

not yet born, like the two verses from Exodus 20 clearly indicate. We have barely started thinking along these lines when it comes to the environment. Today we know that if we pollute the earth, the ocean and the air, it will carry tremendous consequences for the coming generations. We want to reduce the amount of waste and consider the environment both when we do our shopping and when we sort our rubbish at home. We have started thinking this way regarding the environment, but often not when it comes to personal decisions like marriage and family. My claim is that decisions regarding marriage and family also carry long-term consequences.

I also want you to notice that in the two verses from Exodus, God is far more concerned about blessing than cursing. Sin has implications for three to four generations, while the passage says that the benefits of good decisions reach as far as a thousand generations. Marriage is not explicitly stated here, but clearly implied. To the reader it is obvious that new generations come from a man and a woman who marry and have children. When we realise that any given marriage is about the next thousand generations, it is easy to understand why God gets involved in this holy union making them no longer two, but one, as Jesus says (Matt 19:6). He knows it is not just about the two, but also about the coming thousand generations. He knows they will need help.

God doesn't want children growing up without safety and connection with their parents. He wants reliable communities where all of God's attributes are lived out. Marriages are the natural building block of such communities. When two adult human beings make the choice to be a couple, something new is created. An entirely new entity that never before existed comes into being and the relationship between them is this new entity. If they choose to get married, a marriage comes into being. That marriage never existed before the day of the wedding and that particular marriage can only exist between those two individuals. They become one that day, but we can also say that two individuals entered the church building and that three individuals left. They are no longer just two human beings, but a man, a woman and a marriage. This entity – marriage – has a life of its own. A marriage may be strong or weak, young or old, tired or renewed. It may be starved or flourishing. In any case, it is an entity that remains, an entity that becomes the foundation for generations to come. People that end up breaking such relationships experience that the actual entity keeps on living even if the two are no longer living together. Sissel Gran, a leading couples therapist and author in Norway, writes that you can divorce your husband, but you cannot dissolve a relationship.³ The relationship doesn't cease to exist, even if sometimes that's what the people divorcing want most of all.

Collaboration

A marriage is comprised of two individuals and it is easy to understand that collaboration is needed. The two persons must collaborate when it comes to practical tasks like shopping and cooking, but also in their raising of children. More than being a partnership between two individuals, it is also a collaboration that joins the two and God together. If we only consider marriage a partnership between two individuals, it is limited to something far less than was intended.

Initially the man, woman and God dwelled together in the Garden of Eden. There was no shame, sin or embarrassment that kept them apart. Adam and Eve literally lived in the presence of the Lord. Adam and Eve were labouring together in



their God-given assignment: “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Gen 1:28). Together Adam and Eve grew in their understanding of the world they lived in. They enjoyed one another sexually through the command to multiply. They were aware of God’s presence in the garden. At any time, they could pose their questions to Him, or ask for help if there was something they couldn’t do themselves. Entering into sin was not about some irresistible fruit, but the tempting scenario the serpent described if they would indeed eat. The serpent promised that they would become like God, which he, some time before, had painfully experienced was impossible. Adam and Eve were then told they would learn to discern good and evil, becoming independent from God. Their decision was detrimental. Day after day they had experienced the delight in walking with God. They had known true liberty and joy. Everything was already theirs, but on this day they gave up their faith in their dependence on God and His good ordinances. They thought they knew best what was right. God had said they could eat any fruit, except the one from the tree in the middle of the garden. Their downfall was thinking that they knew better and no longer needed God’s boundaries, counsel and protective laws. Not only did they lose their liberty and

intimacy with God, they also literally ate themselves into selfishness. This resulted in rejection, shame, fear and loneliness, having shifted from perfect collaboration to individual toil.

Many marriages fail for the same reason. They leave God and each other and become self-occupied. When my personal needs and my considerations get centre-stage, marriage is no longer what it was intended to be. The Bible addresses this clearly in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

How are we to understand this? It says that it is good to be two and that it is a strength and an advantage not to be alone. Being in company of another person empowers you when one is insufficient. It also means that you can receive warmth when life is otherwise chilly, that you don't feel loneliness and isolation, but intimacy and relationship. You will be able to stand tall in stronger winds than what one person alone can handle.

The final sentence takes it all to a level higher, where it talks about a third entity. What, or who, is this third cord? It is God!

Collaboration between God and people

The Bible describes a marriage as collaboration between God and people. They are closely knit together, like the individual strands of a cord working together to carry the load. In order to make a strong cord, multiple strands are twisted together. When rightly put together the resulting cord can carry far more than the individual strands could do alone. Within the image of a cord of three strands, we find the image of the triune God. Like the Father, Son and Holy Spirit collaborate, the husband, wife and God collaborate in a marriage. For this unity to function as intended, both spouses have to know God and be confident in their relationship with Him. However, that is not the case in all marriages.

How does this third strand, God, enter into the marriage? Does He enter in if He is invited at some point or does He join from the beginning? Jesus gives an answer to this when addressing the issue of divorce. Someone in the crowd asks if divorce is permissible for any reason and Jesus responds:

Haven't you read, 'he replied,' that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason

a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate (Matt 19:4-6).

Jesus is saying that God intervenes in the wedding ceremony and joins the two together, so they become one. God is actively involved from the beginning and comprises the third strand in the cord. Many can testify that God was the strand that kept them together in the hard seasons of life, at times when the other strands were worn out, void of feelings and hope.

It gives us reason to wonder why God engages in the marriage, a relationship between two individuals. I've already mentioned that God knows what is best, not only here and now, but also in the long run. God is aware that the purpose with the man and woman's "unity" reaches far beyond the two that are in love. He knows that all marriages are not only about the two that marry, but also families, future generations and society in general. God gets involved in the marriage because it is a building block in any society, where blessings and curses are passed on. The Bible starts with a wedding. Adam and Eve were the first married couple and their marriage is the cradle of humanity.

God joins two individuals together as one when the marriage commences, and He remains an active member every

day following this. An example is that He protects the marriage through healthy boundaries. God protects the marriage in particular through three of the Ten Commandments. The first one is: “Honour your father and your mother” (Ex 20:12). But that’s not about marriage, you may think. It is, because in Biblical and historic understanding; a mother and a father were married. This commandment therefore says that we are to honour this married couple, our parents. It is referring to our two biological parents that have committed to a lifetime together. We also are, of course, to honour our parents if we were born as a result of a one-night stand, but the intent of this verse is that we honour the couple that is committed in marriage and have had children. It is interesting to note that this is the only commandment directly tied to a promise: so that you may live long in the land. We know that a nation with strong marriages and families is a stable society not easily shaken or overthrown by others. It has been this way through the ages. This book will give you some of the answers to why that is. Honouring, protecting and seeking to preserve marriages are responsibilities God has given to all of us, not only those who are married. Hebrews 13:4 says: “Marriage should be honoured by all”. Notice that it says “all”. We are to honour marriage whether we are married or not. Everyone ought to do it. In the commandment given in Exodus 20:12, God emphasises the

honouring of those that have gone ahead of us, the generation that precedes us. Two commandments later God focuses on our own marriages. This commandment says we are not to break the marriage (Ex 20:14). It doesn't say that it is preferred that we don't break the marriage, or that we should try to avoid breaking it. God is direct and leaves no doubt about what He is saying. Don't break the marriage! God makes it even more specific a couple of commandments later, where He says: "You shall not covet your neighbour's wife" (Ex 20:17). This commandment protects marriage in two ways. Firstly, it protects the husband's marriage. Secondly, it protects the marriage of the attractive woman who may be coveted by other men. Both parties' marriages are protected by this commandment. Naturally, a woman is also not to covet the husband of another wife. This commandment is obviously addressing sexual desire, but coveting also has other expressions. We may lust for power or money, and I think we may also experience relational lust. Some women may desire men that they find easier to talk to and who are more open than their spouses. This would be a relational lust. Three out of ten commandments are given specifically to guard and protect marriage. That's a pretty high share. Most nations wouldn't have 30% of their laws address the guarding and protection of marriages.

Collaboration between to people

A marriage is also collaboration between two people. Unique personalities with different experiences, skills, values and traditions join together to collaborate in a good way. I have, for part of my life, lived in areas of the world where animals are still used for ploughing and other heavy tasks in the fields. Once in a while two oxen would plough together. This happened when the task was too hard for just one. They would then wear a yoke that connected the oxen and the plough. Some of these yokes had an adjustable attachment point for the tools they would pull, and the farmer could adjust the load so the strongest animal would pull the most. The strongest ox would have the plough attached closer to its side than the weaker ox. In this way the highest load was put on the strongest. This is how a marriage is intended to be as well. For the couple to utilise their differences the tasks must also be divided accordingly. The one who is strongest in one area must give the greatest contribution there. Strengths are often in different areas, and collaboration then implies that each carries their area of responsibility. In some marriages, or in phases of the marriage, one may have greater strength than the other, maybe in almost all areas. One spouse may suffer from illness that causes limitations in many areas. It is then natural that the strongest carries the biggest

load. Some may think this seems unjust. If we believe that a marriage is about dividing all tasks equally, it is indeed unjust, but even if a marriage is about collaboration, it doesn't mean that it is 50% for you and 50% for me. Having one spouse contribute more is actually the intent of a marriage. The idea is that both give 100% of themselves. Any 50/50 solution divides the unity among the two. I will come back to this in the chapter "A Covenant".

If the collaboration is to work, the differences cannot be too significant in the major areas. If two oxen are used to pull a plough, they must be walking in the same direction in order to help each other. In order to protect the faith of the Jewish people, God forbid them to marry their sons and daughters to foreign peoples with other gods (Ezra 9:12). Paul gives similar advice to us as Christians: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" (2 Cor 6:14). For a marriage to work as intended, the two spouses must have a basic common understanding. The Message translates this verse as follows: "Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? That's not partnership; that's war". John Gottman, considered one of the foremost researchers on relationships between couples, writes: "The more you agree about

the fundamentals in life, the richer, more meaningful, and in a sense easier your marriage is going to be.”²⁴ He is onto something here. What a blessing it is to agree on the deep questions. That makes the little things less difficult. In 1 Corinthians 7 it talks about marriage. Initially sex is mentioned as something mutually joyful to the spouses; a pleasant collaboration. The Message conveys it as follows: “Marriage is not a place to ‘stand up for your right’. Marriage is a decision to serve the other, whether in bed or out.” I think this is a wonderful way to explain it. Marriage is a decision to serve the other.

We read that God created the woman as a helper to the man. Some interpret this as condescending to the woman that she is made as a helper. It is certainly possible to make this interpretation, but it is just as easy to understand it differently. Who got the helper? The man did. Why? Could he not manage on his own? The logical answer is: no, he couldn’t make it on his own. The man is in need of help. I am not trying to put down either man or woman, but rather to elevate them. God made His most excellent creature, the woman, to be a helper to the needy man. I find this useful to keep in mind when I read Paul’s description of how the collaboration between a husband and a wife ought to be in a marriage. We find the portion where he specifically addresses this in Ephesians chapter 5, verses 21 through 33. He starts by saying they ought to submit to one

another out of reverence for Christ (v. 21). In order for their collaboration to work, and for the marriage to be as intended, they must submit to one another. This is the foundation for what he then writes both to the man and the woman.

Having confirmed their mutual submission, Paul then writes a paragraph addressing women and then a paragraph addressing men. These have often been taken out of context and misused to promote a certain agenda. Remember that it all starts with mutual submission. Following this we find the distinct paragraphs that address the parties. Everything must be read and understood in context. Allow me to take you through this in the sequence the Bible gives us. First, we have the paragraph addressing the women:

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 (Eph 5:22-24).

This is repetition, clarifying the general exhortation to submit to one another. Many find submission to be a difficult concept. In Western society we've been raised to think that I, and my opinions, must be heard, respected and considered.

Many times, this isn't even enough: we also want to have the final say. If we don't get that, we feel imprisoned, that we've lost our freedom. Isn't the woman annihilated if she submits herself? That's not how it is intended. Again, it is important to read this in conjunction with what comes before and after. Before there is the paragraph about mutual submission, but after there are some verses that speak specifically to the man in the marriage.

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. (Eph 5:25-33)

The husband is commanded to love his wife. Paul describes that when we love someone it manifests in attitude, intention and action. He uses the works of Christ to show the husband how he was meant to express this love. He makes plans – plans to rescue, protect, bless and equip his wife. Act in a way that makes her know she is loved, significant and worth fighting for. When she doesn't succeed with all she tries to do or makes downright mistakes, and even gets self-centred, the husband forgives her. He must invite her into the most purposeful mission and help her do the things she thought she could never do. He trusts her and believes in her. He is willing to carry the cost when she makes mistakes. Practically, this means that he will pay her parking ticket should the need arise. Not with hard feelings, but with kindness and grace. It means he will show her off proudly and talk about all her strengths. Talk about the strengths she is already displaying and those that aren't yet visible. If she struggles with something, the husband does all that is in his power to help her. According to the scripture we just read, he ought to be willing to face death for her. He should not think that she has her own problems that she must solve herself. They have become one and helping the wife is equivalent to helping oneself. He must do all that is in his power to assure that she feels loved and protected. Should it blemish his reputation, that's not a hindrance. If it implies that he needs

to say no to benefits or desires of his own, that should also not get in the way of loving her and putting her first. The husband has been commanded to love, and true love is described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

The standard put on the husband is exceptionally high, too high for him to do it without God's assistance. Who can love like Jesus did? He renounced Heaven and became like one of us. He took upon Himself the lashes that were ours without uttering a word. He voluntarily gave His own life to set us free. In these verses to men, Jesus is lifted up as the role model. There are indeed high expectations on men. It is a mission we cannot undertake ourselves, apart from God's help. The expectations make us dependent on God and His help in everyday life. Interestingly a distinct promise is connected to being understanding, honouring, supporting and helping the spouse.

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers. (1 Pet 3:7)

The Bible quite clearly says in this verse that our prayers will have greater impact if we let our marriage work the way God intended. On the flip side our prayers may be obstructed if we don't.

Thus, Mutual submission is the way in which God intended a marriage to work. The wife submits to and respects her husband, who in everything is mindful about the well-being of his wife. He also acts upon his thoughts about her. All this happens while God remains the third strand, twisted together with them both, making a strong entity. An old proverb says: *Those who pray together stay together*. It is loaded with truth. When couples pray together the threefold cord in the marriage is strengthened.

A place for growth

We've looked at how Ephesians specifically describes how spouses love and respect one another. Marriage is intended to be the safest place to be. That's where you can be who you really

are. Of course, it is also the place where spouses freely share their dreams and visions. Dreams about the immediate, but also about the future. It should be equally natural to protect and support each other. There should be a 100% certainty that the spouses will back each other up. Within this trust and commitment, it is safe to expose our weaknesses and vulnerabilities. My spouse should be the person who knows me most intimately. Consequentially, the spouse should also be the person who encourages and stimulates growth. It's the one who supports new steps in family, work and church life, but also encourages stepping into greater honesty and openness. Stepping closer to God, confessing sin and inviting God to heal wounds. Grace is not just about forgiveness; it is also about loving. So much so, that the greatest desire is the release of the full potential in the spouse. This may call for some challenging talks and for action. A significant objective for every person is to increasingly resemble Christ (Rom 8:29), and marriage is one of God's ways to bring transformation. Living intimately with another person leads to dependence, humility, vulnerability, etc. Hence, it is a place where we learn to surrender personal opinions and goals in order to support and help the other. It is a place where we give ourselves for the benefit of the other (Eph 5:25). Who can see it more clearly than our spouse when we make selfish decisions, only considering ourselves? Who, apart from

a spouse and children, is better equipped to tell when family and marriage are getting less attention than work? The truth will set you free, Jesus said (John 8:32). Marriage should be like this also. Truth and honesty set us free to live at liberty, close to God and others.

The intent for marriage is to be the foremost place where we practise the supremacy of grace above the law. Some approach me as a therapist, bringing long lists of their expectations to their spouse: he works too little, helps too little with the children, doesn't carry the spiritual leadership, doesn't prioritise the relationship, etc. The Word of God says that rules and demands don't lead to freedom and joy; grace, on the other hand, does. Couples that live by the law, demanding this and that, usually end up accomplishing the opposite of what they really want. The intent of marriage is for us to practise grace in order to bring out the best in our spouse. We are not meant to start "preaching the law" and pull out our list of demands if our spouse doesn't respond like we expect. In Romans chapters 4, 5 and 6, Paul explains what the law does and what grace does. The law leads to more sin while grace does the opposite. Grace leads to gratitude, freedom and a transformed life, a life growing beneficially. Grace is never intended to breed passivity. Sitting on the couch with the remote, self-indulging, or in front of the computer just to disconnect, is not the fruit of grace, but

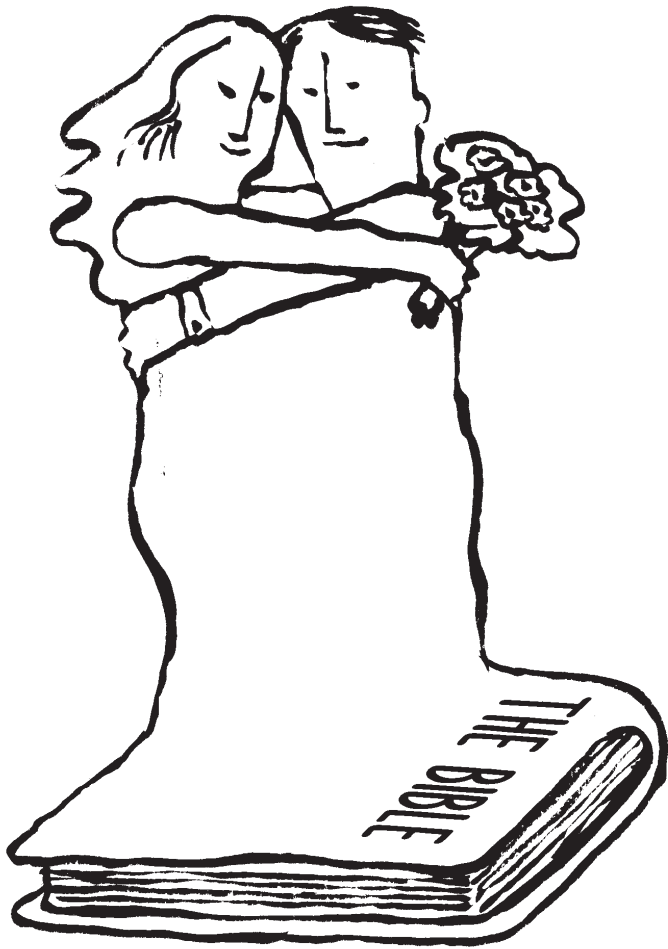
rather self-pity. Both spouses are called to love and honour the other in daily life. The grace I am talking about is what enables us to do it. Being seen, accepted and loved, creates a desire to act. Becoming more like Jesus is also about giving yourself to serve others. Invite your spouse into all areas of life. Marriage and family are meant to be places where we manifest our walk with Jesus. Marriage is also a place to nurture spiritual and human development. Faith in God, together with the experience of His recognition, is significant in this context. If our relationship with God is broken, there will be disorder in every other relationship. If the husband seeks approval from his wife instead of God his Father, something detrimental happens. If he is not confident in God's approval, he will engage with an endless pursuit in all the wrong places. It is not unusual that a man seeks it in a woman's beauty, but it is extremely dangerous. It wasn't meant to be this way. The original intent was that the man would live out of God's approval, just like Adam did in the Garden of Eden, and out of that, invite the woman into this place of confidence. Then he can offer support and protection, inviting her into a far larger mission than affirming an insecure man. Otherwise, he will always look to the woman for affirmation that he is good enough, handsome enough, clever enough, attractive enough, etc. This will drive her crazy. She will realise that the constant endeavour to affirm her insecure

husband over a lifetime will be much too demanding when the hardships of life come. On the other side, the husband will remain insecure until his death, or until he discovers the acceptance of God his Father. If the relationship with God is established, marriage becomes a place for growth, because the spouses are confident in God and one another. But don't be too ambitious about changing your spouse. The aim is to create an environment for growth, not to place demands based on what you think is needed.

A Covenant

Another significant aspect in God's original intent with marriage is that it is a covenant. A covenant is something very different from an agreement or a contract. Let's look at a couple of verses in Malachi:

You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favour on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. (Mal 2:13,14)



The spouse is spoken of as someone you are covenanting together with. In the modern world of today we're used to having the right to withdraw from contracts we establish.

A couple of weeks ago I purchased a DAB radio online. I committed to the agreement that I would pay and they would send the radio. I paid and they immediately sent the radio, as agreed. I used the radio for some days, but realised that it wasn't as good as I had imagined, and decided to make use of the 45-day return policy. I returned the radio and got my money back. These agreements are convenient, but they are very different from a covenant. In a contract I fulfil my part – pay for the DAB radio, and they fulfil their part – ship the exact DAB radio to me. Today many treat their marriages the same way: I am expected to do my part and have the right to expect that you do your part. If you don't do as I expect and I don't get the *goods I pay* for, it is in my right not to do my part. In a marriage the *payment* may be respect, giving practical help, being kind in conversation, being intimate and sexually devoted, being faithful and reliable, etc. Such contractual thinking is fundamentally different from the idea of covenant, which is how the Bible describes marriage.

If you are in a covenant relationship and cannot contribute as expected, the other party reaches out to compensate. The space that is created must be filled by the other. In a covenant

this is not done just out of kindness, but it is integral to the covenant.

The NATO treaty is a modern-day example of a covenant. Every membership nation has committed to contribute if another member is attacked. Smaller members, such as Norway, will for obvious reasons not be able contribute as much as larger membership nations. This is the nature of a covenant. If there is an attack on Norway, the other members must send soldiers and munitions to their aid. It is expected that citizens from other nations will face death in order to help Norway in such a situation. In recent years several NATO members have not contributed as expected, cutting down on their own defence expenditures. When their defence budget is reduced over multiple years, their defence is increasingly weakened. That leaves them more dependent on help from other membership states, while themselves becoming less of a help to others should the need arise. Understandably, a nation in financial crisis must also reduce their defence expenditures and others will then have to compensate. In a covenant, however, you cannot choose whether to contribute or not. A covenant expects every party to always contribute according to their ability. Every membership state is expected to contribute. Even though this comparison with the NATO treaty has its obvious limitations it is probably the closest we get to the Biblical

understanding of covenant. One of the differences is that it is possible to withdraw from the NATO treaty, but you cannot withdraw from a Biblical covenant.

The Bible talks about several covenants that were made and the implications for those who made them. Let me mention a couple of examples.

Let's first look at the Old Covenant. That's the covenant God made with the Jewish people. He would be their God and they would be His children. He would bless them and protect them. This covenant is still valid today. Jesus then established the New Covenant. This is a covenant that gives everyone the opportunity to become a child of God. It is a covenant where we are totally forgiven and made a child of God, without any personal merit. There was much grace in the first covenant as well, but in the New Covenant it abounds. In the New Covenant it is about receiving, not earning. This covenant was made by God alone. We weren't involved at all.

God wasn't the only one who made covenants. The Israelites made covenants with other peoples. One striking example is the one they made with the Gibeonites. In Joshua chapter 9, we read the story about how the people from Gibeon established a covenant with the people of Israel. This covenant was established on completely false premises. The Gibeonites lied about who they were, and the Israeli leaders didn't seek God

for counsel, where this scheme could have been revealed. They ended up making a covenant out of sentiment. Three days after the covenant was made, Israel realised that false premises had been used and they had been absolutely fooled. It's easy to think that they could have gone back to the Gibeonites, explaining that they couldn't lie when making a covenant and thus withdraw from it, but they weren't able to cancel the covenant. The people of Israel were bound by it, even if it had been established on deceitful premises. We even read that some time later the Gibeonites were attacked and asked for military assistance from Israel. They tricked themselves into an agreement that secured their future in their land. What happened when the Gibeonites had conflicts with other neighbours? They turned to Israel, referring to the covenant, and asked for help. Honouring the covenant, the Israelites came to their help, putting their own lives at risk (Josh 10:6). God blessed it and they won the battle.

What does it mean that marriage is a covenant? It means that you don't cancel your marriage, even if *truths* appear after some time. You are married even if your spouse never told you everything from their story before you got married, either because she didn't think about it, forgot or because she was worried that you wouldn't marry her if you knew. Your marriage is instituted as a covenant when you both say "Yes".

In the Old Testament covenant making was accompanied by certain set rituals and symbols: pledges were given in front of witnesses, a symbol of the covenant was made, a blood offering was poured out and they had a covenant meal. We recognise these rituals and symbols in the wedding celebration. Witnesses are asked to be present at a wedding and there are often many present to observe the event and the pledges that are pronounced.

Witnesses see to it that nothing illegal takes place, but also that each of the two clearly say “Yes” when the pastor asks: “Do you promise to love and to honour until death do you part?” The rings that are exchanged are the symbol of the covenant. The covenant meal is the wedding feast most people enjoy after the wedding ceremony. The only covenant making ritual that is not carried on from the Old Testament in contemporary wedding celebrations is the blood offering. Naturally there will be animals given for food at the wedding feast, but the shedding of blood is not evident any longer. At earlier times the shedding of blood during intercourse was the evidence of a fully established covenant. The bedsheet was then hung up outside to show the mark of the blood. This is not practised any longer. God intended that the marriage was consummated with the sexual act. The Bible tells us that something very special happens when we have sex with another

person: we become one with that person (1 Cor 6:16). God's intent was that we were connected together with another human being in a special way by having sex together. The intent was also that it would happen within the safety and care that is found in a marriage. We are not to have sex with, and thus become bound to, many persons. As we can see, there was a good point with the mark of the blood when entering into the marriage covenant. That being said, not all covenants in the Bible were made with the mark of the blood (see for example God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9:9-17).

Will a marriage be incomplete if some of the rituals or symbols were left out on the wedding day? Certainly not. God considers all weddings as the making of a covenant, whether it is done in a church with many witnesses or outdoors with only a few present. Whether rings are used or not doesn't turn God away. The main issue is that marriage is a covenant and the rituals we still use have an origin and a purpose. God will show up in every wedding regardless and make the two into one. He creates a new entity at that moment, one that will last for life. According to the laws of many nations, it is possible to get divorced and no longer be married, but the covenant will last for a lifetime. The relationship that was created will keep on living. Anyone who has been divorced can testify that the memories, the connection and the relationship with the other

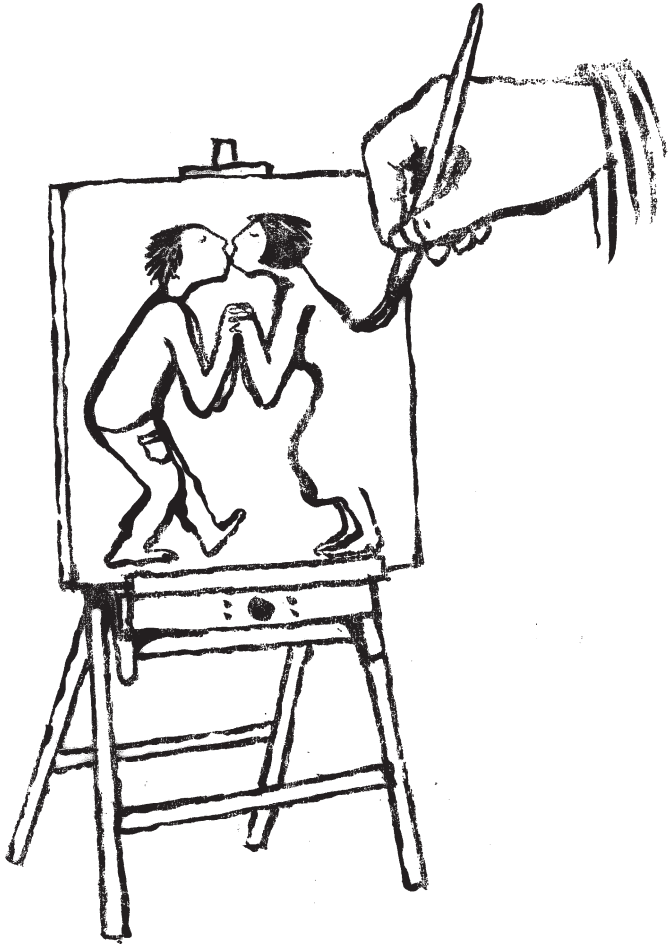
person are there for good and for bad – for life. These things do not disappear by getting divorced, even if many wish they would. Any marriage relationship will be for life.

A covenant says: I am committed to you for life. This implies security. You know that the other part will never yield or leave you, no matter what happens. This is one aspect of a covenant. On the other side it is very binding. You put your life on the line (if necessary). There is a price to pay, but the gain on this investment is greater than the cost. Marriage is about your needs being more important than my needs, and that everything at my disposal is there to serve your needs. I will make a choice to be gracious and forgive. In short, I will no longer live for myself, but for you. What is unique about a covenant is that you cannot turn this against your spouse and say: “You have to ...” These words are only valid for oneself. Does this mean total annihilation? No. Let’s learn from Jesus: He was willing to be born a human being, even if He was God. He was willing to be mocked and tortured, even killed, for sins He hadn’t even committed Himself. He most definitely laid down His life, but was He obliterated through these deeds? No. He did all this to get His bride. A bride He will marry at the end of the age. By giving Himself, He got what He wanted.

An Image

God has chosen three witnesses of His love, forbearance, power, grace, plan, care and faithfulness. These are the people of Israel, the church and marriage. Israel was called to bear witness of the true and living God to the world. The church was also meant to reveal God. As the people in the church would preach the good news and live lives worthy of their calling, the power and grace of God were to be revealed. God promised to be with them by the demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Cor 2:4). It is less known that marriage was intended to reflect the image of God, a practical and lifelike proclamation of His character.

We've already entertained the thought that marriage is



something more than just the two that are joined together. We've seen that marriage is the building block of society, that choosing a spouse has ramifications generations down the road and marriage is a collaboration between God and people. The intent of a marriage is to point beyond itself and the two that comprise it. This is made clear as early as in the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. A Biblical understanding of marriage is as fundamental as the stories of when the earth, the animals and mankind were made. It all starts from the very first pages of the Bible.

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." 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 the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Gen 1:26-28)

It says they were made in God's image. People then, are an image of God. When Moses received the Ten Commandments, one of them stated that they could not make any images of

God. He, on the other hand, did just that. He created man and woman in His image.

Why are images made? Five reasons come to mind when I think of this. Firstly, an image is made for an artist to perfect his skills. Secondly, it is an artist's desire to recall a mood, a person or a place. Thirdly, because the artist enjoys creating and finds great joy in making images. Fourthly, images can be made as a showcase so others can see it. Finally, images can be created and sold in order to make money. God doesn't need money, and I am pretty certain that God doesn't need to improve His skills, nor does He need an image to recall who He is. I believe He enjoys creating and finds great joy when He does, but primarily that His purpose for making the image was that others would see it, marvel and understand something about the One who made the image. I am convinced that God created man and woman in His image in order to reveal something about Himself that distinguishes this image from any other image in the world. Some images lead the spectator to learn something, but in this case, the image itself; mankind is meant to understand who they resemble. Man is both the image and the intended viewer of the image. I believe husband and wife together in marriage were meant to be an image easily understood by children and obvious to everyone – an image of God and His character.

I do not intend to give an exhaustive list of all we can learn by studying this image, but I do want to mention some of the God-like qualities marriage was intended to reflect.

Male and female

Genesis 1:27 says: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” We don’t know everything about God’s being, but we can be certain that He is not limited by our natural bodies. God creating us male and female is ultimately not about our physical expression. Gender differences must consist in something far more profound and eternal. God could have created mankind without the two genders, but He didn’t. There were two genders for a reason. John Eldredge writes that God created a masculine and a feminine heart, each in their unique way reflecting God’s heart to this world.⁵ Beautifully he describes the differences between the heart of the man and the woman. The man, born outside the Garden of Eden, is created to fight for something. He has received a mission far beyond himself that he lives and fights for, and he is to champion and invite a beauty to join him in the enormous task at hand. Fill the earth and subdue it, God commanded the man (Gen 1:28). God obviously thought Adam had what was needed for such a

mission. That is, He didn't intend for him to do it on his own. He created the woman, the crown of creation, for the man to have someone to fall in love with and fight for; someone who would stand by his side in the mission. Since we are physically created to depend on each other in order to reproduce, that also testifies of God as a relational being. The man was created from the dirt of the wilderness outside the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:7-8).

Even if much has changed over the years in the way children play, now often sitting still in front of a screen, there are still obvious differences between boys and girls. It is common knowledge that boys and men are attracted to fierce and often dangerous things, and the question is whether this is something inherent to the male heart. How many boys have not played cowboys and Indians, or some kind of battle? I don't think it is by chance that many boys have carried a spear or shot someone with a toy gun. The majority of shooter game players on computers are boys. Exodus 15:3 says "The Lord is a warrior". Boys are, in a unique way, an image of this aspect of God. I don't think it is only culturally determined that most girls prefer social games while boys more often jump from tree to tree. Many boys feel compelled to discover how fast their homemade go-kart runs down the hill past their house. Having broken my right arm three times and been stitched here and there is

no evidence of my maleness, but exposing myself to dangers and testing limits was undoubtedly an accompanying reason.

What is the recipe for successful play for boys? A big enough challenge (to discover if he's got what it takes) combined with some danger and a bit of competition. If someone *dies*, that will do the trick. How many boys care to play if there is no winner? How many men want an occupation where there are no challenges or battles to win? Many men desire to devote themselves and overcome fear or opposition. Could this be because we carry the warrior quality of God himself? Many women also embody this, but they often choose a safer route. A young lady in our circle, age 19, was asked if she would test the limits of the vehicle she borrowed. She replied: Why would I do that? It's dangerous. Many boys would have responded to her answer: but, that's exactly why we need to test the car. They want to know that they can handle danger. The other day I spoke with a gentleman in his 50s who had borrowed a brand-new car; a Tesla. Smiling he told me that he just had to test it to see how fast it accelerated. Fifty years old and still eager to test the limits. What is it about men? I believe men and women are images of unique aspects in God's nature. It is not by chance that girls are less involved in accidents than boys. He was created out of the wilderness while she was created from bones of Adam within the Garden of Eden. Her

beauty surpasses that of Adam, and comfort and care are dear to her heart. It is not a contradiction that some women also enjoy testing limits and live exciting lives, but this is not her primary expression. She is a remarkable image of other attributes of God. Only a woman can give life to a new child. Only she can nurture it, make it grow and finally deliver it. So much more could be said about the woman, but the point is that God was intentional when He created the man and the woman different. It was in order to manifest His attributes in the image they were to form together. Following the Fall this image faded and the image we see in men, women and their marriages, is not as vivid and obvious as originally intended. The clarity of the image also depends on whether the man or the woman has received the Spirit of God. The Hebrew writing shows in an almost humorous way the need for both the male and the female to complete the God-image. “Man” is Ish and “woman” Isha. It is not noticeable in our western writing, but becomes very clear when Ish and Isha appear in Hebrew. The words are different, but two characters are common to both. At the same time, they both have one character that the other one does not. If you put together these unique characters you get the shortest form of God’s name: Yahve. What remains are the characters that translate to fire. Though they are individually made in God’s image, it is when they are joined together and

become one that God's name appears. It is interesting and hardly by chance, even if some scholars call this kind of Scripture interpretation Kabbalism. If we remove God from the marriage we're left with fire. Fire is warming and good under controlled circumstances, but it can be very destructive if it gets out of control. Fire without Godly governance and care may quickly damage both yourself and those around you.



God is Relational

God is a triune being and thus relational in His nature. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different, but the three are also one in a wondrous way. How this works is beyond my understanding, but they obviously have an inseparable connection. They depend on one another and they honour one another. They have different functions and abilities, yet they are still one. Jesus said He couldn't do anything unless He first saw His Father do it (John 5:19). This is a very dependent relationship. This doesn't mean Jesus is not an independent person. One example is when

Jesus says that He lays down His life voluntarily and that He has the power to do it (John 10:18). Jesus dying on the cross; making atonement for humanity; setting the stage so the Holy Spirit could be made available to every person. The Holy Spirit depended on the completion of Jesus' work before He could do His part. All three persons in the godhead are distinct, but work together in a marvellous way. God wanted to pass this community and interdependence on to mankind. In a marriage the man and the woman complete one another with their differences, while simultaneously being totally dependent on each other. They are also to live in dependence on God, in marriage and family life. Human beings are created for community. The cruellest thing we can do to a person is to exclude them from the community and no longer have relationship with them. We know that loneliness leads to psychological problems and that a range of problems are resolved if meaningful relationships with others are established. It is very damaging for a person to experience the absence of greetings and being noticed. It is hard to live without any relationship with others. Isolation, preventing a person from relating to others, is the most severe penalty in our society. This is because we are created for relationship. We have some of God's DNA within us. God created the man and the woman for relationship – deep intimacy. They were created for a deep, safe and good physical, mental and

spiritual relationship. When this happens in the marriage, we are proclaiming God's relational qualities. The relationship a couple shares also has expanding characteristics. Through children the relational sphere grows. The safe and good relationship expands and is passed on.

God is the Creator of Life

This takes us to one of God's other attributes that we find reflected in a marriage, God as the Creator of Life. God created the earth and all living creatures (Gen 1:1). None other than God can create life. The evil one can only steal, kill and destroy what God has created, so he has no ability to create life. Jesus says that He Himself is life (John 14:6) and that eternal life is found in Him. He says He came that we may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). Even if a woman has what it takes to give birth to a child, she cannot conceive on her own. God is still the only one who can give life. He has a plan for everyone (Ps 139:13-16) and is the One who gives life to every human being on earth (Jer 1:5). In a way God has given the ability for the man and the woman to create life within their marriage. Their intimacy becomes an image of God's life-giving power when they become father and mother. At this point it is important to mention children

that are conceived out of wedlock. Before they used to be called illegitimate children, a terrible label that sadly could lead to a very difficult life for those concerned. God doesn't have any illegitimate children, regardless of who the parents are and how that life came to be. Every child is 100% His, loved and created by Him. God intended that every child would grow up experiencing that they belonged to mum and dad, not partially but entirely. Everyone was meant to grow up in a safe and confident relationship with their parents, just like God intended for us to live with Him from our first to our last day. The man and the woman joined together in a committed and intimate relationship – marriage – is an image of God the Creator of Life.

God is Faithful

God is faithful (1 Cor 1:9). It means we can trust Him regardless of circumstance. He remains and He stands by His Word. He doesn't just disappear. He remains for all eternity. These characteristics are embedded into the marriage. A marriage is meant to be a reflection of God's faithfulness. A married man must be faithful towards his wife: financially, relationally, sexually and spiritually. Her well-being and their relationship should be the focal point of his energies. He is to do this for

better and for worse. This is why everyone who gets married must promise to love during both the good and the bad days, to love until death separates them. Because God is faithful and never leaves us, His image is meant to reflect this. Media has created an impression that only a few marriages actually last for life, but this is not true. The truth is that most marriages are for life. I have done research around this for years and will revisit the topic of divorce in the appendix. God's intent behind all marriages was that they would be an image of His faithfulness. The point is not just to endure together, but to live faithful and devoted lives for common pleasure and development. This kind of faithfulness creates secure societies and confident families. Children ought to grow up with the full assurance that they can come home to mum and dad anytime, whether they are two, twenty or forty years old. The intent is for parents to be faithful and safe anchors in a world that at times appears both frightening and unsafe. In this way parents become an image of God's faithfulness.

God Forgives

The Bible tells us time and again that God is a God who forgives. We learn this from the first through to the last book in the Bible. When Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit,

God approached them, not to judge, but in order to restore the relationship.

But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" (Gen 3:9-11)

The Lord called on Adam, even if He already knew where he was. He called because He wanted fellowship, even after Adam sinned. Adam replied that he was hiding because he was naked. God thought Adam looked good in his natural body, but proceeded by asking if he had eaten from the tree in the garden. This was an invitation for Adam to take responsibility for his own actions, an invitation to receive forgiveness. Rather than taking responsibility, Adam blamed both God and Eve. The consequence was enormous, and God sent them out of the Garden of Eden. You may wonder, how does this show God's forgiveness? The first thing we read is that God didn't curse them, but rather helped them: "The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them" (Gen 3:21). We also learn about His promise to reverse the situation. That day the serpent fooled mankind, but one day the opposite

will happen. One day Eve will fool the serpent. From the day they were caught by the trap the serpent set and ate the fruit, God prophesied that a day would come when Eve's descendant would overthrow the serpent. There is no doubt that the serpent is the devil. Many years later a descendant of Eve, Jesus, became the one who disarmed the powers and authorities, triumphing over them on the cross (Col 2:15). God came in the incarnation of Jesus and gave His life so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). But what does this have to do with marriage?

A marriage is meant to be an image of the merciful God. Most of the time we can contain ourselves and show our best side in church and at work, but at home everything is revealed. Fear, anxiety and cowardice quickly get exposed in the light of the intimate relationship. If anyone knows my weaknesses it is my spouse and my children. We hurt each other with both words and deeds. We do it even if it is not deliberate and also when we are not aware of it. The need and the opportunities for forgiveness are great in a marriage. God's desire is that forgiveness flows in a marriage. The intent is that the children observe this forgiveness between mum and dad. They are to learn how forgiveness is extended and received. They must also experience an abundance of forgiveness and grace themselves. Parents and spouses are to be a living image of the forgiving God.

God is Love

One of the primary attributes of God is that He is a loving God. 1 John 4:8 says that God is love. This is an active, self-giving and eternal love. 1 Corinthians 13 gives a description of love's appearance and function. It is obvious that love cannot be practised with only one person present. It calls for two or more people. Healthy and true love requires more than one person. Love is meant to move from one person to another, from God to a person or from a person to God. Only loving oneself is downright harmful. The ancient Greeks understood this. Greek mythology gives us the story of Narcissus who was so in love with himself that he died from the sight of his own reflection in the mirror. He just couldn't get himself to leave. The counterpart is the Bible's twofold command to love, first God with our whole heart and then our neighbour as ourselves (Matt 22:37-40). God is love. This is one of God's eternal attributes that existed long before the creation of mankind. True love is a combination of feelings, choices and action. Out of love He created all that has come into being, so He could share His love with creation, especially human beings. God was love before He created people and this love was always directed towards others. This was possible because God is a triune being: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who have the most committed love

for one another. Out of love, God created all of creation, so He could share His love with everything; above all with mankind. Marriage is an image of this active love.

Adam and Eve received each other both to love and to be loved. For the perfection of the image of God's love they wouldn't just live in the joy of being in love, but also to have children together. These children would naturally receive love. Anyone who's had children of their own knows the special bond of love that is created. God's children – people – are loved by Him equally. We experience the same when we have children. We don't have a limited amount of love with less love remaining as the number of children grows. Rather, the amount of love keeps growing with every child, and they all receive the fullness of love. This shows the infiniteness of love. True love doesn't end with the two that are in love, but flows into the creation of children. In the same way as every person is created by the love of God, the intent was also that every child would be conceived out of the love between one man and a woman, a man and a woman who wouldn't confine their love to only themselves. God planned that their love would grow when they had children to love. His intent was for this to happen generation after generation. The love a mother and a father had for each other and their children was to be a vivid image of Him, the Creator – true love.

We are all created with the need to be loved. Therefore, it fits perfectly that we are so intensely loved by God. Sadly, many never get to experience this love. This created need is crying out to be satisfied. If we don't let God satisfy the need, we easily seek out others to fill the void of being loved. Entering into marriage because I need to be loved leads to much pain because no human being can fill our love tank. We must first receive God's love, then we can love our spouse and receive their love. Marriage is intended to be an image of who God is. We have seen how it demonstrates the various attributes of God. Strong marriages that display these characteristics are an image of the Creator of the universe. That's significant!

A Sign

We've seen how a marriage is the building block of society, a collaboration, a covenant and an image. Now we'll look at how marriage, and especially weddings, are central to God's plan of redemption. You may have noticed already, but the Bible both begins and ends with a wedding. God's complete story about our world, and humanity, starts and finishes with weddings. Adam and Eve are the first and the Wedding of the Lamb in Heaven is the last. Just to make sure we don't forget this theme. God has placed Song of Songs right in the middle of the Bible, between these two wedding stories. The centrality of weddings is confirmed when Jesus performed His first miracle during a wedding (John 2:1-12).



He chose to commence His public ministry by transforming water into wine, so the wedding celebration could be completed according to customs. With that action he also more than hinted to Himself being the groom at the Great Wedding (Rev 19:7). I certainly don't think it was coincidence, but an obvious sign that He, whom all of creation was waiting for, had come. He who soon shall return and gather those that are His at the Wedding of the Lamb at the end of the age. Like I have mentioned, marriage is an image of God, but it also points to and illustrates the relationship between the church and Christ. Ephesians 5 underlines this: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (v. 25). The strongest expression of the connection between marriage and Christ and the church is that the man and the woman are declared to be one. This is a sign of something that is yet to take place, that will happen on the day of the wedding in Heaven (Rev 19:7). When God shows John what He has planned for the end of this world, it is in the expression of a wedding celebration. We can read about this in Revelation chapter 19:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the

wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.) Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added, “These are the true words of God.” (Rev 19:6-9)

This paragraph tells us that a magnificent wedding lies ahead. It is a greater and more joyous celebration than ever before. On that day, the betrothed – Christ and the church – become one. Their becoming one is evidenced by the church, which until then has been called the bride, now wife (Rev 21:9). A wedding is the ultimate joyous celebration, also because every wedding is a transition from one marital status to another. Two individuals are joined together in marriage. They arrive as individuals and leave as a couple, which we know from the previous chapters. The wedding marks the transition to become a couple, and the great wedding that Revelation speaks of is the final great transition. This will bring an end to sorrow and torment. Then we will be united with God once again, and we shall see Him clearly and walk with Him. In earthly weddings we celebrate the two that have chosen to commit themselves to one another for life. Basically, everyone who gets invited

to a wedding responds with a yes to attending. In a wedding people from two completely different families meet together, eat delicious food and have a good time together. Connected to this I would like to highlight a paragraph by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians that I have mentioned before.

*“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. (Eph 5:31,32)*

Here Paul writes both about marriage and the relationship Jesus has to the church. It may be a little hard to discern what he talks about in the different portions of the scripture. The husband’s relationship to his wife is clearly stated, but so is Christ’s relationship to the church. As Christ is one with the church, the husband is to be one with his wife. Like Christ loved the church and laid down His life for it, the husband is to love his wife. Christ then, is an example of how a marriage is to function. Consequentially a marriage lived like this becomes a proclamation of Christ. It is a very powerful image of God. This side of Heaven, marriage and family are the best and most accurate display of the intimate, relational and loving character of the triune God! Marriage isn’t just an image of this, but a

sign that God exists. No wonder there is battle around marriage! But there is more.

Jesus is spoken of as the bridegroom (John 3:29) and also talks about Himself as bridegroom (Matt 9:15). Like we said, the church is called the bride (which we just read in Ephesians 5 and Revelation 19). On the day of the Wedding of the Lamb, Satan's days are also numbered. He will then be thrown into the pit of eternal perdition. Any wedding is therefore a sign of the great wedding that will happen in Heaven one day. Any wedding is a reminder that Jesus will return. When this happens, the days of evil will come to an end and the enemy is thrown into the abyss. In this perspective it is obvious to me how annoying joyful wedding celebrations or strong marriages are to the devil. Every wedding is a sign that the day of the Wedding of the Lamb is soon approaching. In 2016 alone, 250,000 couples married in the UK, 2.3 million in the US and 8.5 million in India. Altogether there are many signs of the return of Jesus every year.

The breakup of marriage as a sign of the end times

Marriage is a sign of the end times also in another way. In the book of Daniel, we read the account of King Nebuchadnezzar's

dream (Dan 2). This was a prophetic dream about his kingdom, but also about kingdoms to come. He saw a large statue – an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. Further in the dream we read that the feet were crushed and the entire statue fell. The statue was divided into many small pieces that vanished in the wind and could no longer be seen. Daniel could interpret the dream by God’s help. It was about Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom and the empires that would arise after his death. In verse 43 we read that the iron mixed with clay is an image of the state of marriages in the final great empire. Daniel explains: “And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.” This is describing a time when marriages will dissolve. The prophetic message is that when the time comes where marriages and families will no longer be safe entities then the society and the kingdom will crumble. It will be dissolved. Daniel continues explaining: “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.” This is about when God will

re-establish His Kingdom afresh. This is when Jesus returns and a new Heaven and a new earth are established (2 Pet 3:13). The time before the great wedding, the Wedding of the Lamb, will be a time when couples don't stay together for life. It is a time when couples no longer hold on to each other. We find a similar prophetic statement about marital breakdown being a sign of the end times in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 4:3 we read that in the end time they no longer advise the young to marry, but rather do the opposite. It says they will be prohibited from marrying. The message seems to be that the institution of marriage will be abandoned. You may wonder why this is one of the end time signs. According to what I have highlighted before, all marriages are an image of God and it is not strange to think that the enemy is working intensely to remove as many as possible. He doesn't want images of God and signs of the final Wedding. Weddings and marriage are a sign of the existence of God and that He is awesome and powerful, eternally relational, eternally loving, the One who will restore order on earth and the relationship with all people. This leads us to the next chapter: Marriage is a Battle.

A Battle

We've come to the sixth and final aspect of what a marriage is. The first five were the building block of society, a collaboration, a covenant, an image and a sign. Marriage is also a Battle. In some marriages there is perpetual battle between personal desires and those of the spouse. This kind of fighting between two individuals was not God's intention. This book is about the original intent of marriage, and therefore what it actually can be. A marriage is not a battle *against* the spouse, but *for* the spouse! To fight for your marriage is also a battle to keep the image of God as pure and clear as possible. Since every marriage in the world is a powerful image of God, the enemy wants to destroy as many as possible. Any wedding day



is a reminder of the approaching Wedding of the Lamb and that the devil's days are numbered.

In my description of marriage as a battle, I mean that every marriage is part of the ongoing spiritual battle.

The devil has been working to destroy marriages and divide spouses from the beginning of time. He attempted to destroy the first marriage; Adam and Eve's. The serpent was in the garden together with them and they had probably met before the day they ate the fruit. This probably wasn't the first time they heard him speak either. If they had never seen a talking serpent, do you think they would have listened and believed it? I doubt it, but this serpent talked to the woman. He knew that they would be easier to trap if he could divide them and only speak to one of them; tactics he's used ever since. It started with a question leading Eve to doubt God. Then came a lie and she was convinced. Where was Adam? It appears that he was nearby, but the devil didn't approach him. Adam, on the other hand, allowed the serpent's seduction of Eve without intervening. I envision the devil's smile when he realised they were fooled. Immediately his nature went to work on the people. This led them to withdrawing and hiding from God. What was Adam's response when God asked what he had done? It seems he didn't know what to do so he blamed both God and Eve: "The woman you put here with me – she gave me some

fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Gen 3:12). Adam, Eve and God were no longer a team that worked together. The division of the first marriage was a reality. Shame and distrust had entered. Something happened that day where they no longer fully trusted one another. Eve asked herself: can I really trust Adam in the hard times? This is what the devil attempts to do with every marriage. He seeks to divide, isolate, trick, lie, create distrust and get them to think that it is God’s, or the spouse’s, fault that things are not working. It is important to note that Adam and Eve didn’t divorce, even though this must have been the devil’s plan. They were, however, blaming each other. Their sin had consequences on all of humanity, and they experienced their son Cain murder his own brother. Many have divorced over less. There is a battle over the marriages. There is a battle over the image of God on earth. This is the spiritual battle Genesis 3:15 talks about: “And I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.” It is a battle that rages in the homes and hearts of everyone who’s married. Spiritual warfare is a foreign thought to many. Others are used to thinking that there is a spiritual battle over nations and territories. All of us, however, are in a spiritual battle. The fact that there is an ongoing battle about your marriage may be totally unknown to you. My claim is that the battle most of us are impacted by is not the

one over churches, regions or nations, but the one over your marriage and your family. It is very real and remains whether you engage with it or not. It doesn't go away if you pretend it doesn't exist. Let me bring to your attention a chapter in the Revelation of John that clearly speaks about this. It speaks of a battle in Heaven ending with the devil being thrown out and hurled to the earth. This displeased him tremendously and he went to battle against anything that resembles God, especially His chosen ones:

Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (Rev 12:7-9)

This is not good news to anyone who lives on the earth. We read on: “But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short” (Rev 12:12). When the serpent realised he was cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman (Rev 12:13), became furious with the woman and went to make war with

the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev 12:17). The devil is not only annoyed with people and all that points to God – he is furious! Jesus tells us that he comes in his fury to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). Every wedding is a reminder that his time is shorter than the day before. Every wedding is also a painful reminder of the eternal perdition that awaits him. This doesn't make him any kinder. Every year when we celebrate our wedding anniversary, I am twisting the knife in his heart a little. He doesn't appreciate this. This is why every marriage is spiritual warfare. This is not some innocent shoving, but a life and death battle.

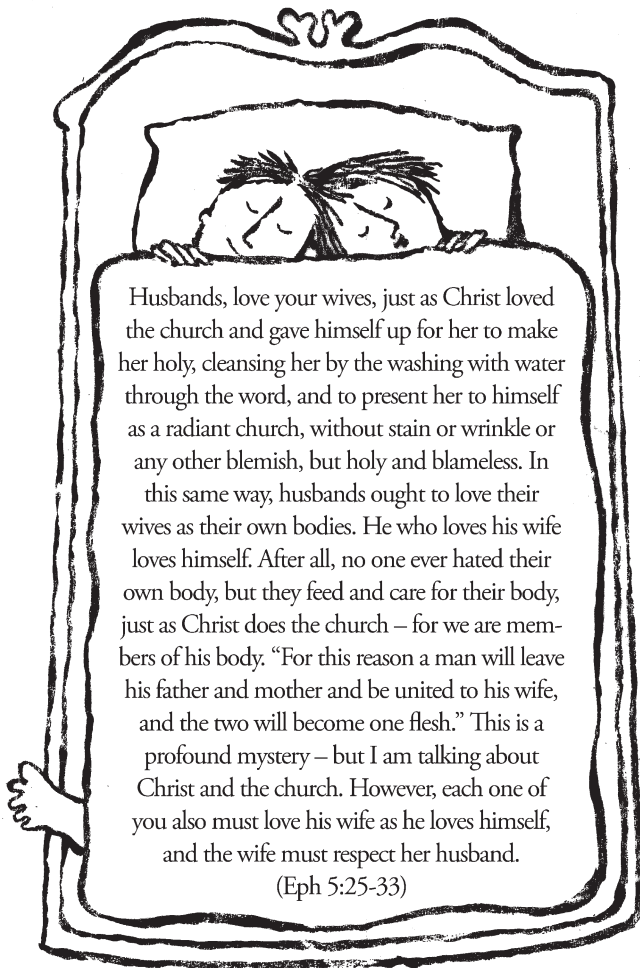
The Bible describes this spiritual battle: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). This may seem like a battle happening far away from us, but that's not the whole story. Even though the battle is spiritual, it manifests in our daily lives together. It is perhaps there, in the marriage and the family, that the spiritual battle is the most intense. The devil wants to steal your intimacy with your spouse. He wants to kill your joy and destroy your love. If he can pervert your love, he will rejoice. If he can tempt you to seek love other places than with your spouse, then he's happy.

His objective is to get married couples to resign and divorce. This battle is about something far greater than your personal marriage. It is a battle between God and the devil. Your marriage is just one of the battlefields of this fight. Winning this battle together with God means you're part of something great. It doesn't just bring peace and joy to the family, but also allows it to remain an image of God, continually prophesying the return of Jesus. Allow me to briefly highlight three points in this battle:

Firstly, it is a battle that manifests in the little things in life, like how we talk to each other and whether we encourage or put each other down. Secondly, it is a battle over the big things. Like I have mentioned, it is not only about the two, but also the much bigger battle about removing the honour from God and destroying the humanity that God loves. When there are tough times in a marriage it is not just about those two; even more it is that those two are part of a much bigger battle. The battle between good and evil. My spouse is not my actual enemy, it's the devil. Thirdly, this emphasises how important it is that couples pray together. Many couples live their lives without realising that there is a battle over their marriage. Hence, it isn't strange that so few couples do actually pray together.

Appendix

This is a book that describes what a marriage is from a biblical perspective. What it was intended to be when God created it. However, many experience divorce, or know someone that has experienced it. With the exception of the Philippines and the Vatican City, every nation in the world allows its residents to divorce under some conditions. From early 1960 until about 2000 the divorce rates have skyrocketed in some populations. Total divorce rate is the measure of how many of all those who married in a specific year (a cohort) ended by divorce. Those numbers vary from cohort to cohort and from country to country. In Norway for example, 93% of those who married in 1930 lived together until death did them part while



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.

(Eph 5:25-33)

approximately 60% of those who married in 1980 have experienced the same⁶. However, they have identified a continuous decline in divorce rates over the last ten years⁶. Several studies have found that first marriages have a significantly lower divorce rate than higher order marriages⁷.

In most of the 36 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries there has been declining rates of marriages per 1000 people⁸. This decline has been accompanied by increases in rates of divorce. The crude divorce rate is defined as the number of divorces during the year per 1000 people and vary considerably across countries – from as low as 0.1 divorces per 1000 people in Chile to as high as 3.2 divorces per 1000 in the United States. The numbers are higher now than in 1970, but we recognise that they continue to increase for some countries while they decline for others. Cross-national differences in trends in divorce rates may be influenced by developments in divorce regulation and legislation. Among the OECD countries this is the case, particularly with Ireland, where the prohibition of divorce was repealed in 1997.

Endnotes

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About YWAM Family Ministries

This book is presented to you by YWAM Family Ministries International. Please find us and join our network at www.ywam-fmi.org

We want to dedicate this book to all of you serving globally as families and couples in YWAM. Be encouraged!

YWAM affirms the importance of families serving God together in missions, not just the father and/or mother. We also embrace the inclusion of single-parent families. We encourage the development of strong and healthy family units, with each member sharing the call to missions and contributing their gifts in unique and complementary ways. We uphold and celebrate the biblical view that God's intent for holy matrimony is between one man and one woman.

(Gen 2:21-24; Gen 18:17-19; Deu 6:6-7; Pro 5:15-23; Pro 31:10-31; Mal 2:14-16; Mat 19:3-9; 1Co 7:1-16; 1Ti 3:2-5; Heb 13:4)

Foundational YWAM value #15